

**Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Saturday
Some 68 More Iranians Died From
The COVID-19 Over the Past 24 Hours
Bringing the Total Deaths to 59,409**

IRAN NEWS

**Iran's Ambassador to India Said That
Four Iranian Detainees Fishers Were
Released From the Prison Upon the
Efforts made by the Iranian Diplomatic
Mission and Indian Officials**

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Leader Hails Youth's Strong Presence in Iran's Vital Arenas

TEHRAN (MNA) – Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei praised the significant role that the young generation play in the critical and important issues of the country.

In a message to the 55th meeting of the Union of Islamic Students Association in Europe, Ayatollah Khamenei said described the strong presence of the youth in the country's sensitive arenas as another achievement of the Islamic Revolution.

The text of his message, which was read this morning by Hojjatolislam Ahmad Vaezi, the representative of the Leader for University Student Affairs in Europe, in the virtual meeting of this union, is as follows:

In the Name of God

Dear students,

With each passing day, the importance of the role of the youth in the development of the country and guaranteeing its future is becoming more and more apparent.

The coronavirus pandemic proved this once again. The enthusiasm, motivation and joyful hope of the youth in this matter, like many other issues in the country, led to scientific and practical openings.

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Any Signature to Return to JCPOA Invalid Without Verification

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations said that any signature to return to JCPOA is invalid without verification of Tehran.

"During the Obama administration, we also sent reports to the JCPOA coordinator, protesting the actions of the United States at that time against its obligations," said Majid Takht-Ravanchi in an interview with Khamenei.ir.

"Now, they have imposed three kinds of sanctions on us. If none of this is repealed, there is no point in returning of the United States to the JCPOA," he added.

"It is of no value to just say that I am ready to return to the JCPOA if the sanctions are not be lifted in practice," the Iranian diplomat said, adding, "We cannot just sign an agreement. It does not make sense if the signature is not accompanied by a process for verifying the actions."

He highlighted, "If it is announced that the embargo on Iranian oil has been lifted, there must be guarantees that there will be no problem in selling oil, and the buyer can be able to easily transfer the money to Iran through the global banking system."

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All Figures on Iran COVID-19 Infection, Fatalities "Accurate"



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – President Hassan Rouhani says statistics on coronavirus infections and fatalities in the country have always been announced promptly and accurately.

President Hassan Rouhani further praised the establishment of the National Coronavirus Headquarters.

"The decision made by the Supreme National Security Council to form the National Coronavirus Headquarters as well as the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution's move to communicate this decision was a major development," said the president at a meeting of the headquarters on Saturday.

He also lauded untiring, wholehearted and round-the-clock efforts by medical personnel to stem the spread of COVID-19.

"The state radio and TV, the Armed Forces, supervisory institutions and the production sector have done a great job standing by the people over the past year in tandem with the National Coronavirus Headquarters and medical staff," he said.

President Rouhani also reviewed the developments over the past year and since the outbreak of COVID-19.

"Over the past year, we came to the conclusion that lifestyles should be changed in order to tackle this disease because conditions for shopping, travelling, education, taking part in religious ceremonies and going to recreational centers are not the same as they were before the COVID-19 pandemic," he explained.

Rouhani also said: "We should change our lifestyle based on the new conditions, observe the health protocols, and reduce gatherings. If we see a symptom of the virus, we should quarantine ourselves so that we can get through the situation well."

He also hailed the Iranian nation and healthcare system for the battle against the coronavirus, saying the Islamic Republic has been doing well in curbing the pandemic despite the U.S.' illegal sanctions.

He said the Iranian nation suffered severe hardships since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic over the past year since all the world nations were free to use their own money for medical equipment, food, medicine and vaccine except for the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was deprived of access to its own financial resources due to illegal and cruel U.S. sanctions.

"Iran was the only country that was fighting with sanctions parallel with the coronavirus... We faced many problems for procuring and paying for COVID-19 vaccines," Rouhani said on Sunday during a session of the Coronavirus Prevention and Combat Headquarters.

U.S. Ready to Re-Engage With Parties to JCPOA

TEHRAN (PressTV) – U.S. President Joe Biden says America stands ready to "re-engage" with the group of countries that are party to a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, less than three years after his predecessor, Donald Trump, pulled Washington out of the multilateral deal.

Giving a speech via video-link to the Munich Security Conference on Friday, Biden said his administration was "prepared to re-engage in negotiations" within the "P5+1" of countries, which initially negotiated the nuclear deal with Iran — namely France, Britain, Germany, the US, Russia and China.

Biden was merely repeating his administration's position, announced by his officials a day earlier, that the United States was prepared to join the Europeans in the diplomatic process with Iran on reviving the nuclear deal, stopping short of giving a more detailed explanation of America's plans regarding the accord — formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The agreement's future has been in doubt since May 2018, when Trump withdrew his country out of the JCPOA, which he called the "worst deal ever," and called for new negotiations for a "better" deal with Iran, which would address Washington's intrusive demands from the Islamic Republic, including its national defense program and its influential regional role.

Succumbing to Washington's pressure, the European co-signatories, in turn, failed to fulfill their contractual commitments to Tehran, including confronting the harsh economic sanctions that the US restored on Iran after abandoning the UN-endorsed Iran deal. That prompted Tehran to begin a set of counter-measures a year later in several phases based on the legal mechanisms stipulated in Articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA.

Biden has pledged to return the US to the JCPOA, but his administration has conditioned a return to the nuclear deal on Tehran's resumption of the commitments it has suspended under the JCPOA.

Tehran has, however, refused to return to full compliance with the JCPOA while the US sanctions are still in place. Iran wants Washington to lift its unilateral bans practically and verifiably before the country reverses the steps it has taken away from the accord. In what appeared to be a mere symbolic gesture, the Biden administration on Thursday backed away from an already abortive attempt by the Trump administration in September 2020 to restore UN sanctions on Iran, in disregard of the condition set by Tehran for the reversal of its retaliatory measures.

Iran to Launch Direct Shipping Line to S. Africa, Latin America

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran is going to launch a direct shipping line to South Africa and Latin American countries in near future, an official with the Iranian Chamber of Cooperatives (ICC) informed.

According to Babak Afghahi, ICC's head of the non-oil trade and export development committee, the mentioned shipping line will connect southern Iranian ports to the ports of South Africa and then to Latin American countries, specifically Brazil.

The said shipping line is going to be launched with the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) and is aimed to develop Iran's non-oil trade with the countries in the mentioned regions.

"With the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, considering the capacity of Iran's cargo export to the mentioned destinations, the chambers of commerce across the country, the Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) of Iran and other export bodies have been informed about the new development," Afghahi said.

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Goods Transit Via Bashmaq Border Effective In National Economy

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri hailed the Bashmaq crossing border for playing a key role in the country's economic programs.

On Saturday a ceremony was held for starting the executive operation of the plan for developing the Bashmaq crossing border in Kordestan Province.

Speaking in the ceremony, Jahangiri said that Bashmaq border is one of the important trade borders in the country which plays a key and influential role in the country's economic programs including import and export goods.

Jahangiri also expressed hope that in a very short period of time, the infrastructure required for the Bashmaq border will be built and it will be recognized as a model border in the country.

In this ceremony, the Deputy of Iran Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization, Khodadad Moghbeli, stressed that the development of the Bashmaq border can play a valuable role in the commercial development of the Kordestan province and the country.

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PdV Importing More Refining Catalyst From Iran

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's state-owned PdV is importing more refinery catalyst from Iran in an ongoing effort to boost gasoline production at its 305,000 b/d Cardon refinery.

State-owned airline Conviasa is ferrying the strategic product on daily flights from Tehran to Josefa Camejo international airport on the Paraguana peninsula near PdV's 940,000 b/d CRP refining complex, which includes Cardon and the 635,000 b/d Amuay refinery.

A CRP manager tells Argus that Conviasa is scheduled to make at least 20 flights transporting catalyst and "two or three Iranian refinery technicians on each flight." The first flight arrived on 11 February and as of 17 February at least seven flights had arrived, the manager added.

The catalyst, which is transported by truck to Cardon under heavy guard, is used to help PdV produce more and better quality fuel.

Oil ministry and PdV officials declined to say how much catalyst will be imported and what the government is paying Tehran for it, but a presidential palace official said Iran is recouping the cost in the form of Venezuelan gold.

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Ukrainian Plane Crash Case Completed In Iranian Military Court

IRAN (IP) - The Head of the Judicial Organization of the Armed Forces of Iran said that the military court investigation into the crash of a Ukrainian plane near Tehran in January 2020 had been completed.

Speaking on the sidelines of a visit and meeting with the staff of the military court of Shahrud city, Shokrollah Bahrami said: "With the completion of the case of the crash of a Ukrainian plane in the military court, this case is currently in the process of preparing an indictment."

He added: "The investigation of this case will begin after the initial process of the court in the presence of the defendants and the relatives of the passengers."

Tehran, Madrid Expand Ties In Fighting Narcotics

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Chief of Iran's Anti-Narcotics Police Brigadier-General Majid Karimi emphasized expanding mutual cooperation on fighting narcotics at the regional and international level.

"We are calling for expanding cooperation in the intelligence and operational fields to eradicate drug trafficking at the regional and international level," Brigadier-General Karimi said in a video conference with the Chief of Spain National Police's Drugs and Organized Crime Unit.

He noted the seriousness of the Islamic Republic of Iran in fighting drug trafficking and transit of narcotics.

While explaining the counter-terrorism measures and the involvement of his colleagues across Iran, General Karimi said that fortunately in the year 2020, a total of 1,150 tons of drugs were found by the country's counter-terrorism devices, which came from the Spanish side.

The anti-drug police are making full readiness to continue holding such sessions to share knowledge about the equipment of discovery, tracking as well as information analysis software that leads to the discovery of organized crime in the field drug trafficking, Chief of Iran's Anti-Narcotics Police added, stressing the necessity for enhancing mutual cooperation.

He added that the fight against narcotics is of global importance because today "we see serious harm to communities and the young generation".

"Each country may have its own methods and approach to curb the illicit drug problem, but we are looking to cut the illicit drug demand, and if demand is stopped,



supply and trafficking will also be stopped," Brigadier-General Karimi said.

Spanish Police Commissioner Marcos Frias Barbens, for his part, thanked his Iranian side for providing the groundwork for holding a meeting between the two countries, saying that no doubt holding such bilateral meetings would help increase the exchange of information and mutual cooperation between the two countries in order to fight this crisis.

Spanish Police Commissioner, meanwhile, called on his Iranian counterpart to visit Spanish police's achievements in the fight against drugs, adding that the Spanish Anti Narcotics Force (ANF) has announced its readiness to develop relations in the areas such as training dogs, developing specialized training programs, knowledge related to the new methods of treatment, rehabilitation and practice of addicts.

Spread of UK Variant of COVID-19 In Khuzestan Is Dangerous

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman for the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus in Iran said that the western borders should be strictly controlled to prevent the spread of the UK variant of COVID-19.

During a news conference on Saturday, Alireza Raisi stressed that the country was suffering from the UK variant of COVID-19, adding that there was a rapid spread of the virus in Iraq; therefore, the western provinces bordering Iraq should be more vigilant and follow health protocols properly.

The spokesman for the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus stated that Khuzestan province has the highest prevalence of COVID-19 among the provinces of the country and the UK variant has spread in Khuzestan province which is an alarm for the country.

Raisi added: "There are 11 cities with red status in the country and all of them are in Khuzestan province. Also, 52 cities have orange status, 217 cities have yellow status and 108 cities have blue status."

He noted that the rate of spread of the Coronavirus in Khuzestan province is very high and care must be taken to ensure that health protocols are being strictly observed in this province.

Raisi also stated that the observance of health protocols in the country has decreased by more than 14% which will lead to an increase in coronavirus.

The health official stressed that vaccination alone is not enough to control COVID-19 and that health protocols must be strictly observed.

Dr. Mohammad Reza Kamali, expert and political and economic activist:

Iran Should use the Opportunity of US Compromises in the Agreement



Dr. Mohammad Reza Kamali, having knowledge in economic and political fields, told our reporter: "Knowledge production in any country is a sign of that country's capability." Undoubtedly, knowledge production is one of the most important processes of knowledge management. Nuclear science and technology is one of the most advanced and advanced technologies in the present age. On Thursday, the European Troika and the United States issued a statement on the agreement, stating that Washington was ready to hold talks with Tehran. Simultaneously with this statement, the US government also showed three green lights to Iran. Accordingly, Washington has withdrawn its request for a key mechanism and reduced travel restrictions on Iranian diplomats. Visas are also issued for Iranians. The State Department spokesman also stated that we accept the European invitation to negotiate with Iran. Dr. Mohammad Reza Kamali, an expert on political and economic issues, said: "Given that the US government, Mr. Joe Biden has agreed to return to the P5 + 1 or the agreement (an agreement that previously only the US had withdrawn). "Our nuclear energy is not a war and we are not looking for an atomic bomb," he said. Referring to the

recent US compromises and the positive signals of the President to Iran, Dr. Kamali said: "The authorities should use the opportunity to reduce the pressure on the people and meet the country's challenges." He went on to say that all officials should work hand in hand to bring this important issue to fruition, and that sanctions should be lifted when countries return to the UN Security Council, and now, due to the conditions and problems created by the outbreak of coronary heart disease. The revival of Borjam will be in the interest of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Emphasizing the need for Iran to negotiate with the P5 + 1 countries and the need to address the concerns of the members of the Atomic Energy Organization regarding Iran's decision to reduce the IAEA, he said: "We should not act in a way that worsens the situation and it is necessary to adopt a policy." Correct and negotiated, it coordinated the countries for the return of the United States to the UN Security Council. The expert and political and economic activist, referring to the escalation of sanctions and the situation in the country during the Corona, said: "We should not rush to comment on the current situation." Sharp and misguided statements by the left, right, reformist and fundamentalist factions should be avoided more than before.

Iran to Launch Production Line Of 100-Seat Passenger Plane

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization has announced plans to launch the production line of a 100-seat passenger plane and use IrAn-140 aircraft as a cargo jet.

Speaking to Tasnim news agency on Friday, Touraj Dehghani Zanganeh hailed achievements made by Iranian knowledge-based companies in repairing and supplying aircraft parts.

"We are expanding the aircraft manufacturing program in the country, according to which IrAn-140 plane will be used as a cargo aircraft. It will be used in military units," he said. "In addition, we are working on launching the production line of a 100-passenger passenger plane."

The IrAn-140 is a locally built variant of the Antonov An-140. It is assembled under license by Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company (HESA) in Isfahan.

Iran has in recent years made great strides in developing its civil aviation sector in defiance of the sanctions that have sought to restrict the country's access to the sophisticated foreign technology. It has already been among the leading states in manufacturing military planes.

2 Major Air Defense Plans Unveiled

TEHRAN (IP) - Two operational and technology plans of the Iranian Army Air Defence Force unveiled on Saturday including Bahman radar system.

The inauguration of two operational plans and technology plans was held on Saturday with Commander of Army Air Defense Force Brigadier General Alireza Sabahifard and vice president for science and technology in attendance.

The two projects unveiled today include radar and rescue dimensions.

The first achievement of the advanced radar with the ability to detect small aircraft called the Bahman radar system and the other achievement is the design and construction of a self-propelled operating room called the rescue system.

At the official unveiling ceremony of these plans, Commander of the Air Defense Forces of the Iranian Army, said: "The Bahman radar system was designed and built to detect Micro air vehicles (MAV) without emitting any signals or signals and to be installed in all environments, even urban environments."

Brigadier General Sabahifard said: "The purpose of designing and building a rescue system is to create a tactical set in the form of a self-propelled operating room that, in addition to improving combat capability in the field of support, can provide services in critical situations and help people in need."

Cooperation Between Iran, IAEA to Be Reviewed during Grossi's Visit

TEHRAN (IP) - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) criticized the leak of confidential information of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), And said that in a meeting with the IAEA's director-general, considerations will be discussed within the framework of the safeguards agreement and cooperation between the two sides.

Regarding Reuters quoted diplomats that the UN nuclear watchdog found uranium particles at two Iranian sites it inspected after months of stonewalling, which was published on the eve of the visit of Rafael Grossi to Tehran, Salehi added: "After announcing the implementation of Article 6 of the law passed by the parliament's resolution regarding the suspension of the voluntary implementation and submitting a letter to the IAEA in this regard, Rafael Grossi requested an urgent visit to Iran and a meeting with me."

Salehi said: "Unfortunately, the leak of the Agency's confidential information in the international media is an unpleasant process that has been going on for years, and in this regard, the Islamic Republic has repeatedly submitted its objections to the Agency."

Regarding the goals of Grossi's visit to Tehran, Salehi also announced: "In tomorrow's (Sunday) meeting with Grossi, the Agency's considerations will be discussed within the framework of the safeguards agreement and the cooperation of the two parties."

Free Iranians Accused of Ignoring Illegal U.S. Sanctions

TEHRAN (MNA) - The head of the Iranian Judiciary's High Council for Human Rights said that if the European troika is concerned about JCPOA, they must end the arbitrary detention of Iranians accused of ignoring the "illegal" U.S. sanctions.

"Are European signatories of JCPOA concerned about human rights? Better they end the arbitrary detention of Iranian citizens accused of "legal act" of ignoring the "illegal" U.S. sanctions", Ali Bagheri-Kani said the remarks in reaction to the recent E3 statement against Iran.

The United States and the European Troika claim they have accelerated their attempts to pave the way for returning to the Iran nuclear deal amid approaching ultimatum for lifting sanctions against Iran.

The European Troika consists of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian hosted his German and British counterparts in Paris, with America's new top diplomat Antony Blinken joining via video-conference on Thursday. The three European countries, known as the E3, along with the US are signatories to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

In a statement issued by E3 and U.S. foreign ministers, they expressed concern over Iran's remedial measures in response to US unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and E3's lack of commitment and inaction.

Trade Volume Between Iran, Syria To Increase by Threefold

TEHRAN (MNA) - Chairman of Iran-Syria Chamber of Commerce said that the trade volume exchange between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria will hit a threefold increase during the next year.

According to Keyvan Kashefi, the bilateral trade volume exchange between Iran and Syria is moving towards development and progress.

With the measures taken in this regard, it is predicted that the bilateral trade volume exchange between the two countries will increase by threefold until the next Iranian calendar year (to start March 21, 2021), he said in an interview on Friday.

Turning to the trade situation between Iran and Syria, he said, "Unlike other Arab countries, Syria enjoyed an excellent level in terms of development and progress before outbreak of war and was even considered as a rival of the Islamic Republic of Iran in exporting products to Iraq."

He went on to say that Syria has a tough and difficult condition for importing goods in line with supporting its domestic products.

He pointed to the construction materials, various types of ingot and steel, tiles and ceramics, sanitary wares, medicines and medical equipment as Iran's main export products to Syria.

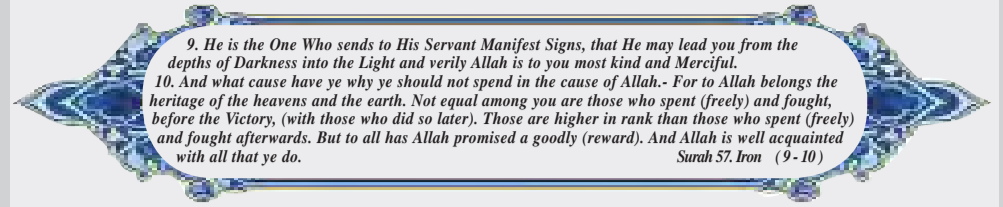
Elsewhere in his remarks, he referred to the export of agricultural products to Syria's lucrative market and added that export of agricultural products in Syria has a good market but it is a matter of regret to say that the country did not manage to take advantage of this export opportunity due to the prolongation of time of arrival of products to Syria via land borders.

The chairman of Iran-Syria Joint Chamber of Commerce reiterated trade volume exchange between Iran and Syria is developing.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:17
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:10
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:19
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:42



Turkish, Chinese Auto Parts Replace European-Made Ones

IRAN HEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Union of Vehicle Auto-Parts of Tehran says sanctions have affected the market of auto-parts in the country and currently the Chinese and Turkish-made auto-parts have replaced their European likes.

Speaking to ILNA, Mr. Mehdi Kazemi said that sanctions have affected imports, especially imports of the auto spare parts but the country has tried to import the auto-parts from China and Turkey to replace the European parts. He admitted that due to the U.S. sanctions, fewer original parts have been imported but the imported parts are good quality. He noted that those parts which are manufactured in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have faced problems in being exported to Iran. He admitted that the parts which are provided via the offices of the companies in Turkey or the UAE cost the country 10 to 15 percent higher.

Kazemi reiterated that if the domestic manufacturers are unable to produce the parts, then the union will take action for the imports of the parts to meet the market demands otherwise they are imported via Turkey and China.

He went on to say that the union does its best good quality and first class goods



to be imported, reiterating that the low quality parts in the market mostly belong to the previous years.

Kazemi noted that 50 to 60 percent of required parts of Pride and Peugeot cars are manufactured domestically, adding that the parts of cars which have been rolling in the streets of the countries since years ago are mostly manufactured domestically.

He also warned people to be cautious for purchasing auto-parts from the online-shops unless they are valid ones. He reiterated that all shops selling the auto parts are obliged to put their licenses in their shops in order that the customers can see them.

He admitted that some online shops sell fake auto parts which create headache for the customers and the officials.

Chadormalu Backs Project of Water Transfer From PG to Khorasan, Isfahan

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company (CMIC) describing it a brace decision the President Hassan Rouhani and Industry Minister's decision over supplying fresh water for South Khorasan, Razavi and Isfahan Provinces through transfer of water from Persian Gulf, saying that Chadormalu as one of the major shareholders of this national mega project welcomes the two predicted existing lines en route of water transfer of the Persian Gulf to northeastern provinces of the country and Isfahan Province, and supports it and will participate in it.

Eng. Naser Taghizadeh said the esteemed president and minister's decision regarding the water transfer project to other provinces is praiseworthy because it can save those areas from possible future fresh water crisis.

He also called it unique the super water desalination project and transfer of water from the Persian Gulf to the industrial units and cities of Kerman and Yazd provinces, adding that the first line of the mega national project with leadership of Golgohar, Mes-e Sarcheshmeh and Chadormalu companies were exploited while many of experts and the officials saw no chance for the success of the project and used to call the project a dreamy one but because of the Almighty help and the guidelines of the Supreme Leader and supports of the president this old dream came true and it blew life into the bodies of dwellers of the desert.

Taghizadeh added that the first phase of the project was carried out in three phases that the first phase was from Bandar Abbas to Sirjan and Golgohar Mining and Industrial Complex, the second phase from Golgohar to Mes-e Sarcheshmeh and the third one from Mes-e Sarcheshmeh to Chadormalu Industrial Complex and soon fresh water will reach Yazd Province.

He noted that in this project two, more lines have been predicted on the sidelines of the major line for water supply to the almost dry areas of the country in case of need.

He announced the support of Chadormalu Company regarding the lines 2 and 3 of water transfer to other provinces, reiterating that the company will definitely support the project and participate in it.



Jask Oil Terminal's 2nd Offshore Line's pipe-Laying Completed



TEHRAN (MNA) - The construction of the second 36-inch offshore oil pipeline of the Jask crude oil export terminal has been completed, the operator of Jask oil terminal project in southern Iran announced.

According to Vahid Maleki, the construction of the mentioned pipeline was started immediately after the completion of the first pipeline in late January and the project was completed on Friday on schedule, Pars Oil and Gas Company (POGC) reported.

Maleki put the total physical progress of the Jask Oil Terminal early-phase at 82 percent, saying: "With the completion of these two offshore pipelines, in the coming days, it will be possible to install the project's first single point mooring (SPM) system which is currently loaded in the Khorramshahr industrial yard."

The construction of the first SPM system of the Jask crude oil export terminal was completed last week and the SPM has been loaded and ready to be shipped toward its designated point in the Gulf of Oman waters.

According to the official, the capacity of this SPM system is 7,000 cubic meters per hour (equivalent to one million barrels per day).

As the country's second major oil terminal, Jask terminal is under construction by POGC on 60 hectares of land and with nearly €260 million of investment.

In line with the development of the mentioned oil terminal, a pipeline project, dubbed the Goreh-Jask oil transfer project, is also underway which is going to provide Iran with an alternative route for the country's crude oil exports that are currently carried out through the Strait of Hormuz.

According to the deputy director of the project in Petroleum Engineering and Development Company (PEDEC) the progress of the first phase of the strategic Goreh-Jask oil pipeline project has also surpassed 70 percent.

Ali Jafarzadeh said that such progress promises that the project will be completed by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20).

Despite the tough condition created by the sanctions and also coronavirus outbreak, this strategic project will be completed at the scheduled time, he underscored.

Webinar on Iran-Oman Trade Opportunities to Be Held

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN- The international department of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) will hold a webinar on investigating the opportunities and potentials for trade between Iran and Oman on Tuesday.

The online event will be attended by the members of Iran-Oman Joint Chamber of Commerce, some representatives of provincial chambers of commerce, as well as the chairmen of different unions and associations.

The meeting will review opportunities, challenges and obstacles related to private sector cooperation with Oman and reports will be released on the latest developments in the region, bilateral cooperation and the prospects for the development of relations and cooperation in addition to the existing opportunities between the two countries.

Problems and proposed solutions to facilitate the entry of Iranian companies into the Omani market will also be discussed by representatives of provincial chambers, as well as the chairmen and representatives of related committees and unions.

During a meeting between the Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) and Oman's Foreign Affairs Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad, in Muscat in late January, the two sides emphasized the necessity of expanding bilateral economic and banking relations.

Addressing the meeting, the Omani minister pointed to the importance of Iran's role and position in the region, and considered the expansion of trade and economic relations between the two countries important.

It should be noted that before this and in the meeting of the CBI governor with the commerce and industry minister of Oman in Tehran last year, strategies for continuous development and facilitation of banking and trade relations between Iran and Oman were discussed.

2nd Consequence National Human Resources Excellence Award for KSC

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The bronze Human Resources Excellence Award went to Khorasan Steel Complex Company (KSC) for the second consecutive year and the company has improved its place in this human resource evaluation.

According to reports, the company for the second consecutive year of its presence in this evaluation category won the bronze award in the C2 class of National Human Resources Management Excellence Award based on the 34000 standard while the company improved its position in the national top company rankings by one place.

The 5th National Conference on Human Resource Management was held at Faculty of Management of



Tehran University on February 2-3 and the top companies and organizations were announced based on evaluation system of Human Resources Management Awards.

Continuous evaluation of activities, processes and results of actions in the field of human resources as well as identifying the weak points and opportunities for improvement are of the goals of Khorasan Steel Complex Company for its presence in the 34000 standard of human resources management that the performance of the company was tested for the second time with the emphasis of the CEO of the company Mr. Kasra Ghafouri.

Mobarakeh Club Hailed for Its Good Performance

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

ISFAHAN – The CEO of Mobarakeh Steel Club Mr. Hamid Reza Azimian hailed the performance of the company's sport clubs, stipulating that sport is one of the sectors which can bring life and joy to the nation.

Addressing the board of directors of the cultural and sport Mobarakeh Steel Club during his visit to the club, Mr. Azimian pointed to the positive role of the club in the scene of the national sport, saying that one of the sectors which can inject joy and life into the society is the very sport that Sepahan Club (name of the club) with its good performance has achieved this point that the Supreme Leader has demanded.

He noted that Sepan Club should act in a way in the country to show if clubs go towards privatization, their performances will be better, adding that this club has kept his social responsibility along with its other tasks which should be institutionalized in the society.

Azimian also said that the club's approach towards the disabled sports with the approach of revitalizing hope in the society is praiseworthy and appreciable. He noted that 90 sport teams are active in this club and Sepahan Club tries to move in a direction in the class and stance of Mobarakeh Steel Company and high standards.

Then Manager of Sepahan Club Mohammad Reza Saket, for his part, highlighted major activities of the club and pointed to the task and responsibility of the club in defending revolutionary values.



Head of IDRO Inspects Industrial Capacities of Shooshtar, Gatvand



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade and Head of IDRO Mr. Mohsen Salehi Nia and his accompanying entourage paid a visit to towns of Shooshtar and Gatvand in Khuzestan Province to inspect the industrial capacities of the region.

According to reports, Salehi Nia during his trip visited some parts of Khuzestan Tire Manufacturing Company and assessed the problems and hurdles in way of activities of the company. He also paid a visit to the construction process of Persian Kimia Company.

The Head of IDRO in his visit was accompanied by representative of Shooshtar and Gatvand to Majlis Mr. Sohrab Gilani and some of the officials of the province.

Salehi Nia in his visit called for reviewing and upgrading the industrial projects in the province based on better condition for investment and announced IDRO's readiness for participation of the private sectors in the project.

He also attended the conference on reinforcing and improving the industrial units of Shooshtar and Gatvand said that these two towns have good production and industrial capacities.

In the conference, the participants reviewed hurdles and problems in way of industry and production in these two towns.

Algeria Frees First Activists After Presidential Pardons

ALGIERS (Dispatches) - Algeria released a dozen "Hirak" protest movement activists from jail on Friday, the first batch freed under presidential pardons issued ahead of the second anniversary of a popular uprising.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, in a long-awaited speech to the nation late Thursday, declared dozens of pardons in a gesture of appeasement as the protest movement gathers momentum once again.

The "Hirak", meaning "movement" in Arabic, swept former strongman Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power in 2019, but continued after his fall.



Protests Flare Up Over Jailed Spanish Rapper

BARCELONA (Reuters) - Police charged protesters who threw stones and bottles at officers and neighbors in Spanish cities on Friday in the fourth night of clashes after a rapper was jailed for glorifying terrorism and insulting royalty in his songs.

The nine-month sentence of Pablo Hasel, known for his fiercely anti-establishment raps, has galvanized a debate over freedom of expression in Spain, prompting the government to announce it would make speech laws less restrictive and sparking protests that, at times, turned violent.



Biden Signals U.S. Return to World Stage



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. president says he is 'determined to re-engage with Europe', in reversal of Donald Trump's isolationist foreign policy.

In his first big appearance on the global stage, President Joe Biden promised the Group of Seven (G7) leaders during the virtual Munich Security Conference that the United States was recommitted to multilateral engagement, including the Paris Agreement on climate change.

"America is back," he said on Friday, breaking away from his predecessor Donald Trump's isolationist foreign policy that saw the US withdraw from significant global agreements and alliances.

"Our partnerships have endured and grown through the years because they are rooted in the richness of our shared democratic values. They're not transactional. They're not extractive. They're built on a vision of the future where every voice matters," he said. Biden told U.S. allies that they must stand firm against the challenges posed by China, Russia and Iran, saying Russia was seeking to weaken the transatlantic alliance and calling for a united front to counter what he called China's abusive economic practices.

Biden arrived bearing gifts - a \$4bn pledge of support for global coronavirus vaccination efforts, the re-entry of the U.S. into the Paris Agreement climate accord and the prospect of a nearly \$2tr spending measure that could bolster both the US and global economies.

A month after Biden took office, the world's largest economy and second largest carbon emitter was formally back in the 2015 global agreement aimed at confronting the planet's dangerously rising temperatures.

The re-entry of the United States means that the Paris accord again includes virtually every country after Biden's predecessor Donald Trump made the United States the sole outlier.

Biden first met G7 leaders from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan by videoconference on Friday. He plans to join them for an in-person summit hosted by the UK this summer.

"'America is back' was the main theme of the speech, a theme of global cooperation, and also of the US standing by Europe's side", he said.

"He was clear when he spoke about China and Russia that this new Biden administration was going to stand up to them - but also on key issues like COVID-19 and the climate crisis, work together with them, too".

European Union chief executive Ursula von der Leyen told the conference that Europe and the U.S. should join together in the fight against climate change and also agree to a new framework for the digital market, limiting the power of big tech companies.

"I am sure: A shared transatlantic commitment to a net-zero emissions pathway by 2050 would make climate neutrality a new global benchmark," von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, said.

G7 Leaders Boost COVAX Support, Focus on COVID Recovery

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Group of Seven leaders, who control a little under half of the world's economy, have pledged billions of dollars to COVAX, a United Nations coronavirus vaccination programme for poorer countries.

U.S. President Joe Biden and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi debuted at the G7 virtual leaders' meeting on Friday which was chaired by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Johnson promised to free up any surplus UK vaccines for poorer countries at a future date, and underlined the need for collective action to recover from the pandemic, which has killed 2.4 million people, tipped the global economy into its worst peacetime slump since the Great Depression and upended normal life for billions.

"We've got to make sure the whole world is vaccinated because this is a global pandemic and it's no use one country being far ahead of another, we've got to move together," he said in opening the virtual summit.

At the G7, Biden pledged \$4bn (3.3bn euros) in US aid to the COVAX fund to buy vaccines for global distribution.

Germany said it was giving an extra 1.5 billion euros for the global rollout, and the European Union doubled its own COVAX funding to one billion euros.

The total in G7 commitments stands at 7.5 billion euros, the group said in a joint statement following the talks. UN health chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus welcomed the G7's move in stepping up their support for COVAX.

"Without global solidarity this virus cannot be defeated," the World Health Organization (WHO) leader told the Munich Security Conference via video-link from Geneva.

Leaving poorer countries without immunisation will allow the coronavirus to mutate, and vaccines will become less effective, Tedros said.

"We could end up back at square one," the WHO chief warned.

The leaders also sought to look beyond the COVID-19 pandemic towards rebuilding their battered economies. They called for stronger defences against a future pandemic, including exploring a global health treaty, but the focus was on a green recovery - on the same day that the United States rejoined the Paris climate agreement.



U.S. Calls on Taliban to End Violence in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - United States defence secretary Lloyd Austin called for a reduction in violence in Afghanistan and said more progress is needed in Afghan peace negotiations before Western forces withdraw from the war-torn country.

"Clearly, the violence is too high right now and more progress needs to be made in the Afghan-led negotiations," Secretary Austin said at a Pentagon news conference on Friday.

"I urge all parties to choose the path towards peace, and the violence must decrease now," Austin said a day after discussing Afghanistan with NATO defence ministers in Brussels.

The U.S. "will not undertake a hasty or disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan" that puts NATO forces at risk, Austin said, adding "no decisions about our future force posture have been made."

"In the meantime, current missions will continue and, of course, commanders have the right and the responsibility to defend themselves and their Afghan partners against attack," he said. New U.S. President Joe Biden faces a thorny choice in Afghanistan: whether to withdraw all U.S. forces by the end of April - as promised to the Taliban by the former Trump administration - or extend the U.S. troop presence while trying to sustain troubled Afghan peace talks.

Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on February 16 called on the U.S. to honor its agreement regarding international troop withdrawals and warned that the group would not allow continuing interference in Afghan affairs.

Pakistan's ambassador to the U.S. said on Friday the Biden administration should negotiate with the Taliban on any decision to keep troops in the country.

"The first party that needs to be consulted is the Taliban. That is where the process should start," Ambassador Asad Majeed Khan told an online forum sponsored by the Stimson Center.

"To present this as a fait accompli, I think, will only create difficulty," Khan cautioned, according to the Reuters news agency.

Taiwan Deploys Missiles After Chinese Jets Enter Its Air Zone

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwan's air force has activated its missile system after eight Chinese fighter jets flew into the southwestern part of its air defense identification zone, in an uptick in tensions as Taipei announced a new defense minister and intelligence chief.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said on Friday four Chinese J-16s and four JH-7s, as well as an electronic warfare aircraft, flew near the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands in the top part of the South China Sea, into the southwestern area of its air defense identification zone.

The ministry said Taiwan's air force was scrambled, with "radio warnings issued and air defense missile systems deployed to monitor the activity".

In recent months China has increased its military activity around the democratic island it claims as Chinese territory. Beijing says it is responding to what it calls "collusion" between Taipei and Washington, Taiwan's most important international backer and weapons supplier.

Chinese aircraft fly in the southwestern corner of the zone on an almost daily basis, though the last such large-scale incursion was on January 24 when 12 Chinese fighter jets were involved.

There was no immediate comment from China. Shortly before the ministry's announcement,

Taiwan announced a reshuffle of senior security officials - including a new, U.S.-trained defense minister - to help bolster military modernization and intelligence efforts.

President Tsai Ing-wen has promised to defend the island and has made modernizing its armed forces a priority, including developing a fleet of new submarines, buying new F-16 fighters from the United States and upgrading its warships.

Presidential Office spokesman Xavier Chang told reporters that National Security Bureau Director-General Chiu Kuo-cheng, who graduated from the US Army War College in 1999, would replace Yen De-fa as defense minister.

Chang said the president expected Chiu to complete the next stage of military reforms, including planning for "asymmetric warfare", focusing on high-tech, mobile weapons designed to make any Chinese attack as difficult as possible. Chiu's old job as intelligence chief will be taken by Taiwan's top China policymaker, Chen Ming-tong, now head of the Mainland Affairs Council.

Chang said Chen was ideally placed for this due to his deep knowledge of China.

"The most important task of the National Security Bureau is to understand and have a grasp on China," Chang said, adding the newly-appointed officials will formally take up their posts next week.



Six People Killed in Clashes, Gun Battles Across Kashmir

SRINAGAR (Dispatches) - Fighters in Indian-controlled Kashmir have killed two police officers in an attack in the disputed region's main city,

while elsewhere in the disputed Himalayan region three suspected rebels and a policeman were killed in two gun battles, officials said.

The violence on Friday came a day after diplomats from more than 20 countries, including from Africa, Europe and Latin America, stationed in India's capital concluded a two-day visit to the region.

Police said fighters sprayed bullets at two policemen near a police station in Srinagar city. Both died later at a hospital.

A short video of the attack circulated on social media shows a man in a pheran, a Kashmiri tunic worn during the winter, taking out what appears to be an automatic rifle and shooting at the policemen. He then quickly runs away.

Police and soldiers searched the area and later detained a young man for questioning. No armed group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

In a separate incident, a gunfight erupted shortly after dozens of police and soldiers launched an operation late on Thursday in a village in southern Shopian district following a tip that three fighters were there, Inspector-General Vijay Kumar said.

All three were killed in an exchange of gunfire early on Friday, Kumar said. He said police recovered two rifles and a pistol.

Residents said government forces used explosives on a civilian house during the fighting, a common tactic by Indian troops in Kashmir.

In another gun battle, fighters killed a policeman and injured another in western Beerwah area early on Friday, Kumar said.

Both India and Pakistan claim the divided territory of Kashmir in its entirety. Many Muslim Kashmiris support the rebel goal that the territory be united either under Pakistani rule or as an independent country.

New Delhi describes actions by Kashmir armed groups as Pakistan-sponsored "terrorism". Pakistan denies the charge, and most Kashmiris consider it a legitimate freedom struggle.

Tens of thousands of civilians, rebels and government forces have been killed in the conflict.



Shanon
(adviser)

Parsian

Mahmoodieh (\$2300) Apt
220sq.m
3bdrs, S/p
Sauna, J
roof garden
marble floor
pkg, & F.F

Farmanieh Villa (\$7000)
2000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
Sauna, J
nice yard
terrace, pkg
elegantly Furn

Kamranieh Apts
(\$1800) 160sq.m, 2bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, & F.F
(\$2700) 260sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, & F.F

Nice mountain View

(\$1800) Gheitarieh Apt
180sq.m, 3bdrs
balcony, & F.F

Niavaran (\$2000)
200sq.m, 3bdrs
balcony

Elahieh bldg (\$5000)
4storey, 13bdrs
pkg lots

Commercial office
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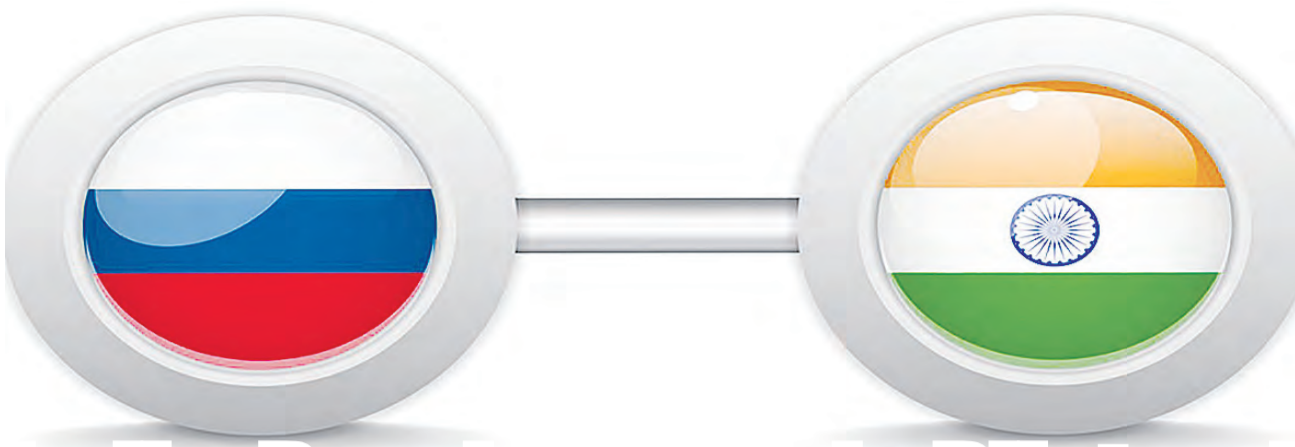
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Gold Hits Lowest in More Than Seven Months

LONDON (Reuters) - Gold recouped some losses on Friday after dropping to its lowest in more than seven months, but stayed on course for its biggest weekly drop since end-November as rising U.S. Treasury yields eroded the appeal of non-yielding bullion.

Spot gold was down 0.1% at \$1,773 per ounce, having touched its lowest since July 2 at \$1,759.29 earlier in the session. Spot prices have declined 2.9% so far this week. U.S. gold futures slipped 0.1% to \$1,773.20. Prices have clawed back some lost ground after hitting technical support at \$1,760, said Hareesh V, head of commodity research at Geojit Financial Services.



India, Russia to Triple Bilateral Trade by \$5b per Annum

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - The Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla has said that India and Russia should diversify their trade basket and economic exchanges by going beyond the traditional sectors and cooperating in new areas like railways, transport and logistics, pharmaceuticals, minerals, and steel that will add momentum to the bilateral ties. He was speaking at a meeting hosted by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow.

Shringla said that India-Russia trade, which amounted to US\$10.11 billion in 2019-2020, is far below potential. "Last year there was a slump, but we are finding ways of reviving it. Both countries have set the bilateral trade target at US\$ 30 billion by 2025," he said.

One of the steps taken to enhance trade is the commencement of negotiations in August 2020 for the India-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Free Trade Agreement. The EAEU includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia and occupies a geographic space between China and the European Union. It has a market of 175 million people and a GDP of US\$5 trillion. Such an FTA would open markets in Central Asia to Indian businesses.

The operationalization of a "Green Corridor" and a bilateral investment protection arrangement are also likely to encourage bilateral trade and investment, respectively, Shringla said, while use of national currencies in bilateral trade settlements would reduce cost and time as well as reducing risk of delayed payments. Both India and Russia are members of the BRICS group of nations that have previously agreed to look at non-US dollar settlements in mutual trade. The development of a BRICS digital currency has also been discussed.

Shringla pointed out that the oil and gas sector has been a flagship sector of commercial cooperation and said the two countries have been looking out for ways to diversify economic exchanges. India is looking at investment in new areas, such as coking coal, timber, and LNG. "We have already started a shipping line between Vladivostok and Chennai. We are looking at a significant trade route which was never there, a new route between our two countries."

Stressing that Indian companies have significantly invested in Russia, he said India's investment in the Sakhalin-1 project was one of India's earliest public sector investments abroad.

To date, Indian oil and gas companies have acquired stakes in five Russian companies/projects at a value of about \$15 billion. Rosneft was the leader of a consortium of investors that, in 2017, acquired a 98 percent stake in India's Essar Oil at a cost of \$12.9 billion. Shringla said that India is privatizing its major oil companies, and some are having discussions with their Russian counterparts to see if some of these stakes can be acquired by Russian investors.

"We are looking at long-term arrangements for the supply of coking coal from Russia for Indian steel plants. An India Energy Centre will be opened in Moscow next month," he said. Underlining the importance of diversifying and expanding India-Russia trade he said, there is interest in taking forward cooperation in railways, transport and logistics, civilian ship building and repair, inland waterways, pharmaceuticals and medical devices, minerals, steel, chemicals, including petrochemicals, ceramics, agro-industry, timber, high technology, and scientific research. Indian companies are actively exploring investments in Russia in energy, minerals, infrastructure, and healthcare, he said.

U.S. Weekly Jobless Claims Rise as Labor Market Recovery Stalls

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The number of Americans filing first-time applications for unemployment benefits unexpectedly rose last week, raising the risk of a second straight month of tepid job growth despite declining new COVID-19 infections.

The weekly unemployment claims report from the Labor Department on Thursday, the most timely data on the economy's health, could add impetus to President Joe Biden's push for a \$1.9 trillion package to aid the recovery from the pandemic.

At least 18.3 million Americans were receiving unemployment checks at the end of January. Government-funded benefits for millions of these people will expire in mid-March unless Congress approves the Biden administration's spending plan.

"Robust pandemic aid is precisely the medicine the economy needs to get Americans back where they want to be, at work," said Andrew Stettner, senior fellow at The Century Foundation.

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits increased 13,000 to a seasonally adjusted 861,000 for the week ended Feb. 13. Data for the prior week was revised to show 55,000 more applications received than previously reported.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast 765,000 applications in the latest week. Many were perplexed by the second straight weekly increase in claims, given the declining coronavirus cases, the disbursement of nearly \$900 billion in additional rescue aid by the government in late December and the White House's pending massive stimulus package.

Timely data have shown an improvement in economic activity, with retail sales surging by the most in seven months in January. Job openings have also been creeping higher.

Minutes of the Federal Reserve's Jan 26-27 policy meeting published on Wednesday showed most Fed officials "anticipated continued progress in vaccinations would lead to a sizable boost in economic activity."

"There have been promising signs of improvement which will hopefully be further boosted by the upcoming spring weather," said AnnElizabeth Konkel, an economist at Indeed Hiring Lab in Washington.

Stocks on Wall Street were trading lower. The dollar slipped against a basket of currencies. U.S. Treasury prices fell.

Part of the increase in claims could be related to the temporary closure of automobile plants beginning last week due to a global semiconductor chip shortage. General Motors announced it would take down production entirely at its Fairfax plant in Kansas City during the week of Feb. 8.

Ford Motor has reduced shifts at its Dearborn truck plant and Kansas City assembly plant.



"Accelerating Trade Digitalization in Times of the Pandemic"

By: Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana

"According to the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, Iran is above average regionally with a nearly 70 per cent overall trade facilitation implementation rate."

Tomorrow marks the entry into force of a new international agreement promoting paperless trade, a timely reminder of how the COVID-19 pandemic has brought digital solutions to regional development challenges into the limelight.

Paperless trade across borders has proven an effective way to mitigate trade disruptions since the onset of the crisis, enabling commerce to continue while limiting physical contact. Yet, despite the increasing acceptance of electronic documents across borders, implementation of cross-border paperless trade remains low according to the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation for Asia and the Pacific.

Across Asia and the Pacific, governments must move from time-consuming paper-based processes to electronic and traceable trade procedures that can significantly enhance competitiveness and address new challenges associated with e-commerce and the digital economy. In doing so, our region can also recover some of the \$200 billion in illicit financial flows that sharply reduce the capacity of governments to put in place support measures for vulnerable groups.

At the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in 2016, member States adopted the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific to accelerate trade digitalization – the electronic exchange of trade-related data across borders – while leaving no one behind.

More than 25 countries worked together to develop the treaty, which is now open for accession to all 53 members of ESCAP. The five countries that have ratified or acceded to the treaty – Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Philippines – represent a diverse group of countries spanning the wider Asia-Pacific region but all are committed to regional cooperation in this critical area. Armenia and Cambodia signed the treaty in 2017 while several other ESCAP members are in the process of completing their accession this year, before implementation of the agreement starts in earnest in 2022.

But we must do more to realize the transformative potential of trade digitalization.

First, we need to fully use the Framework Agreement to provide a region-wide multilateral intergovernmental platform, a dedicated space for developing and testing legal and technical cross-border paperless trade solutions that build on national, bilateral, and subregional initiatives. This treaty marks the beginning of a new journey, one focused on turning cross-border paperless trade into reality through cooperation, testing, innovation, and implementation.

Second, we have to ensure that the Framework Agreement is catalyst for those countries that become a party to it to implement key measures featured in the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), including Single Windows and other actions requiring the use of information and communication technologies.

Third, we recognize that the Framework Agreement is an inclusive and highly flexible cooperation and capacity building opportunities that countries can participate in regardless of their levels of development and digitalization. The estimates presented in the most recent regional trade facilitation report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and ESCAP suggest that the Framework Agreement can help reduce trade costs by more than 20 per cent in most of the region's developing countries. So, this is particularly important now when many bilateral or regional deals exclude some of the least developed countries.

According to the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, Iran is above average regionally with a nearly 70 per cent overall trade facilitation implementation rate. However, Iran could still increase its efficiency, especially for cross-border paperless trade measures. Joining the Framework Agreement sends a clear signal of the leadership's commitment and vision on trade digitalization, supporting the development of the country's digital services capabilities, and enabling the Iran to shape the priorities and implementation of paperless trade in Asia and the Pacific.

I encourage all ESCAP member States to join the treaty as soon as possible and demonstrate political will. There is no deadline for acceding to the treaty but doing so early on will ensure a seat at the table when the Parties formally discuss the implementation of priorities. The benefits of cross-border paperless trade multiply with the number of countries involved. So, the more countries on board, the larger the development gains for all. It is time to accelerate the excellent bilateral and subregional paperless trade initiatives that have emerged across the Asia-Pacific region to build truly seamless and resilient supply chains as we recover better together in the post-COVID-19 era.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana is Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP

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Japan Cuts Economic Outlook in February for First Time in 10 Months

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's government cut its view on the overall economy in February for the first time since April last year as an extended state of emergency to curb coronavirus infections battered consumer spending.

Analysts expect the world's third-largest economy to shrink in the current quarter as renewed restrictions rolled out in Tokyo and some prefectures last month to contain the pandemic damage businesses and household spending.

"The economy shows some weakness though it continued picking up amid severe conditions due to the coronavirus," said the economic report for February.

The government slashed its assessment on consumer spending for a third straight month in February, saying it has shown weakness recently, as the emergency hurt the retail industry as people avoided eating out and travelling.

Meanwhile, the government raised its view on capital spending for a second consecutive month, saying it has been "recovering recently", reflecting an improvement in the nation's core machinery orders.

The government also upgraded its assessment on corporate profits for the first time in two months as they were "picking up while weakness is seen in non-manufacturers" due to the impact from the pandemic.

Manufacturers' profits improved helped by a recovery in auto production and 5G technology related demand, the report said. Thanks to brisk demand for communication devices, the government raised its outlook on imports for the first time in two months.

Turkey to Invest Nearly \$111m in Gas Facility in Black Sea

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey will invest 780 million Turkish liras (around \$111 million) to build a subsea gas production facility, and a 155-kilometer-long pipeline connecting to a new onshore gas processing facility in Filyos, in the Zonguldak province along Turkey's western Black Sea coast, according to an environmental impact assessment application report for this three-phased integrated project.

Turkey's first national drillship, Fatih, discovered 405 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas last year in the country's largest

discovery ever in its history and the biggest offshore gas discovery worldwide in 2020 at the Tuna-1 well located about 170 kilometers off Turkey's Zonguldak coast.

The Fatih drillship continued drilling appraisal wells in the region, the first of which was completed at the Turkali-1 last month. The drillship is currently working on the second well, the Turkali-2, at water depths over 3,000 meters.

The first section of this project, which constitutes the subsea gas production facility, will be built in Turkey's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Black Sea. The second section comprises the subsea natural gas pipeline that will be laid 2.2 kilometers below sea level connecting to the third section – the gas processing facility located in the Filyos Industrial Zone on the Black Sea coast in Zonguldak.

Turkish Petroleum Corporation, the national oil and gas company and project operator, will allocate a significant part of the Filyos Industrial Zone to this new facility.

Around 2,000 people are expected to be employed to bring Sakarya gas to the mainland. The new subsea facility and pipeline, which will have a 40-year lifespan, will be operated remotely without staff.

In the first phase of the project, starting from the first quarter of 2023, a total of 10 million cubic meters (mcm) of natural gas per day will be produced from 6 to 10 wells at the Sakarya Gas Field.

This production volume will be transferred via pipeline to Filyos where it will be processed, ensuring its gas pressure level conforms with that of Turkey's Petroleum Pipeline Company (BOTAS). BOTAS will then distribute the gas to its end users.

The facility will process around 3.5 bcm of natural gas from the Sakarya field annually to help meet Turkey's natural gas consumption of 50 bcm per year.

Total daily field production from around 30 to 40 wells will reach 40 mcm during the second phase of the project from 2023 onwards.

Iran Seeks Gas Exports to Europe

TEHRAN (IP) - The CEO of the National Iranian Gas Company said that the country seeks gas exports to Europe in conjunction with the countries' future atmosphere, adding that the type of cooperation and the developments in Tehran's diplomatic relations affect gas trade."

Hassan Montazer Torbati, CEO of the National Iranian Gas Company says, Iran must pursue gas trade as one of the main issues,

and Turkey is one of the good routes for gas trade.

"Turkey wants to have different gas supply sources and will not depend on one country; naturally, it supplies part of its market from Iran, which is in the interest of both Turkey and Iran. On the other hand, Turkey is a good route for gas trade with Europe in the future," Hassan Montazer Torbati told Shana.



World's Most Unbanked Countries 2021

LONDON (Dispatches) - According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "unbanked" refers to a person or entity "not having access to the services of a bank or similar financial organization." You would be out of luck if your preferred vocabulary is the Merriam-Webster, which concisely explains that the term describes something that is "not deposited in a bank."

Yet, around the globe, there are scores of such thinly or ill-defined specimens: more than 1.6 billion adults, according to the World Bank. Never mind the practicality of cheques or ATM machines, let alone the luxury of credit cards or airline miles: the unbanked have no checking, savings or mobile money provider accounts, no access to financial products like insurance, loans or mortgages, no protection for their money from theft or loss. They are also more likely to be poor—and to stay poor too.

Most of us take basic access to financial services for granted. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, many people relied on digital payments to have groceries and purchases delivered to their homes. Avoiding crowds in stores and marketplaces became a matter of life and death and some nations—from Sweden and Norway, to South Korea, China and Australia—are increasingly becoming cashless societies.

Financial exclusion is expensive. It impacts people's quality of life and it prevents them from investing in their future, it leaves them with limited safeguards if they lose their job or fall ill, it makes them vulnerable to usurious and predatory lenders. In other words, access to financial services is a vital factor for coping with and escaping poverty, which is also why 7 out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals promoted by the United Nations see it as an essential factor in improving the condition of the most marginalized.

But financial exclusion is costly not only for those directly affected: it impedes nations' economic growth and development. Consulting firm EY Global has estimated that broader access banking, savings and lending products could boost GDP by up to 14% in large emerging countries such as India and up to 30% in frontier economies such as Kenya. All variables aside, the unbanked present strikingly similar traits at every latitude and longitude: they are low income and less educated, they often lack the identification and documentation requirements to open a bank account, they tend to live in rural areas far from bank branches. In many nations, they belong to ethnic or religious minorities; in all of them, they are overwhelmingly women.

Morocco, Vietnam, Egypt, Philippines, Mexico: these are the top 5 countries, according to a just-released study by the British research platform Merchant Machine, where the unbanked population is the largest. On a global level, the regions with the highest proportion of developing or emerging economies, quite predictably, top the list: in the Middle East and Africa the 50% of the population is financially excluded, South and Central America follow at 38%, Eastern Europe



and the former Soviet republics at 33%. Asia Pacific's share stands at 24%.

But make no mistake: the two most-developed regions of the world are no shining examples of financial inclusion either—furthermore, having a bank account does not always equal being able to access certain correlated services such as loans. While in Western and Central Europe a relatively low 6% of the population experiences a measure of financial exclusion, the proportion reaches 21% in North America—a figure that closely mirrors a 2019 report by the Federal Reserve showing that 22% of adults in the United States (or 63 million) were underbanked (16%) or fully unbanked (6%).

Yet, if there is a silver lining in the current difficult circumstances, there are already signs that the COVID-19 pandemic could turn into a powerful booster of financial inclusion everywhere. Over the past year, a record number of new accounts have been opened worldwide by firms providing mobile money, fintech and online banking services. Looking ahead, the challenge will be reducing unequal access to digital infrastructures to further these advancements even more.

However, that alone will not be enough to enhance economic participation and eradicate extreme poverty in one magic rapid sweep. As a survey released last year by the central bank of the Philippines—which in 2007 became the first monetary authority to establish an office dedicated to financial inclusion—explains why. With over 50 million individuals unbanked out of a total adult population of 72 million, the bank reported, almost half of them (45%) mentioned the lack of enough money as the top reason for not having an account. Most people who are unbanked are unbanked because they have no income in the first place. True financial inclusion begins by lifting the unbanked out of poverty.

Virus Crisis Upends Hopes For Aviation Careers



PARIS (AFP) - One year ago 26-year-old Perrine was on the cusp of realizing her childhood dream of becoming a flight attendant.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic arrived and Perrine is now on track for a job in insurance instead.

At the CFA center near Paris's Bourget airport where Perrine has been training in mock aircraft cabins, the seats for passengers are now empty and there are no attendants.

Most of the 8,000-square-metre (86,000-square-foot) facility is silent.

In a vast hanger that holds a Falcon business jet and a Super Puma helicopter for technical training, just a couple of dozen students are busy at work benches.

Making the traditional welcome speech at the start of the academic year in this very unusual year "was a bit touch and go", said instructor Pierre-Henri Greze. "Most of the students are concerned, anxious about the future," he added.

The number of apprentices at the start of the 2020 academic year was down by half to 300, with the courses for flight attendants at a complete halt as airlines shed cabin crew jobs to match the vastly reduced number of flights they are operating.

The mechanic and technician students are down by a third. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw airlines ground most of their planes as travel came to a near standstill, graduates of the CFA school had no problem finding jobs.

Rather, it "had trouble finding candidates" for all the jobs that the aviation industry was looking to fill, said CFA director Veronique Flavigny.

In France, the aerospace and aviation industries recruited 8,000 apprentices in 2019, double the number a decade ago as air traffic expanded between 3.0 and 4.0 percent per year.

But Covid-19 brought all that to a brutal halt. Companies are now shedding jobs, thousands of them. Airbus has plans to let 15,000 staff go, including 5,000 in France. Air France plans to cut 8,500 jobs.

Air traffic was down two-thirds globally in 2020, according to the International Air Transport Association, and it does not expect a return to 2019 levels before 2024.

CFA director Flavigny hopes to make it through the worst of the pandemic so the school can survive.

"We found solutions for 2021," she said.

But beyond that, "all depends on how things recover and the support we receive," she added, noting the school has tapped funding offered by the French government.

Air Pollution Caused 160,000 Deaths in Big Cities Last Year

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) - Serious pollution caused around 160,000 premature deaths in the world's five most populous cities last year, even as air quality improved in some places due to coronavirus lockdowns, an environmental group said Thursday.

The worst-affected was New Delhi, the most polluted capital on Earth, where around 54,000 deaths are estimated to have occurred due to hazardous PM2.5 airborne particles, according to a report from Greenpeace Southeast Asia. In Tokyo, the figure was 40,000 with the rest spread across Shanghai, Sao Paulo and Mexico City, according to the report, which looked at the impact of microscopic PM2.5 matter produced by burning fossil fuels.

"When governments choose coal, oil and gas over clean energy, it's our health that pays the price," said Avinash Chanchal, climate campaigner at Greenpeace India.

PM2.5 particles are considered the most harmful for health. They damage the heart and lungs, and increase the chances of severe asthma attacks.

Some studies have linked PM2.5 exposure to a higher risk of dying from Covid-19.

The report used an online tool that estimates the impacts of PM 2.5 by taking air quality data from monitoring site IQAir and combining it with scientific risk models, as well as population and health data.

The tool is a collaboration between Greenpeace, IQAir, and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air.

Despite the high numbers of deaths, coronavirus lockdowns imposed across the world -- that took traffic off the streets and shut down polluting industries -- did temporarily clear the skies above big cities.

Delhi, for instance, underwent a dramatic transformation for a period last year when curbs were imposed, with residents revelling in azure skies and clean air.

Scientists say that massive drops in some pollutants due to lockdowns are bound to have prevented deaths.

Nevertheless, Greenpeace urged governments to put investment in renewable energy at the heart of plans to recover from the pandemic-triggered economic downturn.

"To really clean up our air, governments must stop building new coal plants, retire existing coal plants, and invest in clean energy generation, such as wind and solar," said the group's air pollution scientist Aidan Farrow.

Air France-KLM Plunges to Huge Loss in Pandemic-Hit Year

PARIS (AP) — Air France-KLM plunged to a 7.1 billion euro (\$8.5 billion) loss in 2020 as the global pandemic grounded planes and halted travel plans worldwide causing a 67% slump in passenger numbers at the French-Dutch aviation giant.

The year 2020 "tested the Air France-KLM Group with the most severe crisis ever experienced by the air transport industry," CEO Ben Smith said Thursday.

Both the French and Dutch governments pledged billions in support last year to help the carriers survive the brutal downturn in air traffic caused by the coronavirus.

Smith said the airlines also adapted flight schedules and transported more cargo to compensate for falling bookings.

"Thanks to the French and Dutch state support and this

agile way of working, we were able to drastically reduce our costs, protect our cash, and continue the execution of major transformation plans within our airlines," he said.

Revenue sank by 60.4% to 9.2 billion euros. The massive loss included some 2.1 billion euros in restructuring and other charges. Smith said the carriers now are looking for an improvement in 2021 "as soon as vaccination is deployed on a large scale and borders once again reopen."

KLM CEO Pieter Elbers called 2020 an "incredibly tough" year and referred to massive job losses, saying that "it was with pain in our hearts that we had to say goodbye to more than 5,000 hard-working and dedicated colleagues in 2020."

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.

Russia is better able to absorb oil shocks than many of its OPEC+ allies, primarily because of its flexible exchange rate to the U.S. dollar, the currency used to price its crude. The ruble's value tends to fall against the U.S. dollar when oil prices drop. This allows Russian producers, whose costs are primarily in rubles, to minimize the impact of low prices on their operations.

Leader...

FROM PAGE 1

This is one of the greatest honors of the Islamic Revolution, which has been able to give the opportunity to the honorable youth of the country to play such vital roles.

Dear students, in this precious opportunity that is available to you, you are expected to adorn yourself as much as possible with scientific, religious and moral competencies and prepare yourself to play great roles.

The Union of Islamic Students Associations has a heavier, and of course more honorable, task in this regard.

Seyed Ali Khamenei

Any Signature to...

FROM PAGE 1

"The Europeans told us to wait and we would compensate for the withdrawal of the US. But not only did they not compensate, but they also did not fulfill their obligations under the JCPOA," Takht-Ravanchi noted.

After the illegitimate U.S. exit from the JCPOA in May 2018, the three European signatories to the deal remained indifferent to making up for Iran's losses.

Amid the Europeans' lack of action, Iran took five steps to reduce its commitments to the deal while vowing that it will reverse the course as soon as the other parties live up to their commitments under the accord.

Recently, the Iranian parliament passed a bill, dubbed the Strategic Action Plan to Counter Sanctions in early last December, setting a Feb. 21 deadline for Biden to lift the U.S. sanctions. Otherwise, Iran will halt inspections of its nuclear sites by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and further boost uranium enrichment.

Iran to Launch...

FROM PAGE 1

The Islamic Republic's trade with South Africa reached \$43 million in the first six months of the previous Iranian calendar year (March 21-September 22, 2019), while the figure stood at \$27 million in the same period of its preceding year. Following a new strategy for boosting non-oil trade and distancing the country's economy from oil, Iran has been launching several direct shipping lines to its major trade destinations over the past few years.

Goods Transit Via...

FROM PAGE 1

From the beginning of the current Iranian year to late January, the volume of the transit goods at this crossing border hit about \$250 million, he said, adding that Bashmaq ranks fourth in the country in terms transit, accounting for 10% of Iran's transit.

Marivan Customs is busy in the field of transit, export, passenger affairs, and also the import sector. Kordestan province Customs Offices including Bashmaq border in Marivan and Siranband border crossing in Baneh are offering quality customs services to those who are active in the economic sector. Meanwhile yesterday, interior minister announced that any departure from or entrance to Khuzestan was banned, and new restrictions were implemented.

Responding to the question on Khuzestan's infection rate, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli stated that the entrance of 300-400 people to Iran had been the main reason for the surge in UK variant cases. Rahmani Fazli highlighted that from the emergence of the COVID-19, Khuzestan citizens had implemented all the hygienic protocols and would follow them. "By the upcoming new [Iranian] year, people are urged and asked not to leave home if not necessary, and also this year no exhibition will be held to cut down the virus surge," he noted.

He pointed out that the crowded places such as buses, metros, and taxi stations were fully controlled, adding that during the defined commute lockdown, these places were under strict monitoring by the law-enforcement forces and related organizations, especially during the new year holidays. "In the upcoming 2-3 weeks, a drill to control and contain the coronavirus will be implemented across the country with red and orange zones in priority, especially in Khuzestan Province," Rahmani Fazli announced.

PdV...

FROM PAGE 1

Both Venezuela and Iran are subject to US sanctions that they blame for extensive domestic hardship.

Iranian state-owned carrier Mahan Air made around 20 flights transporting catalyst to the CRP in 2020. The switch to Conviassa has enabled Caracas to save on transport costs. Iran supplied up to 1.2mn bl of gasoline and alkylate to Venezuela in mid-2020. Last month Iranian-flagged tankers Faxon and Fortune delivered over 400,000 bl of gasoline to PdV's Guaraguao terminal in eastern Venezuela. PdV regularly imported catalyst from US and European suppliers until the US government imposed oil sanctions on PdV in late January 2019.

Cardon currently is producing about 40,000 b/d of gasoline and 20,000 b/d of high-sulfur diesel.

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Mertens, Sabalenka Clinch Australian Open Women's Doubles Title

MELBOURNE (Reuters) - Elise Mertens and Aryna Sabalenka beat Czech pair Barbora Krejčíková and Katerina Siniaková 6-2 6-3 to win the Australian Open women's doubles title on Friday for their second Grand Slam trophy together. Seeded second at Melbourne Park, the pair won their maiden major at the 2019 U.S. Open and the victory at the Rod Laver Arena was their fifth title overall. However, they will not be teaming up at Grand Slam events for the rest of 2021 as Sabalenka wants to focus on singles.

Double High Jump World Champion Vlasic Retires

LONDON (Reuters) - Croatia's double high jump world champion and Olympic medallist Blanka Vlasic announced her retirement on Friday after a prolonged battle with injuries. Vlasic made her Olympic debut as a 16-year-old in 2000. She underwent surgery on a thyroid condition five years later but bounced back to claim the silver medal in Beijing in 2008 and bronze in Rio in 2016. Vlasic, 37, said the decision to retire had "come naturally" after she had spent the last few years trying to recover from a foot injury.

Medvedev to Play Djokovic In Australian Open Final



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Daniil Medvedev insisted the pressure was all on Novak Djokovic in the Australian Open final after the Russian breezed past Stefanos Tsitsipas in straight sets in the semis on Friday.

Medvedev, now into his second Grand Slam decider on the back of a 20-match winning streak, said the world number one has "more things to lose" on Sunday.

Djokovic, with 17 major titles, has won all eight of his Australian Open finals and is looking to close the gap on the record of 20 Slam trophies held by Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

"I like that I don't have a lot of pressure because he never lost in eight times that he was here in the final," said the 25-year-old world number four.

"So it's him who has all the pressure, getting to Roger and Rafa in the Grand Slams (list).

"So I just hope that I'm going to get out there, show my best tennis. As we see I can beat some big names if I play good.

"For sure he has more experience, but more things to lose."

Medvedev, a 6-4, 6-2, 7-5 winner against Tsitsipas, has now beaten 12 top-10 players and lifted three trophies during his winning run.

Friday's win included "one of my best shots in my career" -- an off-balance backhand that rocketed past Tsitsipas to break for 6-5 in the final set.

"That was the moment that I won the match," he said. "The shot was unbelievable, I think one of my best shots in my career.

"Actually, my legs were facing the other way of the court because I didn't have time, so I have no idea how I made this, and I was really happy about it."

He said the lessons learned in his debut Slam final, when he came from two sets down to give Nadal a huge scare at the 2019 U.S. Open, would help him on Sunday.

"It's experience, it was my first Grand Slam final against one of the greatest.

On Sunday I'm going to come against one of the other greatest," he said.

"I played against Rafa in this crazy US Open match. It's an experience that maybe, if we're going to have some crazy match, can turn some things for me and not against me."

Medvedev on Friday said he was hoping to land a "great success" for Russia in the Australian Open final at a time when the country's flag and anthem is banned from international sport.

Medvedev, 25, who will play eight-time winner Novak Djokovic in Sunday's decider, said he didn't understand why the Russian flag will not be flown at this year's Olympics. But he said he wanted to show children that Russia can be a "great tennis country".

Russia's flag and anthem is barred from international events until December 2022 -- including the Tokyo Olympics, Beijing Winter Olympics and football World Cup in Qatar -- as punishment for severe doping violations.

"We want kids to play tennis. We want kids to know that Russia can be a great tennis country, and that's the most important. That's the most enjoyable part of success we are in."

Russian players are riding high in tennis, after three reached the Melbourne quarter-finals. Medvedev is on a 20-match unbeaten streak, including four wins during Russia's victorious ATP Cup campaign.

"When we talk about tennis, we don't have all these restrictions," Medvedev said of the flag ban.

Real Madrid Hit by Benzema Injury



MADRID (Dispatches) - Karim Benzema could miss Real Madrid's Champions League game against Atalanta next week after Zinedine Zidane confirmed the striker was injured on Thursday.

Benzema missed training on Friday morning and Zidane said he did not travel with the team for La Liga game away at Real Valladolid.

The club have not yet confirmed the specifics of the problem.

"He won't be with us tomorrow," said Zidane in a press conference on Friday. "He has a problem and because it came up yesterday he won't be there tomorrow. We'll see for next week."

Madrid might cope without Benzema against Valladolid but his absence for the trip to Bergamo in the first leg of the Champions League last 16 on Wednesday would be a huge blow.

The Frenchman has scored 17 times in all competitions this season and has netted in his last two consecutive matches.

"We know what Karim gives us and how important he is for us," said Zidane. "But we have to deal with this and get him back as soon as possible, like the others."

Kasatkina Returns to Winning Ways in Melbourne

MELBOURNE (Reuters) - After suffering an early exit at the Australian Open, Russia's Daria Kasatkina made the most of another opportunity to shine at Melbourne Park by winning the Phillip Island Trophy on Friday.

The tournament, a WTA 250 event, was set up to provide players eliminated during the first week of the season-opening major a chance to boost their match fitness following a mandatory 14-day quarantine upon arrival in Australia.

Playing in her first WTA final since winning the 2018 Kremlin Cup in Moscow, Kasatkina rallied from a set down to beat Czech Republic's Marie Bouzková 4-6 6-2 6-2 in the final.

Bouzková produced a fighting display but eventually ran out of gas, having come through a brutal three-hour semi-final against second seed Bianca Andreescu.

Kasatkina, who was knocked out in the Australian Open second round by Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka in straight sets, rebounded to overcome four seeded opponents en route to her third WTA title.

The Phillip Island Trophy, a WTA 250 event, was set up to provide players eliminated during the first week of the season-opening major a chance to boost their match fitness following a mandatory 14-day quarantine upon arrival in Australia.

In a bid to rediscover her best level on court, former world number 10 Kasatkina revealed she has been working with a psychologist since the start of last season.

"It took a lot of time to rebuild my game, to rebuild my confidence, to change myself. Finally I'm feeling good," the 23-year-old said.

"I was working with a psychologist a lot. I learned that your confidence shouldn't depend on your results.

"To lose one match doesn't have to kill yourself from inside, so... I think that was the main thing."

Spurs Can Still Finish in Top Four



LONDON (Dispatches) - Jose Mourinho still believes Tottenham Hotspur can finish in the top four of the Premier League despite a poor run that has sent them tumbling down the table.

Spurs have slipped from top to ninth after a run of just three wins in the past 12 games, meaning they are now outsiders to secure Champions League qualification.

Mourinho's men visit West Ham on Sunday -- they are six points behind the fifth-placed Hammers with a game in hand.

"It's very premature to think about the table," said the Spurs manager. "People still have matches in hand. In our case, we played already two matches

against Liverpool, Chelsea, Manchester City.

"There are other teams that didn't even play a second game against one of the top teams.

"We have one match in hand. I know already that because Southampton has to play the quarter-finals of the FA Cup in the same week as we should play them, we're not going to play that match."

Mourinho said Spurs, who play City in the League Cup final in April, would fight to qualify for next season's Champions League.

"Anything can happen," the Portuguese boss added.

"We can finish top four, top six or outside the top six. We have to make sure the best possible thing is going to happen."

The reverse fixture between the London rivals at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in October finished 3-3 after West Ham scored three goals in the final 10 minutes.

Harden Powers Nets To Comfortable Win Over Lakers

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - James Harden had 23 points and 11 assists and Joe Harris scored 21 points as the Brooklyn Nets beat the host Los Angeles Lakers 109-98.

Kyrie Irving contributed 16 points and seven rebounds for the Nets, who captured their fifth consecutive victory. Reserve Timothe Luwawu-Cabarrot scored 15 points while making 5 of 8 3-point attempts. Harris was 6 of 7 from 3-point range.

Brooklyn's Kevin Durant (hamstring) missed his third straight contest.

LeBron James had 32 points on 14-of-23 shooting while adding eight rebounds and seven assists for the Lakers, who played without Dennis Schroder (health and safety protocols). They already were without Anthony Davis, who is expected to be sidelined at least two to three weeks due to a calf strain. Kyle Kuzma contributed 16 points and 10 rebounds and Montrezl Harrell chipped in 10 points for Los Angeles, which has dropped two of its past three contests.

The Nets' 3-point shooting played a big role in the outcome. Brooklyn converted 18 of 39 (46.2 percent) from long distance compared to 8 of 30 (26.7 percent) for the Lakers. Overall, the Nets connected on 49.4 percent of their shots compared to 48.2 percent for the Lakers.

Brooklyn, which led 90-74 after three quarters, put the game out of reach midway through the fourth. The Nets held a 31-24 lead after one quarter and increased the margin in the second. Irving followed his own miss with a basket for a 60-41 advantage with 3:08 left in the second quarter.



Man Utd Set for Talks With Cavani Over His Future

LONDON (Dispatches) - Ole Gunnar Solskjaer says Manchester United will sit down with Edinson Cavani to discuss the veteran striker's future at Old Trafford.

The 34-year-old Uruguay international has impressed on and off the pitch since joining on a free transfer from Paris Saint-Germain in October.

Cavani, PSG's all-time top-scorer, signed a one-season deal with United with the option to extend by a further year.

He has scored seven goals in 24 appearances for United and Solskjaer has made no secret of his hopes to keep him at Old Trafford.

"I've been impressed by him," said the United boss. "He's really gelled in the group and we'll sit down with him and speak with him of course in the near future to see his plans and our plans.

"It's a good discussion to (have). We always speak to the players and with his contract situation at the moment we're very pleased with what he's done."

Cavani was ruled out of Thursday's impressive 4-0 win against Real Sociedad in the Europa League with a knock but Solskjaer hopes it will not keep him out of Sunday's return to Premier League action against struggling Newcastle.

Second-placed United could be 13 points behind Pep Guardiola's men at kick-off on but Solskjaer is not focusing too much on their rivals.

"We're going to have to get a good run together if we're going to put pressure on City and it should start on Sunday, of course," he said.

