

Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Wednesday
That Some 86 More Iranians Have
Died From the Coronavirus Disease
Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing the
Total Deaths to 60,353

IRAN NEWS

Foreign Ministry Spokesman
Lashed Out at the Biden
Administration's Allegations
Against Iran Regarding Yemen War,
Reiterating Americans Cannot Act
As a Claimant and Make Baseless
Accusations Against Others

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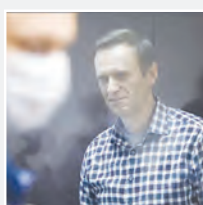


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Ireland to Re-Establish Diplomatic Presence in Iran

DUBLIN (Dispatches) - Ireland will re-establish its diplomatic presence in Iran following the closure of its embassy in Tehran in 2012, Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney announced.

"A Diplomatic Mission will be established this year, to be headed at Charge d'Affaires level, with a commitment to re-open an Irish Embassy in 2023," Coveney said in a statement posted on the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs on Tuesday.

He said that the decision is part of the government's efforts to double Ireland's global impact by 2025 under a Global Ireland strategy.

"As an elected member of the Security Council, it is particularly important that we have the ability to engage in more depth on the range of Middle East issues on the Security Council's agenda," he said.

The minister added that Ireland has a particular responsibility to play a constructive and impactful role on the nuclear non-proliferation agenda as a facilitator of Resolution 2231 for the next two years on the Security Council.

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Iranian Container Ship Refloated Off Indonesian Coast

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian container ship Shahraz has been refloated off the Indonesian island of Batam some nine months after it grounded in a narrow strait in the region.

Indonesian maritime news website Spalsh247 said in a Tuesday report that Shahraz became seaworthy earlier in the day following significant repair works on the ship that involved many vessels.

The report said, however, that the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), which owns and operates the ship, need to carry out more repair work on the vessel before it can put it back to normal service.

Shahraz ran aground on May 12 near the island of Sambu, off Batam, after it reportedly collided with Indonesian-flagged bulk carrier Samudra Sakti. The Iranian ship had been sailing from Malaysia's Port Klang to China's Shanghai.

The incident caused damage to the port side, as well as to the back of Shahraz while the Indonesian ship involved in the scene was refloated and moved to a nearby anchorage.

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President Warns Over Delay In Lifting Sanctions



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday that delay is not good even for one hour for lifting sanctions, adding that the people have the right to get rid of sanctions and the burden they shoulder under sanctions.

In a cabinet meeting, President Rouhani said that the rights of the people are being violated by sanctions when a bullying power does not allow Iran to get back money from export of goods.

He recalled guidelines of the Supreme Leader to focus on domestic economy and the Resistance Economy to avert hardship imposed on people by the sanctions, saying that the sanctions violate basic human rights of the people and life under sanctions and isolation is harmful.

The U.S. rhetoric has changed and they have admitted wrong decisions by the previous U.S. administration and even canceled a letter to the UN demanding snapback to the sanctions lifted by the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, the President said, adding that Washington, however, has taken no serious step to lift the unilateral sanctions and recognizing Iranian nation's rights.

Rouhani underscored that if the seven states parties to the JCPOA have a resolve for compliance to the JCPOA, especially Iran and the U.S., it would be a matter of a few days for the U.S. to lift sanctions and for Iran to return to full compliance with the deal.

President Rouhani said that former U.S. President Donald Trump failed totally in his Iran policy without even a single win and that was a trap laid by Israel.

"Does the current U.S. administration admit that the measures by their predecessor were wrong? If yes, then they should both admit evidently and fulfill their commitments and even compensate the mistakes," Rouhani added.

He underlined that this is exactly what Iranian officials say when talking to Europeans who insist on revival of the JCPOA.

Describing the JCPOA as one of the most important political deals in Iran's history, Rouhani said that the deal legitimized Iran's peaceful use of nuclear energy that was previously a source of pressure on the country.

Referring to the countries remained in the JCPOA as 4+1, the President emphasized that they have to admit that Iran stood up to the Economic War for three years and it was Iran that saved the deal. Therefore, he added, they have to abide by the law.

Meanwhile, he asked Iran's Expediency Discernment Council to pass the law approving FATF bills, elaborating that the FATF-related discussions have nothing to do with sanctions.

Katyusha Rockets Target Ain al-Assad Military Base

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - A barrage of rockets have struck the Ain al-Assad air base hosting American forces in the western Iraqi province of Anbar.

The Security Media Cell, affiliated with the Iraqi prime minister's office, announced in a statement that 10 Grad rockets had struck the base, located about 160 kilometers (100 miles) west of the capital Baghdad, on Wednesday morning. The statement added that security forces had found the launch pad for the projectiles, and further details about the incident would be provided later.

The attack took place at 7:20 am (0420 GMT), coalition spokesman Colonel Wayne Marotto confirmed.

Iraqi and Western security sources said a contractor with the US-led military coalition died of a heart attack during the rocket attack. His nationality has not been unveiled.

Sabereen News, a Telegram news channel associated with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units, reported that C-RAM systems as well as Patriot Advanced Capability-2 (PAC-2) missile systems deployed at the base were not able to intercept the rockets. According to the report, a number of U.S. military aircraft as well as Spanish choppers could be seen flying over the Hit district, where the air base is located, in the aftermath of the rocket attack.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack yet, which is the latest in a series of assaults that have targeted U.S. positions in Iraq over the past few months.

Witnesses said a thick column of smoke could be seen billowing from flames in the base.

The raid comes days after the US military conducted an air raid on positions belonging to the forces of the PMU, better known as Hashd al-Sha'abi, on the Iraqi-Syrian border, where they were engaged in fighting the remnants of the Takfiri Daesh terror group. The Iraqi counter-terrorism force pledged retaliation, prompting the U.S. military forces to go on high alert and adopt maximum security measures in anticipation of a response.

The U.S. raid was said to be a response to recent attacks on its military base in Erbil and its mission in Baghdad's Green Zone, which Washington blames on Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah, a claim rejected by the Hash al-Sha'abi faction.

Tehran, Seoul Agree On Mechanism for Return of Frozen Assets

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that the mechanism for returning Iranian assets from South Korea has been agreed upon by the parties.

"Last week, I had a conversation with the Foreign Minister of South Korea at his request. The Korean minister stated that they are doing their best to reach a conclusion, and we are following up on our part," Zarif was quoted as saying by Iranian media.

"Mechanisms have been agreed, but apparently the Koreans have not yet received the necessary permits, so they say they are pursuing the issue," he added, Mehr news agency reported.

"Iran thinks that it is not necessary to obtain a license from the Americans, but the Korean side is still trying to obtain this license from the United States to release Iranian blocked assets in Korea," the top Iranian diplomat noted.

The Korean foreign ministry said last week that the Iranian assets locked in South Korea will be released after consultations with the United States.

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Iran Taps Old Asian Oil Customers While Eying Return of Exports

LONDON (Bloomberg)- Iran is reaching out to its old customers in Asia to gauge interest in its crude as the Persian Gulf oil producer ramps up diplomacy in a bid to get U.S. sanctions lifted.

At least five refiners across the region have been approached by National Iranian Oil Co. -- the state oil marketer -- to discuss the possibility of buying crude if sanctions are eased, according to people familiar with the matter. Talks are preliminary, with no discussion on volumes or prices just yet, they said, asking not to be identified because the information is confidential.

One processor has been contacted twice so far this year after having no interaction with the OPEC producer at all in 2020, according to one person. The Iranian oil ministry in Tehran declined to comment on the matter.

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Tehran Keen to Lift Whole Leaf Teas From India

KOLKTA (Dispatches)- Iranian buyers have initiated negotiations with Indian tea trade to procure whole leaf teas to meet the country's domestic demand.

The Persian Gulf nation, which was severely hit by the pandemic, is ready to pay good prices to the Indian tea exporters and the contracts will be signed by second week of March when new season teas in small quantities will slowly start arriving in the market.

"Iranian buyers are keen to lift whole leaf or orthodox teas from India," Mohit Agarwal, director at Asian Tea & Exports, told ET. "They are offering us good prices for these teas. Sentiment in Iran is upbeat as Covid cases have come down. Also, with Joe Biden becoming the president of the U.S., they are hopeful that positive steps will be taken towards the sanctions issue." Agarwal added that the exporters are hopeful to achieve exports of nearly 54 million kg to Iran this year, a volume that was achieved in 2019.

Due to the pandemic and payment problems in Iran, exports had come down in 2020. According to Tea Board of India statistics, India exported 31.06 million kg of tea between January and November 2020, as compared to 50.46 million kg in the same period of 2019.

Iranians are fond of tea and import high quality tea from India and Sri Lanka. Though Iran produces 20-30 million kg domestically, the quality of teas is not good. That is why the country imports orthodox teas from India and Sri Lanka. Iran imports 65-70 million kg of tea annually.

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President Congratulates Bulgaria National Day

TEHRAN (IRNA)- President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday congratulated Bulgaria National Day, calling for historical Tehran-Sofia ties to develop to serve international peace and stability.

President Rouhani made the remarks through a message to his Bulgarian counterpart Rumen Radev on the occasion of Liberation Day in that country on March 3.

At the end of his message, Rouhani wished prosperity, health and success for the Bulgarian people. Bulgaria's national day honors Bulgarian volunteers who liberated Bulgaria from about 500 years of Ottoman rule during 1877-1878 war.

IAEA Resolution on Iran Unconstructive

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President's Chief of Staff Mahmoud Vaezi said that the "nonconstructive" resolution in the IAEA Board of Governors against Iran would impact negatively the JCPOA negotiations and Iran's interaction with the nuclear watchdog.

Speaking to reporters after a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Vaezi ruled out that the IAEA BoG meeting was convened to discuss an anti-Iran resolution and said that it is not expected from the IAEA board to issue such a resolution.

However, he described the resolution as "nonconstructive" and stressed that it would impact the JCPOA talks and Iran's cooperation with the IAEA and called for changes to be made to it.

Vaezi pointed to the phone conversation between Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron and said the two presidents exchanged views on the issue of the JCPOA. Vaezi also said that Rouhani told Macron that all parties are willing to fully implement the deal and it is, therefore, only a matter of time. Iran's stance is totally clear that sanctions have to be removed and Americans and



Europeans need to take practical steps followed by Iran's verification before returning to full compliance with the JCPOA, according to Vaezi who went on to say that Iran was set to consider raised ideas and maintain communication at the expert level.

Rouhani's Chief of Staff said that the current US administration cannot continue contradictory policies, admitting in words that measures by the former US administration were wrong, but no action to reverse them.

Enemies Fighting Losing Asymmetric War With Iran

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says enemies are fighting a losing war against the Islamic Republic, citing the country's religious and popular resources as what have devastatingly turned the odds against the adversaries.

"The enemy's fate is defeat forever," Major General Hossein Salami told an event in Tehran on Tuesday. "The asymmetry that characterizes this warfare is rooted in the [difference between] the nature, identity, and logic of the power" that is owned by each side.

The enemies cannot take on the power that Islamic Revolution has bestowed upon Iran using material means, General Salami said, adding that the country's triangle of its religious faith, religious leadership, and popular presence was always destined to frustrate the adversaries.

Although the Islamic Republic may be confronted with various instances of military force or economic siege, its reliance on its beliefs and convictions always enables it to ride out the storm, the commander said.

He said the adversaries had all been abortively trying to target the country since the 1979 Revolution, including by ramping up their pressures to unprecedented levels over the past three years.

The commander described the Revolution as an "awareness revolution" that served to awaken the humanity. "Reprisal of this awakening cannot be prevented now anymore," he said.

He asserted that one of the ideals of the Revolution was saving the humanity from the "arena of modern slavery."

"The truth that defines the Revolution features a new resurrection for the human being so it can rise up from the graveyard of ignorance and servitude," General Salami said.

Ever since the dawn of the Revolution, many powers, who used to appear invincible ended up witnessing the demise of their own logic and beliefs before their eyes, he said. The IRGC chief commander considered the breakdown of the enemies' logical tenets as the area where they have suffered their main defeat.

Removal of U.S. Bans Only Way to Save JCPOA

TEHRAN (IFP) - President Hassan Rouhani had a telephone conversation with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday evening.

During the phone call, Rouhani said the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) cannot be renegotiated in any way, and the only way to maintain and revive it is the removal of US sanctions.

He also warned that missing the opportunity to save the 2015 nuclear deal could make the situation more difficult.

"The stepwise reduction of commitments on the part of Iran was due to the withdrawal of the United States from the deal and the inability of the three European countries to fulfil their obligations," Rouhani said, stressing that Iran's measures can be reversed immediately after the other parties' fulfilment of their obligations.

Rouhani said Iran's move to stop the voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol was made within the framework of the law passed by the parliament.

However, he said, Iran's cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will continue and the country has not withdrawn from the JCPOA in any way.

"Any unconstructive action or position in the Board of Governors could lead to new challenges and complicate the current situation," he warned.

Rouhani referred to France as an important actor and said, "Tehran-Paris relations can be developed based on a sustainable vision and with long-term goals for bilateral, regional and global cooperation."

Referring to the coronavirus pandemic in various countries around the world, including Iran and France, the President said that effective confrontation with the virus requires the cooperation of all countries in the world.

"The United States' cruel, illegal sanctions have made it more difficult for Iran to deal with this disease and made it difficult for the Islamic Republic to access its financial resources, even for the supply of medicine and medical equipment, and the European Union, especially France, is expected not to remain silent regarding this inhumane act," he said.

Macron, for his part, called for the preservation of the JCPOA a necessity for the international community and stressed the need for the continuation of talks in order for all parties to return to the full implementation of their commitments.

He stressed the need for the two sides to take the initial steps and said, "Europe is ready to be more active in the coming weeks to revive the JCPOA."

Reliance on People Key to Iran Prosperity

TEHRAN (IP) - Majlis Speaker mentioned three elements of theism, reliance on people, and self-belief as the ones that led to the Iranian nation's victory against the enemy's pressures.

"We must believe in our own will and effort," said Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf at the closing ceremony of the "Our Blissful Friend" festival.

"God has promised that wherever we resist, and in whatever difficulty, if we stand in His way, victory will be ours."

The Speaker went on to say that the third point is to rely on people.

"Every problem is solved by the people. If the Islamic Revolution succeeded in the face of all these enemies, it was based on believing in divine traditions, reliance on people, and self-belief," he said.

Referring to the characterists of the late Commander of Iran's elite Quds Forces, Lt. Gen.

Ghasem Soleimani, Qalibaf said: "One of the unique attributes of Martyr Soleimani was his bravery besides acting with wisdom. It was this spirit that turned threats and limitations into opportunities through paying attention to the people, and turned opportunities into success."

In order to stand up to murderers and criminals, he Martyr Soleimani organized all free men, the common people, and youth from the Islamic nations.

The closing ceremony of the "Our Blissful Friend" festival was held on Tuesday in Tehran by the Iranian Red Crescent Society in the presence of Iran's parliament speaker, a number of MPs, the head of the Red Crescent Society, and the daughter of Lt. Gen. Ghasem Soleimani Zeinab Soleimani.

The winners of the festival were honored in various artistic fields at the event.

Entrepreneurs Hailed for Contribution in Foiling Sanctions

IRAN (IP) - First vice president has said that Iranian entrepreneurs kept the country's industries alive in these difficult conditions when the Americans wanted to cripple Iran's economy and production.

Referring to some criticisms about the obstacles created for craftsmen, in the fifth awarding Amin al Zarb badge of entrepreneurship, Jahangiri said: "Producer and craftsman always have the task of drawing a bright future so that the governments be able to move forward the country."

In this meeting, which was also attended by the mayor of Tehran and the head of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, 9 of the country's craftsmen and entrepreneurs were awarded the 'Amin al Zarb' entrepreneurial badge and statue.

The Amin al-Zarb Badge (named after a merchant and philanthropist who founded the TCCIM 136 years ago) is given to leading entrepreneurs and thinkers in recognition of their contribution to the economy.

Zarif, Guterres Discuss Yemen Crisis

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres have called for the start of peace talks in Yemen in order to put an end to the protracted Saudi-led aggression and blockade against the war-ravaged country.

In a phone conversation on Tuesday, Zarif and Guterres discussed the latest steps taken by the United Nations to end the war and restore peace in Yemen as well as efforts to start dialogue among all political parties in the country. The UN chief called for the continuation of the prominent efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran in helping to establish peace in Yemen.

Zarif, for his part, expressed Iran's support for the UN's efforts to restore peace in Yemen, and stressed the need for an end to the Saudi war of aggression, lifting the blockade and providing humanitarian assistance to the Yemeni people. The top Iranian diplomat also expressed hope for the establishment of peace and stability in Yemen through holding intra-Yemeni talks and forming an inclusive government.

Saudi Arabia and a number of its regional allies launched the war on Yemen in March 2015, with the goal of bringing the government of ex-president Hadi, back to power and crushing the popular Ansarullah movement. According to the United Nations, 80 percent of Yemen's 30 million people need some form of aid or protection. About 13.5 million Yemenis currently face acute food insecurity, UN data shows.

In a related development on Tuesday, aid groups warned of worsening humanitarian situation in Yemen after a UN appeal for more funds for the war-torn country fell short of reaching its goal.

Iran Anti-Narcotics Police Shares Experiences With Iraq

TEHRAN (IP) - The head of Iran's anti-narcotics police, in a meeting with the Iraqi director of anti-narcotics police, stressed the need to develop bilateral cooperation and exchange information.

Brigadier General Majid Karimi, in a meeting with Major General Mazen Kamel Mansour, the Iraqi Directorate for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, stated: "The Anti-Narcotics Police of the Islamic Republic of Iran in areas such as combating transit and drug trafficking has achieved good results so that the discovery of 1150 tons of drugs by Iran in 2020 shows this fact."

Referring to the existing capacities of the Anti-Narcotics Police of the Islamic Republic of Iran, he said: "The Iranian Anti-Narcotics Police has made significant progress in various fields, especially the training of dogs and a specialized drug laboratory, and declares its full readiness to cooperate with the Iraqi Anti-Narcotics Police and share the experience."

Major General Mazen Kamel Mansour, the Iraqi Directorate for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, while visiting the Iranian Anti-Narcotics Police exhibition, appreciated the countermeasures and extensive activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the fight against narcotics.

He said: "We welcome the development of cooperation with the Iranian Anti-Narcotics Police and call for a memorandum of cooperation in various fields of counter-narcotics."

8th Intl' Exhibition of Rail Transportation, Related Industries, Equipment Opens

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Eighth International Exhibition Of Rail Transportation, Related Industries and Equipment opened in Tehran on Wednesday.

This event was supported by the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and the presence of the Railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Eighth International Exhibition of Rail Transportation and Related Industries Equipment will be held on March 3-6, 2021 attended by companies at Tehran International Permanent Fairground.

Showcasing the latest achievements and technologies of the rail industry in Iran and the world and participation in investments are the most important goals of the Iran Rail Expo 2021.

In this exhibition, domestic companies will present the latest achievements, products, equipment, and services related to the field of rail transportation. These achievements can be in the field of freight or passenger services and even insurance and investment models.

Foreign Companies Urged to Be Responsible Partners in Iran Market

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Abbas Hashemi, director general of Metal Industries and House Appliances, said on Wednesday that foreign companies are keen on presence in Iranian market, but, business talks are required to oblige them to be responsible partners.

Hashemi said that in recent years, well-known foreign companies active in manufacturing house appliances withdrew from the Iranian market under the pressure of the United States, while they wanted to come back to Iranian vast market.

The official also noted the withdrawal had some benefits for Iran and helped the country develop its own industries; so, the Iranians have experienced a good progress in manufacturing different kinds of house appliances.

However, he said, the procurement of certain house appliances from the domestic market is not economic; thus, the country still requires import of the items.

He said that the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade plans to pave the way for increasing the production of house appliances to 25 million items per annum by 2026.

The project has been envisaged given the fact that there is big regional market with 400 million residents, who spend 27 billion dollars for house appliances, Hashemi added.

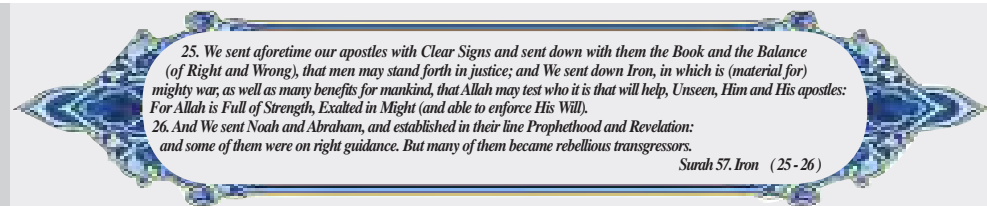
Iran envisioned 30 percent growth of house appliances production for the current Iranian year (March 20, 2020 to March 20, 2021), but the country could hit the record of producing 12 million sets of house appliances within 10 months of the year, he said.

Despite the fact that Iran is facing US-imposed sanctions as well as the outbreak of COVID-19, it has been able to hit the record of manufacturing house appliances sets since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:16
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:20
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:05
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:28



Iran Hand-Woven Carpet Exports Rise 16.4% in 9 Months

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Head of National Iranian Carpet Center (NICC) says Iran's hand-woven carpet exports have grown by 16.4 percent in terms of weight in nine months this year comparing to the same period last year.

Speaking during a ceremony to issue ID certificates for Iranian carpets, Ms. Farahnaz Rafe'a said that over 2,762 tons of hand-woven carpets have been exported to the target countries in nine months comparing to the same period last year that the amount was 2,366 tons.

She added that over 2 million people are working in the hand-woven carpet business as 60 percent of them are constant carpet-weavers and 31 percent are also seasonal weavers.

Rafe'a added that over 261,000 carpet-weavers have gone under the shelter of the social security insurance as it is predicted the number to increase by 20 percent next year.

On the statistics regarding the hand-woven carpet output this year, she said the figure has grown by 32 percent in 10 months this year comparing to the same period last year.

She reiterated that this year and in 10 months over 1.86 million square meters of hand-woven carpet have been produced while the figure for last year was 1.23 million cubic meters.

Yesterday the NICC organized a ceremony to issue ID certificates for Iranian carpets in presence of the First Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri and Governor of Central Bank of Iran.

Addressing the ceremony, Rafe'a also said that the ceremony was held to mark issuing identity cards for Iranian carpets for the first time.

She said that today for the 1st time in past 16 years a ceremony-conference meeting on Iranian handwoven carpets was held in the presence of high ranking officials, including the 1st vice president, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) as well as eight cabinet ministers.



She said that those who have interests in Iranian handwoven carpets are present in the conference and will speak about their concerns and problems, including handwoven carpets' status of export market, the customs tariffs for silk thread, customs clearance problems, issuance of artist cards for the carpet weavers, offering them low interest loans and health insurance services.

The NICC director meanwhile announced that this Thursday and Friday experts meeting will convene for the first time to hear new ideas on improvement of the Iranian carpets' national and international markets, including provision of the raw materials they need using new methods.

She said that in the past emphasis was always made on the point that the handwoven carpets are traditional arts and therefore new technologies should not be applied in their production, whereas the experts meeting is going to break that taboo, and during two days of lectures, workshops and training, the participants will have a fortnight's time to present their ideas and projects in electronic media provided for the purpose, and receive the answers to their questions.

According to the IRNA reports, during the first eight months the current (Iranian) year (that began on March 23, 2020) Iranian handwoven carpets worth \$47,919,663 were exported to world markets, that was merely less and \$800,000 less than the previous year, same period. According to national employment statistics, by mid-June 2020, 1,200,625 people were weaving carpets across Iran, and 191,545 other professional workers in jobs related to carpet industry were working to support them.

Iran Imported Nearly \$2.3b Worth of Corn in 11 Months

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's customs office IRICA says corn imports into the country reached nearly \$2.3 billion in value terms in the 11 months to late February.

IRICA figures published on Tuesday showed that Iran had spent more than \$2.298 billion for imports of nearly 9.126 million metric tons of corn between March 20 last year and February 18 this year.

Corn imports accounted for 21 percent of the value of all basic goods imports into Iran, said IRICA, adding that the value of medicine and medical equipment imports had amounted to \$1.481 billion, followed by oil seeds at \$1.073 billion and cooking oils at nearly \$896 million.

It said Iran had paid an additional \$1 billion for soybean meal and barley imports to respond to a growing demand for feed in its animal husbandry sector.

On staples, the customs office said that Iran had imported nearly three million tons of wheat worth more than \$813 million in the 11 months to late February, while rice imports had amounted to 850,000 tons worth \$776 million. Funds spend on sugar and black tea imports exceeded more than \$650 million for the same period, it said.

Iranian government has managed to maintain a smooth flow of basic goods into the country despite facing restrictions on trade and payment issue because of U.S. sanctions and the spread of the coronavirus around the world.

IRICA has a list of 25 items of basic goods for which the government pays foreign currency at a subsidized price. In addition to staples, medicine and animal feed, the list also includes certain legumes, farming seeds, pesticides, meat, some dairy products, paper and manufacturing equipment.

The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) said last month that it had earmarked \$9.2 billion between March and February to fund basic goods imports into the country.

Tire Output Expected to Hit a Record High by Yearend

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Given the process of tire production in the country in the current Iranian calendar year (began on March 20, 2020), it is hoped that a new record will be achieved in this regard in this year, according to the spokesman of the Iranian Tire Syndicate.

Mostafa Tanha told IRNA that if a record high will be posted, it will be a big success achieved despite the limitations imposed by the sanctions and also the coronavirus pandemic.

As already reported the production of tires in Iran has risen 20 percent during the first ten months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2020- January 19, 2021), compared to the same period of time in the past year.

Some 225,269 tons of tires have been produced during the ten-month period of this year. In terms of number, a 20-percent growth has been also achieved through the production of 20.913 million tires.

As reported, 132,741 passenger car tires were produced in the mentioned time span, showing a 24-percent growth.

Some 20,695 tons of van tires were produced, indicating a nine-percent growth.

Also, 47,859 tons of truck and bus tires were produced, showing a 15-percent rise.

Production of the tires of light agricultural vehicles experienced a growth of 49 percent to stand at 3,609 tons, and that of the heavy ones rose 13 percent to stand at 15,081 tons. Meanwhile, 5,284 tons of road building and industrial vehicle tires were produced, with a 13-percent growth compared to the first ten months of the past year.

The bicycle and motorcycle tire output stood at 16,182 tons, indicating 32 percent growth.

In early August 2020, an official with Iran's Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry said that increasing the amount of investment making for the production of the tire in the country is a necessity. Kamran Kargar, the acting head of planning, supplying, and market regulating office of the ministry, said the consumption of tires is noticeable in Iran due to the country's big transportation fleet.

"Now the ground is properly prepared for the production of light and heavy vehicle tires in the country, and investment making will play a significant role both for the establishment of new production units and for launching development projects", the official noted.

Iran-Georgia Trade Webinar To Be Held in Mid-March

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran-Georgia Joint Chamber of Commerce is going to hold an online seminar on the two countries' trade opportunities on March 14.



The webinar is going to be held in collaboration with Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) and the Iranian Business Women Association (IBWA), the portal of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) announced.

Officials, businessmen and trade representatives from the two countries will be attending this online event to discuss ways of broadening economic cooperation and removing barriers in the way of mutual trade.

Back in August 2020, Iranian Ambassador to Georgia Javad Qavam Shahidi met with the Georgian Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava, to discuss ways for the expansion of the two countries economic relations.

During the meeting, the Iranian ambassador stressed the need for reviving the rising trend of economic cooperation between the two countries before the coronavirus pandemic and even deepen the bilateral cooperation while observing the health protocols.

Iranian Exports to Turkmenistan Set Record

GORGAN (IRNA)- Director-General of Iran's North East Railway Line 2 based in Gorgan said on Wednesday that Iranian exports through Incheboron to Turkmenistan railway reached all time high of 220,000.

Although the border was closed for over 100 days because of lockdown of coronavirus pandemic, over 220,000 tons of goods were exported to Turkmenistan through the railroad, Mohsen Etemad told IRNA.

The official said that some 100,000 tons cement export had the biggest share of exports from Golestan province to Turkmenistan. Steel, tiles, dates, detergent and apples were in next places.

Iran exported some 144,000 tons of goods to Turkmenistan over 11 months last year, but this year, exported some 220,000 tons of goods over the past seven months, he said, forecasting that it would reach 300,000 tons until the end of the current Iranian year (to end on March 21).

Etemad highlighted the width of Turkmenistan railroad that is larger than global standard making a stumbling block for railway trade among the two countries, stating that Iran had solved the problem with a 200-meter bogie, but the Turkmen side has yet to address the issue.

Iran's Minister of Road & Urban Development Mohammad Eslami recently visited the region and the Incheboron border railroad and promised to solve the technical issue of rail width.

He said that the number of railway wagons for transport of Iranian goods to Turkmenistan would increase to 30 from the current 20 wagons. Incheboron is located on Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway.

Banking Problems Can Be Resolved Through Cooperation

BOJNURD (IRNA) - Armenian Ambassador to Iran Artashes Toussanian on Tuesday said that banking sanctions have caused problems in Iran's trade relations with other states, but the problems can be resolved through cooperation.



Iranian companies registered with an Armenian partner cooperate with Armenian banks, he said, adding that given that Armenian banks work with the global banks, there is no problem for Iranian economic actions in Armenia and financial exchange between the banks of the two countries.

Iranians, with whatever currency, can rely on the Armenian banks and operate economically as there is no restriction in this regard, he underlined.

Hydroelectric power plants, wind power plants, solar power plants, mining industries, agriculture, and food industry, as well as auto manufacturing, are among the issues that are highly suitable for investment in Armenia, he further noted.

Armenia has also grown in the field of information technology and most of its partners are European, American, and Indian companies, he said, adding that we can deal with Iran in this field as well.

Second Iran-Syria Business Meeting Held in Damascus

TEHRAN (IFP) - Vice President for Science and Technology Sorena Sattari, who is in Damascus at the head of a sci-tech delegation, has attended the second Iran-Syria business matchmaking meeting.



Addressing the opening ceremony on Tuesday, Sattari touched upon the developments which have taken place in Iran over the past six years.

"All of you know Iran for its huge oil and [natural] gas reserves. We have the largest hydrocarbon resources in the world. But

what has happened in the past few years is the emergence of expert manpower potential and [the emergence of] a new economy alongside the traditional oil-and-gas-driven economy," he told the gathering, which brought together some 40 Iranian and Syrian technological bodies.

"Today, more than 40 knowledge-based companies are present in this conference, which is only a small part of the events that have happened in the domain of technology in Iran," he explained.

"Today, Iran has the largest startups in the region in the domains of communications and information technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology, aerospace, stem cells and other modern technologies," Sattari added.

Sattari, who is also the head of the Iranian Elites' Foundation, said the new generation of knowledge-based, technological and innovative companies in Iran has been developed by young and educated manpower.

"These young people and modern companies amount to the future of Iran's economy. They serve as a bulwark against international sanctions and threats. This new generation of companies is learning how to export their products to international markets," he said. "Sales of products by Iranian knowledge-based firms have reached more than \$12 billion.

This economy has caught up with the existing, traditional markets in Iran," said Sattari. "The oil, gas and petrochemical economies have seen considerable growth. I hope the meetings today will establish a proper link between the two Iranian and Syrian sides, so that technological and knowledge-based exchanges between the two countries will increase. Iran knows no limits for trade and technological exchanges with Syria," he said.

The vice president also touched upon the opening of the Iranian Innovation and Technology Centre in Syria. "We have established similar centers in China and Kenya, too, and tomorrow the third such center will be inaugurated in Syria. We hope this office will help develop trade and technological exchanges between the two countries in the knowledge-based domain," Sattari said.

He added governments have a responsibility to establish a connection between university students, professors, technological companies, businessmen and industrialists, so that they can find each other in different countries and have technological and scientific exchanges with one another.

"The Science and Technology Department of the [Iranian] president's office also seeks to develop technology diplomacy," he said.

Sattari said diplomacy technology is, in fact, a new form of diplomacy.

"We introduced this concept because of our technological potentialities in the world, and we hope this gathering will result in good events between Iranian and Syrian technology experts. I invite all of you to come to Iran and visit Iranian knowledge-based firms and rich history," said the vice president.

FARC Guerrillas Killed In Military Attack

BOGOTA (Dispatches) - A military bombing killed 10 guerrillas and injured three at a base of dissidents of the former FARC rebel group in southeast Colombia, official sources said Tuesday.

Defence Minister Diego Molano said on Twitter the military action “neutralised” 13 FARC dissidents under the command of a man who goes by the alias “Gentil Duarte.”

These dissidents have distanced themselves from Colombia’s 2016 peace pact, which ended a half-century civil war and saw the FARC disarm the following year.

Molano did not say when the assault happened.

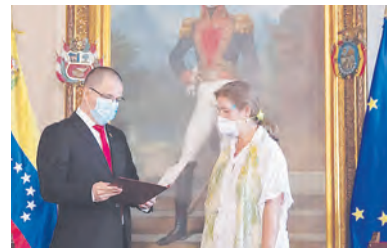


EU Ambassador Leaves Venezuela After Expulsion Order

CARACAS (Dispatches) - The European Union’s ambassador to Venezuela left the South American country on Tuesday after she was expelled last week over a diplomatic spat related to new sanctions.

Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa, who is Portuguese, left Venezuela aboard a Turkish Airlines flight, an EU source told AFP.

The order to expel Brilhante Pedrosa came on February 24 in response to the EU imposing new sanctions on 19 high-ranking Venezuelan officials for “undermining democracy” and human rights abuses.



U.S., EU Impose Sanctions on Russia Over Poisoning of Navalny



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States on Tuesday imposed sanctions on senior Russian officials in a coordinated action with the European Union as US intelligence concluded that Moscow orchestrated the near fatal poisoning of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

In his first major action against Russia since taking office, President Joe Biden’s administration said it was freezing any U.S. assets and criminalising transactions with seven senior Russians including the director of the FSB security service.

U.S. intelligence assessed “with high confidence” that officers of the FSB, successor to the KGB, poisoned Navalny with the nerve agent Novichok on August 20, 2020, a U.S. official told reporters.

Navalny was flown to Germany for treatment but defiantly returned in January, only to be arrested and then sent to a penal colony after spurring massive rallies through his allegations of corruption by Putin.

“The U.S. government has exercised its authorities to send a clear signal that Russia’s use of chemical weapons and abuse of human rights have severe consequences,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

“We reiterate our call for the Russian government to immediately and unconditionally release Mr. Navalny,” he said.

The announcement comes one day after EU member states approved a fresh round of sanctions over treatment of Navalny. The bloc had already in October targeted the FSB chief, Alexander Bortnikov, among others on the U.S. list.

Officials newly targeted Tuesday by both the United States and European Union included Alexander Kalashnikov, the administrator of Russia’s prisons.

The U.S. Commerce Department said it was also blacklisting 14 companies or entities for export controls out of fear they could help Russia develop chemical weapons.

The Kremlin has denied responsibility over Navalny’s ill health and on Tuesday asked Western powers what they would achieve through sanctions.

“The answer will be obvious: such a policy does not achieve its goals,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking with his Uzbek counterpart, warned of reprisals, saying that one rule of diplomacy “is the principle of reciprocity.”

The Biden administration has vowed to work more closely with allies and to take a harder line than defeated president Donald Trump, who voiced admiration for Putin even though he signed off on some sanctions on Russia.

The Biden team has also made clear it is not attempting another “reset” in relations of the sort initially attempted by former president Barack Obama.

More Demonstrations in Myanmar As ASEAN Diplomatic Effort Stalls

YANGON (Dispatches) - Protests against a military coup in Myanmar showed no sign of abating with more planned across the country on Wednesday, as Southeast Asian neighbors struggled for consensus in their efforts to end the month-long crisis.

Security forces fired warning shots into the air as protesters gathered at one site in the commercial capital Yangon early on Wednesday, according to a journalist at the scene.

At least 21 people have been killed since the Feb. 1 coup against Aung San Suu Kyi’s democratically elected government, and police opened fire to break up crowds again on Tuesday.

An activist in Chin State said strikes were taking place in nearly all of its townships on Wednesday.

A group tracking arrests said dozens more people may have been detained on Tuesday, including a protest organiser who it said was taken away at gunpoint by security personnel in unmarked cars.

Myanmar’s ousted President Win Myint is facing two new charges, his lawyer Khin Maung Zaw said on

Wednesday, including over a breach of the constitution that is punishable by up to three years on prison.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) failed to make any breakthrough in a virtual meeting on Myanmar by its 10 foreign ministers. While they were united over call for restraint, only four members - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore - called for the release of detainees including Suu Kyi.

“We expressed ASEAN’s readiness to assist Myanmar in a positive, peaceful and constructive manner,” said a statement by the ASEAN chair Brunei.

Myanmar’s state media on Wednesday said the military-appointed foreign minister attended an ASEAN meeting that “exchanged views on regional and international issues”, but made no mention of the purpose of the talks.

It said Wunna Maung Lwin “apprised the meeting of voting irregularities” in last November’s election.



Protesters Shut Down Roads in Beirut

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Protesters blocked roads with burning tyres and dumpsters across Lebanon on Tuesday after the currency tumbled to a new low in a financial meltdown that has fueled poverty.

“We can’t bear it anymore...The dollar is going up and they don’t care about us. They’re still dividing up their gains,” Rabih Khaled, who has been unemployed for months, said at one of the protests.

Crushed under a mountain of debt, Lebanon is grappling with a financial crisis that has wiped out jobs, raised warnings of growing hunger and locked people out of their bank deposits.

The collapse of the Lebanese pound, which fell to 10,000 to the dollar on Tuesday, has slashed about 85% of its value in a country relying heavily on imports.

The decline was the last straw for many who have seen prices of consumer goods such as diapers or cereals nearly triple since the crisis erupted.

“They’re taking away our dignity. We came down today to say no we have dignity ... We are not insects. They are controlling the dollar for your interests to steal money from the people,” 43-year old Tawfik Marei said.

“If I can still afford to get bread to feed my kids, others can’t. I’m telling everyone to go down to the streets for these people.” Protesters shut down a main highway out of the capital Beirut and the airport road. People took to the streets in other cities as well after the cost of scarce dollars hit 10,000 Lebanese pounds on the informal market.

That makes Lebanon’s minimum wage worth about \$68 a month.

Political leaders have failed to agree a rescue plan since the crisis, rooted in decades of state graft, erupted in late 2019 as dollar inflows dried up.

At the time, protesters had swept the country angry over economic hardship and new tax plans, including a daily 20-cent fee on Whatsapp calls.

The currency last touched lows close to 10,000 in the summer of 2020, weeks before the huge August port blast that devastated much of Beirut.

Bosnia Receives Jabs From Serbia Amid COVAX Dispute

SARAJEVO (Dispatches) - Bosnia and Herzegovina received 10,000 vaccines from neighboring Serbia amid a dispute with the international COVAX mechanism over a delay in planned shipments.

The Balkan nation has threatened to sue the program unless the vaccines arrive as agreed. It has asked for 1.2 million vaccines that would cover about one-third of its population.

Members of the multi-ethnic Bosnia presidency on Tuesday discussed the delivery problems with World Health Organization director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Bosnia will sign what it described as “additional” documentation requested by vaccine producers, a statement issued after the video conference said. It added that Bosnia has met the conditions for the arrival and storage of the jabs.

Serbia’s populist president, Aleksandar Vucic, flew to Bosnian capital Sarajevo to deliver the AstraZeneca vaccines to authorities there. The delivery is enough for 5,000 people to receive both required doses.

Vucic described the move as an act of solidarity and urged closer cooperation among the Balkan countries.

“We have expected vaccines from the EU [European Union]; we didn’t get them,” Vucic said. “We will thank them when we receive vaccines from the COVAX

[COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility] program.”

Serbia launched its vaccination program in January, mainly with China’s Sinopharm and to a lesser extent with Pfizer-BioNTech, Russia’s Sputnik V, and as of recently AstraZeneca.

Displaying a regional sway, Serbia has donated vaccines to neighboring nations Montenegro and North Macedonia that are still waiting for shipments.

“President Vucic made us an offer at the moment when international mechanisms failed and we accepted it,” said Sefik Dzaferovic, the Bosniak member of the multi-ethnic Bosnian presidency.

Croat representative Zeljko Komsic added that “if even one of these 5,000 vaccines saves a life, then it’s worth it”.

But Bosnia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Bisera Turkovic expressed reservations, telling a local news website the vaccines donated by Serbia were produced in India, as written in the agreement, and these vaccines still do not have approval for use in the EU.

Turkovic said the EU surely has a valid reason for not approving them and one should be careful.

Responding to objections, Vucic at a press conference at Sarajevo’s airport on Tuesday said whatever vaccines citizens are looking for, “we will deliver it”.



Erdogan Promises Stronger Freedoms, Human Rights in Turkey

ANKARA (Dispatches) - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has promised Turkey will strengthen freedom of expression and organization in the country and the right to a fair trial as part of what his government has called a “human rights action plan”.

The proposal, promised in recent months as part of a series of legal and economic reforms, would also improve the judiciary system, Erdogan said at the presidential palace in Ankara on Tuesday.

No one can be deprived of freedom because of their thoughts, said Erdogan, who has faced criticism both at home and abroad for his handling of rights issues. As part of a nine-point plan, Erdogan outlined measures to improve the judicial system in areas including nationalisation of land and the trial of minors, to steps to ensure a speedy trial and ease business conditions.

He said the government was reviewing prosecution of crimes related to the press and the internet.

“Improving freedom of expression, organisation and religion ... is the goal we have so far worked the hardest on,” he told ministers and other government officials.

“We will not water every flower we see,” Erdogan added. “While watering a flower with its head bent means justice, watering a thorn means cruelty.”

Critics say Erdogan’s government applies political pressure on the judiciary, which has been bent on punishing thousands of the government’s perceived opponents since a failed coup in 2016. Ankara says courts are independent and it has acted in the face of security threats to the country.

Turkey has ignored rulings by the European Court of Human Rights for the immediate release of high-profile philanthropist Osman Kavala, jailed more than three years without conviction, and Selahattin Demirtas, former leader of Turkey’s third-largest party, the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP).

The court, whose rulings are legally binding, says such detentions violate human rights and serve only to limit pluralism and political debate.

Erdogan said on Tuesday a committee would be set up to observe human rights conditions in prisons and a human rights report on Turkey would be published annually.





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marble fl
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

Tajrish Villa (\$5000)
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5bdrs, S/p
S, J, & pkg
marble floor
Fully Furn

Parsian

Niavaran (\$1800)
3bdrs, 200sq.m, F.F

Zaferanieh
220sq.m, 3bdrs
S/pool, S, J, pkg
F.F (\$2400)

Jordan bldg (\$8000)
4storey, 20bdrs, pkgs

Kamranieh (\$2700)
220sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, F.F

Elahieh Villa (\$5000)
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OPEC Demand Outlook Sees Oil Stocks Falling in 2021

LONDON (Dispatches) - OPEC expects oil inventories to drop by about 400 million barrels in 2021 in the latest supply and demand outlook being reviewed by a technical meeting on Tuesday, two OPEC+ sources said.

The figure, similar to the implied 2021 stock draw of 406 million barrels seen a month ago by OPEC, is part of what one of the OPEC sources called a “healthy” supply and demand balance for 2021.

OPEC+ experts, the Joint Technical Committee, are meeting on Tuesday ahead of a ministerial meeting on Thursday to decide oil output policy.



CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's crude oil exports rose last month despite Washington imposing new sanctions in January on several trading houses that worked with Caracas to export its oil. According to Tanker Trackers and OilX, crude oil exports from Venezuela were up in February. But Venezuela isn't exactly transparent about its exports, and not everyone agrees that its crude oil shipments saw a rise in February.

Bloomberg reported that Venezuela's exports had fallen to less than 420,000 bpd, down 13 percent over January, citing tanker tracking data and shipping reports that reflect the imposition of sanctions on one Maltese and one Swiss trading company for facilitating the attempts of the Maduro regime to market its oil abroad.

According to Tanker Trackers, however, Venezuela exported at least 500,000 bpd of crude oil in February, which was an increase over January.

OilX said that Venezuelan oil exports averaged 522,000 bpd in February, versus 468,000 bpd in January.

Reuters also reported higher export figures, although these included crude and fuels. According to Reuters' data, Venezuela's crude oil and fuel exports in February rose to 700,000 bpd, again based on ship-tracking data and documents. The report also noted that the February daily average was the highest in ten months, driven by new clients in Asia and their appetite for fuel oil.

Reuters notes Venezuela's PDVSA has been acquiring what some are calling “phantom clients” through partnerships with entities with no track record in oil trading to circumvent U.S. sanctions, which at the end of last year extended to oil swaps.

This appears to be the latest tactic by Caracas to go around sanctions after already established moves such as ship-to-ship transfers of crude oil that then gets masked through the addition of certain chemicals to obscure its origin.

Even with these new tactics and an apparent increase in crude oil exports in February, Venezuela's oil exports remain far below last year's levels, not to mention the export levels before the unraveling of the Venezuelan economy during the previous oil crisis and the U.S. sanction offensive began.

China Extends Lead Over U.S. in Global Patents Filings

GENEVA (Reuters) - China was the biggest source of applications for international patents in the world in 2020 for the second consecutive year and extended its lead over No. 2 filer the United States, the U.N. patent agency said on Tuesday.

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), which oversees a system for countries to share recognition of patents, said China filed 68,720 applications last year while the United States filed 59,230.

The rate of increase was higher for China with a 16.1% year-on-year increase versus 3% for the United States, it added. China first knocked the United States from the top spot in 2019.

Daren Tang, WIPO director-general, said the rise in Chinese filings was part of a longer-term trend for higher applications from Asia more broadly, with South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia all submitting more applications last year.

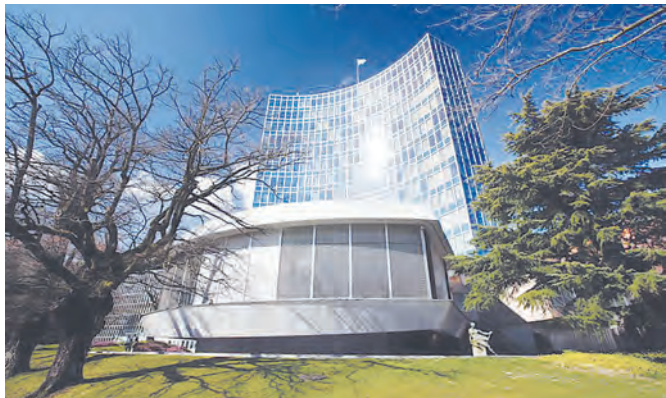
“It's not as if filings from the traditional parts of the world like the U.S. or Europe have decreased, it's just that the rate, the acceleration, has become a lot stronger in Asia,” he told journalists. The region accounted for more than half of all filings via WIPO's system known as the Patent Cooperation Treaty versus just over a third ten years ago.

Unlike after the 2008 financial crisis when filings fell sharply, overall filings via WIPO's system were up 4% overall in 2020 to a new record despite the COVID-19-induced slowdown, it said.

“The trend is that innovation remains resilient and the sense is that the world needs more innovation ... during a crisis,” said Tang.

The biggest single filer under this system last year was China's Huawei Technologies Co Ltd for the fourth consecutive year and second was South Korea's Samsung Electronics Co Ltd, WIPO said.

Singapore's Tang began his term in October and received strong support from Western countries including the United States in a highly politicized race against a Chinese candidate for the top job last year.



Saudi Arabia, UAE Provide 3 Quarters of Japan's Oil Needs in January

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia maintained its position as top crude oil supplier to Japan in January with 36.54 million barrels, or 45.7 percent of the total imports, according to data from Agency for Natural Resources and Energy belonging to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

Japan imported a total of 80.01 million barrels during that month. 93.5 percent of those were provided by 7 Arab countries, the agency reported.

Imports from the United Arab Emirates amounted to 24.25 million barrels or 30.3 percent, while imports from Qatar equaled 6.189 million barrels, or 7.7 percent of the total.

Kuwait equaled 4.4 million barrels, or 5.6 percent.

Bahrain provided 1.85 million barrels or 2.3 percent of the total, while imports from Oman amounted to 1.31 million barrels or 1.6 percent in January, Algeria's share was 0.3 percent of the total, METI data showed.

Imports from the natural zone, bordering Saudi Arabia and

Kuwait were 185,643 barrels or 0.2 percent of total imports.

Russia provided 2.30 million barrels, or 2.9 percent of the total. American oil imported by Japan in January amounted to 0.6 percent of total imports. Ecuador exported nearly 740,000 crude oil to Japan, or 0.9 percent of the total imports.

American sanctions against Tehran led Japanese oil and energy companies to stop importing Iranian crude since last year. Prior to the sanctions, Iranian oil provided about 5 percent of Japan's oil needs.

Countries of South East Asia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia provided Japan with 1.2 million barrels (1.5 percent). Crude from Australia and Papua New Guinea imported by Japan in January was each at 0.1 percent of the total imports.

The figures cited represent the quantities of oil that arrived to refineries, tanks and warehouses located at ports in Japan during the month of January.

Lebanon Currency Hits Record Low

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - The Lebanese pound hit a record low against the dollar on the black market on Tuesday as the country's political crisis deepens with no prospects of new Cabinet in the near future and foreign currency reserves dwindle further.

The dollar was trading at 9,975 Lebanese pounds around noon Tuesday. The previous record was registered in July, when the dollar briefly sold for 9,900 pounds on the black market. The official price remains 1,520 pounds to the dollar.

Lebanon has been hammered by one crisis after another, starting with the outbreak of anti-government protests against the country's corrupt political class in

October 2019. That has been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic and a massive, deadly blast in Beirut's port last August.

In neighboring Syria — where the economy has been hit by the 10-year conflict, corruption and Western sanctions — the dollar also hit a record on Monday, reaching nearly 3,900 Syrian pounds. The economies of the two neighboring countries are connected and many Syrians have had their money blocked in Lebanese banks that have implemented harsh capital controls.

The massive blast at Beirut's port last August, when nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate detonated, killed 211 people and injured more than 6,000. Large parts of the Lebanese capital were badly damaged in the blast.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government resigned six days after the Aug. 4 blast, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. In October, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri was named to form a new Cabinet but nearly five months later, disagreements between him and President Michel Aoun on the shape of the Cabinet has stood in the way of a new government's formation.

Lebanon has also been in desperate need for foreign currency but international donors have said they will only help the country financially if major reforms are implemented to fight widespread corruption, which has brought the nation to the brink of bankruptcy.

The crash in the local currency will throw more people into poverty. In Lebanon, the minimum wage is 675,000 pounds, or about \$67 a month. Before the protests broke out in 2019, the minimum wage was about 450\$.

The crisis has driven nearly half the population of the small country of 6 million into poverty. Over 1 million refugees from Syria live in Lebanon.

In December, the World Bank warned that Lebanon's economy faces an “arduous and prolonged depression,” with real GDP projected to plunge by nearly 20 percent because its politicians refuse to implement reforms that would speed up the country's recovery.

Global CO2 Emissions Rising Again After Nearly 6% Fall Last Year

LONDON (Reuters) - Global carbon dioxide emissions dropped by 5.8% in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic slowed economic activity, but they rebounded at the end of the year and are on course to rise further, the International Energy Agency said on Tuesday.

Major economies led a rebound in December when emissions were 2%, or 60 million tonnes, higher than in December 2019, as a pick-up in economic activity increased energy demand.

China, the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, was the only country that experienced an increase in emissions last year of 0.8%, or 75 million tons, from 2019 levels, the IEA said in a report.

In India, the world's third biggest emitter, emissions rose above 2019 levels from last September as economic activity increased and restrictions were relaxed.

“The rebound in global carbon emissions toward the end of last year is a stark warning that not enough is being done to accelerate clean energy transitions worldwide,” Fatih Birol, IEA executive director, said.

“If current expectations for a global economic rebound this year are confirmed, and in the absence of major policy changes in the world's largest economies, global emissions are likely to increase in 2021,” he added.

Primary energy demand fell 4% in 2020 as lockdowns and other restrictions limited industrial activity and transport.

This prompted an unprecedented decline of almost 2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide - the equivalent of removing all the European Union's emissions from the global total, the IEA said.

In the global power sector last year, emissions fell by 3.3%, the largest absolute fall on record. Although energy demand decreased, the growth of renewables generation was the biggest contributor to the fall.

The share of renewables in power generation rose to 29% last year from 27% in 2019. Emissions from transport fell by 14% last year from 2019 levels.

China Steel Imports Surge 150% in 2020



TOKYO (Dispatches) - China's imports of steel increased by 150% to 38.56 million tons in 2020, according to the country's customs agency, as its producers struggled to keep up with surging demand fueled by government efforts to pull the economy out of a coronavirus-induced downturn.

As one of the world's biggest producers of steel, the country has been working to reduce capacity to eliminate a global supply glut. And despite the recent developments, fear of another glut persists and looms heavy over the international market.

For now, steelmakers across Asia are enjoying tailwinds from rising Chinese demand. Vietnam's Hoa Phat Group logged an 80% surge in net profit for 2020 to 13.5 trillion dong (\$587 million) after its exports doubled. Most of its overseas shipments go to China, the company said.

Vietnam's steelmakers long suffered from an influx of cheap alternatives from China. But the trend reversed last year, when steel exports to China increased more than ninefold to 3.35 million tons. “The supply glut originating in China feels like a lifetime ago,” said the chief executive at one Vietnamese company.

Indian steel exports to China increased by a factor of 15 last year to 5.08 million tons. Tata Steel reported net profit of 39.8 billion rupees (\$540 million) for the October-December quarter in a sharp turnaround from its 11.6 billion rupee loss a year earlier. Exports buoyed the company through the worst of India's coronavirus-induced downturn and -- combined with a recovery in domestic demand -- propelled Tata Steel to its second straight quarter of profits.

Japanese steelmakers also were quick to tap Chinese demand. Mini-mill producer Tokyo Steel Manufacturing resumed exports to China for the first time in a decade in July. “Smaller steel processors in China are also buying more semifinished products,” said Kiyoshi Imamura, a managing director.

“Demand for steel products will remain high in 2021 as well,” said another industry executive.

Big Chinese producers like China Baowu Steel Group have been cutting output since last spring, expecting demand to fall due to the pandemic. But government measures to reenergize China's economy led to a sharp uptick in demand, and domestic steelmakers could not keep up on their own. China imported more steel than it exported for the four months through September.

Coronavirus Situation in Khuzestan Still Worrying

TEHRAN (IP) - Health Minister said that the trend of coronavirus in the southwest of Iran is worrying.

Saeed Namaki in presenting a report on the latest situation of coronavirus in Iran said, "Unfortunately, most cities in Khuzestan province are dealing with COVID-19."

Namaki stated that the coronavirus was different from the Chinese virus, adding that the UK variant of the virus had a high rate of transmission and death toll.

He stated that all flights had been canceled due to the coronavirus in other countries and only cargo flights were active.



Finland's Employment Rate Drops Below 70%

HELSINKI (Dispatches) - The number of people in employment in January this year was down by 61,000 compared to January 2020, according to preliminary figures released by Statistics Finland.

Finland's employment rate now stands at 69.9 percent, which is two percentage points lower than a year ago.

The data agency's Labor Force Survey also revealed that Finland's unemployment figure in January reached 235,000, which equates to 41,000 more than this time last year. The unemployment rate was 1.6 percentage points higher than January 2020, at 8.7 percent.

In a press release in response to the latest employment figures, Chief Economist with the Finland Chamber of Commerce Mauri Kotamäki called on the government to ease the uncertainty in the Finnish economy created by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"The government should urgently outline compensation for losses caused by the coronavirus shutdown in essential industries such as the hospitality and restaurant industries. It is up to the government to dispel uncertainty as much as possible," Kotamäki wrote.

Meanwhile, a separate set of statistics released by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment found that there were 332,800 unemployed jobseekers registered with TE offices around the country at the end of January.

This figure is 81,200 higher than in January 2020, but it is 24,000 less than were registered one month earlier, in December 2020.

The differences between the figures provided by the ministry and those of Statistics Finland can be explained by how the two bodies define an unemployed person.

In the ministry's definition, an unemployed person is someone who does not have an employment contract or business activity. However, according to Statistics Finland's definition, an unemployed person is anyone who has been actively applying for jobs in the last month and is ready to receive a job offer within the next two weeks.

Statistics Finland produces Finland's official and internationally-comparable unemployment figures.



The ministry's data further revealed that the number of long-term unemployed people had increased by about 50 percent compared to the previous year, with a total of 93,000 long-term unemployed in January this year.

"Worst of all, long-term unemployment is up by more than 30,000 people. This trend is not surprising, but this part of unemployment is the most unfortunate in the context of recessions," Kotamäki wrote. Long-term unemployed refers to people who have been out of work for one year or more. There were also more than 40,000 unemployed jobseekers under the age of 25, an increase of nearly 10,000 from the corresponding period last year.

Kyrgyz, Kazakh Presidents Adopt Joint Statement



AKIPRESS (Dispatches) -President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov and President of Kazakhstan Kasym-Jomart Tokayev adopted the joint statement following the talks held on Tuesday in Nur-Sultan.

The heads of state praised the positive dynamics of bilateral relations drawing on centuries-old friendly, good neighborly and spiritual ties between fraternal nations.

The countries reaffirmed commitment to strengthening of bilateral relations of friendship, strategic partnership and alliance on the basis of equality, mutual trust, respect and account of interests of each other.

The countries underlined importance of active political dialogue for dynamic development of relations between two countries and spoke for further expansion of trust-worthy and constructive contacts on top, high and other levels.

The countries found it necessary to bolster business ties aimed at implementation of cooperation projects in industry, hydropower, fuel and energy complex, mining, agriculture, processing sector, logistics, road and transport infrastructure, banking sector.

The governments were tasked to expedite creation of the logistical center on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border to ensure unimpeded movement of goods across the territory of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Importance of further development of consultative meetings of the Central Asian leaders was emphasized, which create favorable conditions for expansion of pentilateral cooperation in all areas of regional cooperation. They noted importance of the next consultative meeting of the Central Asian leaders to be held in Kyrgyzstan in 2021 upon improvement of epidemiological situation.

The countries stressed importance of the upcoming First European Union-Central Asia Economic Forum, which will facilitate more sustainable development of Central Asian economies.

The countries agreed to erect the monuments to Manas and Chingiz Aitmatov in Nur-Sultan and the monument to Abai Kunanbaev in Bishkek in the nearest time.

President Japarov thanked the President and people of Kazakhstan for hospitality and invited President Tokayev to make return visit to Kyrgyzstan at any time convenient for him.

President Tokayev has accepted the invitation. The date of the visit will be negotiated through diplomatic channels.

Canada Economic Activity Heats Up

OTTAWA (Reuters) - Canada's economic growth in the fourth quarter was stronger than expected and it likely rose again in January, boosting speculation that the Bank of Canada will reduce its bond purchases soon.

The economy grew at an annualized rate of 9.6% in the fourth quarter, beating analyst expectations of 7.5%, data from Statistics Canada showed on Tuesday. Real GDP likely climbed 0.5% in January, according to a preliminary estimate.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the central bank last year slashed interest rates to near zero and introduced a large-scale bond buying program - known as quantitative easing - to ensure market liquidity.

"There had been speculation already that they (the Bank of Canada) would start to taper the quantitative easing purchases, at least announce that as soon as April. This just makes it more likely," said Nathan Janzen, senior economist at RBC Economics.

Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem reiterated last week that interest rates will stay at record low levels until into 2023. The next rate decision is on March 10.

Canadian mortgage rates are beginning to inch higher for the first time since before the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the spike in long-term bond yields.

But if economic growth remains robust and the output gap closes more quickly than expected, a rate change could also come sooner than 2023, said economists. Money markets see about 50 basis points of tightening already in 2022.

"I think they'll find it difficult to stay on hold (with interest rates) as long as they are guiding," said Derek Holt, vice president of Capital Markets Economics at Scotiabank.

"Macklem just repeated that the output gap won't close until 2023... We have (the output gap) closing by the end of this year or possibly early next year," he added. "So that's why we think the bank hikes in the second half of next year."

The Canadian dollar was trading 0.1% higher at 1.2638 to the greenback, or 79.13 U.S. cents.

Economic activity edged up 0.1% in December, an eighth consecutive increase, but remained about 3.0% below February pre-pandemic levels, StatsCan said.

The Canadian economy posted its largest annual drop on record in 2020, down 5.4% on the year.

Canada has grappled with a harsh second wave of infections in recent months, with populous Ontario and Quebec both imposing strict restrictions in December and January to contain the spread. Those are now being loosened.

"This early read on January... is very good news," said Doug Porter, chief economist at BMO Capital Markets.

"It suggests that the economy is dealing with this second set of restrictions much better than I think most expected."

(Reporting by Julie Gordon in

India Woos Tesla With Offer of Cheaper Production Costs Than China

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India is ready to offer incentives to ensure Tesla Inc's (TSLA.O) cost of production would be less than in China if the carmaker commits to making its electric vehicles in the south Asian country, transport minister Nitin Gadkari told Reuters.

Gadkari's pitch comes weeks after billionaire Elon Musk's Tesla registered a company in India in a step towards entering the country, possibly as soon as mid-2021. Sources familiar with the matter have said Tesla plans to start by importing and selling its Model 3 electric sedan in India.

"Rather than assembling (the cars) in India they should make the entire product in the country by hiring local vendors. Then we can give higher concessions,"

Gadkari said in an interview, without giving details of what incentives would be on offer.

"The government will make sure the production cost for Tesla will be the lowest when compared with the world, even China, when they start manufacturing their cars in India. We will assure that," he said.

India wants to boost local manufacturing of electric vehicles (EVs), batteries and other components to cut costly imports and curb pollution in its major cities.

This comes amid a global race by carmakers to jump-start EV production as countries work towards cutting carbon emissions.

But India faces a big challenge to win a production commitment from Tesla, which did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment about its plans in the country.

Tehran Keen to...

FROM PAGE 1

Indian orthodox or whole leaf tea producers, mainly from Assam, are heavily dependent on the Iran market. "Iran will become a strong buyer for orthodox tea this year," said Vivek Goenka, chairman of Indian Tea Association. "The gardens in Assam produce around 70 million kg of orthodox teas."

The United Nations had imposed sanctions on Iran a few years ago but allowed Iran to import food products like tea, and India to import petroleum products. Later, India and Iran governments made a Vostro payment mechanism through which a portion of oil import proceeds was converted to rials and then to rupee. UCO Bank was authorized to deal with all payments in rupee. Gradually, India established itself as the largest tea exporter in Iran, replacing Sri Lanka, which did not have any special payment mechanism. The system was severely affected when the U.S. imposed further restrictions on Iran and oil imports were stopped after May 2019. Vostro account thus shrank and since end-2019 payments were severely affected. Central Bank of Iran restricted rupee allocations and all payments were delayed for a long time.

Agarwal said that though many exporters are yet to get payments from Iran against exported teas, but since sentiment in Iran has turned positive, payment would start coming soon. In fact, basmati exporters have started getting their payments from Iran, which has raised the hopes of the Indian tea trade.

Ireland to...

FROM PAGE 1

Resolution 2231 is a resolution passed by the UN Security Council on July 20, 2015, which endorses the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the nuclear program of Iran.

"Ireland is fully committed to the success of that agreement, and the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

"The re-establishment of an Irish presence in Tehran is a concrete sign of our commitment to deepen dialogue with all relevant partners, including Iran, on this issue," Coveney said.

Ireland closed its embassy in Tehran in 2012 due to the impact of the financial crisis, according to the background information attached to the statement.

Ireland took up its seat as an elected member of the UN Security Council for a two-year term starting from January 1, 2021.

The UN Security Council has five permanent members, namely China, the U.S., Russia, the UK and France.

The Council also has ten non-permanent members which are elected by the UN General Assembly for two-year terms starting on January 1, with five replaced each year.

The main difference between a permanent member and a non-permanent member is that the former has a veto power while the latter does not.

Ireland joined the UN in 1955 and will serve as Presidency of the UN Security Council in September 2021, according to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.

Iranian Container...

FROM PAGE 1

The situation surrounding Shahraz worsened in November when a Greek container ship grounded in the same strait after it ploughed into the Iranian ship.

Iranian authorities have yet to make any statement about the refloating of Shahraz.

The IRISL issued a statement in May denying any collision with Indonesian ships in the region while saying that any loss to Shahraz was covered by "credited international insurances."

Tehran, Seoul...

FROM PAGE 1

"Our government has been in talks with Iran about ways to use the frozen assets, and the Iran side has expressed its consent to the proposals we have made," the Korean ministry said

"The actual unfreezing of the assets will be carried out through consultations with related countries, including the United States," it added.

The announcement came after the Central Bank of Iran said it had reached an agreement with South Korea on the release of frozen Iranian assets in the East Asian country.

Since 2019 when then US president Donald Trump ended the US sanctions waivers for South Korea to buy Iran's oil, Tehran and Seoul have been at loggerheads over the latter's blocking of some seven billion dollars of Iran's cash assets.

Iran Taps...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran's crude shipments dwindled to a trickle after sanctions by the former U.S. administration in 2018 and the end of waivers for some countries in 2019, although a number of Chinese refiners continued to take some oil. Prior to the penalties -- put in place to pressure the country into renegotiating a nuclear deal -- China and India were Iran's biggest buyers in Asia, followed by South Korea and Japan.

Citigroup Inc. has described Iran as the biggest wildcard for the oil market this year, although there's no certainty a deal will materialize anytime soon that would lead to rising exports. President Joe Biden has offered to participate in talks to revive a nuclear accord, but Tehran wants U.S. sanctions to be lifted first. Europe said recently it will be more active to revive the pact.

While Iranian oil exports are still subject to sanctions, shipments have been creeping up and flows to China have received some unwanted attention recently. India is also hoping Biden will take a softer line against Iran so that the world's third-largest oil importer can diversify its crude sources.

China continued to import Iranian oil after Beijing opposed the sanctions and accused the U.S. of reaching beyond its jurisdiction. The U.S. claims Iran disguises the origin of its crude to skirt the sanctions and Washington recently seized 2 million barrels of crude aboard a Greek tanker, saying the owner was deceived into thinking the oil came from Iraq.

Pogacar Signs New Deal With UAE Team Emirates

PARIS (Dispatches) - Tour de France champion Tadej Pogacar has committed his future to UAE Team Emirates by signing a new deal to 2026, the cycling outfit announced on Tuesday.

The 22-year-old is one of cycling's brightest prospects and the announcement comes days after he claimed the honours at the season-opening UAE Tour.

Pogacar joined UAE in 2019 after training in the continental team Ljubljana Gusto Santi, and had already extended his contract last year until 2024.

LICENCE HOLDER: SOKHAN GOSTAR INSTITUTE

Switchboard:

(+98) (21) 44253448

Public Relations Tel:

(+98)(21) 44253450

Editorial Board: 44253449

Public Relations Fax:

(+98)(21) 44253395

Advertising Department:

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

Website:

http://www.irannewsdaily.com

E-Mail Address:

info@irannewsdaily.com

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Kramer Takes Charge of Bielefeld Amid Fans Fury

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bundesliga strugglers Arminia Bielefeld on Tuesday appointed Frank Kramer as their new head coach but the club's supporters were still raging on social media after the sacking of his popular predecessor Uwe Neuhaus.

Kramer, whose only experience as a Bundesliga coach is a handful of games coaching Greuther Fuerth in 2012/13, has signed a contract until June 2023. He took his first training session on Tuesday, the day after Neuhaus, 61, was dismissed with Bielefeld winless in their last five league and 16th in Germany's top flight.

Harden Lifts Nets to Overtime Win Over Spurs

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - James Harden scored 30 points, dished out 15 assists and pulled down 14 rebounds as the Brooklyn Nets earned a 124-113 overtime win over the host San Antonio Spurs.

Brooklyn scored the first eight points of the extra period and never looked back, winning its ninth game in its past 10 contests. The Nets won in San Antonio for the first time since Jan. 22, 2002, ending a 17-game skid. Kyrie Irving added 27 points for the Nets with Bruce Brown scoring 23 and Nicolas Claxton hitting a season-best 17 points off the bench. Brooklyn's Kevin Durant (hamstring) missed his eighth straight game.

DeMar DeRozan led San Antonio with 22 points and 11 assists while Dejounte Murray and Lonnie Walker IV scored 19 each.

New Orleans Pelicans 129 - Utah Jazz 124

Zion Williamson and Brandon Ingram scored 26 points each as host New Orleans held on to defeat Utah.

Lonzo Ball added 23 points as the Pelicans cooled off the team with the NBA's best record. New Orleans had a 53-39 rebounding advantage, led by Steven Adams' 11 boards.

Bojan Bogdanovic scored 31, Rudy Gobert had 22, Donovan Mitchell added 21 and Jordan Clarkson had 20 for the Jazz.

Portland Trail Blazers 123 - Charlotte Hornets 111

Carmelo Anthony established season highs of 29 points, six 3-pointers and five steals and Portland halted a season-worst, four-game losing streak with a victory over visiting Charlotte.

Damian Lillard also had six 3-pointers and recorded 23 points and 10 assists for the Trail Blazers, who set a franchise record with 24 3-pointers (on 46 attempts). Robert Covington scored a season-best 21 points, matched his season high of five 3-pointers and collected 10 rebounds.

LaMelo Ball had 30 points, eight assists, six rebounds and four steals for the Hornets, who dropped to 2-3 on a six-game road trip. Terry Rozier scored 20 points and Malik Monk added 19.

Dallas Mavericks 130 Orlando Magic 124

Luka Doncic flirted with a triple-double, posting 33 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists, and Dallas weathered a late surge to beat host Orlando.

Jalen Brunson scored 24 points off the Dallas bench, and Kristaps Porzingis had 17 points and 10 boards.

The Mavericks led by 18 points with



fewer than five minutes to go, but Orlando powered back behind Nikola Vucevic, who finished with a team-high 29 points.

Cleveland Cavaliers 101 - Houston Rockets 90

Collin Sexton scored 39 points, handed out eight assists and sparked a critical fourth-quarter run to lead visiting Cleveland over Houston.

The Rockets took their 12th consecutive defeat, their longest losing streak since a 15-game skid in 2001-02.

Houston guard John Wall, who played in both games of a back-to-back for the first time this season, finished with a season-high 32 points.

Philadelphia 76ers 130 - Indiana Pacers 114

Shake Milton scored 26 points off the bench, Joel Embiid added 24 points and grabbed 13 rebounds and host Philadelphia cruised past Indiana.

Furkan Korkmaz hit six 3-pointers and added 19 points and Ben Simmons contributed 18 points for the Sixers, who rebounded after a three-point overtime loss to the Cavaliers on Saturday.

Malcolm Brogdon led the Pacers with 20 points while Edmond Sumner added 18. Domantas Sabonis contributed 15 points, nine rebounds and seven assists.

Denver Nuggets 118 - Chicago Bulls 114

Nikola Jokic scored 17 of his 39 points in the fourth quarter to fuel visiting Denver over Chicago. Jokic also had 14 rebounds and nine assists to fall just shy of his ninth triple-double of the season and second in as many games. He had 19 points, 13 assists and 11 rebounds in

Denver's 126-96 romp over the Oklahoma City Thunder on Saturday.

Ex-Barcelona President Released From Custody

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Former Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu was conditionally released on Tuesday after appearing before a judge looking into last year's "Barcagate" scandal, just days before the club holds presidential elections.

Bartomeu and his former advisor Jaume Masferrer exercised their right not to speak when they were questioned by the judge following a night in jail, the Barcelona court said in a statement.

Police arrested the pair along with two other club officials, and searched Barcelona's stadium, on Monday as part of a probe into allegations the club carried out a defamation campaign against current and former players who were critical of Bartomeu.

Spanish radio station Cadena Ser claimed in February 2020 that Barca covered up inflated payments to a company called I3 Ventures which it had hired to boost the image of the club on social media.

Part of the social media campaign included criticising current and former players like Lionel Messi and Xavi Hernandez, and iconic coach Pep Guardiola.

Messi described the controversy as "strange" in an interview with Catalan newspaper Mundo Deportivo.

Cadena Ser claimed Barca made its payments to I3 Ventures in smaller, separate amounts to avoid the club's financial controls.

Azarenka Shines In Cloudy Doha

DOHA (Dispatches) - Svetlana Kuznetsova and Victoria Azarenka provided what was perhaps the best tennis on the opening day of the Qatar Open, with Azarenka prevailing 6-2 6-3.

Despite conceding the first set, Russia's Kuznetsova put up a spirited defence in the second leading to increasingly sprawling rallies with her well-matched Belarusian opponent.

A number of knife-edge line calls added to the suspense as the two played into the evening, prolonged by Kuznetsova's formidable depth and court coverage in the second set.



Wawrinka Dumped out of Rotterdam ATP

ROTTERDAM (Dispatches) - Stan Wawrinka was knocked out of the Rotterdam ATP meeting in the first round on Tuesday after being seen off in straight sets 6-4, 7-5 by Russia's Karen Khachanov.

The three-time Grand Slam winner, playing in his first ATP match since losing a five-set epic to Marton Fucsovics at the Australian

Open, was put away by world number 21 Khachanov in a fairly comfortable fashion.

Big-hitter Khachanov eased through the match without dropping a service game to eighth seed Wawrinka.

The 24-year-old will face British qualifier Cameron Norrie in the last 16.

Khachanov's countryman and fourth seed Andrey Rublev strolled into the next round thanks to a 7-6 (8/1), 6-3 win over American qualifier Marcos Giron.

World number six Stefanos Tsitsipas was to take on Egor Gerasimov later in his first match since falling at the semi-final stage of the Australian Open to Rotterdam top seed Daniil Medvedev.

Man City Equal Unbeaten Record

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City equalled their club record of 28 games unbeaten on Tuesday, hammering Wolverhampton 4-1 to open up a gaping 15-point lead at the top of the Premier League.

Pep Guardiola shuffled his pack at the Etihad against the team who did the league double against them last season as he maintained his club's assault on an unprecedented quadruple.

The champions-elect were made to sweat after Conor Coady cancelled out an early own goal from Leander Mendoncker but two late goals from Gabriel Jesus and a Riyad Mahrez strike sealed the three points.

City's 28-match unbeaten run in all competitions equals their run from April to December 2017 and they are red-hot favorites to wrap up a third Premier League title in four years.

The victory was their 21st in a row and their 15th straight Premier League win.

City have not trailed for a single minute in any of their past 19 Premier League games — equalling Arsenal's record set in 1998/99.

Guardiola hailed his "fantastic team" but said his only focus was on the next game, against cross-town rivals Manchester United, who are City's nearest challengers.

"After 1-1 we suffered but we created lots of chances in the end," he told BT Sport.

"Manchester United. That's all we care (about now)," he added. "The champions is Liverpool, the crown belongs to them. We are in the best position right now to take them out and we are going to try but they are the champions."

"There is 33 points to play for. Tomorrow our opponents will play, we have one or two days off and prepare for Manchester United at home."



Juve Boost Hopes Of Title With Win Over Spezia

TURIN (Dispatches) - Juventus gave their hopes of a 10th straight Serie A title a timely boost as they beat struggling Spezia 3-0 on Tuesday to move within seven points of league leaders Inter Milan.

Andrea Pirlo's side were frustrated for long periods, but second-half goals from Alvaro Morata, Federico Chiesa and Cristiano Ronaldo clinched an important win.

Juve sit three points behind second-placed AC Milan, who host Udinese, with Inter Milan four points further clear ahead of their match at Parma on Thursday.

"The gap is just the points that separate us," Juventus coach Pirlo, who took over at the start of the season, told Sky Sport Italia.

"We know it will be a long chase, Inter have been playing together for two years, they have a well-drilled approach, whereas we just started this season. We still intend to be there right to the end."

The Turin giants have won the last nine Italian league titles, but have it all to do to deny either of the two Milan clubs from ending that remarkable run.

"We are working to win, if we don't win this season, then we'll congratulate the champions, but as long as there's a mathematical chance, we'll give our all on the pitch," Morata said.

There was still time for Rodrigo Bentancur to launch a Juventus counter-attack, which was finished off by Ronaldo, with the Portuguese forward scoring his 20th Serie A goal of the campaign.

It is the 12th straight season Ronaldo has notched 20 league goals, dating back to his final term with Manchester United, when he netted 18 times in the 2008-09 Premier League season.

