

**Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Friday
That 155 More Iranians Lost Their
Lives Due to the COVID-19 Over
The Past 24 Hours as the Death
Toll Hit 64,029**

IRAN NEWS

**Iranian Foreign Ministry
Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh
Has, in an Instagram Post,
Defended the Iran–China 25-Year
Cooperation Document, Saying
Opponents of the Document Seek
To Isolate Tehran**

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Verification of Sanctions Removal Means Iran Should Be Able to Sell Oil

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei says any US claim to having removed Iran's sanctions must be verified by Tehran and this means that the Islamic Republic should be able to sell its oil under normal conditions and receive its money.

The Leader's remarks came in a post on his Instagram page on Thursday as an Iranian negotiating team is in the Austrian capital city of Vienna to discuss conditions for the revival of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with other signatories to the deal.

"Verification [of U.S. sanctions removal] means [being capable of] selling oil in an official manner, with ease and under normal conditions, and its money be received by Iran," the Leader added.

The Leader's Instagram account also released a video in which Ayatollah Khamenei reiterated that Tehran is in no hurry for Washington to come back to the nuclear agreement.

The Leader added that the signatories of the nuclear agreement failed to abide by their commitments under the deal, noting that the decision by the Iranian government and parliament to rollback Tehran's nuclear commitments was right. Ayatollah Khamenei stated that commitment on one side should be reciprocated by commitment on the other side and the U.S. must remove all sanctions if the West wants Iran to return to JCPOA compliance.

The Leader said Tehran will return to full compliance with the nuclear deal once it verifies sanctions have been really removed by the U.S..

Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei said other signatories to the deal have no right to set conditions for Tehran as long as they have not fulfilled their obligations, emphasizing that this is Iran's definitive policy from which Tehran will not step back.

Ayatollah Khamenei had already said during a meeting with commanders, pilots, and staff members of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) that Iran will retrace its nuclear countermeasures once the United States lifts its sanctions in a manner that could be verifiable by Tehran.

Indian State-Run Refiners Prepare to Buy Iran Oil

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India's state-run oil refiners are ready to snap up Iranian crude the moment U.S. sanctions are eased, according to a government official.

Refiners have started making preparations in advance of the possible removal of penalties so they can swiftly enter into contracts for Iranian supply, said a senior oil ministry representative, asking not to be named because they're not authorized to speak to the media. This includes drafting commercial terms and putting in place mechanisms to quickly assess crude quality, the official said.

India has been vocal in its support for Iranian crude purchases recently as it laments the price of supplies from Saudi Arabia. The world's third-largest importer has also signaled its desire to diversify its sources of oil, hoping the new US administration will take a softer line on sanctioned producers. Its criticism comes as the consumer struggles with lower demand due to a Covid-19 resurgence.

Iranian exports tumbled after former U.S. President Donald Trump tightened sanctions in 2018 and ended waivers for some countries in 2019, including India. Iran and world powers this week began their most serious attempt yet to resurrect a nuclear deal. While some progress has been made, the path to an easing of penalties and sharply higher oil exports remains uncertain.

India — once Iran's second-biggest customer — imports more than 85 per cent of its total oil needs. Getting access to Iranian crude would bring a number of benefits, including cheaper barrels and a longer credit cycle, while the shorter voyage means savings on freight costs. China, meanwhile, has recently boosted purchases from the sanctioned nation to about 1 million barrels a day.

Spokespeople at the biggest state-run refiners — Indian Oil Corp, Hindustan Petroleum Corp and Bharat Petroleum Corp — declined to comment.

U.S. Economic War Waged Against Iran Totally Failed



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani says the economic war waged by the United States against the Islamic Republic has totally failed and all measures taken by Washington to bring Tehran to its knees have been proven futile. Rouhani made the remarks in an address via videoconference to the 10th summit of the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also known as Developing-8, on Thursday.

"Here, I am honored to announce that all illegal unilateral measures taken by the United States to bring the Iranian nation to its knees have failed," Iran's president told the D-8 participants.

"Despite suffering heavy economic pressures, we have been able by relying on our own domestic will and capabilities to break remarkable grounds in various fields, including in the field of fighting the COVID-19 and its aftereffects," he said.

Rouhani said while the world economy shrank by 3.5 percent and many countries experienced negative economic growth of five to 10 percent, the Iranian economy grew by more than 2 percent in the same period.

This clearly attests to the failure of the United States in its economic war against Iran, he added.

"In the last four years, the international community has witnessed the intensification of the U.S. government's economic war against Iran. These cruel sanctions have caused great damage to our country," Rouhani noted.

Despite U.S. efforts, "the nuclear deal, which the United States violated and did its utmost to destroy, has been preserved thanks to the wisdom of the Islamic Republic of Iran," he added.

The president underlined that Washington is obligated to return to the JCPOA by lifting all anti-Iran sanctions and taking practical measures to secure Iran's interests under the nuclear pact because "this is the duty of the same government that has reneged on the agreement."

"The Islamic Republic, for its part, will definitely respond to such U.S. action with a positive reciprocal measure," he asserted.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rouhani further denounced unilateralism and economic terrorism as issues that go hand in hand with the coronavirus in harming the international community.

These actions, he continued, not only illegally target ruling governments and independent nations, but also pose a serious threat to the achievements of the international community.

He also pointed to the issue of organized Islamophobia in the world, saying that in addition to targeting Islam's lofty values and dignity, Islamophobia has also had far-reaching negative economic impacts on Islamic countries.

Rouhani went on to say, "we will establish the first free trade zone with the Eurasian countries, shortly."

The 10th Summit of the D-8 Organisation for Economic Cooperation kicked off on Thursday with President Rouhani and the member states' leaders in attendance.

In the virtual summit hosted by Bangladesh as the organization's current chair, leaders of Iran, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, and Nigeria are taking part.

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Iran Not to Reduce Nuclear Activities Before Removal of All Sanctions

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's deputy foreign minister for political affairs says Tehran will not reverse the reduction of its nuclear compliance before the U.S. removes all its sanctions and returns to the landmark nuclear deal it abandoned under former U.S. President Donald Trump.

"Until the United States removes all of its sanctions and returns to the JCPOA, none of Iran's nuclear activities, especially in the field of enrichment, will be halted or even reduced," Abbas Araqchi said late Thursday, according to IRNA. Araqchi's remarks come as intensive talks are underway in Vienna to lift the unilateral US sanctions on Iran and revive the JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, after the former Trump government almost wrecked it by its withdrawal.

Back in May 2019, Iran began to scale down its nuclear compliance under Article 36 of the JCPOA, saying the move was a response to the US withdrawal and the remaining parties' failure to protect Iran from US sanctions.

Under a law passed by the Iranian Parliament last December, the Iranian administration started to produce and store enriched uranium with a 20-percent purity level, breaking the 3.67-percent enrichment parameter set by the 2015 nuclear agreement. However, Tehran has repeatedly said its measures will be reversed as soon as Washington removes its illegal sanctions.

"Our 20% enrichment is now moving even faster than the speed envisaged by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Iranian Parliament) in its law, and 20% enriched materials are being produced now," Araqchi said.

He asserted that the process will continue until an agreement on the implementation of the JCPOA is reached, under which the US should remove all of its sanctions. "As it has been stressed many times, all of the sanctions must be removed in one step," the top Iranian negotiator added.

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ViewPoint By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Vienna Meeting Under the Blade of Iran-China Agreement

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and Head of Iran's delegation in the meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission on Wednesday in Vienna met and talked with Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg.

In the meeting which was held in a friendly climate, the bilateral relations between Iran and the European country were reviewed and the two sides emphasized the will of the two nations to deepen bilateral cooperation in various fields, and discussed other issues of mutual interest. They also discussed the latest round of talks in the JCPOA Joint Commission meeting in Vienna.

In this regard and while thanking the Austrian government for its efforts and hospitality and especially Austrian police proper reaction in wake of the MKO grouplet supporters' gathering in front of the hotel hosting the JCPOA meeting, Araqchi explained Iran's stance and stressed the need for the full lifting of the sanctions and the practical steps that the U.S. government must take to return to the JCPOA.

Schallenberg, for his part, stressed the readiness of the Austrian government to provide the necessary facilities and make every effort to create a suitable atmosphere for the holding of Iran-related talks in Vienna and described the JCPOA and its continuation as being in the interest of all parties (Westerns).

The Vienna meeting is being held in a condition that P4+1 countries have become content to mediate in the dispute between Iran and the U.S. and to draw up ways of protecting the JCPOA and ways of return of both countries to the JCPOA.

This point that the U.S. pullout from the JCPOA during Donald Trump's presidency led to 80 percent failure of the JCPOA and lack of commitment of Europe and caused the trust to the sustainability regarding the obligations and promises of the West has completely been questioned, and Iran has repeatedly emphasized that the only way for the U.S. return to the JCPOA is its full commitment to its obligations and removing effectively all of the imposed, even the re-imposed sanctions or re-named sanctions and their verifications.

The result of the meeting still with drawing up plans covering two impacts has been put on the agenda of the two expert workgroups. Although the U.S. openly and explicitly announced that it is opposed to remove all sanctions and has put on the agenda some issues beyond the JCPOA and with these methods it shows that Biden Administration despite repeated claims of its intention to return to the JCPOA and diplomacy is not ready for any practical action in this field.

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UNHCR Funds Health Care For Thousands More Afghan Refugees in Iran

GENEVA (Dispatches) - The U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR) reports it is covering the cost of health insurance for an additional 20,000 Afghan refugees in Iran. This boosts the number of refugees to 120,000 who will be able to access medical care for COVID-19 and other illnesses under Iran's national health plan.

Iran hosts nearly 800,000 Afghan refugees. Over the past year, the UNHCR has paid insurance premiums for 100,000 of the most vulnerable refugees. Given the dangers posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it now has boosted that number by another 20,000.

UNHCR spokesman Babar Balloch says Iran is one of only a handful of countries in the world that allows refugees to sign up for its national health insurance and receive the same treatment as its nationals.

"The national insurance scheme allows for free COVID-19 treatment and hospitalization. It also subsidizes the cost of surgeries, dialysis, radiology, laboratory tests, out-patient care and more. However, many refugees are not able to afford the premium costs," he said.

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Iran Will Definitely Respond Attack on Vessel in Red Sea

TEHRAN - The spokesman for the Iranian Armed Forces stressed that the attack on the Iranian vessel in the Red Sea would definitely be responded after the necessary investigations were done.

In an interview with Sputnik, Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi said that Iran did not accuse any of the Persian Gulf states of attacking the vessel, stressing that Iran's immediate enemies, the US and Israel, are to blame.

Brigadier General Shekarchi added: "Undoubtedly, the United States is involved in any efforts against Iran."

Iran, Turkmenistan Strike Deal on Cooperation

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The foreign ministers of Iran and Turkmenistan signed a document on cooperation program, Trend reports citing Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran.

Prior to the signing ceremony, a meeting was held between Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov.

During the meeting, Zarif praised the cooperation between Iran and Turkmenistan in political, economic and cultural fields.

Zarif added that Iran sides with the idea of development of two countries' cooperation in the fields of environmental protection, transit, innovation, as well as within Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

In the meeting with the foreign minister of Turkmenistan earlier today, Zarif "I am very happy that after a while that I was not able to travel to Turkmenistan due to the coronavirus pandemic, I finally managed to return to the lovely city of Ashgabat and I'd appreciate the warm and sincere hospitality of the Turkmen authorities."

Noting that he was also grateful for the great meeting he had had with the President of Turkmenistan, the Iranian foreign minister added, "This meeting was very good and showed the depth of relations between the two countries."

Zarif added "With the comments that the President of Turkmenistan made during his meeting with me, one can say that these views are completely in parallel with the viewpoints of the President of Iran and the Leader [of the Islamic Revolution.]"

He told the Turkmen Foreign Minister that, "you and I, and the head of the Joint Commission on behalf of Iran should seek to seriously advance relations between the two countries."



Speaking at the meeting, Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov also stressed the importance of relations between the two countries and the need to activate existing potential for the comprehensive development of relations.

Within the meeting, the sides exchanged views on the peace process in Afghanistan, cooperation in regional and international organizations, multilateral cooperation in the region.

Later Zarif held talks with Berdymukhammedov, the President of Turkmenistan in Ashgabat on Thursday afternoon.

As the last leg of a 4-nation tour to Central Asia, Zarif arrived in Turkmenistan and met with the President of the Central Asian neighboring country Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov.

In the meeting, Zarif explained the dimensions of relations between the two countries in various political, economic and cultural fields and stressed the importance of relations between the two neighboring countries.

During the meeting, the President of Turkmenistan, for his part, supported the relations between the two countries in various political, economic and cultural fields and reaffirmed his country's determination to expand bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

Furthermore, after meeting with the President of Kazakhstan and his Kazakh counterpart as part of the tour to Central Asian countries, the top Iranian diplomat tweeted that "As always, our neighbors are our priority."

Iran Firmly Supports Syria



TEHRAN (IP) - Special Assistant to the Speaker of Iran's Parliament for International Affairs stressed that the Islamic Republic strongly supports the Syrian nation and government.

In a meeting with the Syrian envoy to Tehran Shafiq Dayoub on Thursday, Hossein Amirabdollahian said that by imposing economic sanctions, the United States was waging a terrorist war against Syria through economic terrorism.

He pointed to the interventionist policies of the US and said: "Iran has negotiated with Democrats and Republicans, but the White House rulers are just changing their masks and openly breaking covenants and betraying."

"Today, the United States once again is speaking of direct negotiations with Iran, but there is only one way, and that is a practical step to remove all the sanctions," he stressed. The Syrian ambassador to Tehran, for his part, pointed to the Iran-China strategic partnership document and called it a great achievement that changed the balance of power.

Shafiq Dayoub appreciated Iran's support for the Syrian nation and emphasized: "The support of Iran's government, nation, and Leader of the Islamic Revolution will remain in the historical memory of the Syrian people forever, and we are proud of it."

Two-Week Restrictions Imposed in Tehran to Curb New COVID Surge

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Authorities impose a two-week partial lockdown in the Iranian capital amid new surge in COVID cases.

The Iranian capital has been put under a partial lockdown that would last for two weeks amid a fresh surge in cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Tehran's Governor Anoushirvan Mohseni said that businesses, schools and gathering places would close down after a red alert was issued for the capital city that indicates a rising wave in number of COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Mohseni said a handful of businesses and government departments whose services are deemed necessary for daily life of more than eight million inhabitants of the city would remain open during the two-week partial lockdown.

"Tehran is seeing a growing spread of this disease and there has been a rising trend in referrals to outpatient services as well as in hospitalizations and deaths," he said.

The governor said closures would affect theaters, cinemas, sport centers and even gatherings held prior to the start of the holy month of Ramadan which falls on April 14.

Mohseni said, however, that a total lockdown for Tehran was avoided because the capital city accommodates major national and international activities.

The announcement comes amid a new wave across Iran of infections to the so-called British variant of COVID-19 which authorities blame on easing of restrictions on gatherings and travel during two weeks of Persian New Year holidays starting March 21.

Tehran, Bishkek Planning to Establish Joint Defensive Committee

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Major-General Mohammad Baqeri said on Thursday that Iran and Tajikistan have agreed to establish a joint defensive and military committee.

He made the remarks while speaking to reporters after a meeting with visiting Defense Minister of Tajikistan Colonel General Sherali Mirzo.

General Baqeri said that the joint committee will draw the future of military and defensive cooperation between the two neighboring countries.

He said that the visit to Tehran by the Tajik defense minister laid the foundations for the expansion of military cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan.

Baqeri believed that cooperation between the armed forces of Iran and Tajikistan will definitely help boost regional security and stability.

After a meeting with General Baqeri, the Tajik defense minister met with his Iranian counterpart for a second time during his stay in Tehran.

Speaking to reporters during a joint press conference after the meeting, the Iranian minister of defense said that there are many different grounds for cooperation between the two countries in the areas of security and defense.

Brigadier-General Amir Hatami said that both Iran and Tajikistan are subject to terrorist threats as well as other regional countries which have their roots in extra-regional interventions.

Tajikistan's defense minister said for his part that Ashgabat believes that fight against terrorism in the region relies on the expansion of cooperation among regional countries.

Our neighbors Are Our Priority | Sanctions Undermine Demining

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who is on a Central Asian tour, has once again said that the neighboring countries for Iran have always been a priority.

"In Kazakhstan on third leg of my regional tour, where I've had substantive and fruitful meetings with President Tokayev and FM Tileuberdi. Our two countries share many objectives on regional stability and global nuclear disarmament," the top Iranian diplomat has tweeted after meeting with the President of Kazakhstan and his Central Asian country's counterpart as part of a tour to four Central Asian countries that he recently started.

The Iranian foreign minister Zarif further reiterated that "As always, our neighbors are our priority."

Zarif has already visited Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to meet with the two countries' presidents and foreign ministers during the tour so far. Turkmenistan is his next destination.

TEHRAN (IP) - Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations stressed that unilateral sanctions undermined the demining capacity of the targeted countries.

In his Thursday speech at the UN Security Council on demining, Majid Takht-Ravanchi said mines and other explosive matters of war were a challenge to the security and the sustainable development of some countries.

Takht-Ravanchi referred to the 8-year imposed war on Iran by the Iraq Ba'athist Saddam's Regime, saying that five provinces of Iran were contaminated with mines and other explosive remnants of the imposed war, which delayed the reconstruction and socio-economic development of the war-torn cities and villages, and the martyrdom or injury of many Iranian citizens.

He denounced the sanctions as unjust and unacceptable, calling for the immediate lifting of the sanctions and the facilitation of access to technology for demining operations.

Takht-Ravanchi emphasized that the Islamic Republic of Iran was ready to expand its cooperation with the countries of the region and beyond, in demining, transferring of experiences and exchange of experts, and holding training courses.

Iran, IAEA Interaction Will Go On

VIENNA (IP) - The Deputy Foreign Minister and the head of the Iranian delegation at the JCPOA Joint Commission meeting, Abbas Araqchi, stressed that cooperation between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency would continue in various fields.

After meeting with the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi in Vienna, Araqchi said on Thursday: "This meeting was held to coordinate more with the IAEA to play its role if need be."

Araqchi added that IAEA needed to do its duty set out at the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Joint Commission meeting and that the Director-General should have been involved in the negotiations."

Cooperation between Iran and the IAEA in areas such as verification, technological assistance and other issues will continue," Iran's diplomat said.

"In our opinion, the United States should take all actions at once, we will verify, and then Iran will take its own actions," he added.

Tehran, Moscow Review Bilateral Cooperation

MOSCOW (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov examined mutual cooperation between Iran and Russia.

On the threshold of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Tehran on April 13, Jalali met and held talks with Morgulov.

The two sides discussed important issues of mutual cooperation, as well as regional and international concerns.

Earlier, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova announced that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov will be traveling to Tehran on April 13, 2021, at the invitation of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

She highlighted that the two sides are supposed to discuss some important international issues, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The situation in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, the Persian Gulf, and the region will be reviewed in a meeting between the two sides, she added.

Iraq Releases 40 Iranian Prisoners

BAGHDAD (IRNA) - Iraq has released more than 40 Iranian nationals being held in the country's prisons, deputy Iranian ambassador to Baghdad Mousa Alizadeh Tabatabaei said on Thursday.

The release of the prisoners follows a recent visit to Baghdad by Iranian Chief Justice Hojjatoleslam Ebrahim Raisi during which some judicial documents were signed between the two countries.

Alizadeh Tabatabaei said that the released prisoners will enter the Iranian soil later today via Shalamchek border terminal.

He cautioned Iranians about strict laws in Iraq, saying some Iranians visiting Iraq get imprisoned for lack of knowledge about or negligence of Iraqi rules.

The diplomat said that Iraq has heavy sentences even for having drugs such as codeine analgesics.

He, however, noted that the number of Iranian prisoners in Iraq is not significant compared to the high number of Iranian passengers and pilgrims who travel to the country.

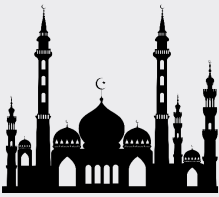
Iran Discusses Oil Comeback With OPEC

TEHRAN (MNA) - Mohammad Sanusi Barkindo, the secretary-general of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), met with Amir Hossein Zamaninia, Iran's governor for OPEC in Vienna, on Thursday to discuss the Islamic Republic's return to the oil market in case of U.S. lifting the sanctions on Iran's oil industry.

Speaking in the meeting, Barkindo expressed hope that as a result of the ongoing negotiations on Iran's nuclear program in Vienna, the unfair conditions imposed on Iran will end and sanctions will be lifted, Shana reported.

According to Zamaninia, during the meeting, issues related to the current management of the OPEC Executive Board were also discussed.

Iran could be poised to officially rejoin the ranks of oil exporters in the current year as the U.S. seems willing to rejoin the nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)

■ Evening (Maghreb)

■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)

■ Tomorrow's Sunrise

13:05

19:51

05:09

06:36

28. Let not the believers Take for friends or helpers Unbelievers rather than believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah, except by way of precaution, that ye may Guard yourselves from them. But Allah cautions you (To remember) Himself; for the final goal is to Allah.

29. Say: "Whether ye hide what is in your hearts or reveal it, Allah knows it all: He knows what is in the heavens, and what is on earth. And Allah has power over all things.

Surah 3. The Family Of 'Imran, The House Of 'Imran (28-29)

First Home-Made Metro Carriage Unveiled

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Iran unveiled its first home-grown subway car on Thursday during a ceremony in the capital city of Tehran attended by President Hassan Rouhani through video-conferencing.

In the unveiling ceremony, some Iranian officials including Tehran Provincial Governor Anoshirvan Mohseni Bandpey were taking part and the first home-made subway car was inaugurated by President Hassan Rouhani through video-conferencing.

According to a report by the Iranian authorities, the completion of the project to produce the metro carriages inside the country took 18 months and during this period, the share of the Iranian companies in the know-how knowledge of designing and producing the metro carriages rose from the 25-30% to 85%.

Despite being under foreign sanctions, the Iranian experts have been able to domestically produce previously imported equipment and goods in a bid to neutralize the impact of the sanctions in line with the guidelines of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei in accordance with his Resistant Economy doctrine.

In the inaugural ceremony, President Rouhani said the United States blocked Iran's access to ten million doses of a coronavirus vaccine by pressuring the companies involved in the transferring of the vaccines to Iran.

"We have done what we should have done. We bought vaccines from India and we paid for it, but then they said 'our Judiciary has gotten in the way and we cannot give you the vaccines,'" Rouhani said during a video conference call on

Thursday during a ceremony to inaugurate five national knowledge-based and innovative projects.

Pointing to the unprecedented U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic, Rouhani said Tehran's general impression was that no country would target another country's access to basic needs such as food and medicine with sanctions, but the United States, under former president Donald Trump, proved Iran wrong.

He also explained that importing vaccines is not an easy job to do, stressing that "wherever there is a vaccine, we immediately provide money to purchase it."

"I want to say that this is not a simple matter," he said. "The administration, the Health Ministry and the Central Bank have taken all the necessary measures ... and I stress that nothing comes before the issue of vaccines for us."

The president noted that Iran has bought 16.8 million doses of vaccines via the World Health Organization's COVAX global vaccine scheme, which is being gradually imported into the country.

Iran was among the front-runners in placing an early order to purchase vaccines, he said.

Tehran Rejects Reports On Disruption in Gas Flow to Turkey

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) has dismissed reports that its supply of gas to Turkey has faced disruptions in recent months, saying exports have continued unabated since early summer.

A senior NIGC official said that gas flow to Turkey has not stopped since July when Iran resumed exports after a three-month halt that had been caused by an explosion in the export pipelines in the Turkish territory.

"The flow resumed since this country (Turkey) carried out repair works and there have been no reports whatsoever about any disruption in exports," said Mohammad Reza Joulayi.

Joulayi said that Iran had indeed halted supplies to Turkey for several days earlier this year because of additional repairs on the pipelines and installations.

Turkish media reports in January said that Iran had decreased the amount of gas supplied to Turkey by more than 60 percent for a brief period and because of "technical issues".

That came after Turkey's state-owned petroleum trade company BOTAS said that gas supplies from Iran had been declining since late December.

However, Joulayi said that Iran is currently supplying 30 million cubic meters (mcm) per day of natural gas to Turkey.

Iran is supposed to provide an average of 833 mcm of gas per month to Turkey under a current contract between the two countries.

Turkey is the second top buyer of Iranian gas after Iraq. Russia and Azerbaijan are other top suppliers as Ankara faces growing demand for energy in households and industries.

Iran's gas supplies to Iraq amount to around 50 mcm per day at peak times although the flow has been slashed significantly over payment issues since December.

Iran Economy of Resistance Against Sanctions Bearing Fruit

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran is poised to raise its science and technology exports to \$1 billion this year, Vice President for science and technology Sorena Sattari says, hailing it an eye-catching achievement.

The country leads the Middle East in a number of technological fields, including nanotechnology and aerospace, and Sattari is the architect of a push to transform the country's resource-centered economy to a tech-based economic jurisdiction.

On Wednesday, he touched on Iran's high scientific and technological capabilities in the wake of "spectacular progresses" which the sector has made in recent years, saying his main focus is to boost technological products.

"The success of Iranian innovators in various fields, including in the field of diagnostic kits for testing and other products related to the coronavirus, shows the progress of our country in the fields of science and technology," he said.

Sattari also touched on plans to set up Iranian innovation and technology centers abroad with the aim of facilitating the country's knowledge-based exports.

"We have planned to develop these centers in various countries, including our neighbors and the countries to which we can export our goods."

The official made the remarks during a visit to the northeastern city of Shahroud where he signed a number of MoUs to expand science and technology parks in Semnan province.

Last year, knowledge-based Iranian companies reportedly exported \$800 million worth of products and services, mainly to Iraq, Russia, Afghanistan, and Syria. The exports included content production, application, software development, and IT research.

Persian Gulf littoral states, Europe, China and Central Asia are the new target of Iran's science and technology exports.

Knowledge-based projects have the special blessing of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei who is a regular visitor of science and technology exhibits, with his tours often stretching to a couple of hours.

In the past, the Leader has allowed the country's sovereign wealth fund to be tapped for scientific and knowledge-based projects with the aim of making Iran's economy resilient to sanctions.

Iran's National Development Fund, a rainy-day kitty, was established in 2011 to collect some of the proceeds from the country's oil and gas industries for the benefit of future generations.

D-8 Hails Iran's Efforts to Launch International University

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also known as Developing-8, has reiterated its support for Iran's efforts to set up a prestigious international university under the organization's auspices, as members of the bloc seek closer scientific and academic exchanges to bolster their economic ties.

In a communiqué released on Thursday after the 10th Summit of Developing-8 countries hosted by Bangladesh, leaders of the bloc said they welcome Iran's provision of finances and resources for the establishment of the D-8 International University in the western city of Hamedan.

The Dhaka Declaration 2021 hailed Iran's move to use some of its best facilities and staff for the launch of the University while adding that the D-8 would encourage all member states to provide support for the initiative.

Turkey, a leading D-8 member, proposed the idea of

setting up a major university within the D-8 when it assumed rotating presidency of the bloc in 2017.

Iran has started admitting international students under a pilot scheme launched in Hamedan's Bu-Ali Sina University, a major academic hub in western Iran which is named after Avicenna, the great Iranian scientist and physician who is buried in the city.

Local authorities in Hamedan have promised they would dedicate a piece of land to construct separate premises for the D-8 International University.

Iran's ministry of sciences says students that will be accepted in the University would enjoy bursaries provided by D-8 member states while admission for non-D-8 nationalities would also be possible.

The D-8 developing bloc was founded in 1997 based on an initiative by Turkey. The group comprises of Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Nigeria and Indonesia.

Rail Export of Cement Via Bandar Torkaman

GORGAN (IRNA) - Iran started cement exports via railway to the Central Asia countries, particularly Turkmenistan, by sending three 68-ton cargo wagons from the northern province of Golestan.

Prior to this, the provincial businessmen had to forward this product by trucks to Inche-Borun Rail Station near Gonbad-e Kavoos city, from where it was exported to the Central Asian countries.

The managing-director of Iranian 2nd Northeastern Railroads said at a ceremony on the occasion that the railway officials have considered a 40% discount for railway exports through Torkaman Port.

Mohsen E'temad added that the initial capacity for cement exports from port is 50 tons, that will be forwarded in a number of shipments to the Inche-Borun border.

Iranian cement exporters in Golestan, Mazandaran, and Semnan provinces can use this capacity, he said, adding that economic blossoming of Torkmen Port and Inche-Borun and the decreased expenses for the exporters due to elimination of the trucks charge are all the benefits of lunching this new cargo railway.

The Torkaman Port was officially opened on Aug 25, 1938 at a two-hectare area with a peripheral area that is over 42 hectares on the coast of the Caspian Sea and is the north-most Iranian railway station.

Iran to Import 200m Tons of Phosphorus Soil From Syria

TEHRAN (IP) - A member of the Iranian Parliament's Agriculture Commission announced plans to import 200 million tons of phosphorus soil from Syria.

Alireza Nazari stated that there were plans to import 200 million tons of phosphorus soil from Syria to Iran, which is currently being done with a certain volume. He noted that it was aimed at indigenizing phosphate fertilizers.

Isfahan Producing 2,100 Tons of Medicinal Herbs

ISFAHAN (IRNA) - Isfahan province produces 2,100 tons of different types of medicinal herbs in natural lands per annum, a provincial official says.

Director General of Isfahan Natural Resources and Watershed Management Department Abtin Mirtalebi told IRNA on Friday that the value of the medicinal herbs accounts for 53.8 billion toman (2198969.9 dollars).

The director general point to the fact that the job creation of the sector stands at around 203,000 man-days.

Asafoetida, Ferula, Seidlitzia, celery, radish, sumac, of thyme, Mahaleb, caraway, artichokes and acorn are among the medicinal herbs, which are being produced in 6.5 million hectares in the province, he noted.

Nearly 300 types of plants are growing in natural lands of Isfahan province of which 45 kinds are proper for medicinal purposes and can be profitable in both domestic and international markets, he stipulated.

Isfahan province is located in the central part of Iran and enjoys semi-arid and arid climates. Some 3.2 million hectares equivalent to 32 percent of areas of the province are desert lands.

Iran Proper Alternative To Suez Canal

MASHHAD (IRNA) - An Iranian transport official believes that recent blockage in Egypt's Suez Canal showed the world that they should find alternative routes such as Iran, which can play the role of a north-south corridor for global trade.

Mahmoud Ommati, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Khorasan International Transport Companies Association, told IRNA on Friday that the Suez Canal has been a long-term corridor for transiting commodities as well as energy between Asia and Europe, but the one-week blockage of the Canal last month by a giant 250,000-ton container ship seems to be a sign that the global trade needs to find substitute routes.

Ommati underlined that all countries are seeking ways to transfer energy, especially oil, from the Middle East region to Europe faster, cheaper and easier.

Iran had been a main route between other Asian countries to Europe, he said, adding that the country is also on the verge of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan; so, such an accession will flourish the north-south corridor.

According to the official, the establishment of the north-south corridor, which was agreed by Russia, India and Iran in 2000, seems to be another reason that the Islamic country can play a key role as an appropriate alternative to the Suez Canal.

Following the equipment of ocean port of Chabahar in southern Iran by India, the Indians can transit their goods through the Iranian port to Russia and the Russians can transfer several million tons of their own shipments via Iran to other nations, he added.

Argentina Announces Curfew to Curb Surge in Covid-19 Infections

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez announced a three-week nighttime curfew after a second consecutive day of record coronavirus infections.

The curfew will enter into force on Friday and apply from midnight to 06:00 am every day until April 30, he said in a message recorded at his official residence, where he is self-isolating after being infected with the virus himself.

It will be in force in the country's highest risk areas, mainly the urban centers, the president said.



Sudan, Qatar to Reactivate Agreements

DOHA (Dispatches) - On his first visit to Doha as the head of Sudan's ruling council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has said his country and Qatar had agreed to reactivate several bilateral agreements.

Al-Burhan arrived in the Qatari capital on Wednesday to discuss a range of bilateral issues, including trade and regional issues. It was his first trip to the Gulf state since former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir was removed by the military in April 2019. Some arrangements between the two countries had been suspended after the fall al-Bashir's government.



Belfast in Turmoil as Brexit Stokes Tensions in Northern Ireland



BELFAST (Dispatches) - Rioters waged a running battle with police in Belfast on Thursday night -- tossing petrol bombs, setting fires and dodging jets from water cannon as a week of unrest showed no sign of letting up.

Hundreds of boys and young men gathered from early evening in a western neighbourhood in the Northern Ireland capital, which has been riven by violence over Brexit and domestic politics.

Masked and in hooded tops, they hurled rocks, bricks and glass bottles at police barricades where riot officers formed ranks with armoured Land Rovers.

Petrol bombs burst into flames in the street and fireworks were aimed into police formations, exploding and smothering their lines in thick smoke.

Behind riot shields and with batons drawn, police drove back the surging crowds late into Thursday night, as locals peered out of their windows to witness the spectacle. When one group tried to push a vandalised car into the police barricades, a lumbering water cannon forced them away with powerful spraying jets. A police loudhailer warned crowds to disperse or face arrest.

"Force may be used," the female voice rang out. Northern Ireland was the site of "The Troubles" sectarian conflict, which wound down in 1998 -- but Brexit has been partially blamed for igniting old tensions.

The unrest started last week in the pro-UK unionist community, where tensions are high because of new post-Brexit rules some feel are dividing the region from Britain.

But the pro-Ireland nationalist community has begun to respond in scenes like those of Thursday night.

Nationalist and unionist communities in Belfast are often separated by towering "peace walls" to guard against projectiles. On Wednesday there were ugly scenes when warring groups from unionist and nationalist communities faced off at a gate in the peace wall between their neighborhoods.

The doors are etched with a slogan reading: "There was never a good war or a bad peace." But the gates were pried open and rioters traded missiles in vicious confrontations.

"It's deep rooted, it's not just about Brexit although Brexit has done something as well obviously," Belfast native Fiona McMahon told AFP earlier on Thursday. "We have been scuppered big time," she said, voicing the sense of exasperation many here feel over Britain's split from the EU.

The rising unrest has caused a political crisis in Northern Ireland, with the regional assembly recalled to address the violence on Thursday. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, his Irish counterpart Micheal Martin and U.S. President Joe Biden have all called for calm. Meanwhile police have pleaded to those with "influence" in the community to hold back the crowds from participating in riots.

Merkel Urges Putin to Pull Troops Back From Ukraine Border

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel told Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday to pull back a military build-up near the country's border with Ukraine amid heightened tensions in the conflict-stricken Donbas region.

Ukrainian government troops have battled Russian-backed separatists in the country's eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions, which form part of Donbas, since the rebels seized a swath of territory there in April 2014.

Fears of an escalation in hostilities have mounted in recent weeks, with Ukraine raising the alarm about an increase in Russian forces along the countries' shared border and renewed front-line clashes.

"The Chancellor demanded that this build-up be unwound in order to de-escalate the situation," Germany's government said in a readout of a telephone call between Merkel and Putin. The Kremlin, for its part, said in its readout of the phone call that "Vladimir Putin noted provocative actions by Kyiv which is deliberately inflaming the situation along the line of contact".



Crushing Poll Defeats for South Korea's Ruling Party

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's conservative opposition won landslide victories in elections for the mayors of the country's two biggest cities, results showed Thursday, in a bad sign for Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party a year before the next presidential poll.

Both Democratic-held posts became vacant last year as a result of sexual harassment allegations, with Seoul mayor Park Won-soon killing himself while the leader of the southern port of Busan resigned.

Between them, the two municipalities account for around a quarter of the national population and the vote was seen as a significant barometer of public opinion ahead of the March 2022 presidential election.

In Seoul, Oh Se-hoon of the conservative People Power Party defeated his Democratic opponent by 57.5 percent to 39.2 percent, according to the National Election Commission, winning all the city's 25 districts.

Oh pledged to "embrace the many citizens of Seoul who are in pain".

The conservatives' margin of victory in Busan was even higher, at 62.7 percent to 34.4 percent.

Moon and his Democratic Party have been struggling with plummeting ratings in recent months amid public outrage over soaring housing prices, deepening inequality, and corruption and sex abuse scandals involving senior officials.

"I solemnly accept the people's reprimand," Moon said, according to the presidential spokesperson, promising: "I will lower myself and carry out state affairs with a much heavier sense of responsibility."

The two new mayors will serve out the remaining 14 months of their predecessors' four-year terms. It was the first time turnout at local elections had exceeded 50 percent, the commission added.

Moon -- who is limited to a single term by South Korea's constitution -- saw his approval ratings plunge to a record-low 32 percent last week, with 58 percent disapproving of the job he is doing, according to a survey by Gallup Korea.

Armed Clashes Break Out in Myanmar Between Troops, Protesters

YANGON (Dispatches) - At least 11 demonstrators were killed in clashes with security forces in a town in northwest Myanmar after truckloads of troops arrived to quell a protest against the ruling military junta, domestic media reported on Thursday.

Protesters armed with homemade guns, knives and firebombs fought back against the troops in the town of Taze and more soldiers were brought in, the Myanmar Now and Irrawaddy news outlets said.

Fighting carried on into Thursday morning and at least 11 protesters were killed and about 20 wounded, they said. There was no word of any casualties among the soldiers.

It took the toll of civilians killed by security forces to more than 600 since the junta seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 1, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) activist group.

Taze is near the town of Kale, where at least 12 people were killed in a similar clash between troops and protesters on Wednesday, according to news media and witnesses. The incidents could signal a new phase in a struggle in which the opposition has largely used peaceful means of protest despite the lethal actions of the security forces.

"People will try to defend their own lives and their rights," said a former government minister who belongs to the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a group of lawmakers representing

the ousted civilian government.

"People will not wait for CRPH to act," the minister told Reuters. "The CRPH cannot stop the possible armed resistance by the people, from the people."

A member of the CRPH, which is attempting to restore the civilian government, will on Friday address an informal, virtual gathering of the 15 U.N. Security Council members in New York, diplomats said.

It will be the first public discussion of Myanmar by the Council's members since the coup on Feb. 1.

The Security Council has condemned the violence against protesters, but has not defined the military takeover as a coup or threatened any action, due to opposition by China, Russia, India and Vietnam. The United States, which has imposed sanctions on the junta's economic interests, on Thursday added a state-owned gem enterprise to its list of targets. The junta has not balked at taking on celebrities, and on Thursday arrested Paing Takhon, a popular 24-year-old model and actor who had spoken out against the coup and pledged support for Aung San Suu Kyi, his sister Thi Thi Lwin said.

Anti-coup protesters burn a Chinese flag in Yangon, Myanmar April 5, 2021. REUTERS/Stringer

She said eight trucks and about 50 soldiers had come to pick him up at their parents' home in Yangon, where he had been staying as he was unwell from malaria and a heart condition. She did not know where he had been taken.



UN Calls for Countries to Sign Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called Thursday on countries that have not done so to sign an international treaty banning anti-personnel mines.

The accord, which went into effect in 1999, bans the acquisition, production, stockpiling and use of the weapons.

The countries that have not signed up include the United States, China, Russia, India, Iran, Israel, Myanmar, North Korea and Vietnam, which called for Thursday's debate.

"More than 160 states are party to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. I call on those that have not yet acceded to the convention to do so without delay," Guterres said during a Security Council debate after a short video featuring the actor Daniel Craig, who works for the UN drive to eradicate anti-personnel mines. "Our main worry is that this convention only gives a short amount of time for neutralizing mined areas," a Vietnamese diplomatic source said. The southeast Asian nation, scarred by the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, needs decades to get that work done, the source said.

Signatories are expected to have ceased production and development of anti-personnel mines, destroyed their stockpiles and cleared all their mined areas within 10 years of ratifying the treaty, although this timeframe can be extended.

Children playing outdoors in former war zones are among the main victims of anti-personnel mines around the world. The weapons can be small and rudimentary or terribly destructive. Nguyen Thi Dieu Linh, a Vietnamese official working to rid the country of mines, was warmly applauded after addressing the Security Council -- a rare overt show of approval by members.

In his speech Guterres also warned against development of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). He said these are "the greatest threat" to UN forces in Africa, from Somalia to Mali.

"New explosive threats are emerging in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo," he said. "Landmines, IEDs and explosive remnants of war represent the worst of humanity. But efforts to eradicate them reflect humanity at its best. Let us today commit to intensify our efforts to rid the world of these inhumane threats," said Guterres.





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4storey, 12bdrs, pkgs

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Japan's Toshiba Considers \$20b Take-Private Deal

TOKYO (Reuters) - Toshiba Corp is considering a \$20 billion offer from private equity firm CVC Capital Partners to take it private, a person familiar with the matter said, as the Japanese industrial conglomerate faces pressure from activist shareholders to improve governance.

The proposed deal, which comes three weeks after shareholders approved an independent probe into the scandal-hit company, could shield managers, particularly Chief Executive Nobuaki Kurumatani, from that scrutiny. It would, however, invite regulatory review given its government work. "Toshiba received an initial proposal yesterday, and will ask for further clarification and give it careful consideration," Toshiba said in a statement, without providing further details.



G20 Extends Debt Relief for Low-Income States Until End of This Year

LONDON (FT) - The G20 group of the world's largest economies has extended its offer of temporary debt relief to low-income countries suffering the economic impacts of coronavirus, in the latest of a series of efforts to ward off a debt crisis in the developing world.

The G20 said on Wednesday that it would extend to the end of this year its debt service suspension initiative (DSSI) which launched last May and was initially due to end in to December, though it was subsequently extended until June.

Daniele Franco, finance minister of Italy, which chairs the G20 this year, said the further extension would allow beneficiary countries to mobilise more resources to face the challenges of the coronavirus crisis. However, he added, this will be the final extension of the initiative.

The DSSI has allowed the 46 countries that have so far applied to take part — out of 73 that are eligible — to defer an estimated \$12.5bn in debt repayments otherwise due to bilateral lenders in G20 member countries. Those debts must still be paid in full over a maximum of six years once the suspension expires. The new extension would cover an estimated \$9.9bn in bilateral debt payments due in the second half of this year if all eligible countries participate. But analysts and debt campaigners said more must be done to address the underlying economic problems in many emerging economies which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Earlier this week the IMF said that poor countries would need to spend about \$250bn up to 2025 to respond to the pandemic, and an additional \$250bn to reduce poverty.

"It's a welcome relief to know that countries battling the impossible choices between repaying their debt or fighting the pandemic will be given more breathing space. But... the additional debt suspension agreed is merely a drop in the bucket compared to the financing gap facing the world's poorest countries," said David McNair, policy director at the anti-poverty ONE Campaign. On Wednesday the G20 joined other organisations in calling for a new \$650bn allocation of the IMF's special drawing rights (SDRs), a form of reserve asset that countries can sell for cash.

The proposal was vetoed by the US last year under then-president Donald Trump but has since been backed by Joe Biden's administration and by the G7 group of wealthy nations.

Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the IMF, said after the G20 announcement that she would propose a \$650bn SDR allocation to the IMF's board by June, and that she hoped it would happen by August. While the outlook for the global economy is better than previously expected thanks to the swift rollout of vaccinations in many countries, she warned that low-income countries risked being left behind.

"Economic fortunes are diverging dangerously," she said, adding that there was great uncertainty over the emergence of new strains of the virus and over shifting financial conditions, raising the risk of economic scarring and extreme poverty in the worst-affected countries. "We are only as strong as the weakest link," she said. "Time is not on our side."

Spain to Lower 2021 Economic Forecast After Weak Start to Year

MADRID (Dispatches) - Explore what's moving the global economy in the new season of the Stephanomics podcast. Subscribe via Apple Podcast, Spotify or Pocket Cast.

Spain's government is set to trim its 2021 growth forecast after renewed pandemic restrictions led to a worse-than-expected first quarter and pushed back the country's recovery.

An increase in Covid-19 cases forced some Spanish regions to impose restrictions on movement at the beginning of the year, dealing a blow to companies' hiring plans and dragging on growth in the first quarter, Economy Minister Nadia Calvino said in a Bloomberg TV interview on Thursday.

"That is the main reason why we are going to revise downward our forecasts for this year," Calvino said. "We were expecting to have around 7% growth this year and it may be smaller due to the delay -- the one quarter delay in terms of the recovery."

A downward revision would put the government's forecasts more in line with those of other economists. The Bank of Spain, for instance, said last month it expects the economy to expand 6% in 2021 in its baseline scenario. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's administration published its economic outlook in October.

Despite the setback, Calvino said that economic indicators started to improve in March, in line with the government's expectations for a strong second half of the year. The country's immunization program is also set to underpin the recovery.

"All indicators are going toward the positive," she said, adding that Spain is on track to have around 70% of its population vaccinated by the summer.

Calvino also welcomed a proposal by the U.S. on digital taxation and global minimum levies, while cautioning that leaders would have to hash out the details.

"That gives us hope that by the summer we will be able to reach a global agreement on the tax issues, which we have been working on for years," she said. "We have to stop the race to the bottom."

Italy Considers Shielding Automotive, Steel From Chinese Interest

ROME (Bloomberg) - Italy is considering extending state protection against foreign ownership to the automotive and steel sectors, in a bid to shield businesses from Chinese interest, a government minister said.

Economic Development Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti, of the anti-migrant League party, told lawmakers in Rome that unfair competition by China -- with strong state subsidies normally unavailable to

Italian and European companies -- has been underestimated. The result was many job losses and company closures in Europe, he said.

"Some areas like the automotive and steel sectors are particularly in need of supportive measures because of their strategic character, and being particularly exposed to such competition," Giorgetti said.

"In this regard, we are assessing the possibility of extending the remit of the Golden Power rule to sectors

which are currently excluded, and which have clear significance in the national economic framework," he added.

The so-called Golden Power involves state measures to block or manage foreign ownership in businesses deemed strategic.

League leader Matteo Salvini called last month for the government to protect truck and bus business Iveco as a strategic asset, saying it would be a disaster for Italy if the company were to be sold to China FAW Group Co.

U.S. Trade Deficit Hits Record High As Economy Gains Speed

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. trade deficit surged to a record high in February as the nation's economic activity rebounded more quickly than that of its global rivals and could remain elevated this year, with massive fiscal stimulus expected to spur the fastest growth in nearly four decades.

The economy is roaring as increased COVID-19 vaccinations and the White House's \$1.9 trillion pandemic rescue package boost domestic demand, a chunk of which is being satiated with imports. President Joe Biden last week proposed a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, expected to pull in even more imports and fire up economic growth.

"The deficit could remain wide this year and next because of the fiscal stimulus and potential infrastructure package that could pass in the second half of this year," said Ryan Sweet, a senior economist at Moody's Analytics in West Chester, Pennsylvania. "As the economy continues to strengthen, this will keep the deficit wide."

The trade deficit jumped 4.8% to a record \$71.1 billion in February, the Commerce Department said on Wednesday. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast a \$70.5 billion deficit. The goods trade gap was also the highest on record.

Exports dropped 2.6% to \$187.3 billion. Exports of goods tumbled 3.5% to \$131.1 billion, likely hurt by unseasonably cold weather across large parts of the country. The decline was led by shipments of capital goods, which decreased \$2.5 billion.

Consumer goods exports fell as did those of motor vehicles, parts and engines. There were also fewer food exports. The pandemic remained a drag on services exports, especially travel.

Imports slipped 0.7% to \$258.3 billion. Goods imports fell 0.9% to \$219.1 billion. The drop likely reflected supply-chain constraints, rather than weak domestic demand. Indeed, imports of capital goods hit a record high, boosted by civilian aircraft, medical equipment and electric equipment among others.

Imports of industrial supplies and materials were the highest since October 2018, thanks to \$1 billion worth of crude oil imports. That resulted in the United States recording its first petroleum deficit since December 2019.

But imports of motor vehicles, parts and engines decreased as did those of consumer goods. The reduction in trade flows in February was partly due to harsh weather, logistic and transportation problems at ports.

"Congestion at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which together account for a third of U.S. container imports, caused container ships to anchor offshore while waiting for available port space," said Jay Bryson, chief economist at Wells Fargo Securities in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Euro Zone Business Activity Returns to Growth in March



LONDON (Reuters) - Euro zone business activity returned to growth last month, underpinned by a record expansion in the manufacturing sector, according to a survey on Wednesday that showed the service industry was coping with new lockdowns better than expected.

As Europe battles a third wave of coronavirus infections, governments have re-imposed restrictions on citizens and forced swathes of the dominant services industry to remain closed.

But IHS Markit's Services Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose to 49.6 in March from February's 45.7, much higher than a flash estimate of 48.8 and only just shy of the 50 mark that separates growth from contraction.

A composite PMI, combining both manufacturing and services and seen as a good gauge of economic health, rose to 53.2 from 48.8, above the 52.5 preliminary estimate.

"The economy has weathered recent lockdowns far better than many had expected, thanks to resurgent manufacturing growth and signs that social distancing and mobility restrictions are having far less of an impact on service sector businesses than seen this time last year," said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at IHS Markit.

Factory activity growth galloped at its fastest pace in the near 24-year history of its PMI in March, a sister survey showed last week, although supply chain disruptions and renewed lockdowns in the region could rein it in soon.

Supply issues led to a big jump in input costs for services firms and they increased their prices for the first time in just over a year. The output prices index rose to 50.5 from 48.1.

Still, a pick-up in euro zone inflation is unlikely to be sustained and a slow recovery from a pandemic-induced recession will keep price growth under the European Central Bank's target for years, a March Reuters poll found.

IMF Scales Up Projection for Bangladesh's GDP Growth to 5%

DHAKA (Dispatches) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has scaled up its projection for Bangladesh's GDP growth to 5 per cent in 2021, from its previous forecast of 4.4 per cent in October last year, amid concerns over the country's economic prospects in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The South Asian country's economy is expected to grow 7.5 per cent in 2022 as the global economy looks to regain its footing with the worldwide rollout of vaccines, the IMF revealed in its latest World Economic Outlook report on Tuesday.



The report follows the World Bank's revision of Bangladesh's GDP projection to 3.6 per cent in fiscal 2021, compared to its earlier forecast of 2 per cent, reports bdnews24.com with details from Reuters.

The IMF also raised its outlook for global economic growth again, forecasting worldwide output would rise 6 per cent this year, a rate unseen since the 1970s, thanks largely to the unprecedented policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

That upgrade, from 5.5 per cent less than three months ago, largely reflects a rapidly brightening outlook for the US economy, which the IMF now sees growing by 6.4 per cent in 2021, the fastest since the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, the projections for emerging and developing economies in Asia for 2021 have been revised up by 0.6 percentage point, reflecting a stronger recovery than initially expected after lockdowns were eased in some large countries such as India, the report said. The IMF forecast, if realised, would mark the fastest pace of global growth since 1976 but also comes off the steepest annual downturn of the post-war era last year as the pandemic brought commerce around the world to a near stand-still at times.

The fund said the world economy contracted 3.3 per cent in 2020, a modest upgrade from an estimated contraction of 3.5 per cent in its January update.

The latest World Economic Outlook - released at the start of the IMF's and World Bank's spring meetings - reflects a dramatic divergence between the outlook for the United States and much of the rest of the world courtesy of another \$1.9 trillion in pandemic relief spending recently enacted in Washington.

The outlooks for other advanced economy heavyweights, such as Germany, France and Japan, hardly improved at all since January.

Iran-Pakistan Tax-Free Trade Resumes

CHAGAI (Dispatches) - Limited tax-free trade activities between Pakistan and Iran resumed on Wednesday after the Iranian authorities reopened the trade gate commonly known as Zero Point at the Taftan border in Chagai district.

Taftan Assistant Commissioner Asmatullah Achakzai told Dawn that the gate was closed in connection with the Nauroz holiday in the last week of March.



ESCAP Forum Calls for Regional Cooperation To Avoid Greater Economic Divergence

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - The eighth annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development included roundtables on each SDG under review in 2021, and the launch of a joint report on building forward from COVID-19 for the SDGs.

A Youth Dialogue ahead of the Forum resulted in a call to action with recommendations on three priority issues: “our right to health and quality of life,” “our right to employment,” and “climate change and our environment”.

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) hosted the eighth annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. The Forum included roundtables on each SDG under review in 2021, and the launch of a joint report on building forward from COVID-19 for the SDGs.

The Forum convened in a hybrid format from 23-26 March 2021. In opening statements, UN officials echoed some themes voiced during the regional forum for Latin America and the Caribbean, including on the need for universal social protection and a new social contract between governments and citizens, and the need for COVID-19 vaccines to be considered a global public good. Opening statements at the Asia-Pacific forum also sent a “resounding call for countries to build resilience to ... the twin crises that threaten our future the most” – the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency.

Participants called for a ‘Green Deal for Asia and the Pacific’ to achieve a triple bottom line.

According to a draft of the Forum Chair’s summary of discussions, participants highlighted:

The potential of nature-based solutions for reducing hunger; and the need to ensure people with disabilities have a voice, recognize the mistreatment of indigenous peoples, and protect migrant workers against abuse.

Participants reviewed progress towards the nine SDGs that will be reviewed in-depth at the global level during the 2021 session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). These Goals are: SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), and SDG 17 (partnership for the Goals).

A side event during the Forum served as the launch of the report titled, ‘Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving No Country Behind,’ which was produced by the Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership made up of ESCAP, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The report finds that each country in the region has been affected differently, posing the risk of a “K-shaped” recovery in which some recover faster than others and greater economic divergence emerges both within and between countries. In other words, in addition to leaving behind vulnerable groups within countries, “there is now a heightened risk of vulnerable countries being left behind.” The report considers options to mitigate this growing divergence, focusing on digitalization and regional cooperation.



In the foreword to the joint report, the leaders of the three organizations encourage a “differently-directed regional cooperation” that can prioritize resilience to health, economic, and environmental shocks. They add that regional cooperation to close digital gaps is needed in order to “leave no person and no country behind.”

The Regional Collaborative Platform, established in October 2020, held its first meeting during the Forum.

Ahead of the Forum, a Youth Dialogue moderated by the UN Deputy Secretary-General took place from 14-16 March. It resulted in a call to action with recommendations on three priority issues: “our right to health and quality of life,” “our right to employment,” and “climate change and our environment.”

The other regional groups of UN Member States also held their sustainable development forums in March. Africa’s regional forum on sustainable development took place from 1-4 March, followed by the regional forum for the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) countries from 10-18 March, the forum for Latin America and the Caribbean from 15-18 March 2021, and the Arab Region’s meeting from 29-31 March. The outcomes of each regional forum for sustainable development comprise the regions’ input to discussions at the July 2021 session of the HLPF. [APFSD website] [Publication: Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving No Country Behind]

Detained South Korean Oil tanker, Captain Released

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has released a South Korean oil tanker, the Iranian Foreign Ministry says, more than three months after the ship was detained for environmental pollution.

“Following the completion of an investigation into the violation of the [South] Korean ship and at the request of the owner and the Korean government for the release of the ship, a release order was issued by the esteemed prosecutor,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Friday.

Khatibzadeh said the fact that the ship and its captain did not have a record of breaching maritime regulations in the region paved the ground for “the positive view” of the prosecutor.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a country with long coasts in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, emphasizes the full observance of maritime regulations, including the regulations on environmental protection, and monitors and follows up any violations in this regard,” he added.

On January 4, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)’s Navy said the South Korean-flagged MT Hankuk Chemi tanker had been seized upon a request by Iran’s Ports and Maritime Organization and a verdict by the office of Hormozgan province’s prosecutor.

Carrying 20 crew members, the ship was sailing through the Strait of Hormuz when it was impounded for causing water pollution. It was headed to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) after loading 7,200 tons of oil chemical products in Saudi Arabia.

In February, the crew of the tanker received permission to leave Iran in a humanitarian move, but they remained on the ship for maintenance purposes.

The release of the tanker was first announced by South Korea’s Foreign Ministry earlier on Friday, when it said the ship and its captain and 12 crew members left the port near Bandar Abbas on the southern coast at around 6 a.m. in Iran’s time.

The South Korean ministry added that the captain and the crew members remain safe and sound.

Iran has repeatedly dismissed speculations that the seizure was linked to Tehran’s anger over Seoul’s lack of efforts to release about \$7 billion of Iranian assets locked in South Korean banks due to US sanctions, maintaining that the seizure is purely a “technical issue” related to the Iranian Judiciary.

Iran to Produce 40 Tons of Yellowcake This Year

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The spokesperson for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran unveiled plans to produce 40 tons of yellowcake in the country in the current Iranian year, which began on March 21.

Behrouz Kamalvandi on Thursday said Iran has registered the average annual production of 4 tons of yellowcake during the past 15 years.

He said the average production of 4 tons of the uranium concentrate powder increased to 37 tons in the previous year (March 2020 – March 2021).

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran has set a target of producing 40 tons of yellowcake this year, the spokesman added, referring to the solar year 1400 that will end on March 20, 2022.

Kamalvandi said plans have been made to produce 100 tons of yellowcake in the medium term, adding that in order to achieve that goal, Iran needs to design and build two or three other power plants.

He noted that Iran is currently constructing two nuclear power plants with the help of Russia, saying the construction activities in the project and the provision of 15 to 30 percent of the equipment used in the power plants have been undertaken by Iran itself.

Iran is among the world’s top seven or eight countries in the nuclear enrichment industry, he stated.

AEOI Chief Ali Akbar Salehi announced on Wednesday that Iran will unveil as many as 133 nuclear-related achievements, including radiopharmacology products, to mark the upcoming National Nuclear Technology Day.

UNHCR Funds...

FROM PAGE 1

Balloch said the pandemic has severely affected the ability of refugees to earn a living as they usually rely on precarious and unstable jobs. The cost of health care, he said, is unaffordable for most refugees as it represents about 40% of a refugee family’s monthly expenses.

And, yet, in the time of COVID, accessing treatment could be a matter of life or death. The World Health Organization reports Iran is the most COVID-affected country in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The latest data show more than 1.9 million cases, including 63,000 deaths. The UNHCR warns fewer refugees are likely to seek treatment for urgent health needs if they are unable to afford health insurance. The agency says it may not be able to continue subsidizing the cost of insurance premiums for the refugees due to its tight budget. The agency notes this year’s UNHCR funding appeal of \$97 million is only 7% funded.

Iran Not to Reduce...

FROM PAGE 1

Araqchi also denied indirect talks with Washington through the European parties to the JCPOA, saying the talks involve China and Russia in addition to the Europeans.

“We are negotiating here with all of the current members of the JCPOA, namely the three European countries, Russia and China, as well as the European Union, which is the coordinator of the JCPOA, and they, on the other hand, are talking to the Americans and convey the results of the talks,” he said.

The senior diplomat noted that there are signs that the Americans are reviewing their positions and are moving toward removing all of the sanctions.

“But we are not yet in a position to judge, and negotiations have not yet been concluded,” he said, adding that there is a long path forward but the talks are constructive.

Araqchi also said on Thursday that the Iranian negotiators are engaged in talks over the removal of sanctions all at once as well as details of which and how the sanctions would be lifted.

“In our view, America has to take its actions in one step, then we’ll verify, and then Iran will follow with its own actions,” he reiterated. “How verification will happen is another point of our discussion.”

He made similar remarks while speaking with Press TV’s correspondent in Vienna.

Vienna Meeting...

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Mikhail Ulyanov, Permanent Representative of Russia to International Organizations in Vienna, in his tweet regarding this issue wrote, “Two expert-level groups (on sanctions lifting and nuclear issues) were tasked to identify concrete measures to be taken by Washington and Tehran to restore full implementation of JCPOA.” In one prediction, they will try first to restore to some extent the lost reputation of the West and secondly, they will try to find a way to save President Hassan Rouhani’s government from this current ludicrous condition which has wasted almost eight years of Iranian nation for almost no achievement of course through Western diplomacy and methods.



In contradiction to this approach, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price, who had hidden in the backroom of the negotiations and monitoring the pettiest detail of talks, criticized the raised topics by Iran and called it “too much” and added, “We do not expect any immediate breakthrough. We recognize this to be potentially the start of a process, knowing that we do have a long – a potentially long road ahead.” State Department’s Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, heading the U.S. representative in the meeting in Vienna and monitoring the talks from the adjacent room, said after the meeting, “The U.S. has some concerns about Iran’s ballistic missile programs and first we should put the current nuclear issue to the side, then the talks on Iran’s regional activities will start.”

This meeting is getting executive in a condition that Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has not taken part in it and it shows seemingly the Rouhani Government has still retained an upper hand in facing with the West.

If we notice the reasons for holding the meeting, we reach this point that the Iran-China agreement has led to the full reason for the West’s fear of Iran’s getting rid of sanctions and its defiance to the JCPOA. Of course, the West is in a great dilemma both to compensate the maximum pressure on Iran and at the same time not to give any concession for the survival of the Islamic Republic establishment and it is seeking a solution wretchedly and perplexedly.

Some believe that the upcoming presidential election in Iran causes that the West helps its West-oriented favorite candidate to win, and for this reason it wants to take an effective action on the result of the election but this wish is much closer to delusion because eight years of the resistant Iranian nation’s policy of tolerating the armed to the teeth President Rouhani’s anti-public government has had only one result for the West and it has been distribution of poverty and destitution, and as the result distrust of around 90 percent of the public to its West-ward look.

So the Westerners with their intention of gradual toppling concealed in their velvet gloves are unlikely to change their policy in encountering Iran. Of course under the influence of Iran-China agreement, they will try first to find a way for destroying this relation and secondly offering some proposals in the level of lollipops for massive induction propagation for providing stuff for the pro-Westerners in Iran.

U.S. Economic War...

FROM PAGE 1

Ever since the dawn of the D-8, the Islamic Republic of Iran has endeavored to play its part in accomplishing the Organization’s lofty objectives. Such measures as the establishment of the D-8 International University and D-8 Technology Transfer and Exchange Network, which, combined, target two key areas of ‘education and human resource development and ‘development of technological cooperation’ among eight countries, are testimony to our efforts.

Rouhani also noted, “We are fully prepared to participate in the operationalization of D-8 agreements in IT, trade facilitation, investment, agriculture, petrochemicals, science, health, tourism, and visa issuance facilitation. Given the importance of foreign trade for national development and public welfare of the great people of D-8 Member States, I would like to stress that the current trade volume among the eight countries is a far cry from the actual trade potentials of the D-8.”

Certain mechanisms must be developed to promote and promote trade among the Member States, including through customs and banking facilities and mechanisms as also non-banking ones. Such proposed initiatives as a D-8 chamber of barter trade and D-8 credit cards may help this context, he continued.

Osako Fires Bremen Into German Cup Semis

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Japan striker Yuya Osako fired Werder Bremen into the German Cup semi-finals with a superb goal on Wednesday in a 1-0 win at second-tier side Jahn Regensburg.

Bremen will host RB Leipzig, who they also face on Saturday in the Bundesliga, on April 30 for a place in the final at Berlin's Olympic Stadium on May 13.

The quarter-final had been postponed from early March when the Regensburg squad were quarantined after a Covid-19 outbreak.

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U.S. Not Discussing Boycott of Beijing Olympics

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. is not discussing a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing due to alleged human rights abuses, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

"Our position on the 2022 Olympics has not changed. We have not discussed and are not discussing any joint boycott with allies and partners," Psaki said.

A State Department spokesman indicated on Tuesday in an exchange with reporters that the U.S. was discussing whether to skip the Olympics in Beijing as part of a boycott with allies.

Mbappe Leads PSG to a Win At Holders Bayern Munich

PARIS (Dispatches) - Kylian Mbappe insisted Paris Saint-Germain still have it all to do after he scored twice in a thrilling 3-2 win at holders Bayern Munich in Wednesday's Champions League quarter-final first leg.

Bayern had their 19-match unbeaten run in the Champions League ended in a repeat of last year's final, as the German giants suffered their first European defeat since March 2019.

PSG raced into a 2-0 lead after just 28 minutes behind closed doors at the Allianz Arena as Neymar created goals for Mbappe and Marquinhos.

Bayern, whose top scorer Robert Lewandowski is sidelined by a knee injury, drew level courtesy of headers by Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting and Thomas Mueller.

However, Mbappe showed his class with a superb second goal to give the visitors an advantage for the return leg in Paris.

"We used all our chances and had a bit of luck, but nothing has been decided," Mbappe told Sky, with the second leg to come in Paris on Tuesday.

PSG goalkeeper Keylor Navas played a key role with a string of saves as Bayern peppered his goal with 31 shots compared to the French club's six.

"We have to score a lot more goals," said Mueller. "If it had ended 5-3 or 6-3 for us, no one could have complained based on the chances."

Bayern coach Hansi Flick, who finished on the losing side for the first time in the Champions League, also rued the number of missed chances.

"With the chances we had, we could have got a good result despite conceding three goals," Flick said. "We don't like to lose, but the way the team played was top."

This was a record 19th appearance in the Champions League quarter-finals for Bayern, but there was little for them to celebrate at the final whistle.

"Kylian Mbappe made the difference. It's a very positive result for us, but everything is still open," said PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino.

Meanwhile superb individual goals from English pair Mason Mount and Ben Chilwell gave Chelsea a 2-0 win away to Porto in their Champions League quarter-final first leg on Wednesday in Seville as the Londoners



made the most of their few chances.

Midfielder Mount ran on to an incisive pass from Jorginho then swivelled to get past a defender before firing the ball low and hard into the far corner to prise Porto open in the 32nd minute and score his first Champions League goal.

Left back Chilwell also got off the mark in Europe's top competition to grab Chelsea a second away goal in the 85th to take into the second leg on April 13, which will also be played at Sevilla's Sanchez Pizjuan stadium due to coronavirus restrictions on travel between Portugal and England.

"We knew it would be a tough game. We kept going, we got the goal in the first half and the second secured a good win," said Mount. "The job's not done. They'll fight for the next leg and we'll have to give it our all. We'll be ready."

Porto midfielder Mateus Uribe said his side "left with a bitter taste" after playing so well but having failed to take their chances. "We weren't clinical in front of goal, they had fewer opportunities and scored two goals," he said.

"They got the result, but we leave with our heads held high because of our performance and believe we can turn the tie around with our quality players."

Porto knocked Juventus out in the last round on away goals but were missing their two top scorers in Sergio Oliveira and Mehdi Taremi through suspension.

They were more adventurous than the Premier League side and narrowly missed the target in the first half with thumping volleys from Uribe and Zaidu Sanusi.

Basilashvili Thwarts Five Match Points In Cagliari



ROMA (Dispatches) - Fourth-seeded Nikoloz Basilashvili overcame a first-set loss and survived five match points to beat Jozef Kovalik in the second round on the clay courts of the Sardegna Open in Cagliari, Italy.

Despite trailing 3-0 in the final set, the Georgian eventually dispatched Kovalik 4-6, 6-4, 7-5 in a match that lasted 2:59.

Basilashvili won the fourth game of the third set and then broke his Slovakian opponent's serve to get to 2-3, then lost serve and was down 2-4.

He broke Kovalik's serve again and then won on his own serve to tie 4-4, but Kovalik took the ninth game for a 4-5 advantage. Basilashvili pulled even at 5-5, surviving five match points in a 24-point game. After breaking Kovalik again in the 11th game, Basilashvili cruised without ceding a point in the decisive final game.

In other second-round action, second-seeded American Taylor Fritz beat Slovakia's Andrej Martin 6-2, 7-6 (4), fifth-seeded German Jan-Lennard Struff beat the United Kingdom's Liam Broady 6-4, 6-2 and Slovenia's Aljaz Bedene dropped Belarus' Egor Gerasimov 6-4, 7-6 (5).

Japan May Prioritize

Olympic Athletes for Vaccine

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan is considering prioritising its Olympic athletes for coronavirus vaccines, aiming to get them inoculated before the pandemic-postponed Tokyo Games open on July 23, local media said Thursday.

Japan's government denied any such plan was being considered, but said it would be "closely watching discussions" about protecting athletes' health.

The reported move sparked criticism online, with one Japanese Twitter user demanding: "Give it to my granny first!"

Japan's vaccine rollout is moving slowly, with just one million first doses given so far to medical workers since jabs began in February.

Older people will start receiving doses only from next week, and so far Japan has approved only the Pfizer vaccine.

A date has not yet been set for vaccinating the broader population, but the government is now considering giving Japanese athletes both shots by late June, Kyodo News agency reported, citing unnamed government sources.

Private broadcaster Nippon TV and other media also reported the plan, with some pointing out that the proposed timeline would mean healthy young athletes would finish their inoculations before some of Japan's elderly.

Top government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said there was "no fact in the claim that the government is studying such a plan and the government has no intention of discussing it at this point."

But he told reporters the government would be "closely watching discussions on athletes' health issues" among Olympic officials, the Tokyo Games organisers and host city Tokyo.

Online, the reports were met with criticism, with one Japanese Twitter user calling on "all the athletes to come out and say they won't do this."

"Will you thank the old and sick people who died because their vaccines were late for giving their lives for the Olympics?" asked another.

Japan has seen a comparatively small virus outbreak, with just over 9,200 deaths since the pandemic began.



Neymar Banned for Two League Games After Red Card

PARIS (Dispatches) - Neymar has been suspended for Paris Saint-Germain's next two Ligue 1 matches after being sent off in their loss to title rivals Lille last weekend, the French league (LFP) said Wednesday.

The Brazilian forward was given two yellow cards, the second for a late push on

Tiago Djalo, who was also dismissed.

Neymar also tried to confront Djalo again in the hallway leading to the dressing rooms. He will miss Saturday's game at Strasbourg and the match against struggling Saint-Etienne on April 18.

It was Neymar's second sending off of the campaign, and his fourth in as many seasons since joining PSG from Barcelona. The defending champions sit three points behind new Ligue 1 leaders Lille with seven matches remaining.

Liverpool Champions League Comeback Will Be Tough

LONDON (Dispatches) - Jurgen Klopp says it will be tough for Liverpool to turn around their Champions League fortunes against Real Madrid at an empty Anfield despite their reputation as "comeback kings".

A chastening 3-1 defeat in the first leg of their quarter-final in Spain on Tuesday has given the Premier League side a mountain to climb if they are to reach the last four.

Goals from Vinicius Junior and Marco Asensio gave the home side a 2-0 lead before Mohamed Salah pulled one back but Vinicius found the net again to put Real firmly in the driving seat.

Liverpool famously overturned a 3-0 first-leg deficit against Barcelona in the 2019 semi-final, winning 4-0 at a frenzied Anfield on their way to being crowned European champions for a sixth time.

Next Wednesday they must do something similar. An away goal gives them a lifeline but they will be playing behind closed doors due to coronavirus regulations.

"Of course, it is completely different," said Klopp. "Completely different."

"If you want to have some emotional memories, then you watch the Barcelona game back and 80 percent of this game was the atmosphere in the stadium, so yes, we have to do it without that."

"But it is not that I sit here and think, 'Comebacks are our thing, we do it all the time'. We did from time to time but we always had supporters in the stadium."

"We don't have that this time so I don't know if we can do it, but I can promise you we will give it a proper try."

The other factor counting against Klopp's men is their shocking recent home form, which has torpedoed their Premier League title defence.

Liverpool have not won at Anfield since mid-December, losing six of their eight matches at their former fortress and scoring a paltry two goals.

Former Liverpool defender Mark Lawrenson believes another rescue act could be beyond them.



French Open Postponed By One Week Due to Covid-19 Concerns

PARIS (Dispatches) - This year's French Open has been postponed by a week due to the COVID-19 pandemic and will begin on May 30, the French Tennis Federation (FFT) said on Thursday.

The claycourt Grand Slam, which was postponed by four months last year and took place in front of limited crowds, will finish on June 13, two weeks before the expected start of Wimbledon.

The postponement is set to have an impact on the ATP and WTA calendars, especially on the grasscourt season with tournaments scheduled to start on June 7 in s'Hertogenbosch (WTA and ATP) Stuttgart (ATP) and Nottingham (WTA).

FFT President Gilles Moreton said it had made the decision after consulting with public authorities, the governing bodies of international tennis, and its partners and broadcasters.

It hoped the delay would let them welcome more fans on the grounds than last year, when only 1,000 were allowed at Roland Garros every day.

"It will give the health situation more time to improve and should optimize our chances of welcoming spectators at Roland-Garros ...," he added.

"For the fans, the players and the atmosphere, the presence of spectators is vital for our tournament, the spring's most important international sporting event."

The FFT had been heavily criticized for postponing last year's tournament until the end of September without consulting the elite men's and women's tours, who this time have been kept in the loop.

"Both the ATP and WTA are working in consultation with all parties impacted by the postponement to optimize the calendar for players, tournaments, and fans, in the lead up to and following Roland-Garros," the WTA and ATP said in a joint statement.

France last Saturday entered a third nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, with President Emmanuel Macron saying he was hoping to "re-open" the country around mid-May.

