

**Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on
Wednesday That 304 More Iranians
Died From the Coronavirus Disease
Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing
The Total Deaths to 65,359**

IRAN NEWS

**In a Phone Talk With His Iraqi
Counterpart Barham Salih,
President Hassan Rouhani Said
That Iran Opposes Any Foreign
Interference in the Internal Affairs
Of the Countries in the Region**

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Advanced Centrifuges To Produce 60% Uranium By Next Week

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran says it has already started work to use IR-4 and IR-6 centrifuges in Natanz for enriching uranium to the level of 60 percent and that it expects the product to be ready next week.

Iran's permanent representative to Vienna-based international organizations Kazem Gharibabadi made the announcement in a tweet late Tuesday, expressing hope that the move will help the country increase the manufacturing of radiopharmaceutical products that are also higher in quality.

Enriching UF6 up to 60% will be done in two cascades of IR-4 and IR-6 centrifuges in Natanz. Modification of the process just started and we expect to accumulate the product next week. This will improve significantly both the quality and quantity of radiopharmaceutical products.

Iran announced on Tuesday evening that it had informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of a plan to start enriching uranium up to 60 percent purity, following a suspected Israeli act of sabotage on Iran's Natanz nuclear site.

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Iran Capable of Boosting Electricity Exchange With Neighbors

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian has said the country is capable of boosting its electricity exchange with the neighboring countries to 10,000 megawatts (10 gigawatts), IRNA reported on Wednesday.

Speaking in the monthly meeting of the members of the Iranian Energy Club which was held through video conference, Ardakanian put the country's current capacity for electricity exchange with the neighbors at 3,500 MW.

Referring to the positive measures taken by the Energy Ministry for expanding the possibility of energy exchange with neighboring countries, the minister said: "Now, we have the possibility to exchange electricity with all countries that share land borders with us."

The Energy Ministry, however, is also pursuing a plan for exporting electricity to the southern Arab neighbors through sea.

Ardakanian also mentioned the synchronization of the country's power grid with Iraq back in November 2019, and the plans for synchronization of the electricity network with Russia through Armenia-Georgia or Azerbaijan, saying: "Whichever of these routes that is agreed on sooner will become operational."

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Five Countries Apply for Iranian COVID-19 Vaccine



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Two European countries and three regional countries have asked to purchase homegrown coronavirus vaccine (COVIRAN BAREKAT), Mohammad Mokhber, the head of the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam has said.

COVIRAN BAREKAT, the first coronavirus vaccine made by researchers at the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam which was unveiled on December 29, 2020, started to be mass-produced on March 29.

At least two European countries and three countries in the region are now seeking to negotiate on purchasing vaccine, but we will export once the domestic needs are met, he noted, adding, the production capacity of COVID-19 vaccine in the world is about 2 billion doses per year, while the need for a vaccine is about 14-16 billion doses.

"We have achieved great success in developing vaccine; as clinical trials were conducted successfully, and the third phase of the human trial will start by the next two or three weeks, but what is more important is mass production of vaccines," he noted.

Mokhber went on to say that the production line of three million doses of vaccine per month has been fully completed and we have gained valuable achievements in the field of research and development.

In the beginning, our scientists could get 100 doses of vaccine per liter of the virus, which increased up to 1,000 doses by now, he highlighted.

"In the first phase, we can produce 3 million doses of vaccine per month and we are determined to submit the first shipment of BAREKAT vaccine with a capacity of one million doses to the Ministry of Health and the Iranian people in May," he said.

The second line of vaccine production with a capacity of 12 to 15 million doses will also be operational in two months, its construction stages have been completed and it is planned to be launched in mid-July, he added.

At the end of June, the vaccine production capacity will reach 18-20 million doses per month, which can definitely increase in case of any changes in condition, he also stated.

The second Iranian coronavirus vaccine, Razi Cov Pars, which started the clinical trial on February 27, will be mass-produced in early August.

Fakhra vaccine, the third homegrown vaccine, was unveiled and started the clinical trial on March 16.

Meanwhile the spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Kianoush Jahanpour said that five countries including two European countries ask for Iranian Corona vaccine so far.

Jahanpour wrote in a tweet that uranium enrichment will begin up to 60% and so far five countries including two European ones asked for the Iranian vaccine. Along with the increase in production efficiency, it would be close to achieving producing 20 million doses of vaccine per month.

Health Minister Saeed Namaki has promised that by the end of this spring, the domestically produced vaccine will be accomplished and placed on the service table and injected into the Iranian citizens.

China's Iranian Oil Buying Spree Crushes Demand for Brazil, Angola Crude

SINGAPORE (Reuters) - China's record imports of Iranian crude in recent months has squeezed out supply from rival producers, forcing sellers of oil from countries such as Brazil, Angola and Russia to slash prices and divert shipments to India and Europe.

The jump in Iranian volumes took the market by surprise and has capped global oil prices although the Biden administration had been expected to resume talks with Tehran to revive a nuclear deal.

Iranian oil started to slip into China from late 2019 despite tough U.S. sanctions, but volumes began to surge only since late last year as oil rebounded above \$60 and buyers were emboldened by the prospect of the United States lifting sanctions under President Joe Biden.

China received a daily average of 557,000 barrels of Iranian crude between November and March, or roughly 5% of total imports by the world's biggest importer, according to Refinitiv Oil Research, returning to levels before former U.S. President Donald Trump re-imposed sanctions on Iran in 2019.

Most of these oil ended up in the eastern province of Shandong, China's hub for independent refiners.

"These 'sensitive' barrels are hammering supplies from everywhere, as they are simply too cheap," said a Chinese trader who handles oil sales to Shandong, referring to Iranian oil which was sold \$6-\$7 a barrel below that from Brazil earlier this year. A second trader said suppliers from South America to West Africa and North Sea are boosting efforts to find new markets as Chinese demand plummeted.

South America's top exporter Brazil and West Africa's Angola were among the worst hit, while Russia's far-east grade ESPO crude recorded some rare flows to the U.S. pinched by falling Chinese demand.

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60% Enrichment, Launch of IR6 Response To Wickedness

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that the 60% enrichment and launch of IR6 are a response to wickedness in Natanz.

"We are clear and say that the United States must return to the conditions of 2015, and as soon as the United States fulfills its obligations and we verified it, we will return to our obligations too," said Rouhani in the Cabinet session on Wednesday.

Referring to the start of 60% enrichment in Natanz and the launch of IR-6 centrifuges, he added, "You cannot commit crimes in Natanz and expect us to remain silent."

"The Iranian people should know that if some conspire against our nation, we will respond," he stressed.

"If you want to disrupt Iran's peaceful technology and harass us, we still act within the law. Your work was nuclear terrorism, our work is legal," the President noted.

Rouhani highlighted, "If the Zionists take action against us, we will respond. They got the first response. If you make a problem for IR1 we will launch IR6 to realize that you cannot stop us from this technology."

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Iran, Pakistan Urged to Bolster Bilateral Trade

PESHAWAR (Dispatches) - President, Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Sherbaz Bilour and Iranian Consul General in Peshawar, Hamid Reza Ghomi have agreed to make joint efforts to give further boost to bilateral trade and economic relations between the two brotherly Islamic countries.

The agreement was reached during a meeting held between them here at the chamber house on Wednesday and attended by SCCI Senior Vice President Engineer Manzoor Elahi, Iranian Second Consul (Economic section) Mr Seyed Ebrahim Dehnadi and other high-officials of the Iranian Consulate in Peshawar.

Both sides, during the meeting, agreed on further strengthen Pak-Iran bilateral trade and economic relations by signing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), installation of an effective banking channel, establishment of markets at border region, elimination of illegal trade, exchange of business delegation, organizing joint trade exhibition, Businessmen to businessmen meetings.

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Suez Blockage Highlighted Importance Of Iran Corridor

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The International North-South Transport Corridor envisions a 7,200 km-long multi-mode network of ship, rail and road for freight transport.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says the recent incident where a ship blocked the Suez Canal for almost a week highlighted the need for a reliable transit route and the corridor being developed by Iran, Russia and India is best suited to serve that goal.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), proposed by the three countries in 2000 and later supported by 10 Central Asian nations, is connecting the Persian Gulf and India with Russia via Iran.

"We hope that the North-South ITC will eventually serve as the basis for the creation of a single seamless transport, logistics, and economic space stretching from the southern coasts of Iran to northern cities of Russia," Lavrov told IRNA news agency in Tehran.

"Addressing such a task appears especially relevant at the moment when the recent incident with the blocking of the Suez Canal has highlighted the need for reliable land transport routes," he added.

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Iran Bans Flights to, From France

TEHRAN (IP) - Iran's Civil Aviation Organization says the country's flights to and from France will be banned from Wednesday.

According to Iran's Civil Aviation Organization, from Wednesday, flights to the United Kingdom will be restored. Also, flights to and from France will be banned.

Flying from the origin and destination of countries that are

on the list of the coronavirus special conditions is prohibited, and countries that are on the list of high-risk countries are required to retest for COVID-19 in Iran. France, Botswana, Brazil, Czech Republic, Iraq, Estonia, Ireland, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Slovakia, South Africa and Zambia are on the list of countries with special conditions, who have the UK's COVID variant.

Israeli Regime Presence In Region Dangerous

TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Hassan Rouhani has once again reiterated that regional issues, including the ongoing crisis in Yemen, should be solved through diplomacy and negotiations, warning against the "dangerous" presence of the Israeli regime in the region.

"We regard that the only successful way to ensure security, peace and stability in the region is the settlement of issues peacefully and responsibly and taking collective interests into account. We believe that militarism cannot resolve regional problems," Rouhani said in a phone conversation with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on Tuesday.

Rouhani also pointed to recent talks between the remaining parties to a multilateral 2015 nuclear agreement in the Austrian capital of Vienna and the U.S. willingness to rejoin the nuclear deal, which was abandoned by former US president Donald Trump, and stressed the importance of lifting all sanctions imposed by Washington against Tehran.

"The only way (to solve the nuclear issue) is the US's return to the JCPOA [the nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], lifting of all sanctions and fulfilling all obligations under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 and there is no doubt that after these measures by the U.S., Iran will also return to all its commitments as per the JCPOA," the president stated.



He said he hopes that the Americans have realized over the years that sanctions and pressure are not the right approach, adding, "The Americans need to return to the Security Council resolution (2231) and the nuclear agreements between the seven countries and this is the only solution."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rouhani stressed the importance of utilizing Tehran-Doha capacities to further improve ties in all fields, particularly in the trade and economic sectors.

The Qatari Emir, for his part, highlighted the significance of deepening relations between the two countries, especially cooperation in the field of transportation, and said Tehran and Doha should use their utmost potential to develop ties.

Al Thani threw his country's weight behind the path of dialogue to resolve problems and expressed hope that all parties to the JCPOA would return to their commitments to facilitate the revitalization of the multilateral international agreement.

He once again invited President Rouhani to visit Qatar to exchange views about regional developments and issues of common interest.

Judiciary Takes Decisive Action To Increase National Production

TEHRAN (IP) - judiciary spokesman said that the judiciary had taken decisive steps to fulfill the slogan of the year 'Production, Support, and Elimination of Obstacles'.

Gholamhossein Esmaili, in response to Iran Press question on the judiciary system's effective program to eliminate production obstacles, said that the revival of more than 2,000 production and industrial units in the last two years was a clear reason for the judiciary system's promising steps aiming to increase national production.

Roughly 70 percent of production units in Lorestan province, western Iran, were either semi-active or inactive, which are now active with the help of the judiciary, said the judiciary spokesman.

He also stressed: "Other governmental sectors should take steps to increase national production and eliminate any obstacles because supporting production is the duty of all institutions, and part of this support is legal and judicial."

Withdrawal of U.S. Forces From Iraq Will Promote Regional Security

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami says the pullout of American troops from Iraq under a law adopted by the parliament of the Arab country will contribute to the establishment of peace and security of Iraq and the whole region.

"The withdrawal of American forces from Iraq within the framework of the wise legislation approved by this country's parliament will help the establishment and improvement of security and stability in Iraq and the region," Hatami said in a Tuesday meeting with Iraqi National Security Council (INSC) Advisor Qasim al-Araji in Tehran.

He slammed as an "unforgivable crime" the US military's assassination of senior Iranian and Iraqi anti-terror commanders, General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy head of Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'abi, and their companions.

The expulsion of the American troops from Iraq is a "legitimate right of the Iraqi people," the defense chief said.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Hatami said Tehran and Baghdad have cultural, historical and religious commonalities and voiced Iran's full support for Iraq's sovereignty, territorial integrity and security.

He emphasized that growing bilateral cooperation in the defense and security fields would play an important role in advancing strategic relations based on the two nations' interests.

As the Iranian nation and Armed Forces stood by Iraq in its fight against the Daesh terrorist group, they would also participate in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country, the defense chief added.

For his part, the Iraqi official hailed Iran's role in the fight against terrorism and called for the expansion of ties in all areas.

Tehran, Beijing Expand Ties in Fighting Narcotics



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian deputy chief for Regional and International Affairs of Anti-Narcotics Police, Col. Naghi Mahmoodi, in the meeting of Chinese police liaison officer on Wednesday, reaffirmed joint campaign against drug-trafficking.

Mahmoodi in the meeting of "Chen Yuta O", emphasized holding regular meetings and acceleration of sharing information by Iran and China, reaffirming Iran's readiness to expand joint campaign.

He made it clear that special officers have been appointed on contact points for Iran and China.

The Iranian officer noted that drug traffickers are using different methods to smuggle the narcotics adding that we have to change the tactics to combat drug trafficking.

Chinese police liaison officer Chen Yuta O for his part, said that his country was also ready to improve interaction and cooperation between Anti-Narcotics bodies of the both countries.

Moreover, the two sides discussed the need for regular interaction, communications and sharing of best practices in fighting narcotics.

Uranium Enrichment Continues in Natanz

TEHRAN (IP) - The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization announced the continuation of uranium enrichment in the Natanz nuclear facility.

Ali-Akbar Salehi stated that Iran's action to produce uranium up to 60% enrichment had been following parliament's "Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions" law. "This process is envisaged in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) framework and we have been researching for a long time," he noted.

The Islamic Republic of Iran announced in a letter to the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi, on Tuesday that 1,000 new centrifuges would be installed at the Natanz nuclear facility.

Iran has announced that 1,000 new centrifuges would be of the IR-1 type, but the efficiency of these new machines would increase by 50%.

Araqchi Meets Head of Chinese Delegation in Vienna

TEHRAN (RNA) - Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Seyyed Abbas Araqchi met and conferred with the head of Chinese delegation, Wang Geun in Vienna on Tuesday.

The meeting took place at the sideline of the JCPOA talks in Vienna where bilateral and multilateral negotiations of the Iranian delegation are underway.

Wang Geun, the head of the Chinese delegation attended the residence of Araqchi and the two sides while surveying the latest status of negotiations and the talks on revival of JCPOA, exchanged viewpoints on harmonizing their moves there.

The Iranian delegation, led by Araqchi is in Vienna for resuming the nuclear talks in the framework of the JCPOA Joint Commission.

In this round of the negotiations, representatives of the concerned bodies, such as the Oil Ministry, the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) and some other organizations will be in the combination of the Iranian delegation for technical talks.

The 18th Joint Commission of JCPOA began on March 2, online among Iran and the G4+1 members.

Israeli Regime Behind Natanz Site Sabotage

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Chief of Staff of Presidential Office Mahmoud Vaezi said on Wednesday that the Israeli regime was behind sabotage act in Natanz nuclear site, adding that such measure drove Iran to IR6 centrifuge chain and 60-percent enrichment.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting, Vaezi underlined that Iran's nuclear activities are naturally peaceful and the UN nuclear watchdog, IAEA, was informed of the activities and their objective.

Despite the new U.S. administration's acknowledgment that Donald Trump's 'maximum pressure' against Iran failed, the official said, it has been pursuing the same path by keeping sanctions in place.

Vaezi said that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's travel to Iran was good, as all aspects of Iran-Russia cooperation were discussed in his meetings with Iranian official, in particular with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

The JCPOA was among the issues discussed by Lavrov and Iranian officials, he said, adding that Russia, as a participant of the deal, has always supported it and urged other participants to stick to it, including the US that should lift sanctions as soon as possible.

The United States ceased its participation to the nuclear deal in 2018, resuming all sanctions removed in total disregard of the UN Security Council Resolution 2231.

Tehran, Moscow to Boost Cooperation Against U.S.' Media Propaganda

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh held talks with Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who was accompanying the visiting Russian delegation in Tehran.

In the Tuesday meeting, the two sides discussed areas of cooperation in the domain of public diplomacy.

They touched upon campaigns launched by Western and American media against independent countries, and added the United States' internet and media monopolies are partly to blame for that. The two sides urged closer cooperation between Iran and Russia, which are both targets of such media and propaganda campaigns.

Among other topics of discussion was the promotion of cultural and media cooperation between the two sides. Khatibzadeh said the agreement signed by the two countries' foreign ministers in Tehran on April 14, 2021 on the establishment of, and the framework for the activities of cultural centers can serve as a good basis for the enhancement of cultural cooperation between the two sides. The two sides also emphasized the importance of exchanging media delegations, regular contacts and facilitating talks between the media outlets of both countries.

Portugal's Ambassador Summoned

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has summoned the ambassador of Portugal, the current holder of the European Union's rotating presidency, to protest the bloc's latest batch of anti-Tehran sanctions.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned Carlos Costa Neves on Tuesday and expressed the country's strong protest to the EU's illegal action with the Portuguese ambassador.

The ministry censured the sanctions as "politically motivated" and said Tehran was considering counter-sanctions against the bloc.

"We will suspend, as we have already announced, all comprehensive talks with the European Union and subsequent cooperation, especially in the fields of terrorism, illicit drugs and refugees," the Iranian Foreign Ministry added.

The EU added eight Iranian officials and three entities to its sanctions blacklist on Monday and imposed restrictive measures ranging from travel bans to asset freezes on them over alleged violation of human rights.

Iran has repeatedly rejected the accusation and criticized Europe for its double standard on the issue of human rights.

This came after four days of talks between representatives of Iran and the remaining parties to a landmark nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), ended in the Austrian capital, Vienna, on Friday.

Last December, Iranian lawmakers strongly condemned the European Parliament's resolution that censured Iran under the guise of protecting human rights, and threatened to take reciprocal action.

Iran Admits Students From 133 Countries

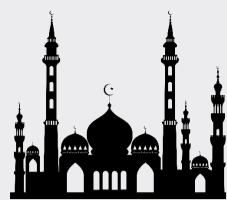
TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian universities now admit students from 133 countries, said the head of office for affairs of non-Iranian students on Wednesday.

In 2013, 18,684 Iranian students were studying in Iran, which grew to 57,675 in 2020, said Afshin Akhondzadeh, adding that about 25,000 of the students are in universities supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (4,000 with scholarship, 16,600 without scholarship, and 10,000 through the Iranian national university entrance exam), 25,000 in Azad University, and about 2,000 are studying in medical universities.

Akhondzadeh said that 57% of the foreign students in Iran are studying at masters, 27% at bachelor's, and 15% at doctorate levels. The remaining one percent study at other levels.

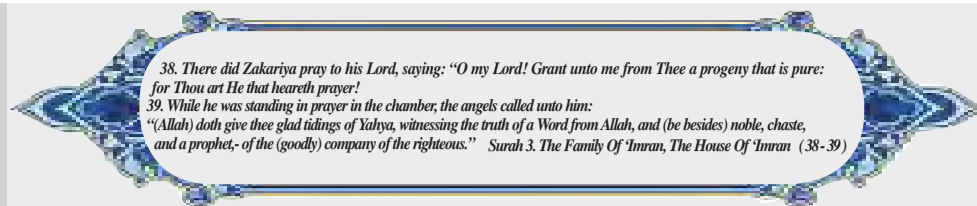
He added that most of these students major in law, Persian Literature, computer engineering, civil engineering, business administration, political sciences, English Literature, Quran and Hadith sciences, international relations, and electronics.

In 2013, 35 centers admitted foreign students, which has increased to 77 in 2021, he said.



PRAYER TIME

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| ■ Noon (Zohr) | 13:04 |
| ■ Evening (Maghreb) | 19:56 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr) | 05:01 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Sunrise | 06:32 |



Chinese, Russian Companies Ready to Finance Projects in Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Deputy Head of Commission on Industries and Mines of Majlis says Chinese and Russian companies have announced their readiness for financing projects in Iran, reiterating that those companies which left the country after the U.S. sanctions will not be allowed to easily enter Iran's market.

Speaking to ILNA, Ali Jeddi said that the relation with those companies which left Iran after the U.S. sanctions will not be like before and Majlis will not get past it easily and it will not let all concessions be awarded to them without getting required guarantees.

On the condition of return of foreign companies which left the country during the sanctions, he said that the behavior of statesmen and Majlis with those companies will not be like before and it is not acceptable that they find again Iran as a consuming market and whenever they like they can go and return.

He added that the commission is working on taking proper strategy for dealing them and the related ministries will be also urged to have proper decision because removal of sanctions is predictable.

Jeddi said that after the JCPOA, those companies made hype for return to Iran market but as soon as the U.S. left the JCPOA, they left Iran market.

He noted that the home appliances sector is very important because during the sanctions the country almost became self-sufficient and if this industry is left alone, then Korean, Chinese or other foreign products would dominate the market.



He also said if in the vehicle sector there is no proper management, foreign cars may flood into the country and it will harm the domestic production, reiterating that using foreign capacity should not harm domestic production.

Jeddi then pointed to the activities of Chinese and Russian companies and said those companies have voiced readiness for financing projects in Iran, adding that some European countries have also said are ready to sign with Iran similar contracts like Iran's with China. He reiterated that there should be different dealing between those countries which continued to cooperate during the sanctions with those which left.

He said French car-makers Renault and Peugeot created headaches for the country when they left due to the sanctions and it will not be ignored.

On the rise in prices and the probable surge in prices, he said he does not believe the country is facing with the wave of rising prices but some events are happening which are effective on the prices, adding that if these events are positive and sanctions are removed, definitely the prices will be balanced and even they may fall but if there is no agreement on the JCPOA, it may lead to a wave of rise in prices and the market is waiting for it to show its response.

Erbil to Host Exhibit On Iranian Products

TEHRAN (MNA) - An exclusive exhibition of Iranian products will be held in Erbil of Iraqi Kurdistan during June 9-12, the head of Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPO)'s Arab and African office announced.

Farzad Piltan said that this exhibition will be held in line with the plans of the TPO, with the aim of introducing the country's export capabilities to the neighboring markets.

The construction industry, steel, casting, mining, home appliances, decoration and furniture, food and agriculture, detergents and health and pharmaceuticals will be among the most important topics of the exhibition, the official stated.

Iran had also held an exclusive exhibition of Iranian products in Sulaymaniyah of Kurdistan in late January 2020.

Having over 500 kilometers of shared borders, Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan can use this capacity to expand their trade relations, Iran's Commercial Attaché in Iraq Naser Behzad said on the sidelines of that exhibit.

He described Sulaymaniyah as the gateway to Iraqi Kurdistan and said: "Due to the stability and security of this region, it is possible to transport goods from this center to other neighboring provinces such as Erbil, Halabja, Diyala and Kirkuk and even other areas of Iraq."

"Having two official border crossings of Bashmaq and Parvizkhan and the great interest in Iranian goods in the region would be a reliable capacity for developing the two countries' trade relations," he stated.

Tehran, Ljubljana Survey Ways of Expansion of Bilateral Ties



BELGRADE (IRNA) - Iran's ambassador to Ljubljana Kazem Shafiee and Slovenian deputy foreign minister Stanislava Rascan in a meeting here on Tuesday surveyed ways of bilateral political, economic and commercial cooperation and exchanged ideas on latest status of bilateral political, and economic relations and how to further expand and strengthen them.

Shafiee in his meeting with Rascan referred to the ongoing nuclear talks and the JCPOA and noted that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) had a positive role on resolving the regional and international crises, and the US exit from JCPOA and return to the new sanctions' status at a greater level created problems both in the region and at the international scene.

The Iranian diplomat added that Iran's objective in getting involved in the ongoing negotiations in Vienna is full termination of the entire sanctions by the United States.

He said that the increased unjust US anti-Iranian sanctions and addition of new US sanctions led to decreasing the level of Iran-Slovenia trade transactions, adding: America blocked the path for importing medicine and even vaccines, and this has had bad effects on increasing the casualties and spread of Corona in Iran.

The Iranian ambassador referred to the recent terrorist attack of the Zionist regime of Israel at Natanz Nuclear Complex, arguing: This act could lead to the outbreak of a human catastrophe and the adventurist act of the occupier regime of the Holy Quds must be registered as a war crime. Iran pursues the matter at the international communities, and preserves its rights in legitimate defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

The Slovenian deputy foreign minister, too, referring to the success of the nuclear talks in the meeting and achieving the JCPOA in the year 2016, wished full success of the ongoing nuclear negotiations in Vienna, adding: Definitely, the success of those negotiations will have great effect on the expansion of bilateral ties.

Rascan also referred to the rotating chairmanship of Slovenia in the EU during the 2nd half of the current year and expressed hope that during that period we will be witnesses to the blossoming of comprehensive ties between Slovenia and Iran.

7.2% Surge in Agrifood Exports in Year to March

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran saw the value of its agrifood exports increase by 7.2% in the calendar year to March 20 despite trade restrictions imposed at borders to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Figures by Iran's customs authority (IRICA) released on Tuesday showed that exports of farming products had topped 6.1 billion US dollar terms at the end of the past calendar year, up from \$5.7 billion recorded for the year to March 2020.

Agrifood exports increased by 24.9% in volume terms over the same period, showed the figures covered in a report by the semi-official ISNA news agency which added that the weight of farming products shipments registered for exports at IRICA had reached a total of more than 8.8 million metric tons.

Main export items included pistachio, tomato paste, biscuits and confections while main destinations were China, Iraq, Russia and Afghanistan, said the report.

Rising exports of agrifood from Iran have come despite months of closures imposed at borders last year when governments in the Middle East and around the world were struggling to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

Iran has sought to encourage more exports of goods and services in recent years to offset losses suffered in its crude revenues because of US sanctions.

The Iranian agriculture sector has recorded significant growth figures since the US sanctions were imposed three years ago. That comes as agricultural output rose to over 130 million tons last farming year, up 32 percent compared to the same period in 2019.

Iranian farmers have specifically benefitted from growing exports of agrifood from the country as they keep earning more on certain crops for which demand in neighboring countries has significantly increased in recent years.

Relic Attributed to Neo-Assyrian King Discovered in Western Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian archaeologists have discovered a portion of a royal memorial inscription, which is attributed to a Neo-Assyrian king, in western Iran.

"During an excavation project in Qabaq Tappeh of Kermanshah province, a team of Iranian archaeologists has unearthed a portion of a royal memorial inscription, which is attributed to Sargon II, who was the king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," ISNA quoted archaeologists Sajad Alibeigi, who leads the survey, as saying.

However, the royal inscription, which bears 23 lines of writing in cuneiform, is so far deemed as the most significant discovery of the survey, according to the archaeologist.

"Qabaq Tappeh was once an important and extensive settlement inhabited at least from the third millennium BC to the Islamic era," Alibeigi noted.

Sargon II, (reigned 721-705 BC) extended and consolidated the conquests of his presumed father, Tiglath-pileser III. Upon his accession to the throne, he was faced immediately with three major problems: dealing with the Chaldean and Aramaean chieftainships in the southern parts of Babylonia, with the kingdom of Urartu and the peoples to the north in the Armenian highlands, and with Syria and Palestine.

By and large, these were the conquests made by Tiglath-pileser III. Sargon's problem was not only to maintain the status quo but to make further conquests to prove the might of the god Ashur, the national god of the Assyrian empire.

Assyria was a kingdom of northern Mesopotamia that became the center of one of the great empires of the ancient Middle East. It was located in what is now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey.

Gov't Imposes Bitumen Tax to Lift Domestic Market

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Iranian government has imposed a tax on bitumen exports from the current financial year, starting on 21 March, in an effort to support asphalt consumption within Iran.

It was announced in the annual budget that "in order to supply the required bitumen for domestic consumption by the country, the income from bitumen exports is subject to tax".

This rule was approved and announced in March but executive regulations have not been announced yet.

This new rule will increase costs for bitumen exporters from the current year after bitumen exports were free of tax in the past.

The Iranian government has allocated bitumen supply subsidies in its annual budget for the current financial year. "Oil ministry should allocate 150,000bn Iranian Rials (\$3.56mn) for asphalt paving of rural roads and their maintenance activities,"

according to the budget statement.

The government could be suffering from the shortage of cash flow and there are outstanding payments to bitumen producers, said local market participants.

Bitumen prices have risen by around 250-300pc in the domestic market over the past year due to stronger vacuum bottom prices, which may have bolstered margins for bitumen producers.

"It is not clear how much export tax will be added this time, but bitumen exporters' margins were on average around 3pc in the past years, but the government has received about 25pc tax from domestic sales performance, according to local participants. As a result of this new tax, higher bitumen consumption in the domestic market and a fall in bitumen export volumes are anticipated this year.

Iran produced about 6mn t of bitumen in April 2020-March 2021. Bitumen exports were around 4.5mn-5mn t with domestic consumption of 1mn-1.5mn t during the same period.

Iran Oil Output Grows for 3rd Consecutive Month

TEHRAN (MNA) - The latest data published by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) shows an increase in Iran's crude oil output for the third consecutive month in March.

According to the OPEC report, Iran's oil production rose by 137,000 barrels per day to 2.304 million bpd in March, marking the highest crude production growth among the OPEC members.

Iran's oil production had jumped by 62,000 and 35,000 barrels per day in January and February, respectively.

The country's heavy crude oil price also witnessed an increase in March from \$60.66 to \$64.30 per barrel.

Annual Iron Ore Concentrate Output Nears 50m Tons

TEHRAN (MNA) - A total of 49.72 million tons of iron ore concentrates were produced in Iran during the last fiscal year (ended on March 20), registering a 5% growth compared with the year before.

According to the latest data released by the Industries Ministry, the country produced 3.5 million tons of the mineral during the 12th calendar month of the year under review (February 21- March 20), indicating a 5% decline year on year.

Golgozar Mining and Industrial Complex was the top producer of iron ore concentrate in the last Iranian year with 16.28 million tons, followed by Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Complex with 11 million tons, Middle East Mines and Mining Industries Development Holding Company with 6 million tons, Goharzamin Iron Ore Company with 4.5 million tons, and Iran Central Iron Ore Company with 4.22 million tons.

Accordingly, the production of iron ore in the form of lumps reached 904,454 tons during the last fiscal year, which shows a 54% fall compared with the previous year.

Austrian Health Minister Quits Over Covid Crisis

VIENNA (Dispatches) - Austria's health minister announced his resignation on Tuesday, saying he was overworked and exhausted managing the coronavirus crisis.

"I've decided to resign from my job," Rudolf Anschober, who has faced death threats over the government's anti-virus measures, told reporters.

"I'm overworked and powered out," the 60-year-old said, adding that 15 months on the job had felt like 15 years.



Stolen Ancient Roman Statue Found in Brussels

ROME (Dispatches) - An ancient Roman sculpture stolen more than a decade ago has been recovered after two off-duty officers spotted it in an antiques shop in Brussels, Italian police said Tuesday.

The "Togatus" marble piece, a full-body, headless 1st century statue of a toga-wearing man, was looted in 2011 from a villa in Rome, the art squad unit of the Carabinieri police said in a statement.

The two officers saw it while walking around the Belgian capital's upmarket Sablon district, known for its antiques and vintage furniture shops, and became "suspicious," police said.



Biden to Withdraw All U.S. Troops From Afghanistan by September 11



WASHINGTON (AFP) - President Joe Biden will remove all U.S. troops from Afghanistan before this year's 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, finally ending America's longest war despite mounting fears of a Taliban victory, officials said Tuesday.

The drawdown delays only by around five months an agreement with the Taliban by former president Donald Trump to withdraw all troops, amid a growing consensus in Washington that little more can be achieved.

Biden, who will make an announcement on Wednesday, has "reached the conclusion that the United States will complete its drawdown -- will remove its forces from Afghanistan -- before September 11," the official told reporters on condition of anonymity. Biden had earlier mused about keeping a residual force in Afghanistan to strike Al-Qaeda or an emergent Islamic State extremist threat or, like previous presidents, making a withdrawal contingent on progress on the ground or in slow-moving peace talks.

In the end, he decided to do neither and will order a complete withdrawal other than limited U.S. personnel to guard the U.S. installations including the imposing embassy in Kabul.

"The president has judged that a conditions-based approach, which has been the approach of the past two decades, is a recipe for staying in Afghanistan forever," the official said.

Biden "has been consistent in his view that there's not a military solution to Afghanistan, that we have been there for far too long," Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday, without confirming the withdrawal date.

For Afghans the fighting will likely grind on. The official spoke shortly after US intelligence released a threat assessment report warning that the embattled Afghan government "will struggle" to hold off the "confident" Taliban if the US-led coalition withdraws.

The Trump administration reached a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 under which all U.S. troops would leave by May 2021 in return for the insurgents' promise not to back Al-Qaeda and other extremists -- the original reason for the 2001 invasion.

The Biden official said that the withdrawal would begin in May and that the delay was largely logistic, with troops possibly out of Afghanistan well before September 11.

The official warned the Taliban -- who are observing a truce with U.S. but not Afghan forces -- not to strike coalition forces as they leave.

"We have communicated to the Taliban in no uncertain terms that is they do conduct attacks against US or allied forces as we carry out this drawdown," the official said, "that we will hit back hard."

The threat assessment report published Tuesday by the director of national intelligence said the Taliban "is confident it can achieve military victory."

Russia Calls U.S. An Adversary

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia on Tuesday called the United States an adversary and told U.S. warships to stay well away from Crimea "for their own good", calling their deployment in the Black Sea a provocation designed to test Russian nerves.

Moscow annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and two U.S. warships are due to arrive in the Black Sea this week amid an escalation in fighting in eastern Ukraine, where government forces have battled Russian-backed separatists in a conflict Kyiv says has killed 14,000 people. "The United States is our adversary and does everything it can to undermine Russia's position on the world stage," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was cited as saying by Russian news agencies.

"We do not see any other elements in their approach. Those are our conclusions," the agencies quoted him as saying. The comment suggests that the veneer of diplomatic niceties that the former Cold War enemies have generally sought to observe in recent decades is wearing thin.

China Push for Global Power Tops U.S. Security Threats

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's push for global power is the leading threat to U.S. national security, while Russia's efforts to undermine American influence and assert itself as a major actor also pose a challenge, said a U.S. intelligence report released on Tuesday.

The 2021 Annual Threat Assessment lays out U.S. spy agencies' views of the chief foreign policy issues facing U.S. President Joe Biden in his first year in office, complicated by the coronavirus pandemic and global climate change.

While China and Russia are presented as the leading challenges, Iran and North Korea will also test U.S. national security, the report said.

The report, sent to Congress, will be the subject of Senate and House intelligence committee meetings on Wednesday and Thursday. Biden's Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and CIA Director William Burns will testify publicly for the first time since being confirmed.

The report said the ruling Chinese Communist Party will press "whole-of-government efforts to spread China's influence, undercut that of the United States, drive wedges between Washington and its allies and partners" and foster acceptance of its authoritarian system.

At the same time, Chinese leaders will "seek tactical opportunities" to lower tensions with the United States when it suits their interests, the report said.

It said China possesses substantial cyber-attack capabilities that, at a minimum, can cause localized, temporary disruptions to critical infrastructure within the United States.

Russia seeks to undermine American influence, sow disagreement among Western countries and inside Western alliances, and build its abilities to "shape global events as a major player," the report said, adding that it too will "remain a top cyber threat." The agencies' assessment of Iran's nuclear program and intentions was mixed.

They said they continued to believe that Iran "is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities that we judge would be necessary to produce a nuclear device."

Egypt "Seizes" Suez Megaship, Demands Nearly \$1b Compensation

CAIRO (Dispatches) - The megaship which blocked Egypt's Suez Canal and crippled world trade for nearly a week has been "seized" on court orders until the vessel's owners pay \$900 million, canal authorities said Tuesday.

The 200,000-tonne MV Ever Given got diagonally stuck in the narrow but crucial global trade artery in a sandstorm on March 23, triggering a mammoth six-day-long effort by Egyptian personnel and international salvage specialists to dislodge it.

Maritime data company Lloyd's List said the blockage by the vessel, longer than four football fields, held up an estimated \$9.6 billion-worth of cargo between Asia and Europe each day it was stuck.

Egypt also lost between \$12 and \$15 million in revenues for each day the waterway was closed, according to the canal authority.

The MV "Ever Given" was seized due to its failure to pay \$900 million compensation, Suez Canal Authority chief Osama Rabie was quoted as saying by Al-Ahram, a state-run newspaper.

Rabie did not explicitly cite the Japanese owners Shoen Kisen Kaisha, but a different source at the SCA told AFP Tuesday that negotiations over damages between that company, insurance firms and the canal authority were ongoing.

The Japanese-owned, Taiwanese-operated and

Panama-flagged ship was moved to unobstructive anchorage in the canal's Great Bitter Lake after it was freed on March 29, and tailbacks totalling 420 vessels at the northern and southern entrances to the canal were cleared in early April.

The compensation figure was calculated based on "the losses incurred by the grounded vessel as well as the flotation and maintenance costs" Rabie said, citing a ruling handed down by the Ismailia Economic Court in Egypt.

The grounding of the ship and the intensive salvage efforts are also reported to have resulted in significant damage to the canal.

In its court filing, the SCA referred to Articles 59 and 60 of Egypt's maritime trade law which stipulates that the ship would remain seized until the amount is paid in full, Al-Ahram reported. But analysts have warned that apportioning legal responsibility for losses incurred by the numerous parties is likely to play out in protracted and complex international litigation.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has ruled out any widening of the southern stretch of the canal where the boat became diagonally stuck.

Sisi oversaw an expansion of a northern section, which included widening an existing stretch and introducing a 35-kilometre (21-mile) parallel waterway, to much fanfare in 2014-15.



U.S. Affirms Germany Ties With Troop Level Boost

BERLIN (Dispatches) - U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday underlined the Biden administration's commitment to closer ties with Germany by announcing an increase in troop levels in the country on his first official trip to Europe.

After four years of open animosity under Donald Trump, Austin said the US government wanted to put its security cooperation with Germany and NATO on a stronger footing. To this end, he told his German counterpart Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer that Washington would also not allow a row over the controversial Nord Stream gas pipeline project between Russia and Germany to harm relations.

"Today I am happy to announce that we will be increasing the U.S. force presence in Germany," Austin, the first member of Biden's cabinet to visit Germany, told reporters. "I briefed the minister on our intention to permanently station approximately 500 additional US personnel in the Wiesbaden area as early as this fall," said the defense secretary, who will also visit NATO headquarters on his European tour.

Trump had moved to reduce the U.S. troop presence in Germany, a cornerstone of NATO security since the start of the Cold War.

Biden's government said in February that it would put those plans for a pullback on hold, in a step warmly welcomed by Berlin. Austin said the 500 new personnel, which would primarily bolster capabilities for space and cyber security, "speaks for our commitment to our partner and to NATO".

Kramp-Karrenbauer called the announcement "wonderful news" and a "very strong signal of solidarity".

The United States has had troops stationed in Germany since World War II, but their numbers have declined since the fall of the Berlin Wall from around 200,000 soldiers in 1990 to 34,500 today.

Although the prospect had been looming for years, Trump's decision last July to redeploy 12,000 soldiers from Germany still came as a shock, particularly to towns that have built strong economic and cultural ties to the U.S. military.

In a marked change in tone, Austin pledged that Germany would "continue to be an important security and economic partner" for the United States "for the years ahead".



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Alibaba Shrugs Off \$2.75b Antitrust Fine

SHANGHAI (Reuters) - Alibaba does not expect any material impact from the antitrust crackdown in China that will push it to overhaul how it deals with merchants, its CEO said on Monday, after regulators fined the e-commerce giant \$2.75 billion for abusing market dominance.

Shares in Alibaba Group Holdings Ltd rose as much as 9% in Hong Kong trade as a key source of uncertainty for the company was removed, and on relief the fine and steps ordered were not more onerous. Alibaba has come under intense scrutiny since billionaire founder Jack Ma's public criticism of the Chinese regulatory system in October.



OPEC Raises 2021 Oil Demand Growth Forecast on Hope Pandemic Wanes

LONDON (Dispatches) - OPEC on Tuesday raised its forecast for growth in world oil demand this year on expectations the pandemic will subside, providing help for the group and its allies in their efforts to support the market.

Demand will rise by 5.95 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2021, or 6.6%, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries forecast in its monthly report. That is up 70,000 bpd from last month.

"As the spread and intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to subside with the ongoing rollout of vaccination programs, social distancing requirements and travel limitations are likely to be scaled back, offering increased mobility," OPEC said in the report.

The upward revision marks a change of tone from previous months, in which OPEC has lowered demand forecasts because of continued lockdowns. A further recovery could bolster the case for OPEC and its allies, known as OPEC+, to unwind more of last year's record oil output cuts.

Oil gained further towards \$64 a barrel after the report was released on Tuesday. Prices have risen to pre-pandemic highs above \$70 this year, boosted by anticipation of economic recovery and OPEC+ supply restraint.

OPEC made a small upward revision in its 2021 demand projection last month, but it has steadily lowered the forecast from 7 million bpd expected in July 2020.

The group raised its forecast of 2021 world economic growth to 5.4% from 5.1%, assuming the impact of the pandemic is "largely contained" by the beginning of the second half of the year.

"The global economic recovery continues, significantly supported by unprecedented monetary and fiscal stimulus," OPEC said. "The recovery is very much leaning towards the second half of 2021."

OPEC+ agreed on April 1 to ease oil output cuts gradually from May, after the new U.S. administration called on Saudi Arabia to keep energy affordable for consumers.

The report also showed higher OPEC oil output already as Iran, exempt from making voluntary cuts because of U.S. sanctions, pumped more in March, driving a 200,000 bpd rise in the group's output to 25.04 million bpd.

OPEC+ cut supply by a record 9.7 million bpd last year to support the market as demand collapsed. Most of those curbs remain in place even after the April 1 decision. OPEC+ holds its next policy meeting on April 28.

Rival producers are also boosting supply, although OPEC left its forecast of non-OPEC output growth in 2021 steady at almost 1 million bpd and still sees U.S. shale output, which often recovers in response to higher prices, declining.

With higher demand and steady non-OPEC supply, OPEC raised its estimate of global demand for its crude to 27.4 million bpd this year, up 200,000 bpd from last month and allowing for higher average OPEC production in 2021.

Euro Zone Poised for Five-Year Post-Pandemic Consumption Boom

LONDON (Dispatches) - The euro zone economy is poised for up to five years of private consumption above pre-pandemic levels once Europe's households are able to spend freely again, European Central Bank (ECB) policymaker Pierre Wunsch forecast on Tuesday.

The Belgian central bank governor also told Reuters in an interview that the ECB could only aim to freeze borrowing costs for a few months and should bear in mind that its aggressive money-printing policy may one day become ineffective. Households in large euro zone countries have been saving up to a quarter of their disposable incomes since the COVID-19 crisis began, partly as a precaution but also as expenses including holidays and eating out were off limits.

Wunsch said this "pent-up demand" would keep spending above pre-pandemic levels for years to come, potentially unleashing more economic growth than the ECB is forecasting.

"What has been saved in 2020 and in the beginning of 2021 would be enough to finance growth in private consumption above the level of 2019 for three, four or five years," Wunsch said.

"In our projections we don't have a lot of pent-up demand, I would be more optimistic on that."

The ECB said in March it expected real GDP growth of 4.0% in 2021, 4.1% in 2022 and 2.1% in 2023, warning however that it saw "downside" risks to those estimates.

It also repeated a pledge to keep financing conditions "favourable" for governments, households and firms and said it would accelerate the pace of its Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program (PEPP) to counter a rise in borrowing costs. Wunsch said the ECB was happy with the current level of bond yields and a rise of 10-20 basis points would not pose a threat to governments as long as their cost of financing for 10 years on the market was below the expected rate of inflation.

"We're fine with financing conditions as they are," he said.

"We're going to use more volumes if we see tightening and less volume if we see that financing conditions stabilise without us buying that much."

But he cautioned the central bank should only aim to preserve market prices on ice for "so many months or a year" before letting economic fundamentals reassert themselves.

UK Economy Returns to Growth Despite Covid Restrictions

LONDON (Dispatches) - The UK economy returned to growth in February despite pressure from continuing government Covid restrictions, as businesses adapted to lockdown and EU exports staged a partial recovery.

The Office for National Statistics said gross domestic product (GDP) rose by 0.4% in February from a month earlier as the economy showed some signs of improvement after a revised drop of 2.2% in January.

Despite the toughest lockdown measures since the first wave of the virus remaining in

place, retailers recorded a pickup in sales, while growth in car production fuelled a rise in manufacturing activity after a poor January and construction grew strongly.

However, the economy remains 7.8% smaller than in February 2020 before the pandemic struck.

Economists said the improved performance came as businesses and households adapted to restrictions and started making preparations for controls to be relaxed after the government announced its roadmap for exiting lockdown.

Suren Thiru, the head of economics at the British Chambers of Commerce, said the easing of pandemic measures over the coming months, alongside rapid progress in the vaccine programme, would help to release further pent-up demand. "However, hope of a sustained consumer-led revival may prove too optimistic as the economic scarring caused by Covid may trigger a renewed reluctance to spend as government support winds down," he said.

UK exports of goods to the EU recovered after a record plunge during January in the first month since Brexit, rising by £3.7bn, or 46.6% on the month as businesses started to adapt to the new relationship and after a pause in deliveries a month earlier due to the Covid lockdown and fears over Brexit border disruption.

The ONS said the increase in exports was driven by machinery and transport equipment and chemicals, particularly cars and medicinal and pharmaceutical products.

However, EU exports remained about 11% below levels a year earlier, reflecting the continuing impact of border friction since leaving and disruption caused by Covid.

U.S. Consumer Prices Post Biggest Gain in 8-1/2 Years

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. consumer prices rose by the most in more than 8-1/2 years in March as increased vaccinations and massive fiscal stimulus unleashed pent-up demand, kicking off what most economists expect will be a brief period of higher inflation.

The report from the Labor Department on Tuesday also showed a firming in underlying prices last month as the broader reopening of the economy bumps against bottlenecks in the supply chain, capacity constraints and higher commodity prices.

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell and many economists view higher inflation as transitory, with supply chains expected to adapt and become more efficient. The supply constraints mostly reflect a shift in demand towards goods and away from services during the pandemic, now in its second year.

"Inflation is a process and not a one-time event," said Chris Low, chief economist at FHN Financial in New York. "These bottlenecks are one offs. The Fed will not consider action until it views price levels changes as permanent rather than temporary, something it does not consider possible until the economy is at full employment."

The consumer price index jumped 0.6% last month, the largest gain since August 2012, after rising 0.4% in February. A 9.1% surge in gasoline prices accounted for nearly half of the increase in the CPI. Gasoline prices rose 6.4% in February.

Food prices edged up 0.1%. The cost of food consumed at and away from home also rose 0.1%.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the CPI advancing 0.5%. In the 12 months through March, the CPI surged 2.6%. That was the largest gain since August 2018 and followed a 1.7% increase in February.

The jump mostly reflected the dropping of last spring's weak readings from the calculation. Those so-called base effects are expected to push up annual inflation even higher in the coming months before subsiding later this year.

Stocks on Wall Street were mostly higher. The dollar slipped against a basket of currencies. U.S. Treasury prices rose slightly.

Excluding the volatile food and energy components, the CPI increased 0.3% after nudging up 0.1% in February. The largest gain in seven months in the so-called core CPI was driven by a rise in rents as well as hotel and motel accommodation prices, which rebounded 4.4% after falling 2.7% in February.

India's Second Wave of Coronavirus Poses Credit-Negative Threat



BENGALURU (Reuters) - A second wave of coronavirus infections in India and new restrictions imposed to contain the surge pose a credit-negative threat and risks weakening the country's economic recovery, Moody's Investors Service said.

"The (second wave) presents a risk to our growth forecast as the virus management measures will curb economic activity and could dampen market and consumer sentiment," the agency's analysts said in a note dated Monday. India reported 161,736 new coronavirus infections on Tuesday, hitting the world's highest daily tally once again, after overtaking Brazil as the second-most affected country.

Officials in the worst-hit state of Maharashtra, home to the financial capital of Mumbai, said they were considering a broader lockdown this week after large closures at the weekend.

However, the targeted nature of containment measures instead of a nationwide lockdown and rapid progress on vaccinating the population will mitigate the credit-negative impact, Moody's said.

India's gross domestic product is still likely to grow in the double digits in 2021 given the low level of activity in 2020, Moody's said. Meanwhile, Barclays said in a note on Monday that India's accelerated vaccination drive may limit the economic disruption caused by a resurgence in COVID-19 cases.

Moody's also echoed concerns raised by Barclays that a shortage of vaccines and India's population of nearly 1.4 billion could slow progress of the vaccine rollout.

India on Monday approved the use of Russian Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine and has so far used two vaccines, one developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University, and the other by domestic firm Bharat Biotech. Some states, including Maharashtra and Odisha, have complained of a scarcity of vaccines during the second wave that has forced some centers to turn away people.

Italy Prepares New 40b Euros Economic Stimulus Package

ROME (Reuters) - Italy's government is preparing a new stimulus package worth around 40 billion euros (\$47.60 billion) to support its coronavirus-battered economy, a source close to the matter said on Monday.

The extra borrowing will probably push this year's budget deficit above 10% of gross domestic product (GDP), up from 9.5% in 2020 when the economy shrank by 8.9% as a result of the coronavirus curbs, a government source told Reuters last week.

The money will fund additional grants to businesses forced to close due to coronavirus restrictions and extend an existing debt moratorium for small and medium-sized companies, hard hit by the restrictions aimed at curbing the infections.

Rome's last official estimate, made by the previous government in January, envisages a deficit-to-GDP ratio of 8.8% this year. That was premised on an economic growth forecast of 6%, which officials say will have to be revised down to a figure between 4% and 5%.

The new stimulus will also increase Italy's huge public debt, equal to 155.6% at the end of 2020 and proportionally the second highest in the euro zone after Greece. The last time Italy registered a double-digit deficit was in the early 1990s.

The new deficit and debt targets, along with multi-year GDP growth forecasts, will be issued in the Treasury's Economic and Financial Document, which is expected to be approved this week.



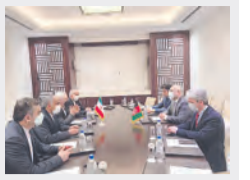
Iran Invited to Conference On Afghanistan in Istanbul

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran is invited to take part in a conference on Afghanistan to be held in Istanbul on April 24 through May 4.

The conference is organized by the United Nations, Turkey, and Qatar.

“Invitations have been sent to Austria, Azerbaijan, Canada,

China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, to the EU high commissioner, the NATO secretary-general, and the secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation,” the source was quoted as saying by TASS.



IMF Offers Rosier View on Asia, Warns of Fed Fallout on Markets

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The International Monetary Fund offered a more upbeat view on Tuesday on Asia's economic outlook than six months ago, but warned a faster-than-expected rise in US interest rates could disrupt markets by triggering capital outflows from the region.

While Asia is rebounding from last year's slump caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a divergence between nations benefitting from surging global demand and those reliant on tourism, said Jonathan Ostry, deputy director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department.

“Setbacks in the vaccine rollout, questions about the potency of the vaccine against new variants of the disease, and a resurgence of the virus, together constitute a key downside risk,” Mr Ostry told an online briefing.

The IMF expects Asia's economy to expand 7.6 per cent this year, up from an 6.9 per cent increase projected in October, as advanced economies such as Japan, Australia and South Korea enjoy solid growth thanks to robust US and Chinese demand.

The IMF expects Asia's economy to grow 5.4 per cent in 2022.

The region's outlook, however, is bound with risks including the fallout from US fiscal and monetary policy, Mr Ostry said.

While Washington's massive fiscal spending will be positive for export-oriented economies, rising US interest rates were already spilling over to emerging Asian markets, he said.

“If U.S. yields rise faster than markets expect, or if there is miscommunication about future US monetary policy, adverse spillovers through financial channels and capital outflows, as during the 2013 taper tantrum, could present challenges by compromising macro-financial stability,” Mr Ostry said.

Asia has buffers against abrupt outflows of funds as many countries had accumulated foreign reserves, adopted flexible exchange rates and conducted stronger supervision over bank balance sheets, he said.



“However, the increase in leverage across government, household and corporate balance sheets means that higher borrowing costs, when they occur, will hurt,” he said.

Mr Ostry said inflation in Asia would likely be “quite contained”, even as the rebound in global demand and commodity prices pushed up producer prices.

“Asia's recovery has yet to become fully entrenched, and this is expected to keep inflationary pressures subdued,” he said.

Mossad in Iraq Attacked, a Number of Israelis Killed

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Israel's Mossad spy agency has come under attack in Iraq, security sources say, with a number of Israeli forces killed or wounded in what was described as a “heavy blow” on the Zionist regime.

Iraq's Sabereen News, citing security sources, reported late on Tuesday that a facility affiliated with Israel's Mossad spy agency had been attacked by “unknown resistance forces” in the north of the country.

The Iraqi media said the attack resulted in the death and injury of a “number of Israeli forces,” dealing a “heavy blow” to the regime and its spy agency.

The sources fell short of providing details on the

location of the attack and the extent of damage, however, Sabereen said. “Tomorrow, we'll share some pictures of the operation.”

Reacting to the incident, a high-ranking Iraqi military commander said in an interview with Russian TV network RT that they had not so far received any news about the attack.

Media outlets in northern Iraq have yet to comment on the attack.

The incident came hours after an Israeli ship was attacked in the Emirati port of Fujairah, causing damage but no casualties.

Israel's Channel 12 quoted unnamed regime officials as blaming Iran for the ship attack.

The vessel, called the Hyperion and sailing under the Bahamas flag, was associated with the Israeli Ray Shipping company, the same company that owns a vessel hit by an explosion in the Sea of Oman in February.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hastily accused at the time Iran of attacking the ship, with Iran categorically rejecting the charge.

Israeli media said the Tuesday's attack on Hyperion was likely carried out with either a missile or a drone.

Advanced Centrifuges...

FROM PAGE 1

Under the plan, Iran will install 1,000 new centrifuges at the facility in addition to the 5,060 centrifuges already there, some of which may have been damaged, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said in Vienna, where he is slated to attend another round of negotiations over revitalizing the JCPOA.

Araqchi said “the Natanz incident has strengthened our determination for progress in both the nuclear field and negotiations. Contrary to what some may think, our hands are now much fuller in negotiations.”

“Sanctions must be lifted completely, and then verified. Later, Iran will return to its commitments [under the JCPOA]. This is our position and the rest depends on how much the other parties want to go along with this logical stance,” Araqchi said.

“We are not here to waste our time. Tangible progress must be made so we can return to Tehran with a conclusion at the end of this round of talks,” the top negotiator added. A senior Russian diplomat has reacted to Iran's recent decision to significantly boost uranium enrichment, saying Tehran is “transparent” regarding the measures it has taken in retaliation for Washington's withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal and the subsequent imposition of sanctions.

“As always Iran is very transparent in its deviations from JCPOA. Needless to say that we aren't happy with this but we are used to think big,” Russia's Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov tweeted on Wednesday, referring to the Iran nuclear agreement by the acronym of its official name, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

“We need to focus not on current difficulties but on restoration of JCPOA. If we succeed, this and other problems will be settled soon,” he added. Meanwhile, the IAEA confirmed in a statement Iran's intention to increase the level of its uranium enrichment. In a report to member states, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi “said Iran had informed the Agency that the country intends to start producing UF6 enriched up to 60 percent.”

In another development, a Wall Street Journal reporter cited sources as saying that IAEA inspectors will visit Natanz nuclear facility on Wednesday.

Iran Capable...

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“The Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia route is a more feasible route, and with the consent of all three countries, an Iranian contractor has been selected to study this project; the relevant contract was prepared and signed, and the primary studies are hoped to begin soon,” Ardakanian explained.

According to the official, in addition to Iraq and Russia, negotiations are also underway with Afghanistan and some new projects have been defined in order to expand the two country's energy cooperation.

The mentioned plans are to be pursued in the two countries' upcoming Joint Economic Committee meeting which is going to be held in Kabul, he noted.

Referring to the follow-up on the negotiations with Qatar in previous years, he noted: “The chairmanship of the Iran-Qatar Joint Economic Committee has also been assigned to the Energy Ministry.”

Currently, the Iranian power industry consists of one million kilometers of transmission, distribution, and super-distribution networks, about 500,000 mega-volt ampere capacity of high and low-pressure substations, and about 85,000 MW capacity of power plants, Ardakanian said.

60% Enrichment...

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“Our nuclear activities will be purely and definitely peaceful and under the supervision of the Agency,” he added, saying, “Our 60%, 20% and even 3% enrichment is peaceful and under the supervision of the Agency.”

Whenever you return to your commitments, we will return to the JCPOA commitments after verification, he said.

China's Iranian Oil...

FROM PAGE 1

Shipments from Brazil, which last year overtook Angola as China's No. 4 supplier thanks to aggressive marketing and attractive pricing, fell 36% in January-February versus a year ago, though volumes climbed 16% on-year in March, according to Chinese customs and Refinitiv assessment.

While China's appetite for Brazil's sweet oil from Tupi field is “endless” - and the Asian country still pays a premium for it - current margins are less competitive, Roberto Castello Branco told Reuters on Sunday, in his last interview before stepping down as Petrobras Chief Executive Officer on Monday.

India has become a bigger market for oil from Brazil, West Africa and even North Sea as China's demand cools, providing the world's No. 3 importer with ample alternatives as New Delhi cuts Saudi oil purchases.

India's imports of Brazilian and Angolan crude jumped for March to May arrivals while Europe took in more Brazilian oil between March and April than at the start of the year, Refinitiv data showed.

The onslaught of Iranian crude, passed off as oil from Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Malaysia, has dampened prices for competing supplies like Norway and Brazil to multi-month lows, though they recovered moderately in the last couple of weeks.

Spot premiums for Brazil's Tupi crude delivered into China in May earlier dropped to 10 cents a barrel to ICE Brent, down from more than \$1 a barrel for late December arrival before clawing back to 30-40 cents last week. “The Chinese are now hunting for light crude to blend down the heavy Iranian,” said a second source with a West African producer, adding that they managed to sell only two spot cargoes for May, at slightly better prices versus “a bad month” in April.

They could barely compete with Iranian barrels at Brent minus \$3-\$5 a barrel.

“China doesn't want to pay high (prices) with all the sensitive barrel,” said a third trading executive. The surge in Iranian supplies, however, has not affected the market share of Saudi Arabia, China's top oil supplier, as the OPEC kingpin serves a different client base - China's state refiners and mega private plants.

With transactions mostly done in Chinese currency and in some cases end-buyers offered open credit, Iranian oil flows are expected to continue, especially as the private firms face little political pressure to quit the lucrative business.

“Imagine you're a teapot boss, all you care is if the oil is cheap enough and if your plant is equipped to process that,” said a fourth Chinese trading executive.

Suez Blockage...

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The INSTC project envisions a 7,200 km-long multi-mode network of ship, rail and road for freight transport, aiming to cut carriage costs by about 30%-60% and transit time from 40 days to about 20 days.

“The North-South International Transport Corridor is a good example of multilateral collaboration. It is the key infrastructure project in the region designed to promote mutually beneficial interaction between multiple states,” Lavrov said. Iran and Russia, he said, “play a leading role in the implementation of this initiative, as most part of the land route runs through their territories”. Lavrov said sustainable increase in trade and economic cooperation largely depends on the developed logistics network and building modern road infrastructure is of special importance in this regard.

“The Russian government has approved and launched relevant plans and programs, including for the Caspian Sea region. We know that Tehran also devotes special attention to this issue,” he said. “We expect that our Iranian partners will successfully finish the construction of the approaches to the Caspian port [of Bandar Anzali] and the railway to Azerbaijan. This will substantially boost the competitiveness of the North-South ITC and its attractiveness for shippers.”

New Delhi has proposed that Chabahar, which it is developing, be included in the North-South ITC. Indian officials expect to start full-scale operations at the two terminals they are developing by the end of May.

Lavrov also touched on the development of cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), saying it serves the goal of the successful functioning of the transport corridor. He cited a decision taken to on December 11, 2020 to conclude a permanent agreement on the free trade area. A preferential trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU came into effect in April 2020 and the Islamic Republic's transactions with the bloc in six months topped \$1.7 billion.

Lavrov's visit came on the 20th anniversary of the “Treaty on the basis for mutual relations and the principles of cooperation” signed between Iranian and Russian presidents in Moscow and extended in Tehran Monday.

Through the treaty, Lavrov said, the two sides have confirmed their reciprocal commitment to building relations based on the principles of equality and mutual trust and respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. “It is, to a large extent, due to the consistent implementation of the Treaty's provisions that our countries have reached such an unprecedentedly high level of interaction, which is today intensive and diversified,” Lavrov said. “We are strengthening our ties in the political, trade, economic, scientific and technological, cultural, humanitarian and some other fields.”

The Russian foreign minister also cited implementation of major infrastructure projects in Iran, including Russia's construction and operation of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and cooperation in the field of healthcare and fight against the spread of the COVID-19 infection. He said Iran is supplied with Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, and there are plans to organize its production in the Iranian territory.

Iran, Pakistan...

FROM PAGE 1

It was also agreed that a webinar between SCCI and Mashhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry will be organized after Eid.

Sherbaz Bilour invited the Iranian investors to make investment in KP potential sectors, including hydel power generation, marble, mining, match, furniture, honey, gems, especially the Special Economic Zone, which is being constructed under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Emphasizing that the promotion of regional trade is a dire need of the hour, SCCI chief said that the efforts have been initiated to remove hiccups and irritants in the way of trade with regional countries.

There's huge potential to further boost bilateral trade between Pakistan and Iran, which currently stood at \$359million, including \$36million export of Pakistani items to Iran, while Iranian import products of \$323million, says Sherbaz Bilour.

However, he called upon Islamabad and Tehran to take serious initiatives to remove hurdles in the way of bilateral trade between the two brotherly Islamic countries.

The SCCI chief welcomed deal between China and Iran worth \$400billion, besides the launch of train service from Islamabad to Tehran and Turkey, could also boost

friendly relations between these countries.

Sherbaz Bilour called for declaring Chabahar port, as sister port, and asked Iran to take benefits from China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects. He went on to say that youth with huge populations in Pakistan and Iran can play a pivotal role in bolstering mutual relationships between the two brotherly Islamic countries.

Iran gave much importance to boost bilateral trade and economic relations with Pakistan, says Mr Ghomi while speaking on the occasion. He added the efforts have been initiated to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Iranian diplomat fully agreed with recommendations of SCCI chief, saying that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Iranian consulate has facilitated business community and issued visas to them in a short span of time.

He lauded that the Pakistani diplomat in Iran has played a vital role in strengthening Pak-Iran trade while he informed that Iranian ambassador in Pakistan will soon visit Peshawar and hold a meeting with business community. The diplomat asked SCCI to strengthen its relations with Mashhad Chamber to take mutual benefits from each other's experience and to give a boost to bilateral trade between the countries.

PSG Captain Marquinhos Out for 12 Days

PARIS (AFP) - Paris Saint-Germain skipper Marquinhos will miss three games with a groin injury, the French champions announced on Tuesday.

The Brazil centre-back had already been ruled out of the Champions League quarter-final with Bayern Munich later in the day.

The 26-year-old suffered the injury during the 3-2 first leg victory in Bavaria last week. "His return to training will take place in 12 days, depending to his recovery," PSG said.

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Swiatek Pulls out of Stuttgart Open

PARIS (Dispatches) - French Open champion Iga Swiatek has decided to skip next week's Stuttgart Open and will begin her claycourt swing in Madrid the following week, the Polish teenager said on Monday.

Swiatek, 19, said her focus is on playing in Madrid and Rome -- both WTA 1000 events -- before her title defence at Roland Garros which begins on May 30 after it was postponed by a week due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Unfortunately I won't play in Stuttgart this year," she said in a statement.

PSG, Chelsea Into Semis Despite Suffering Defeats

PARIS (Dispatches) Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea despite suffering home defeats in the second leg cruised into the semifinals of the Champions League on Tuesday.

Kylian Mbappe and Paris Saint-Germain lost 1-0 at home to Bayern Munich on Tuesday but won their Champions League quarter-final tie on away goals.

Paris Saint-Germain knocked holders Bayern Munich out of the Champions League on Tuesday despite Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting scoring against his old club as a 1-0 defeat in the second leg at the Parc des Princes could not prevent the French giants from winning a tremendous quarter-final tie on away goals.

Neymar twice hit the woodwork for PSG in the first half and Choupo-Moting then put Bayern in front five minutes before the break. But the reigning European champions could not get the second goal they needed after losing 3-2 at home in the first leg last week.

PSG have revenge following their 1-0 defeat in last season's final in Lisbon, and the dream of winning a first European Cup remains alive for the Qatar-owned club.

Mauricio Pochettino's team, who had already eliminated Barcelona in the last 16, can now look forward to a semi-final against Manchester City or Borussia Dortmund.

"I am delighted, despite the defeat. We were facing a great team, the European champions, but we are going back to the semi-finals," Neymar told broadcaster RMC Sport.

"We are a real team. The most important thing is that we are through. Now we can aim for something even bigger." Bayern will have to console themselves with trying to win a ninth consecutive Bundesliga title, and will wonder what might have been had the prolific Robert Lewandowski, or Serge Gnabry, been available for the two legs of this tie.

The future of coach Hansi Flick will come back into focus, too, given his frosty relationship with the club's sporting director, Hasan Salihamidzic.

"It is not because of tonight that we are eliminated," said captain Manuel Neuer.

"We deserved our win here, but the result in Munich was not good enough.

"It is not all negative. We won the Club World Cup, we have a good chance to win the Bundesliga too, so in the end it will be



a positive season." Meanwhile Thomas Tuchel urged his young Chelsea team to embrace their Champions League "adventure" after they reached the semi-finals for the first time since 2014 despite a 1-0 defeat against Porto in Tuesday's quarter-final second leg.

Tuchel's side will play Real Madrid or Liverpool for a place in the final after producing a masterclass in game management to win 2-1 on aggregate in Seville.

They could do worse than copy Tuchel's tactics as Chelsea smothered Porto with an intelligent defensive approach until Mehdi Taremi's stunning bicycle kick in the last minute of stoppage time. That sublime strike was out of character with the rest of Porto's display as they labored to overturn the 2-0 first-leg deficit.

Chelsea have lost only once in 18 matches since Tuchel replaced the sacked Frank Lampard in January and this was another feather in the German's cap.

Making it to the last four is an even more admirable feat given the lack of Champions League experience among the majority of Tuchel's squad. Tuchel knows the likes of Mason Mount, Reece James, Kai Havertz, Ben Chilwell and Christian Pulisic are all learning on the job, but he hopes their fearlessness will be invaluable.

"Mason scored his first goal in the competition in the first leg. When Mbappe scores or Salah scores or Benzema scores, it is their 100th goal or their 50th goal in the comp

Tsitsipas Strolls Into Monte Carlo Last 16

MONACO (AFP) - Stefanos Tsitsipas made a winning start to the Monte Carlo Masters on Tuesday after the world number five cruised past Aslan Karatsev 6-3, 6-4 and into the last 16.

Greek Tsitsipas, who had been given a bye into the second round, took just one hour and 24 minutes to beat 29th-ranked Russian Karatsev.

The 22-year-old exploited a whopping 32 unforced errors from Karatsev to set up a clash with either Australian John Millman or Chile's Cristian Garin.

Novak Djokovic meanwhile will face Jannik Sinner in his second round match after the up-and-coming Italian saw off Spain's Albert Ramos-Vinolas in straight sets 6-3, 6-4.

Teenager Sinner has risen to 22nd in the world rankings after reaching the final of the Miami Open earlier this month.

Organisers, contacted by AFP, declined to comment on whether third seed Nadal risked being identified as a 'close contact' of Medvedev and forced to quarantine.

Mixed Doubles Back At French Open

PARIS (Dispatches) - The mixed doubles event will be back at the French Open after it was cancelled last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, though it will return with a slimmed down draw, organizers said on Tuesday.

"The mixed doubles event, which was ... cancelled last year due to the health crisis, is back this year at Roland Garros," the French tennis federation (FFT) said.

"This competition will benefit from an adapted format with a 16-pair draw."

The mixed doubles usually features 32 pairs.

The French Open, which has been pushed back by a week from its scheduled start, will be held from May 30-June 13.

Medvedev Tests COVID-19 Positive

PARIS (Dispatches) - World number two Daniil Medvedev of Russia has tested positive for COVID-19 and has been withdrawn from this week's Monte Carlo Masters, the ATP said on Tuesday.

Medvedev, who was seeded second behind top-ranked Novak Djokovic at the ATP Masters 1000 event on clay, has been put in isolation and is being monitored, the men's tennis governing body said in a statement.

"It's a big disappointment not to play in Monte-Carlo," said the 25-year-old Medvedev.

"My focus is now on recovery and I look forward to getting back out on Tour as soon and as safely as possible."

The ATP on Monday posted a video of Medvedev's practice session in Monte Carlo with Spaniard Rafa Nadal. The governing body did not respond to a request for comment on Nadal's participation in the tournament.

As a Monaco resident, Medvedev was allowed to stay at his home as per tournament protocols while other players are staying in bio-secure bubble accommodation.

Players living at home are required to test daily for the virus while those in the restricted environment are tested every four days.

Real Madrid Skipper Ramos Tests Positive for Coronavirus



Ramos is the second case of coronavirus detected in the Real Madrid squad in a week.

MADRID (Dispatches) - Real Madrid captain Sergio Ramos, who was already out of this week's Champions League meeting with Liverpool because of a calf injury, has tested positive for Covid-19, the club announced on Tuesday.

"Our player Sergio Ramos tested positive in the last Covid-19 test he performed," Real Madrid said in a statement.

French defender Raphael Varane tested positive last Tuesday.

Varane has not yet been given the green light to rejoin his teammates.

Ramos injured his left calf while with Spain during the international window but he has been a vocal presence on the sidelines since.

The positive test means he has to stay away from his teammates until he tests negative.

The 35-year-old defender is going through one of the most difficult seasons of his career -- he underwent knee surgery in February and, after returning in mid-March, missed the Liga game against Celta Vigo on March 20 because of a shin injury.

Ramos has still revealed his plans once his contract with Real Madrid expires on June 30.

Curry Makes Warriors History In win

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry became the all-time leading scorer in Golden State Warriors history with the ninth 50-point game of his career, exploding for 53 in a 116-107 victory over the visiting Denver Nuggets on Monday night.

The Nuggets might have lost more than just a second straight game, as standout guard Jamal Murray went down with a left knee injury with 50.6 seconds remaining in the game.

Murray, who missed the previous four games with a sore right knee, was escorted straight to the locker room after the fall, which came at the end of a 17-point night. Coach Michael Malone said postgame that Murray would undergo an MRI exam.

Curry began the game with 17,765 points in his Warriors career, needing 18 to equal Wilt Chamberlain's all-time franchise record. He got there in the first quarter, then went on to finish the night with 10 3-pointers. Nikola Jokic finished with 27 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists for the Nuggets, and Michael Porter Jr. scored 24.

Meanwhile Bradley Beal scored 34 points, Russell Westbrook compiled his fifth consecutive triple-double and Washington overcame a tough start to upset Utah in Salt Lake City. This result snapped the Jazz's franchise-record, 24-game home winning streak.

Westbrook scored 25 points, dished out 14 assists and grabbed 14 rebounds to help the Wizards beat the Jazz for the second time in a month. Utah had won 11 of 13 games since falling at Washington on March 18.



Perez Re-Elected Unopposed as Real Madrid President

MADRID (Dispatches) - Florentino Perez has been re-elected unopposed as president of Real Madrid for a sixth term, the Spanish champions announced on Tuesday.

The 74-year-old was the only candidates to apply after nominations opened at the start of the month.

A club statement said: "A single candidate was validated by the electoral committee... and D. Florentino Perez Rodriguez is proclaimed president".

Perez, the head of major construction group ACS, had already been re-elected unopposed twice: in 2013 and 2017. He is approaching 18 years in charge of Real.

He was the man behind Madrid's star-studded 'Galacticos' era in his first spell as club president between 2000-2006.

His latest mandate runs until 2025.

He called for new elections at a board meeting on April 1, and the club's electoral committee met at one minute past midnight Tuesday to allow any late runners to appear before the deadline.

Perez's fourth consecutive term, and sixth in total, was confirmed quarter of an hour later.

Critics say a reform in the club's statutes from 2012 makes it harder to run for president. Since then, any candidate must have been a Real Madrid member for at least 20 years and be able to guarantee a part of the team's budget with their personal assets.

His personal wealth is estimated by Forbes Magazine at \$2.2 billion dollars (1.85 billion euros).

