

Spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Said That Iran Will Not Accept Pressure And Threat, Underling That Such Measures Will Only Destroy the Remnants of the Nuclear Deal

IRAN NEWS

Health Ministry Spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari Said on Friday That Some 81 More Iranians Have Died From the Coronavirus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing the Total Deaths to 60,512

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Leader Urges People, Officials to Protect Plants, Environment

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei highlighted the importance of protecting plants and the green life as a dominant popular culture.

The Supreme Leader made the remarks here on Friday while participating in a special event on the occasion of National Arbor Day by planting two young trees.

Ayatollah Khamenei planted two saplings in the yard of the Leadership's Office on the occasion of the National Natural Resources Day and the National Arbor Day.

Iran's Supreme Leader described plants as an important factor in the development of civilization, noting that Islam attaches great importance to plant saplings as a good act. Expressing regret over destroying forests and natural resources by those who only think of their own profits, he urged all people and officials to stand against acts that damage the environment.

Elsewhere, the Leader referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, saying "Last year, during Nowruz, people fully observed recommendations and repelled a great danger but this year, the danger has increased and is more extensive; so all people should observe the recommendations." **See Page 7**

Technical Meeting of IAEA With Iran to Be Held in April

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi said that the international nuclear watchdog will hold a meeting with Iran to discuss and resolve some safeguard disputes on nuclear-related technical issues in early April.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, Grossi expressed hope that the outcome of the technical talks would be satisfactory and that the remaining issues would be resolved before the upcoming meeting of the Governing Council.

He added that members of the Governing Council supported the agreement reached in this regard.

He claimed that the discussion was related to the lack of safeguards and non-declared nuclear materials and equipment in Iran and had nothing to do with the recent suspension of the Additional Protocol by Iran.

He stated that he sought to reach an understanding of these issues before the next meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors. **See Page 7**

Tehran Calls for Promotion of Intra-ECO Trade



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani called for plans to boost trade exchanges among the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) member states, particularly in the post-coronavirus era.

The president on Thursday delivered a speech to the 14th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization, held via videoconference.

In his address to the summit, held to discuss "regional economic cooperation in the aftermath of COVID-19", Rouhani hailed ECO as a successful model of regional convergence.

He also called for efforts to find new ways to broaden intra-organizational trade exchanges among the ECO members.

Calling for plans to carry out ECO goals and accelerate the implementation of its trade agreements, President Rouhani proposed the idea of activating and supporting ECO subsidiary organizations, such as the ECO bank, insurance, standards, and chamber of commerce.

Rouhani further emphasized the necessity of removing the obstacles to cooperation among the ECO states in the transportation industry.

ECO enjoys invaluable potential in terms of human and natural resources, energy reserves, complementary economies, interested private sectors, and an incomparable regionally and globally transit and transport advantages, he underlined.

There have been major steps towards the enhancement of economic cooperation within ECO and precious achievements have been made, Rouhani said, adding that however, in certain areas such as trade, the achievements have not met expectations.

Despite the high trade potential and the necessary infrastructure in place, intra-regional trade remains as low as less than 10 percent - totally unacceptable. This has also been addressed in the ECO Vision 2025, he added.

Rouhani said that we are of the view that we need to concentrate on the operationalization of the ECO agreed programs and decisions with a view to accelerating the pace towards realization of the goals and objectives of the Organization.

Implementation of ECO trade agreement, as well as working out ways and means to expand intra-regional trade, further activation of private sectors for the sake of trade boost, strengthening and activation of the existing and new ECO agencies such as ECO Trade and development Bank, ECO Reinsurance Company are measures to be needed to this end, he noted.

ECO Regional Institute for Standardization (RISCAM), and ECO Chamber of Commerce, as well as removing the obstacles and challenges encountering transit and transport cooperation as the fundamental infrastructure for trade expansion are some other steps to be taken, he further noted. **See Page 7**

Return to the JCPOA Is Not Enough

The culture of resistance has brought the current generation an experience that most generations for the past centuries have enjoyed few advantages of it or even enjoyed nothing of it.

The day the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, in explaining the stand of the Islamic Republic of Iran, set the removal of all sanctions and its verification as the conditions of the Islamic Republic of Iran for return to the JCPOA, perhaps nobody could believe that first the post-Trump U.S. and then all the world would have to accept this right-seeking process but today resistance of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishment has borne fruit and it is on the verge of implementation of the JCPOA and bowing down of the opposite sides in deal.

As per news and reports, thirty-two progressive organizations in the U.S. in a letter to U.S. President Joe Biden have urged him to swiftly fulfill his election campaign promises and join a 2015 Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) that was abandoned by the Trump administration. In the letter the organizations addressing Biden have said that return to the JCPOA has been one of the most explicit and important promises of him during his election campaign. They went on to say, "You have stipulated in your promises that you are ready to distance the U.S. foreign policy from Donald Trump's reckless, unilateralism and war-seeking policy." They have called the policy of maximum pressure as a dangerous failure, reiterating that this policy not only has escalated tensions in the Middle East but also has actually helped Iran to get closer to have nuclear weapon capability."

These 32 progressive organizations in the letter have noted that the longer the elements of 'maximum pressure' remain in effect, the more it will continue to embolden hardliners in Iran and make U.S.-Iran diplomacy more difficult. They have said, "The recent escalation in military activity between the United States and reported Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq (pointing to recent attack at Ain al Asad Base in Iraq) only shows how urgently needed a new course of action is."

In the letter they have also emphasized different international developments like the new approach of Europe to the JCPOA, the U.S. acceptance of from Europe to join talks on the future of the deal, the acknowledgement that Trump failed attempts in the UNSC for approving the anti-Iran resolutions. They have also rejected this approach that Iran should take the first steps to meet its JCPOA obligations before the United States takes its own steps, claiming that the fact of the matter is that the United States was the first to violate the deal and it is therefore reasonable to expect the United States to at the very least take concurrent steps with Iran to rejoin it." **See Page 7**

Hague-Based Tribunal Orders U.S. To Pay \$37m to Iran

TEHRAN (PressTV) - In a legal victory for the Islamic Republic, the Hague-based Iran-United States Claims Tribunal (IUSCT) has ordered Washington to pay \$37 million to Iran after finding it guilty of passing Treasury regulations that prevented or delayed the transfer of part of the Iranian assets in violation of the 1981 Algiers Accords.

In a statement released on Wednesday, Iran's Presidency Center for International Legal Affairs said the tribunal — which resolves claims by nationals and governments of Iran and the US — had ruled in favor of Iran in the legal case brought by Tehran, obliging the US to pay financial damages to the country and retribute some of the assets belonging to the Iranian government and government institutions.

In 1982, the Islamic Republic of Iran brought the case against the US before the IUSCT, which issued its initial ruling in 1992, it added.

After hearings, the center said, the tribunal handed down a final verdict in March 2020 condemning the United States for failing to transfer Iran's assets or delaying the process. **See Page 7**

Indian Merchants Almost Halt Exports to Iran

MUMBAI (Dispatches) - Indian merchants have almost entirely stopped signing new export contracts with Iranian buyers for commodities such as rice, sugar and tea, due to caution about Tehran's dwindling rupee reserves with Indian banks, six industry officials told Reuters.

"Exporters are avoiding dealing with Iran since payments are getting delayed for months," said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trading house.

Iran's rupee reserves in India's UCO and NSE 6.21%, the two lenders authorised to facilitate rupee trade, have depleted significantly and exporters are not sure whether they would be paid on time for new shipments, the dealer said.

Under U.S. sanctions, Tehran is unable to use U.S. dollars to transact oil sales.

Iran previously had a deal to sell oil to India in exchange for rupees, which it used to import critical goods, including agricultural commodities, but New Delhi stopped buying Tehran's oil in May 2019 after a U.S. sanctions waiver expired.

Tehran continued using its rupees to buy goods from India, but after 22 months of no crude sales, Iran's rupee reserves have fallen, said the sources, who asked not to be named, citing business privacy.

Iran's reserves have reduced significantly and "will be over soon probably because trade has stopped," said a senior official with IDBI Bank.

The Islamic Republic was buying mainly basmati rice, tea, sugar, soy meal and medicines from India.

"Rice exporters are concerned about the current payment mechanism," said Vijay Setia, a rice exporter and former president of the All India Rice Exporters' Association (AIREA).

"There was too much of delay in payments from last year's shipments. Exporters received payments six months after shipments," Setia said. **See Page 7**

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Wood Cultivation to Avert Deforestation

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – President Hassan Rouhani stressed the need for detailed plans to promote timber plantations in order to preserve the country's woodlands.

Rouhani planted an oak sapling at a botanical garden near Tehran on Wednesday to mark the National Week of Natural Resources.

In comments at the event, the president emphasized that preservation of forests and rangelands would guarantee national and food security in Iran.

European Firms to Be Sued for Aiding Saddam's Chemical Attacks

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The head of the Iranian Judiciary's High Council for Human Rights says Iran has filed lawsuits in international courts against European companies that provided chemical materials to former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's regime, who used chemical weapons against Iranians in the 1980s war.

Ali Baqeri-Kani made the remarks on Thursday in a meeting with families of the martyrs of the Sardasht chemical bombing during a visit to West Azerbaijan Province.

Baqeri-Kani said the Judiciary has filed lawsuits for more than 200 of the victims of Saddam's chemical attacks, and final verdicts have been issued for 70 of the cases. He lamented that the same countries which "brutally" butchered the Iranian people through their "chemical weapons" are now "arrogantly" violating the rights of the Iranian people through their "economic and political" tools, making a reference to their use of sanctions and international institutions against Iran.

"The governments that are exerting the highest amount of pressure and the most extensive sanctions against the Iranian people today are the ones that provided Saddam with chemical weapons, prevented international action against the Ba'athist regime and prevented media coverage of Saddam's crime," he stated.

He further said the same Western countries that suffocated civilians in Sardasht neighborhoods now claim to champion human rights in Geneva fortresses.

The official went on to invite Western rulers to hold their next so-called human rights



meeting in Sardasht, so that they closely see the effects of their atrocities against the Iranian people. "In the Sardasht crime, although Saddam played the role of the executioner in the most criminal way, the approach and action of some Western governments were certainly not less than the role of the executioner," Baqeri-Kani said.

Those governments, he continued, consciously and deliberately produced and sold chemical weapons to Saddam, supported him in the international arena and suppressed media coverage of his crime in order to shift public opinion in their favor.

Sardasht, a small city in Iran's West Azerbaijan Province, was targeted by Saddam's Iraq on June 28, 1987, when Iraqi bombers attacked four densely populated parts of Sardasht with fatal chemical gasses.

Sardasht was the third city after Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki to become the target of weapons of mass destruction. At least 110 people were killed and 5,000 more were injured during the attack.

Western States Main Human Rights Violators

URMIA (IP)- Referring to Saddam Hussein's war crimes with Western countries' cooperation in the field of chemical bombings, Iran's judiciary chief said that western countries are the world's main defendants in the human rights court.

On Thursday, Hojjatolislam Seyed Ibrahim Raisi met with the families of Sardasht chemical attack victims in Urmia, saying: "The lawsuit in the Sardasht incident should not be forgotten, and Saddam's supporters, especially the Europeans who provided him with various bombs, should be condemned."

He added: "Today, we have such a stance that we can claim human rights, and the West is accused of brutally killing the people in Sardasht, other parts of Iran, and even the Iraqi Kurdistan region with chemical weapons."

The border town of Sardasht, the first city to be the victim of chemical weapons attacks in the world, was targeted by chemical bombing by Saddam Hussein's planes on June 28, 1987.

In this horrific chemical attack, 119 people were martyred and 5,000 others injured.

Iran Calls on Int'l Community To Support Refugees

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Director-General of Foreign Affairs and Immigrants of Iran's Ministry of Interior stressed that the international community should support refugees.

In a virtual meeting, Mehdi Mahmoudi stressed the need for serious support for refugees, calling it an international responsibility and a humanitarian act with fair participation of all members of the international community.

Ivo Freijesen, UNHCR Representative in Iran, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health of Iran, ambassadors of various countries to Iran, as well as heads of the UN and international NGO representatives participated in this virtual meeting entitled "Partners of Strategic Solutions Aiming to Support Voluntary Returns, Sustainable Reintegration, and Assistance to Host Countries."

In this meeting, Mehdi Mahmoudi spoke about refugees' services for more than 40 years by the Islamic Republic of Iran in areas, including health, education, livelihood, vocational training, employment, and measures taken to combat COVID-19.

Mahmoudi added: "The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran expects more effective steps to be taken with the support of the international community in accepting the responsibility of protecting refugees, which is one of the goals of the International Refugee Convention."

Zarif Flatly Rejects JCPOA Renegotiation

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's foreign minister has once again categorically ruled out any renegotiation of the nuclear deal clinched by Iran and six world powers in 2015, urging all parties to get down to implementing the deal, instead of just posturing.

"JCPOA cannot be renegotiated—period," Mohammad Javad Zarif said via his Twitter account on Thursday, referring to the historic nuclear accord of 2015. "If 2021 is not 2015, it's not 1945 either. So let's change UN Charter & remove the veto—so often abused by U.S."

Zarif was responding to Wendy Sherman, U.S. President Joe Biden's nominee for deputy secretary of state, who said earlier that the facts on the ground have changed since the nuclear agreement was signed, calling for a "stronger" deal.

"I would note that 2021 is not 2015, when the deal was agreed, nor 2016, when it was implemented," Sherman said during a Senate confirmation hearing on Wednesday. "The facts on the ground have changed, the geopolitics of the region have changed, and the way forward must similarly change."

Zarif said "let's stop posturing" and get down to implementing the JCPOA, which was struck between Iran and six world powers, including the US, France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China, and was abandoned unilaterally by the US in May 2018.

JCPOA cannot be renegotiated—period.

Sherman, who had helped negotiate the JCPOA, suggested that Biden had deserted his presidential campaign promise to re-enter the deal, saying the US president's goal was "a deal that is longer and stronger."

Tehran has repeatedly ruled out any renegotiation of the already-negotiated deal, saying the only way to save the JCPOA is for the US to lift its sanctions on Iran and rejoin the accord.

The Islamic Republic also withstood almost three years of former U.S. President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, which he implemented in hopes of forcing Iran to renegotiate a "better deal" than the JCPOA.

Sherman also suggested that Washington should keep some of the illegal sanctions on Iran, even if the US returns to the JCPOA—a move Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has warned about.

U.S. Should Lift Sanctions to Revive JCPOA

TEHRAN (IRNA)- Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Abbas Araqchi has underlined that the only way to revitalize the 2015 Iran nuclear deal is that the United States should lift illegal sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

Araqchi made the remarks in a virtual meeting with Themistoklis Demiris, Secretary General of the Hellenic (Greek) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on Wednesday that Tehran expects other signatories to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to make use of the remaining opportunity to pursue constructive diplomacy and avoid taking any stance, which will harm the existing environment.

The Iranian official also said that Tehran's scale-back of its nuclear commitments is in line with provisions of the JCPOA, and that the measure was adopted in response to the US-EU inaction to abide by their obligations.

The verbal commitment of three European powers - the UK, Germany and France - to the JCPOA is not enough, he said, adding that the Islamic Republic's self-restraint helped maintain the international deal in last four years.

Pointing to this week's session of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors, he described the Europeans' attempt to prepare a draft resolution as a wrong measure, warning that Tehran will not accept such attitudes especially after the US's so-called maximum pressure doomed to fail.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the diplomat stressed the need for expansion of relations between Greece and Iran.

Demiris, for his part, underlined the importance of using diplomacy to resolve disputes, noting that Greece has opposed the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of unilateral sanctions on Iran.

The Greek official said that his country is ready to develop bilateral collaborations with Iran in different sectors.

Tehran, Baghdad Draft Security Agreement

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy Minister of Interior said in a joint press conference with the High Counselor of Iraqi Interior Minister that a security agreement has been drafted to be signed by ministers.

Hossein Zolfaghari said that Iran hosted an Iraqi delegation this week with high level meetings on promoting cooperation and information exchange on issues concerning security, border cooperation, fighting terrorism, organized crimes, fighting drug trafficking and facilitating civil travels between countries.

He also said that an agreement was drafted to be signed in a future meeting between interior ministers of Iran and Iraq.

Zolfaghari highlighted 'very good cooperation' between officials from the two countries on different areas, including Arbacen ritual which is widely

commemorated by millions of Iranians traveling to Iraq during the occasion.

Although terrorism has been defeated, Iran and Iraq have still close cooperation to fight terrorism in various fields, including intelligence, education, border control, and experience exchange.

High Counselor of Iraq's Interior Minister Abdulhalim Fahim al-Farhoud, in turn, said that he and his companions had several meetings with Iranian counterparts and good conversation on security and issues related to citizens went on in the meetings.

He also said that the Iraqi delegation visited some defense companies in Iran to get familiar with Iranian defense products and Iraq would use the products to meet its defense demands.

Raids on U.S. Bases in Iraq "Suspicious"

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Ministry spokesman has described as the latest wave of attacks against US bases in neighboring Iraq as "suspicious," saying it appears that external elements, such as the Israeli regime, are behind such operations.

In an interview with Al Jazeera Arabic, Saeed Khatibzadeh was asked about the rocket attack earlier in the day that targeted the Ain al-Assad air base hosting American and other foreign forces in the western Iraqi province of Anbar. In response, he drew attention to the similar nature of the attacks that have recently targeted US military bases and diplomatic missions in Iraq, saying the raids have all taken place in a specific manner and period of time.

Such attacks are thus "suspicious," and there are indications that foreign hands, including those of the Zionist regime in Israel, are involved, the Iranian official said.

On Wednesday, a barrage of Grad rockets were fired at Ain al-Assad, the latest in a series of attacks on American military and diplomatic facilities in the Arab country. Two American contractors reportedly died in the raid.

Khatibzadeh, however, said America is not in a position to decide who had been behind such attacks, but it is up to Iraq, as a sovereign state, to make such a decision.

The U.S., he said, violated Iraq's sovereignty by attacking the positions of a Hashd al-Sha'abi that is currently serving to protect the volatile border with crisis-hit Syria, adding that the PMU — an official Iraqi force — likewise condemned the US raid on its border positions as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty.

The Iranian spokesman once again rejected attempts to link Iran to the raids on U.S. positions in Iraq, saying Tehran has asked Baghdad to launch an investigation to find the perpetrators.

President Inaugurates Urban Management Projects Worth Over \$2.38b

TEHRAN (MNA) - President Hassan Rouhani inaugurated 1004 development and urban management projects worth 100 trillion rials (about \$2.38 billion) across Iran in an online ceremony held on Thursday.

The said projects were put into operation following a series of inaugurations in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 20, 2020), IRNA reported.

Some subway stations in Tehran, a terminal and underground parking in Khorasan Razavi province, a cultural complex in Golestan province, a tourism complex in Alborz province, and a fruit and vegetable market in Bushehr province were some of the projects inaugurated in the mentioned ceremony.

Since the beginning of the current calendar year, which has been named the year of "surge in production" by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Seyed Ali Khamenei, the government has urged various bodies and ministries to take the necessary measures for the realization of the year's motto.

In this regard, every week several major projects have gone operational all over the country in different sectors.

Iran Takes Delivery of Third Batch of Russian Vaccines

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian customs authorities have taken delivery of a third batch of Russia's Sputnik V vaccines as the country moves ahead with a nation-wide immunization drive against the coronavirus pandemic.

Iranian customs office deputy chairman Mehrdad Jamali was in the Imam Khomeini airport near Tehran on Thursday to expedite customs clearance of the vaccine cargo, showed a footage published by semi-official Fars news agency.

Jamali said the vaccines would be immediately delivered to representatives of the Iranian health ministry for sending to vaccination centers across Iran.

The new batch contains 200,000 doses of Sputnik V, the jab developed by Russia and approved in Iran for vaccination of health workers and the vulnerable.

Iran had already received 240,000 doses of the vaccine on two flights from Moscow in late January and in early February.

The health ministry is also using a supply of 250,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccines donated by China in a first phase of its inoculation program.

Russia and Iran have also signed an agreement to launch joint production for Sputnik V inside Iran so that nearby countries could have an easier access to supplies of the vaccine.

Iran is expected to expand its vaccination campaign next month or in early April when a first batch of jabs being developed by the country's Pasteur Institute in collaboration with Cuban scientists hit the markets.

A purely homemade vaccine is also due later in April while a third Iranian candidate will be ready in early summer, according to health ministry officials.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:15
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:22
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:02
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:25

27. Then, in their wake, We followed them up with (others of) Our apostles: We sent after them Jesus the son of Mary, and bestowed on him the Gospel; and We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him Compassion and Mercy. But the Monasticism which they invented for themselves, We did not prescribe for them: (We commanded) only the seeking for the Good Pleasure of Allah, but that they did not foster as they should have done. Yet We bestowed, on those among them who believed, their (due) reward, but many of them are rebellious transgressors.

Surah 57, Iron (27)

Chabahar to Turn Into a Hub For Petrochemical Products

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran's Minister of Road and Urban Development Mohammad Eslami on Thursday said in the near future Chabahar Port will turn into a hub for petrochemical products.

Speaking at a virtual event marking Chabahar Day at the Maritime India Summit organized by India's shipping industry, Eslami said that the current implementation trend of the agreement between Iran, Afghanistan and India is in good condition, adding that full completion of the Chabahar Agreement will accelerate the transportation and transit as well as trade, and it will be the ground for meeting the reciprocal interests of the signatory countries as well as the public welfare in the region.

He said that Chabahar can have competitive advantages for neighbors of Iran regarding transshipment of goods, noting that Chabahar Port by being connected to the rail network will become important in terms of development and it can easily connect neighboring countries like Afghanistan to the Central Asia and to the free waters and oceans with the least cost. He then pointed to the developmental operation at Shahid Beheshti Port of Chabahar and said India has unique potential to take advantage of capacities at Chabahar, reiterating that the current capacity of Shahid Beheshti Port in its phase one is 8.5m tons and for its construction more than \$1b has been spent. He added that by improving the transportation and logistics infrastructure of the port, Chabahar can turn into a major hub for petrochemical productions.

Meanwhile India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar proposed the inclusion of Iran's Chabahar Port in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and invited Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to join the multi-lateral corridor project.

Addressing the event, Jaishankar said, "INSTC is an important trade-corridor project, wherein India is partnering with 13 countries to establish the economic-corridor for the benefit of our peoples. We also welcome the interest of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to join the multi-lateral corridor project. Establishing an Eastern Corridor through Afghanistan will maximize its potential."

"India has proposed the inclusion of Chabahar in the INSTC route. I am hopeful that during the INSTC Coordination Council Meeting, member-states will agree to the



expansion of the INSTC route to include the Chabahar port and also agree on expanding the membership of this project," he informed.

INSTC is a 7200-kilometre ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia. The members of this INSTC project are India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Bulgaria (observer).

The move reflects India's strong commitment to work together with all regional stakeholders to enhance connectivity in our region and to provide unhindered access to the sea, to land-locked Central Asian countries through Chabahar Port, said Jaishankar.

The Chabahar port, where an Indian state-run firm - India Ports Global Limited operates Shahid Beheshti Port, is the practical realisation of this important initiative to enhance connectivity to Afghanistan and the Central Asian states.

"India has utilised Chabahar Port to ship 75,000 metric tonnes (MTs) of wheat as humanitarian food assistance to Afghanistan in September 2020. India also assisted Iran to fight the worst ever locust invasion in the last 25 years by supplying 25 MTs of Malathion in June 2020 through Chabahar port," said Jaishankar.

"Chabahar Port has not only emerged as a commercial transit hub for the region but also facilitated the delivery of humanitarian assistance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Port is part of our shared commitment towards peace, stability and prosperity of people of Afghanistan," he added.

Tehran, Helsinki Hold Webinar on Water Resources Management

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran and Finland have held a specialized webinar on water resources management on Wednesday.

A specialized webinar on water resources management was organized by the Iranian and Finnish Ministry of Agriculture as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran via videoconference on Wednesday.

Iranian Minister of agriculture and his Finnish counterpart has recently signed an agreement in the field of water and soil.

Both sides conferred on the expansion of bilateral relations in the field of water management and the implementation of joint projects during the virtual event.

Oil Market Is Currently Stable

TEHRAN (MNA) – Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh has expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of the 14th OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting held on Thursday via video conference and said the oil market is currently stable.

Making the remarks after the meeting, Zanganeh noted that it was decided in the gathering to allow Russia and Kazakhstan to add 150,000 barrels per day (bpd) to their production in April, Shana reported.

Also, Saudi Arabia will cut its oil output by one million bpd voluntarily for April, the official added.

The meeting was positive and did not last too long, Zanganeh said, adding the next meeting will be held on April 1 to review the market conditions and to decide the output level for May.

Amir Hossein Zamaninia, Iran's governor for OPEC also said on Thursday that the final decision made for April was ideal.

Instead of a 500,000 crude oil output rise in April, we agreed an additional oil production of 130,000 bpd for Russia and 20,000 bpd for Kazakhstan and therefore we got 350,000 bpd frozen, he said.

"Saudi Arabia said it will supply the 1 million bpd to the market gradually after April to support market balance provided that other members compensate for their extra production until the end of July," Zamaninia stated.

Tehran-Tashkent Trade Relations to Expand



TEHRAN (MNA) – The head of the Mining, Industry, and Trade Organization of Golestan Province hailed cultural similarities between Iran and Uzbekistan, saying that there are good grounds for expanding economic and diplomatic relations.

The head of the Mining Industry and Trade Organization of Golestan Province Hossein Tolouian made the comments during a webinar on the markets of Iran and Uzbekistan, which was held via video-conferencing with the attendance of a group of economic agents from the selected provinces of Uzbekistan.

Tolouian pointed to the cultural similarities between Iran and Uzbekistan and said that "there are good grounds for expanding economic and diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Iran."

"A brief look at the Uzbek government's economic plans and its adaptation to Iran's development plans shows common views on the two countries' development plans," he said.

The Iranian economic official stressed, "Developments and changes in the political, economic arena and the coronavirus pandemic have made the development of trade relations with neighboring countries, especially the northern neighbors, one of Iran's important priorities."

The head of the Golestan Province Mining, Industry and Trade Organization said that "Currently, trade and trade relations of the two countries are limited to some agricultural and chemical materials and products, but economic exchanges can be improved through removing obstacles."

He added that "barter trade, strengthening border markets, strengthening the use of local currencies, forming national and commodity desks, etc., and applying justifiable tariffs on goods can promise better days in economic, cultural and political relations between the two countries."

Tolouian concluded that strategic similarities with the countries of the region can help the country in realizing development goals.

Tehran Ready to Cooperate With Rome in Energy Sector

TEHRAN (IP) - In a meeting with the Italian ambassador to Tehran, Iran's energy minister stressed the two countries' cooperation in energy sector projects in other countries.

During the meeting with Italian Ambassador to Tehran Giuseppe Perone on Wednesday, Reza Ardakanian referred to the many opportunities for bilateral cooperation in projects in other countries and the possibility of using Iran's unique capabilities in the region.

He stated that bilateral meetings and holding business conferences between Iranian and Italian companies



could help develop relations.

The Italian ambassador, for his part, also stated that large Italian companies were very eager to develop cooperation with Iran in energy, especially renewable energy.

Iran's foreign trade with Europe from March to September 2020 was over 15,910,816 tons of goods worth 8,807,879,841 dollars.

The volume of Iran's exports to Europe in this period was more than 5,605,891 tons of goods worth 2,066,840,538 dollars.

Iran has exported goods to 37 European countries.

Labor Cooperation Among Iraq, Tajikistan, Finland, Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Director-General of Ministry of Labor, Cooperatives and Social Welfare for International Affairs Ali Hossein Shahrivar said that the Islamic Republic plans to cooperate with Finland, Iraq, and Tajikistan on the exchange of workforces.

Shahrivar said that the first joint meeting with Tajikistan and Finland, as well as the second session with Iraq, has been held via video conference.

The mentioned sides held talks on joint ventures in a bid to develop and deepen relations and collaborations, he noted. The official added that in the virtual meeting with Tajikistan, the two sides finalized a draft for a memorandum of understanding on labor and technical pieces of training and the document will be inked in Dushanbe and Tehran in the future.

As to the joint committee with Iraq, he explained that Baghdad and Tehran reviewed a five-year-long joint program and an official invitation will be sent from the Iraqi labor minister to his Iranian counterpart and they will sign the document in Baghdad. In a meeting between Finnish and Iranian officials for labor affairs, the two sides agreed to cooperate on dispatching professional workforces to Finland, exchanging experience and know-how, as well as creating job opportunities and providing pieces of training. The draft of a memorandum of understanding will be sent to Finland through Iran's diplomatic mission in the European country.

Iran dispatched 2,000 workforces to other countries from March 20, 2018, to March 20, 2019.

The Ministry of Labor, Cooperatives, and Social Welfare supports dispatching workforces specialized in technical fields and academic majors except for medical sciences.

Tehran, Damascus Sign Car Production Agreement

TEHRAN (IP) – Iran and Syria signed a cooperation agreement to restart SIAMCO auto manufacturing company in Syria.

This agreement was signed yesterday with the delegates of Sorena Sattari, the Vice President for Science and Technology of Iran, who has traveled to Syria and in the presence of Javad Torkabadi, Iran's ambassador to Syria.

The Syrian Minister of Industry considered the meeting important for the development of the country's industry and economy after the end of the internal crisis, adding: "In this meeting, it was agreed to restart the Syrian Iranian auto manufacturing company SIAMCO."

A member of the board of directors of SIAMCO, said that if the company resumes operations, car prices in Syria will fall in two months.

Iran Among Top 10 World Steel Producers

KKORRAMABAD (IRNA) - Head of Geological Survey and Mineral Exploration of Iran Alireza Shahidi on Wednesday said that the country is among the top 10 countries producing steel in the world.

World Steel Association put the average steel production growth of its member countries in 2020 at 0.9%, while Iran's steel production growth this year has been reported to be 13.4%.

Shahidi pointed out that Iran has gained achievements despite the imposed sanctions.

Nowadays 31 million tons of steel is being produced in the country in spite of the pandemic, he noted. Reportedly, the value of Iran's steel and cast iron exports to China reached \$773 million during the nine months of the current Iranian calendar.

Iran-Turkmenistan Border Wide Railroad Bridge Opens

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The wide railroad border bridge is on the Iran-Turkmenistan border inaugurated on Thursday.

Director-General of Iran's North East Railway Line 2 based in Gorgan Mohsen Etemad said, "The construction of this railway cost 4 million and 500 thousand dollars, and Iran's share for the implementation of this project was 2 million and 240 thousand dollars."

Etemad also stated: "The project, which was carried out in order to facilitate trade relations between Iran and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and reduce costs, has also been welcomed by investors in Iran's Golestan province."

He highlighted that since 2014, when the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway was inaugurated in Incheboron, the wide railway line had not been connected.

It is estimated that by 2025, more than 6 million tons of cargo will be exported from this area, which is cost-effective due to the characteristics of this route, such as reducing the length, time, cost, and final price.

Although the border was closed for over 100 days because of the lockdown of the Coronavirus pandemic, over 220,000 tons of goods were exported to Turkmenistan through the railroad, Etemad stated earlier.

He noted that some 100,000 tons of cement had the biggest share of exports from Golestan province to Turkmenistan, adding that steel, tiles, dates, detergent, and apple were in the next places.

"Iran exported nearly 144,000 tons of goods to Turkmenistan over 11 months last year, but this year, it exported around 220,000 tons of goods in just seven months," the official stated, forecasting that it would reach 300,000 tons until the end of the current Iranian year (March 20).

He said that the number of railway wagons for transportation of goods to Turkmenistan would increase to 30 from the current 20.

U.N. Seeks Access to Tigray For War Crimes Probe

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The United Nations' human rights chief asked Ethiopia on Thursday to allow monitors into Tigray to investigate reports of killings and sexual violence that may amount to war crimes in the northern region since late 2020.

"Victims and survivors of these violations must not be denied their rights to the truth and to justice," Michelle Bachelet said in a statement, expressing her fear that violations could continue without outside scrutiny. Fighting between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's federal troops and forces of the region's former ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), has killed thousands of people, forced hundreds of thousands from their homes and hit infrastructure badly.



U.S. Opposes ICC War Crimes Probe, Citing Support for Israel

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States "firmly opposes and is deeply disappointed" by the International Criminal Court's (ICC) decision to open a war crimes investigation in the occupied Palestinian territories, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said.

The investigation, which was announced on Wednesday, comes after a February ICC determination that the occupied Palestinian territories fall under its jurisdiction, paving the way for an investigation of war crimes committed by both Palestinians and Israelis. "The ICC has no jurisdiction over this matter. Israel is not a party to the ICC and has not consented to the Court's jurisdiction, and we have serious concerns about the ICC's attempts to exercise its jurisdiction over Israeli personnel," Blinken said in a statement.



Kremlin Urges France, Germany To Stop Ukraine Conflict



MOSCOW (Reuters) - The Kremlin on Thursday urged France and Germany to use their influence with the Ukrainian government to make sure that events in the part of eastern Ukraine controlled by Russian-backed rebels did not "cross a dangerous line".

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Moscow was seriously concerned by a rise in violence on the contact line between the rebels and Ukrainian government forces.

The separatists seized a swathe of eastern Ukraine in 2014, including the industrial cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. Major combat ended with a truce agreed in the Belarusian capital Minsk in 2015, whose implementation France and Germany have helped to oversee. But sporadic fighting continues; Kyiv says about 14,000 civilians, Ukrainian soldiers and separatists have been killed in all.

In recent weeks clashes have become more frequent, and at least 10 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed this year. On Thursday, the Kremlin accused Kyiv's forces of shelling in breach of the ceasefire agreement and entering areas where they were not meant to be.

Ukraine's military accused pro-Russian forces of shelling its positions to provoke them into returning fire and opening themselves up to accusations from Moscow. It said Russian-backed forces had violated the ceasefire four times within 24 hours.

The Kremlin said it was using its own influence with pro-Russian separatists to try to calm tensions.

"We also hope all our partners in the ... (Normandy) quartet will pay attention to the growing tension on the contact line and will use their influence to prevent this escalation from crossing a dangerous line," Peskov said. The leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine have met from time to time in the so-called Normandy format to discuss implementation of the peace deal.

"A red line would be the resumption of full-scale hostilities," said Peskov.

Khshoggi's Fiancee Criticizes Lack of Action Against Saudi Crown Prince

LONDON (Dispatches) - The fiancee of slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khshoggi said on Thursday that world leaders should not maintain relations with a "murderer", after a U.S. intelligence report implicated Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler in his killing.

Khshoggi, a critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was last seen entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on Oct. 2, 2018. Turkish officials believe his body was dismembered and removed. His remains have not been found.

A U.S. intelligence report released last Friday said Prince Mohammed had approved the operation to kill or capture Khshoggi in Oct. 2018. The Saudi government has denied any involvement by the crown prince and rejected the report's findings.

Myanmar Police Break Up Protests Again

YANGON (Reuters) - Police in Myanmar broke up demonstrations in several places with tear gas and gunfire on Thursday as protesters took to the streets again undeterred by the rising death toll in a crackdown on opponents of last month's military coup.

The incidents followed the bloodiest day since the military overthrew the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 1, with the United Nations special envoy on Burma saying 38 people had been killed on Wednesday.

The United Nations human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, called on the security forces to halt what she called their "vicious crackdown on peaceful protesters".

At least 54 people had been killed in total but the actual toll could be much higher, she said. More than 1,700 people had been arrested, including 29 journalists.

"Myanmar's military must stop murdering and jailing protesters," Bachelet said in a statement.

Activists said they refused to accept military rule and were determined to press for the release of the detained Suu Kyi and recognition of her victory in a November election.

"We know that we can always get shot and killed with live bullets but there is no meaning to staying alive under the junta," activist Maung Saungka told Reuters.

Police opened fire and used tear gas to break up protests in Yangon and the central town of Monywa, witnesses said. Police also fired in the town of Patheingyi, west of Yangon, and used tear gas in Taunggyi in the east, media reported.

In Yangon, hundreds of protesters soon assembled again to chant slogans and sing.

Big crowds also gathered peacefully for rallies elsewhere, including the second city of Mandalay and in the historic temple town of Bagan, where hundreds marched carrying pictures of Suu Kyi and a banner saying: "Free our leader", witnesses said.

Hundreds of people attended the funeral of a 19-year-old woman shot dead in Mandalay on Wednesday, who was photographed wearing a T-shirt that read "Everything will be OK".

On Wednesday, police and soldiers opened fire with live rounds with little warning in several cities and towns, witnesses said.



Northern Irish Loyalists End Support For Peace Deal Over Brexit

LONDON (Dispatches) - Northern Irish loyalist paramilitary groups have told British Prime Minister Boris Johnson they are temporarily withdrawing support for the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement due to concerns over the United Kingdom's Brexit deal with the European Union.

While the groups pledged "peaceful and democratic" opposition to the deal, such a stark warning increases the pressure on Johnson, his Irish counterpart Micheal Martin and the EU over Brexit. The 1998 peace accord, also known as the Belfast Agreement, ended three decades of violence between mostly Catholic nationalists fighting for a united Ireland and mostly Protestant unionists, or loyalists, who want Northern Ireland to stay part of the UK.

The loyalist paramilitaries including the Ulster Volunteer Force, Ulster Defence Association and Red Hand Commando said they were concerned about the disruption to trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK due to the Brexit deal.

"The loyalist groupings are herewith withdrawing their support for the Belfast Agreement," they said in a March 3 letter to Johnson from Loyalist Communities Council chairman David Campbell, seen by Reuters news agency.

U.N. Says 17% of Food Wasted at Consumer Level

LONDON (Reuters) - An estimated 17% of food available to consumers was wasted in homes, retail outlets and restaurants in 2019, according to research published by the United Nations.

The report, produced jointly by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and WRAP, also found that consumer waste was broadly similar in rich and poor countries.

The United Nations is producing a Food Waste Index (FWI) as it seeks to support efforts to halve food waste by 2030.

"For a long time, it was assumed that food waste in the home was a significant problem only in developed countries," said Marcus Gover, CEO of WRAP, a charity which works with governments to reduce food waste. "With the publication of the Food Waste Index report, we see that things are not so clear cut."

The report estimated that 931 million tonnes of food was wasted in 2019, roughly equal to 23 million fully loaded 40-tonne trucks - bumper-to-bumper enough to circle the earth seven times.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2011 estimated that one-third of the world's food was wasted or lost ever year.

The FAO has produced a Food Loss Index which shows that around 14% of the world's food is lost from post-harvest up to, but excluding, the retail level.

An estimated 8 to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with food that is not consumed (waste and loss), a similar amount to road transportation.

Forests are cleared, fuel is burnt and packaging in produced just to provide food which is thrown away. Meanwhile, rotting food in landfills releases more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

"If we want to get serious about tackling climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste, businesses, governments and citizens around the world have to do their part to reduce food waste," said Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP.

German Warship to Cross South China Sea For First Time Since 2002

BERLIN (Dispatches) - A German frigate will set sail for Asia in August and, on its return journey, become the first German warship to cross the South China Sea since 2002, senior government officials said on Wednesday.

The ship will not pass within what officials called the "12-nautical-mile", officials in the foreign and defense ministries added, in a reference to contested areas of the sea, which China claims almost in its entirety.

The United Kingdom is also sending its navy to the region, announcing that HMS Queen Elizabeth will set sail on its maiden voyage in May this year and is expected to reach eastern Asia by the late northern hemisphere summer.

China has established military outposts on artificial islands across the South China Sea, which is also claimed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan and the Philippines, which took China to the international court over its claims.

In 2016, the Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled there was no legal basis for China's claim. China refused to participate in the case and later dismissed the ruling as "null and void".

The U.S. regularly conducts "freedom of navigation" operations in which their vessels pass close by to some of the islands, asserting freedom of access to international waterways.

Washington accuses Beijing of militarizing the South China Sea and trying to intimidate its Asian neighbors.

The U.S. welcomed Germany's decision to deploy its ship to the region. "The United States has a national interest in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, lawful unimpeded commerce, and freedom of navigation and other lawful uses of the sea," a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department said. "We welcome Germany's support for a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. The international community has a vital stake in the preservation of an open maritime order."

A spokesman for the foreign ministry in China said countries enjoyed freedom of navigation and overflight in the waterway under international law, but added: "They cannot take it as an excuse to undermine the sovereignty and security of littoral countries."



Shanon
(adviser)

Parsian

Farmanieh Apt (\$2200)
200sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, Sauna
J, L.balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

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

Zaferanieh Apt (\$2000) F.F
220sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, S, J, pkg

(\$3000)
Darrous Apt
300sq.m, 4bdrs, S/p
S, J, & F.F

Elahieh bldg (\$5000) renovated
4storey, 12bdrs
enough pkg lots

Sa`adat abad (\$1400)
130sq.m, 2bdrs, & F.F

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Indonesia's Economic Outlook Is Positive

JAKARTA (VNA) - The Indonesian economy is gradually recovering, owing in part to a bold, comprehensive, and coordinated policy response to address the socio-economic hardship inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The country's GDP is projected to expand by 4.8 percent in 2021 and 6 percent in 2022. Meanwhile, inflation is set to rise gradually to 3 percent (y/y) at the end of 2021. The current account deficit is expected to widen to 1.5 percent of GDP in 2021, reflecting higher imports driven by economic recovery.



Big Economies Agree To Boost IMF Funding

LONDON (Reuters) - G20 major economies have agreed to raise International Monetary Fund reserves with a new allocation of the fund's own special drawing rights (SDRs) currency, the IMF's head said, in a potential boost for lending to poor countries.

"We finally last Friday at the G20 meeting got a green (light) to work on a new SDR allocation," Kristalina Georgieva said during the IMF's African Fiscal Forum, broadcast online.

"500 billion - in which each and every member of the IMF would receive its own share immediately contributing to reserves," she said, without specifying the currency unit.

Italy, which heads the Group of 20 major economies this year, is pushing for a \$500 billion issuance of SDRs as a way to provide liquidity to poor countries hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic without increasing their debt levels.

G20 finance officials on Friday expressed broad support for boosting the IMF's emergency reserves after new U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen dropped the opposition of her predecessor, Steven Mnuchin.

An IMF spokesman said the Fund was formulating an SDR allocation proposal at the G20's request. The allocation's size "will be based on our assessment of long-term global need to supplement existing reserve assets," he said.

Georgieva also said the fund would look at ways of redistributing SDRs, which are supplemental foreign exchange reserve assets issued by the IMF much as a central bank prints money.

"We are also very interested to think of a way in which our wealthy members, who do not need this SDR allocation as much as the weaker members do, that they can transfer through us, onlend through us some of these SDRs," she said.

Speaking at the same event, African Union Special Envoy for COVID-19 Tidjane Thiam urged the G20 to extend the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), which provides payment relief to the poorest nations.

G20 leaders are widely expected to agree to extend the scheme, which currently runs until end-June; a decision is expected to be taken in April.

"(The) DSSI should be prolonged," Thiam said. "We need a path to a sustainable debt situation, and if we do that, the money will come. I'm optimistic."

S. Korea's Economy Grows Faster Than Expected in Q4

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's economy grew slightly faster than expected in the fourth quarter of 2020, although this had no effect on the overall economic contraction for last year amid the coronavirus pandemic, central bank data showed Thursday.

The nation's economy expanded 1.2 percent in the fourth quarter from three months earlier, 0.1 percentage point higher than what has expected, according to preliminary data from the Bank of Korea (BOK).

Asia's fourth-largest economy contracted 1 percent last year, unchanged from the bank's earlier estimate.

The BOK has expected South Korea's economy to stage a modest recovery, supported by exports and investment, but its job markets would recover at a slow pace as the pandemic continues to hit the service sector.

South Korea's exports rose 9.5 percent in February from a year earlier to extend their gains for the fourth consecutive month on robust shipments of chips, autos and other key products.

"On the production side, manufacturing rose by 3.0 percent, mainly due to increases in chemical products and electrical equipment," the BOK said in a statement. Last year, the manufacturing sector added only 0.3 percent. Government spending gained 2.3 percent on-year, while private spending plunged 6.5 percent, according to the central bank.

Meanwhile, the BOK said the country's gross national income (GNI) fell 0.3 percent in 2020 from a year earlier.

"Real GNI fell by 0.3 percent as the terms of trade improved, although real net factor income from the rest of the world decreased," the BOK said.

The BOK predicted that South Korea's economy would grow 3 percent this year.

Last year, the nation's per capita income stood at \$31,755, down 1.1 percent from a year ago.

Nominal GDP reached 1,924.5 trillion won in 2020, up 0.3 percent from a year earlier.

In terms of US dollar value, however, nominal GDP fell 0.9 percent on-year in 2020.

The BOK blamed the Korean currency's strength against the US dollar to the decline in nominal GDP in terms of the US dollar.

The GDP deflator, a gauge of inflation, rose 2.4 percent on-year in the fourth quarter of last year, accelerating from a 2 percent gain three months earlier.



Saudi Arabia to Ship Gas to South Korea, Take Back the CO2

RIYADH (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia plans to ship gas to South Korea where it will be used to make hydrogen, and the carbon dioxide produced in the process will be transported straight back to the kingdom.

Hyundai OilBank Co. will take liquefied petroleum gas cargoes from Saudi Aramco which it will then convert into hydrogen, the Korean energy company's parent Hyundai Heavy Industries Holdings Co. said in a statement. The hydrogen will be used at desulfurization facilities and to power vehicles.

The deal signed on Wednesday includes an agreement for the CO2 emitted in the hydrogen-making process to be transported back to Saudi Arabia, according to a Hyundai Heavy spokesman. The gas will then be used in Aramco's oil production facilities.

The Saudi oil major uses carbon dioxide to pump more oil out of the ground in a process known as enhanced oil recovery. Saudi Aramco did not immediately respond to a request for more information on the arrangement.

Aramco shipped its first cargo of hydrogen produced in combination with carbon capture as ammonia to Japan in September. The agreement with HHI differs because the hydrogen will be produced in South Korea, rather than where the natural gas was extracted.

"It seems the project will bank on the idea that shipping LPG to Korea and carbon dioxide back to Saudi Arabia will be cheaper than shipping hydrogen to Korea," said Martin Tengler, BloombergNEF's lead hydrogen analyst.

Korea Shipbuilding & Offshore Engineering Co., the shipbuilding arm of Hyundai Heavy, will jointly develop the world's first vessel that will be able to carry LPG and captured carbon dioxide.



Lufthansa Posts Record Annual Loss, Sees Long Recovery

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German flag carrier Lufthansa said Thursday it lost a record 6.7 billion euros (\$8.1 billion) in 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic wiped out demand for travel and left aircraft grounded.

Europe's biggest airline said it expects to book an operating loss again in 2021, although smaller than last year, as capacity runs at only 40-50 percent of pre-pandemic levels for the full year.

Underlining the long road to recovery, it added that capacity will climb to 90 percent of 2019's level only in "the middle of the decade".

After borders slammed shut as governments scrambled to halt the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis, the airline faced an uncertain future. In June, it was offered a lifeline by the German government, which pumped in nine billion euros for a 25 percent stake.

"The past year was the most challenging in the history of our company -- for our customers, our employees and our shareholders," said Lufthansa chief executive Carsten Spohr.

In the airline's home base, demand is sluggish with work from home orders curtailing lucrative business travel while official warnings are in place against leisure tourism in many countries worldwide.

Across Europe, restrictions are also in place as governments continue to battle rising infection numbers. Lufthansa is currently flying about 20 percent of its capacity, with little improvement expected in the next one to two months. But it expects demand to pick up again in the summer with a vaccination rollout progressing and more capacity for tests available.

Closing Gender Gap to Boost Pakistan's GDP by 30%

KARACHI (Dispatches) - Pakistan could raise GDP by as much as 30 percent if it can close the gender gap, ADB Country Director for Pakistan Xiaohong Yang said while expressing support to women's economic empowerment, quality opportunities for social advancement, and

resilience to external shocks.

"ADB will aim to increase women's access to financial services and raise their skills and education levels - increasing their access to higher-skilled and waged employment such as the ICT sector, and bolster social protection programs, where women are the primary beneficiaries," Yang said in a question-and-answer roundup.

"ADB will prioritize interventions to cut women's time poverty and drudgery by improving their access to modern technology, particularly in the agriculture sector, connecting them to affordable and reliable energy, and contributing convenient water supply and sanitation solutions."

Yang said gender inequities continue to be a significant challenge in Pakistan with low literacy rates and labor force participation for women. COVID-19 has heightened the risk of increased gender disparities in the country, she said.

The ADB recently endorsed a new country partnership strategy (CPS) for 2021-2025, designed to help restore economic stability and growth. This will focus on improving economic management, building resilience through human capital development and social protection, and boosting competitiveness and private sector development to expand economic opportunities.

In 2020, ADB committed \$500 million to help finance the government's countercyclical economic stimulus with a focus on boosting safety nets for the jobless and helping poor and vulnerable groups including women and children. ADB also provided a \$300 million emergency support loan and repurposed \$30 million to help reduce the socioeconomic and health impacts of the pandemic. ADB worked very closely with other international financial institutions and bilateral agencies during the COVID-19 crisis and mobilized about \$1.22 billion in cofinancing from other development partners.

EU to Propose That Companies Report on Gender Pay Gap



BRUSSELS (Reuters) - Companies employing at least 250 people in the European Union will have to start providing data on gender pay gaps under a proposal by the bloc's executive that comes as studies suggest the COVID-19 pandemic has hit female workers more than men.

Women make on average 14% less in the 27-nation EU, meaning they end up working almost two months for free every year compared with men, according to bloc's executive.

The gender pay gap differs from 1.4% in Luxembourg to 21.8% in Estonia, according to the European Commission, which is due to unveil on Thursday legislation to boost pay transparency to help narrow the gap.

It would introduce for the first time an obligation across the EU to report on pay disparities between female and male workers, according to a draft seen by Reuters in advance of publication.

It would give workers applying for jobs and those already in employment the right to demand information on expected pay and on how their individual pay compares with that of others. It would allow fines for companies violating the right to equal remuneration.

With more caring responsibilities, women tend to have more career breaks and work fewer hours. Combined with pay discrimination, that leads to a 30% pension gap, EU data shows.

As the gender pay gap has only narrowed marginally since 2014, most recent studies have sounded alarm that the coronavirus pandemic has deepened labour market inequality.

Women were more affected by job losses as the pandemic hit the retail, travel and leisure sectors, according to LinkedIn.

"Women's jobs are more vulnerable and prone to economic shocks and business disruption than men's ... This labour market vulnerability has set back progress made toward gender equality in the workplace," said the Microsoft's professional networking site.

A February report by EU agency Eurofound had similar findings: "The first impacts of the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on low-paid female workers," Eurofound said.

Iran, EAEU holding Talks to Activate FTA

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Rasoul Mohajer announced the growth of trade exchanges between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and said that the Islamic Republic's negotiations with the EAEU will soon start to implement the free trade agreement (FTA).
Negotiations with member-states of the Eurasian Economic Union

(EAEU) for free trade agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran are underway to implement the free trade agreement soon, in order to establish free trade agreements among Iran and the Eurasian Union countries, said Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy. The official expressed the hope that the implementation of the document will improve the economic cooperation among Iran and the Eurasian member countries.



OPEC Oil Has Advantage Over U.S. Shale During Pandemic Recovery

LONDON (Reuters) - The once-brash U.S. shale industry, which spent profusely in recent years to grab market share, is now focused on preserving cash, putting it at a disadvantage to low-cost OPEC producers as the global economy begins to gear up again.

Prior to the pandemic-induced downturn, OPEC countries led by Saudi Arabia restrained their production, eager to bolster prices to fund national budgets dependent on oil revenue. Shale drillers took advantage, boosting U.S. output to a record 13 million barrels a day.

But attendees of the year's top energy conference made clear that even with a buoyant, \$60-per-barrel oil price, shale will not come roaring back from the Covid-19 pandemic as it did from the 2016 downturn.

By contrast, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies, known as OPEC+, has more than 7 million barrels of daily oil output sitting in reserve. This positions them to boost production much more easily than shale players for the first time in years.

The concern about free-wheeling shale companies taking advantage of OPEC's output curbs led to a brief supply war in March 2020. Russia balked at a three-year agreement to extend production cuts, and Saudi Arabia responded by flooding the markets with oil, leading U.S. futures prices to slump to negative-\$40 a barrel.

"Let's face it. OPEC has had a very difficult time managing to accommodate the U.S. shale players and their ability to grow at low prices," said IHS Markit analyst Raoul LeBlanc, adding that the key debate within OPEC is what oil price is just low enough to avoid a massive U.S. response.

The pandemic destroyed a fifth of global fuel demand, and numerous shale companies declared bankruptcy, while others arranged mergers to offload debt. Frustrated investors sent energy-related stocks slumping throughout 2020.

While shale executives expressed concern about reopening the wells too quickly, OPEC nations are expected to ease supply curbs at their meeting later this week, without having to look over their shoulder at shale. "The worst thing that could happen is that U.S. producers start growing rapidly again," said ConocoPhillips Chief Executive Ryan Lance. The market widely expects OPEC to ease production cuts, which were the deepest ever, by around 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd), with OPEC's leader, Saudi Arabia, ending its voluntary production cut of 1 million bpd.

At CERAWEEK, OPEC vs. shale is often discussed as a showdown between competing interests, but the dynamic of Texas vs. the Middle East is nearly invisible this year. Just one panel discussion in a five-day schedule focused on shale.



Neither the Exxon or Chevron CEOs mentioned shale during their talks. Both companies have cut spending in the U.S. Permian Basin.

Crude on Tuesday topped \$60 per barrel, up from \$44.63 at the start of December, high enough to bolster U.S. producers' earnings given recent cost cuts.

In the past, rising prices have enticed shale companies to ramp up production even after they promised prudence, and \$60 oil would have once prompted companies to rush drilling rigs and frack fleets back to work. That is not happening now.

"They are not taking the bait," LeBlanc said.

Private companies are likely to increase oilfield activity, but not enough to meaningfully boost U.S. output, said LeBlanc, adding that U.S. spending is likely to remain around \$60 billion, flat with 2020, as companies prioritize shareholder returns. "The severe drop in activity in the U.S. along with the high decline rates of shale and the pressure from investment community to maintain discipline instead of growth means in my view that shale will not get back to where it was in the U.S.," said Occidental Petroleum CEO Vicki Hollub.

German Business Decries Gradual Easing of Coronavirus Curbs as "Disaster"

BERLIN (Dispatches) - People walk along Friedrichstrasse street which is closed for traffic for two days as a test project, in Berlin, Germany, October 6, 2019. REUTERS/Hannibal Hanschke

German business groups expressed dismay on Thursday after Chancellor Angela Merkel and state leaders agreed a gradual easing of coronavirus curbs but added an "emergency brake" to reimpose restrictions if case numbers get out of control.

"The results of the coronavirus summit are a disaster for the retail sector," said Stefan Genth, chief executive of the HDE retail association.

Under the five-stage plan agreed late on Wednesday, up to five people from two households will be allowed to meet from March 8, with children under 14 exempt. Some shops, including book stores and garden centres, can reopen.

Other retailers can only reopen in regions where case numbers are below 50 cases per 100,000 people over seven days. If the incidence rises above 50, 'click and meet' restrictions kick in, whereby customers book a slot to go to the store.

Hague-Based...

FROM PAGE 1

Under the ruling, the U.S. government was ordered to pay almost \$29 million to Iran.

The court also set a time limit for America to retribute some assets with historical value like musical instruments belonging to Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. If the U.S. fails to do so, it must pay Iran \$8 million dollars, bringing the total fine to \$37 million.

The IUSCT, which was established on January 19, 1981, consists of nine members, three appointed by each government and three (third-country) members appointed by the six government-appointed

U.S. Violates Iranians' Rights

GENEVA (IP)- At the UN Human Rights Council meeting, Iran's representative said the U.S. violated the Iranian people's rights by imposing unilateral, illegal, and oppressive sanctions and has no right to express concern about the human rights situation in Iran.

The Human Rights Attaché of the Iranian Mission to the UN in Geneva, Mohammad Sadatinejad, stated that the U.S. government continued to pursue Donald Trump's failed policy of maximum pressure, a policy of economic terrorism, against the Iranian nation. He noted that the United States must also be held accountable for Iranians' arbitrary detention which circumvented its illegal sanctions. He underlined that the Iranian nation would never forget the terrorist acts of the United States, including the assassination of Lt. Gen. Qasem Soleimani and his companions.

Leader Urges People...

FROM PAGE 1

Whatever the Coronavirus Prevention and Combat Headquarters says should be implemented, he said, noting that he will definitely have no trips during Nowruz.

On Arbor Day, individuals and groups are encouraged to plant trees and many countries mark the occasion.

National Tree Planting Day (Arbor Day) is the day when Individuals and groups throughout the country are encouraged to plant and care for trees. Every year, just before the Iranian New Year, millions of Iranians plant trees to mark the tree-planting week and hail the advent of spring. National Tree Planting Day, is annually celebrated on the fifteenth day of Esfand, the last month on the Iranian calendar, which usually corresponds with March 5. The day marks the beginning of National Week of Natural Resources (March 5-12).

Technical Meeting of...

FROM PAGE 1

Meanwhile Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Kazem Gharibabadi said on Thursday that eventually, rationality prevailed in the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In relevant remarks as news spread about the European Troika's retreat from presenting a resolution against Iran to the IAEA Board of Governors, Gharibabadi said that rationality eventually took over. He added that as a result of extensive diplomatic efforts, the process of issuing an anti-Iran resolution to the Governing Council was halted.

Gharibabadi criticized the politically-motivated actions and abuse of the IAEA and praised the vigilance and measures of the IAEA members, especially the Board of Governors and the Director-General, for their efforts to avoid unnecessary tensions and to leave the door open for diplomacy.

Further explanations will be provided in this regard after today's meeting of the Governing Council, he noted.

It had been revealed to the media in recent days that the U.S. and the three remaining European countries in Iran's nuclear deal were preparing a draft resolution at the IAEA Board of Governors criticizing Iran for ceasing its voluntary implementation of the IAEA Additional Protocol.

In relevant remarks, the French foreign minister claimed on Tuesday night that a resolution against Iran would be submitted to the IAEA Board of Governors and calling it critical. Jean-Yves Le Drian claimed that the resolution would be presented in the coming days.

Indian Merchants...

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In the first quarter of 2020 Iran imported nearly 700,000 tonnes of basmati rice from India, but in the same period this year shipments would be "very negligible," Setia said.

Last year, Iran was the biggest buyer of India's basmati rice and sugar. Iran fulfils more than one-third of its sugar and rice demand through imports, traders estimate.

Iran's trade ministry and Central Bank of Iran declined to comment on the matter.

"We are in talks with Indian government and Indian traders to resolve these payment issues and I believe it will be resolved soon," said a senior Iranian official, who asked not to be named due to the sensitivity of the matter. "The delay in payments are due to U.S. sanctions on Iran's financial system that has made such payments very difficult," he said.

As rupee reserves have depleted and dollar trade is not allowed, sugar exporters are exploring options to conduct trade in euros, Rahil Shaikh, managing director of

MEIR Commodities Sria, said. Sugar exporters are focusing on other destinations like Indonesia and Sri Lanka, as Iran is unlikely to buy significant quantities this year, said Shaikh.

India's overall exports to Tehran fell 42% in 2020 from a year ago to \$2.2 billion, the lowest in over a decade, said an official with India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The fall is continuing in 2021 and in January this year exports more than halved from a year ago to \$100.20 million, the official said. India's ministry of commerce and industry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Trading houses and exporters were hoping new U.S. President Joe Biden could reverse sanctions imposed by his predecessor Donald Trump on the oil-rich country.

"Exports would rebound even if Biden administration provides a few concessions to Iran like allowing oil trade in rupees," said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trading firm.

Return to the JCPOA...

FROM PAGE 1

It seems that preparing the scene for publishing this letter and emphasis of experts and summed up viewpoints by Europe would be the ground for a heroic flexibility by the U.S and it seems in the first step Biden to issue a statement in the White House that the U.S.



would return to the JCPOA without any precondition.

However, undoubtedly the Islamic Republic of Iran would welcome this step but we should consider this point that backtrack from the unacceptable actions of Trump is considered as the first step in the backtrack in the policy of Europe and the U.S. that it should be considered as a ground for taking serious steps towards removing all sanctions.

The Supreme Leader's emphasis in Iran on the six-month timetable for verification and making sure of no practical hurdles on the route of Iran's free trade in using the SWIFT, purchase and sales, and banking transactions is not an issue to be ended with just a statement by the White House.

So the Islamic Republic of Iran reacting to the continuity of Western states' actions will emphasize this point that return to the JCPOA is a prelude to objective materialization of the paragraphs of the JCPOA in practical and executive elimination of sanctions.

Experience shows us that the U.S. and Europe in a close alignment will try to magnify the White House statement and without removing sanctions they will ask Iran to take the next step and to make a media hype that it is now Iran's turn. However, this point should be emphasized that the U.S. pullout from the JCPOA in the past two years has inflicted heavy damages on the Islamic Republic of Iran, and due to the created distrust climate, if the U.S. return to the JCPOA is not accompanied by the removal of sanctions and at the same time removal of the sanctions is not verified - that unfortunately even with double-standards in the world trade and even the time when the U.S. was a signatory of the JCPOA in Barrack Obama - Iran has not enjoyed any advantage of the deal according to the political and economic officials with taking behind-the-scene measures.

So it is necessary to be emphasized that the U.S. return to the JCPOA will do Iran any good, and practical removal of sanctions and its verification for a logical period in its implementation will be important.

Tehran Calls for...

FROM PAGE 1

The Islamic Republic of Iran remains ready to actively contribute to the operationalization of the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) and creating the necessary financial, banking, and customs arrangements while having on board all ECO Member States, he pointed out.

Given our geographical location, we are prepared to share our transport network as well as infrastructures and facilities along the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea with ECO Members, particularly the landlocked countries, bridging them with international waters and markets, he added.

The international community is now experiencing formidable challenges which have affected all facets of human life. The COVID-19 has deeply and destructively affected the economic and welfare conditions of the countries in the world, he stated. No country can afford to tackle such challenges single-handedly. Rather, it requires collective will along with joint cooperation. Accordingly, we consider very timely and promising for ECO Region the theme of this Summit, namely "Regional Cooperation in the PostCOVID Era", he added. In the time of the pandemic, the international community has disappointingly failed to act against unilateral measures and unlawful sanctions dragged into the realm of the fight against the disease, targeting the countries' capabilities in their struggle against this global plague, Rouhani said.

The great powers' depriving other nations of fundamental rights as well as their disrespect for international organizations necessitate a response from the like-minded countries including through strengthening cooperation and creating a united front against these challenges, he underlined. Meanwhile Turkey urged for the trade deal between member countries of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to be put into action as soon as possible. Addressing ECO's virtual 14th Leaders Summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also called for the members to develop their ties with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and urged for the lifting of U.S. sanctions on Iran.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan opened the summit in his capacity as the chair of the 13th summit, held in Islamabad in March 2017. President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan chairs the 14th summit.

Iran, Pakistan and Turkey are the founding members of ECO, established in 1985. Afghanistan, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan joined the organization later.

Leipzig Reach German Cup Semis

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Yussuf Poulsen and Hwang Hee-chan netted second-half goals as RB Leipzig beat Wolfsburg 2-0 in the German Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday, while second-tier Holstein Kiel also reached the last four.

After Poulsen opened the scoring, South Korea striker Hwang came off the bench to hit a late second goal and seal a semi-final berth alongside Borussia Dortmund and Kiel.

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

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Halep Pulls out of Dubai With Back Issue

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Title holder Simona Halep has withdrawn from next week's Dubai Tennis Championships with a lower back complaint.

The world No.3, who also pulled out of this week's Qatar Open in Doha, has not played a competitive match since losing in straight sets to Serena Williams in the Australian Open quarter-finals last month.

Harden Has Triple-Double In Houston Return



HOUSTON (dispatches) - James Harden had a triple-double with 29 points, 10 rebounds and 14 assists in the first meeting with his former Houston teammates and the Brooklyn Nets won 132-114 to hand the Rockets their 13th straight loss.

The Nets set a franchise record with their seventh straight road victory and have won 10 of their last 11 overall.

It's the longest skid for the Rockets, who had just eight players available because of injuries, since they dropped 15 in a row in 2001. They've had a tough time since Harden was traded Jan. 14 and haven't won since Feb. 4.

The Rockets used a 10-0 run, with five points from John Wall, to cut the lead to eight with about eight minutes left in the fourth. But the Nets scored the next eight points, with two 3s from Harden, to extend it to 113-97 midway through the quarter.

It's the eighth triple-double for Harden this season and his second straight after he had 30 points, 14 rebounds and 15 assists without a turnover in an overtime victory at San Antonio on Monday night. He didn't play as clean of a game Wednesday when he had eight turnovers.

76ERS 131, UTAH 123: Joel Embiid had 40 points and 19 rebounds and hit a tying 3-pointer late in regulation, and Tobias Harris scored 11 of his 22 points in overtime to lead Philadelphia past visiting Utah in a battle of division leaders.

Ben Simmons added 17 points for the Eastern Conference-leading 76ers. Donovan Mitchell had 33 points, eight rebounds and six assists in the NBA-leading Jazz's second straight loss. Mitchell was ejected with 30.8 seconds left in overtime after picking up his second technical. He got his first with 57.5 seconds remaining in the extra period after arguing a foul call.

PACERS 114, CAVALIERS 111: T.J. McConnell set an NBA record with nine steals in the first half and had his second career triple-double with 16 points, 13 assists and a franchise-best 10 steals, leading visiting Indiana past Cleveland.

McConnell was one off the NBA record of 11 steals set San Antonio's Larry Kenon on Dec. 26, 1976, at Kansas City, and matched by New Jersey's Kendall Gill on April 3, 1999, against Miami.

McConnell was 8 of 8 from the field in 36 minutes off the bench, and Malcolm Brogdon scored 27 points to help Indiana snapped a four-game skid. The Pacers overcame a 19-point deficit in the third quarter.

Collin Sexton had 32 points, 10 assists and three steals for Cleveland. The Cavaliers had won four in a row.

PISTONS 129, RAPTORS 105: Wayne Ellington scored 25 points and visiting Detroit beat virus-depleted Toronto to snap a three-game losing streak.

Ellington was 8 of 11 from 3-point range and the Pistons were 20 for 41 overall from long range. Detroit's backup had 56 points, with Rodney McGruder and Saben Lee each finishing with 20.

Norman Powell had 36 points for Toronto, and Kyle Lowry added 21 points. HORNETS 132, TIMBERWOLVES 102: Terry Rozier scored 31 points and Gordon Hayward added 23 as Charlotte won at Minneapolis.

Rozier was instrumental in helping the Hornets pull away in the third quarter. He hit three 3-pointers in a span of 1:29, the last of which pushed the lead to 79-65. Yet another 3 from Rozier capped an 18-0 run that made it 89-65.

BULLS 128, PELICANS 124: Zach LaVine capped a 36-point performance with a driving layup and four free throws during the final minute, and visiting Chicago held off a late rally by New Orleans.

Coby White scored 25 for the Bulls, who led by as many as 19 and were still up 18 in the fourth quarter before the Pelicans' late surge pulled them as close as 117-113 on Jaxson Hayes alley-oop dunk as he was fouled with 1:49 left.

Juve Buy McKennie for 18.5m Euros



TURIN (Dispatches) - Juventus have bought Weston McKennie from Schalke for 18.5 million euros (\$22.3 million), the Serie A club announced on Wednesday, ending the American midfielder's loan spell to make the move permanent.

In a statement, Juve said that an additional 6.5 million euros in add-ons would be paid to Schalke "on achieving given conditions over the course of the duration of the contract". Juve added that McKennie had signed a new contract that commits him to the Italian champions until the end of June 2025.

McKennie, 22, joined Juve from the German Bundesliga's crisis club Schalke in the summer on an initial season-long loan.

The U.S. international spent four years in Germany and made 91 appearances for Schalke, but the Bundesliga club found itself in a perilous financial situation after the coronavirus pandemic.

He has impressed for Juve since his arrival in Italy, scoring four times in 31 appearances for the 'Old Lady' of Italian football.

Juve said when they announced the initial loan in August that they would buy Texas-born McKennie if he met certain unspecified targets, and on Wednesday the club said "it's because of this, that as of today, he has become an outright Juventus player".

Angry Medvedev Out of Rotterdam

ROTTERDAM (Dispatches) - Daniil Medvedev crashed out of the Rotterdam ATP event in the first round, losing in straight sets to Dusan Lajovic and squandering his chance of taking Rafael Nadal's place as world number two, while Andy Murray was beaten by Andrey Rublev in the last 16.

World number three Medvedev was the top seed for this week's tournament following his run to the Australian Open final but was dumped out 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 in just over 90 minutes by Serbian Lajovic, currently ranked 27th.

Russian Medvedev threw his racquet down in anger after being broken in game nine of the second set, having a row with the umpire and starting the final game with a point penalty as a result.

The outburst came towards the end of a tense performance from the 25-year-old which featured eight double faults and 25 unforced errors. A calm Lajovic served out the 10th game to set up a second-round clash with Borna Coric.

The defeat was painful for Medvedev as he would have replaced Nadal as world number two had he reached the final.

Nadal withdrew from Rotterdam with a back injury.

"I think I was very focused the whole match and not influenced by his good serves and shots," said Lajovic.

"I knew if I stayed in the match, I'd get my opportunities and change the rhythm."

Three-time Grand Slam champion Murray was also visibly frustrated during his 7-5, 6-2 loss to Russian fourth seed Rublev.

The former world number one, now ranked 123rd after a series of hip and groin injuries, competed well in the opening set.

But Rublev clinched the crucial break to lead 6-5, before saving two break points as he served it out in the next game.

The second set looked as though it would be another tight affair, but Rublev reeled off five straight games to claim an ultimately comfortable win.

The world number eight will face either David Goffin or Frenchman Jeremy Chardy in the quarter-finals.



Mirza Says Tokyo Olympics Medal Dream Motivated Her Return

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India's Sania Mirza said the elusive dream of winning a medal at her fourth Olympics in Tokyo this year motivated her to return to the WTA circuit after a year-long gap.

Mirza, paired with Slovenian Andreja Klepac, reached the semi-finals in the women's doubles at the Qatar Open on Wednesday, her first tournament since Feb. 2020 when she played at the same Doha event.

The 34-year-old, who recovered from COVID-19 in January, said she wanted to avenge the defeat she suffered in the Olympic bronze medal play-off match in 2016 when she lost 6-1 7-5 in mixed doubles with partner Rohan Bopanna.

"The Tokyo Olympics was definitely one of the reasons (for my comeback)," six-time Grand Slam doubles champion Mirza said.

"We came really, really close to winning that medal last time (when) we lost the bronze medal match.

"I feel when I sort of close this chapter of my life... an Olympic medal is something that I would have loved to win. So I want to give myself another shot at it.

"Whether I can be or will I be able to? Time will tell, but that is something important to me and it was one of the motivations for me to come back."

Mirza, who became a mother in Oct. 2018, also said she is motivated to inspire women to chase their dreams.

"Women sort of think that once they have a baby, life is over, but it's not," she said.

"You don't have to crush your dreams because you have a child. You can still go after them."

Barcelona Reach Spanish Cup Final



MADRID (Dispatches) - Barcelona needed extra-time to reach the Copa del Rey final on Wednesday, with a 3-2 aggregate win over Sevilla coming just two days after a police raid on the club and the arrest of their former president.

Having trailed 2-0 from the first leg, Danish international Martin Braithwaite hit the crucial goal in the fifth minute of extra-time with a diving header off a Jordi Alba cross.

Gerard Pique had equalized in the fourth minute of stoppage time with virtually the last play of the game to save Barca.

The veteran international headed in at the near post after a fine cross from Antoine Griezmann.

That was after Ousmane Dembele, who scored in the 2-0 win at Sevilla in La Liga at the weekend, had given the 30-time Spanish Cup winners a 12th-minute lead in the second leg with a right-foot drive from outside the area.

Sevilla could have killed the game off in the 73rd minute to deny Barca their place in the final for a 42nd time.

They were awarded a penalty when Lucas Ocampos was brought down by Oscar Mingueza.

However, Ocampos saw his tame right-foot effort from the spot saved by Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Flagging Sevilla were then reduced to 10 men in injury time when Brazilian Fernando was red-carded for a foul on Francisco Trincao.

"The team deserved to qualify," said Barca coach Ronald Koeman.

"For their work and honesty. We are more aggressive, we've always created chances, the team has improved enormously. "This is a very important result for the club, for the players, and for me of course as well. This is an important step in earning a title."

AC Milan Salvage Udinese Draw With Last-Gasp Penalty



MILAN (Dispatches) - Franck Kessie scored a 97th-minute penalty to rescue a 1-1 draw for AC Milan at home to Udinese, giving Serie A leaders Inter Milan the chance to pull six points clear at the top.

Rodrigo Becao's second-half header at the San Siro completely deceived Milan goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma and Stefano Pioli's faltering side looked destined for a third defeat in four games.

But a needless handball from Udinese substitute Jens Stryger Larsen offered Milan a lifeline, with Ivorian international Kessie converting the penalty with the final kick of the match.

"Penalties are not easy," Kessie told broadcaster DAZN.

"When you get there, you have two choices: you mustn't feel fear or uncertainty, otherwise you will get it wrong.

"I was not afraid and I scored."

Milan struggled to create many genuine chances in the absence of top scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the Swede sidelined by a groin injury picked up in last weekend's victory over Roma.

Ibrahimovic will miss Milan's trip to his former club Manchester United in the first leg of their Europa League last 16 tie, but of greater concern is the club's dip in form domestically.

Udinese goalkeeper Juan Musso made good saves from Kessie and Samuel Castillejo early in the second half, but it was the visitors who should have taken the lead when Ilija Nestorovski's header was cleared off the line brilliantly by Alessio Romagnoli.

Brazilian centre-back Becao nodded Udinese ahead at a corner on 68 minutes, Donnarumma seemingly distracted by two players jostling in front of him as the ball floated past the Milan keeper.