

Health Ministry Mina Sadat Lari Said on Saturday That Some 319 Iranians Died From the Coronavirus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing the Total Deaths to 66,327

IRAN NEWS

Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic Was Reportedly to Arrive in Tehran Last Night to Have Talks With Iranian Officials On Different Mutual Interest Issues

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Leader Urges Iran's Army To Boost Readiness as Much as Needed

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has issued a message ahead of the National Army Day, calling on the military to strengthen its preparedness as much as needed.

The message, which was released on Saturday, was addressed to Chief Commander of Iran's Army Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi.

"Send my greetings to all the dear Army personnel and their honorable families. Today, the Army is present on the scene and stands ready to carry out its mission. Keep increasing the readiness as much as needed and play a role [in this regard]," the message read.

The National Army Day was included in the Iranian calendar after a historic letter from the late founder of the Islamic Republic Imam Khomeini in 1979, in which he voiced his strong support for the Army and ordered its troops to hold nationwide parades on April 18 every year.

Iran Accuses (P)GCC of Trying to Harm Vienna Talks

TEHRAN (PressTV)- Iran says the "clumsy, irresponsibly and meddlesome" remarks by the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) aim to harm technical nuclear talks in the Austrian capital of Vienna, urging the Arab states to stop leveling constant accusations against Tehran and address Israel's illegal nuclear activities instead.

"These [GCC] irresponsible remarks are made in continuation of their anti-Iran remarks which are not meant to make a request for participation but seek to destroy the trend of technical talks in Vienna," Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Friday.

Diplomats from Iran and the UK, France, Russia and China plus Germany, the remaining parties to the 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), scuttled by former U.S. President Donald Trump, held talks in Vienna on Thursday and Friday with the purpose of ensuring Washington's return to the JCPOA and the lifting of its sanctions against Tehran.

Iran fully honored its nuclear commitments under the deal for an entire year, but it began to scale down its commitments on May 8, 2019. The decision was made as part of Iran's right under Articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA in response to the breach of the agreement by the other side.

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Only Removal of Sanctions Will Save Vienna Talks



TEHRAN (PressTV) - An informed source tells Press TV that only the removal of all sanctions together against Iran will save the Vienna talks.

"It is not acceptable to Iran to divide the sanctions into removal, non-removable and negotiable," the source said on Saturday. "In Tehran, nothing will be accepted but the removal of all sanctions, including those related to the JCPOA, reimposed and relabeled during the Trump era," the source added.

The source also said the recent European sanctions against Iran's military commanders are "a gross violation" of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and should be stopped.

Iran and the remaining signatories to 2015 nuclear deal are meeting in Vienna to try to remove the unilateral U.S. sanctions imposed by former president Donald Trump three years ago after he abandoned the international accord.

The talks will carry on for several days before breaking so that Iranian and U.S. officials can return home for consultations, a European Union official said on Friday.

The U.S. is not allowed to participate in the discussions, but its representatives are reportedly held abreast of the negotiations down the hall by the Europeans.

The new talks come after a "terrorist" attack earlier this week on Iran's uranium enrichment facility in Nantanz which put a number of the country's first generation machines out of order.

Both the U.S. and the Europeans have kept silent on the attack and instead expressed concerns over Iran's 60-percent enrichment which the country launched for the first time right after the sabotage.

In a surprise move, the European Union on Monday imposed sanctions on eight Iranians, including head of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), raising the ante in hostile measures against Tehran.

Iran's chief negotiator Abbas Araqchi told Press TV on Thursday that the EU sanctions are meant to undermine the negotiations.

"The Europeans not only ignored this important act of sabotage, but also they were busy imposing new sanctions on Iran and that was totally unacceptable," he said in Vienna.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has also said the perpetrators of the sabotage are wrong to think the act will undermine Iran's position in Vienna negotiations.

"Incidentally, this cowardly act will strengthen our position in the negotiations," Zarif said on Monday.

Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Ali Akbar Salehi said on Friday Iranian scientists had produced the country's first batch of 60-percent enriched uranium in Natanz.

He said the 60-percent enrichment was completed in two days. "Production of 60-percent enriched uranium is currently 9 grams per hour," Salehi said, adding any level of enrichment is now possible for Iran.

Taliban Can't Revive Afghan Emirate

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif says the Taliban's plan for the revival of an "emirate" in Afghanistan is not viable, stressing the need for the militant group to engage instead in an all-inclusive diplomatic process aimed at achieving "broad-based" peace in the war-ravaged country.

Speaking at a panel discussion session of India's flagship Raisina Conference on Friday, Zarif elaborated on Iran's stance on efforts to restore peace to Afghanistan and Tehran's negotiations with the Taliban over the role the group needs to play in the diplomatic process.

Besides its own national security concerns, Zarif said, Iran held talks with the Taliban to convince the group that "there is a need for a broad-based, inclusive peace in Afghanistan, and that the Taliban should a part of that peace" instead of attempting to "control" the process.

He ruled out the possibility for the Taliban to implement its plan for reviving the "Islamic Emirate" of the 1990s in Afghanistan, saying that plan is no longer viable since the country has gone through a lot of changes over the past two decades and moved toward a democratic system of government thanks to the efforts of the Kabul government and the Afghan people. Zarif said the democratic institutions established in Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban rule "must remain in place...and become even more inclusive, with the Taliban abandoning violence and entering a political process."

He said there is no consensus in Afghanistan over the Taliban's plan, and that an "emirate" is not a system that post-war Afghanistan could be built upon. The foreign minister called on all Afghan groups to work together and draw up a "unified peace" plan for the future of their country.

During the talks, "We pressed upon the Taliban that Iran is prepared to provide any forum for the Taliban and other groups in Afghanistan — particularly the government of Afghanistan — to engage in a serious talk for a movement forward; not threats, not violence, but working for peace within the constitutional framework of Afghanistan."

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President Says Lifestyle Needs Major Shift to Contain COVID-19

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Hassan Rouhani said on Saturday that lifestyle needs major shift to contain COVID-19 pandemic.

He made the remarks in a meeting of the national headquarters for the fight against the coronavirus disease.

The president said that the virus Iran is facing today is 70% more contagious than the virus which initially broke out in Wuhan, China.

Rouhani referred to a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) which said the situation has exacerbated over the past two months to become very worrying so that the countries which used to have less difficulty, now face a lot of problems.

"I have talked to the leaders of some nearby countries. All of them are facing a new wave of spreading."

It is not enough to observe one single protocol, rather all the health protocols have to be taken into account as a whole, the president said, adding that major change in the lifestyle is needed.

Noting that the waves of the virus in Iran have not been heavier than the waves in other countries, he said that observing the protocols is 90 percent effective to contain the pandemic.

Tehran Slams UN Politicization, Abuse of WMD Non-Proliferation Regimes

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's ambassador to the United Nations has lambasted the UN Security Council for the "politicization and abuse" of non-proliferation and disarmament regimes pertaining to the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

Majid Takht Ravanchi made the remarks in a statement read at an informal meeting of the UNSC on Friday.

He stressed that the only "absolute guarantee" against the use of the WMD is to eliminate them all and to ensure that they will never be developed, a "noble objective" that clearly demonstrates the "inherent value" of non-proliferation and disarmament regimes.

"Nevertheless, the authority of such regimes and the credibility of relevant international institutions have seriously been challenged and undermined in the past decades, ironically in most cases, not by those seeking to develop WMDs but by those who have abused non-proliferation regimes to advance their own interests," Takht Ravanchi added.

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Ukraine Official's Claims on Passenger Jet Tragedy Dismissed

TEHRAN (PressTV)- Iran has dismissed a claim by Ukraine's security chief that the January 2020 downing of a Ukrainian plane near Tehran — which happened amid heightened military tensions between Iran and the US — was "intentional."

On Friday, Saeed Khatibzadeh, spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, reacted to comments by Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's national security and defense council, who had told Canadian daily The Globe and Mail earlier in the day that the crash had been a "conscious attack."

Danilov said "when they claim it was accidental... I don't buy that." He described the incident as "intentional" and a "conscious attack."

In response, Khatibzadeh said "despite all the explanations as well as technical and expert reports [on the incident], Ukrainian officials continue making vague, political remarks," expressing regret that "they present their imaginary and commissioned theories through media."

"It appears that the Ukrainian authorities do give priority to neither resolving [the issue surrounding] the bitter incident in line with objective and technical reality, nor reducing the sufferings of the bereaved families," he said.

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Rouhani Congratulates Assad on Syria National Day

TEHRAN (IFP) - President Hassan Rouhani has congratulated his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad on the Arab country's national day.

In a message on Saturday, Rouhani offered his sincere congratulations to the Syrian nation and government on the occasion. "I am confident that valuable steps can be taken to establish peace and stability in the region, promote regional cooperation, and further develop bilateral ties in all fields using the abundant capacities and capabilities of the two states," Rouhani said.

He finally wished health and success for Assad and prosperity for the Syrian nation and government.

Sabotage, Assassination of Scientists Cannot Stop Iran Nuclear Work

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian president's chief of staff, Mahmoud Vaezi, says assassination of Iran's scientists and acts of sabotage will fail to stop the Islamic Republic's peaceful nuclear program.

"The beginning of uranium enrichment at 60-percent purity for peaceful purposes is a clear indication of Iran's progress, and an explicit message to the ill-wishers that peaceful nuclear technology has become indigenous in Iran," Vaezi said in a post on his Twitter account on Friday.

"This means that the Iranian [nuclear] progress will not be stopped through the assassination of nuclear scientists and damaging nuclear facilities."

"Sixty-percent enrichment is currently underway at the Shahid Ahmadi Roshan nuclear facility" in Natanz, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Ali Akbar Salehi said on Friday.

Iran has already informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of a plan to start 60-percent uranium enrichment.

On April 11, Iran reported an act of sabotage that led to a power failure at the Natanz uranium enrichment site. Officials, however, said the incident had not led to any casualties, damage or complications.



Iran has blamed the act of nuclear terrorism at Natanz on Israel, which has a history of carrying out sabotage acts against Tehran's nuclear work and assassinating the country's nuclear scientists.

In another tweet, Vaezi said the start of 60-percent uranium enrichment was also a response to those who claimed over the recent years that the country's nuclear industry has been stopped after Iran clinched the landmark nuclear deal of 2015, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Zarif to Visit Indonesia for Talks on Mutual Interests

TEHRAN (IP) - Foreign Minister will travel to Indonesia today (Sunday), a spokesperson said.

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said the top Iranian diplomat is going to hold talks with senior Indonesian officials about Tehran-Jakarta relations and other issues of mutual interest during the trip.

Last week, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said Tehran was proceeding with efforts for the release of an Iranian oil tanker that was seized in Indonesian waters in January. Indonesia's coast guard seized the Iranian-flagged MT Horse and the Panamanian-flagged MT Freya vessels over suspected illegal oil transfer in the country's waters on January 24.

Indonesia's coast guard spokesman claimed the two tankers concealed their identity by not showing their national flags, turning off automatic identification systems and did not respond to a radio call.

Tehran, Kabul Stress Need to Ink Document on Strategic Cooperation

TEHRAN (MNA) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Afghan counterpart stressed the need for the finalization of a comprehensive document on strategic cooperation between the two countries.

Zarif held a telephone conversation with his Afghan counterpart, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh reported.

Bilateral relations and developments related to the peace process in Afghanistan were discussed in this phone call, he said. Emphasizing the importance of preserving Afghanistan's democratic achievements over the past two decades, Zarif reiterated the Islamic Republic of Iran's full support for the Afghan peace process.

The Afghan Foreign Minister also expressed satisfaction with the increasing relations between the two countries, appreciating Iran's effective role in the Afghan peace process. The two sides also stressed the need for the finalization of a comprehensive document on strategic cooperation between the two countries.

Industry Ministry's Indigenization Plan Materialized by 110%

TEHRAN (MNA) - Head of the Domestic Production Center of Iran's Ministry of Industry, Mining and Trade said the program for indigenizing the knowledge for the production of major industrial equipment has been realized by 110 percent in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20).

Last year the indigenization of the knowledge for the production of \$3.2 billion worth of such equipment in various provinces was on the agenda, however, more than \$3.565 billion worth of such products were indigenized, Mohammad-Mehdi Hadavi told IRNA on Saturday.

The Industry Ministry had notified all provinces about their obligations for replacing imported goods with domestically made goods in the mentioned year, and the share of each province was specified, Hadavi explained.

The provinces of Tehran and Isfahan had the best performance in this regard, so that Tehran, with the indigenization of about \$1.1 billion worth of equipment and goods, recorded a brilliant performance.

According to the official, the goal of the mentioned program was to indigenize the knowledge for the production of \$10 billion worth of commodities by the end of the current Iranian calendar year 1400 (March 2022).

The official noted that the Industry, Mining, and Trade ministry has it on the agenda to indigenize \$3.4 billion worth of equipment in the current Iranian calendar year and the shares of various provinces in this regard will be determined in near future.

Last week, Deputy Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Mehdi Sadeqi Niaraki announced that relying on domestic production has saved Iran \$3.5 billion during the previous Iranian calendar year.

Since the re-imposition of the U.S. sanctions, the Iranian Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry was tasked to pursue a program for indigenizing the knowledge for the production of major industrial equipment.

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei said in October 2019 that government officials should ban the import of goods that are also produced domestically. Back in 2019, when the mentioned program was started, the Iranian Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister at the time Reza Rahmani had said that relying on domestic production was going to save \$10 billion for the country in two years.

India Reaffirms Commitment To Develop Chabahar



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Indian Minister of State for Ports, Shipping and Waterways has reaffirmed commitment to develop southern Iranian strategic port of Chabahar.

Mansukh Mandaviya made the remarks in a meeting with Iran's Ambassador to New Delhi Ali Chegini.

The two officials exchanged views about capacities to develop cooperation in ports.

The Indian minister pointed to good historical relations between New Delhi and Tehran, and welcomed further cooperation at the present time through Chabahar Port.

Chabahar with its important strategic position is the main center for development. The port plays a key role in the exchange of goods among Central Asian states, according to Iranian officials.

India is determined to fulfill its commitments to develop Chabahar Port, Mandaviya said.

The Indian minister described Chabahar Port as a better way to transit goods to Afghanistan and Central Asian states as well.

He then welcomed operation of shipping lines between Indian ports and Chabahar to transport passengers.

Mandaviya expressed willingness to lead an Indian delegation to Chabahar Port in the near future to get the Indian businesspersons and entrepreneurs familiarized with this strategic port.

Chabahar Port with 10 million tons capacity of loading and unloading is an important port in southern Iran and north of Sea of Oman, Director-General of Ports and Maritime Organization of the southeastern Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan Behrooz Aqaei said in March.

Iran to Send Trade Attaché to Azerbaijan

TEHRAN (TPO)- Iran will soon send trade attachés to Azerbaijan, Russia, Oman, and China, Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade of Iran, Head of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPOI) Hamid Zadboum said.

Zadboum noted that in addition, sending trade attachés to Turkey, Pakistan, and India is on Iran's agenda.

The deputy minister added that the individuals sent as trade attachés received training on trade activities and worked with the relevant countries for 6 months to 1 in the Export Markets Development Department of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran.

"The presence and operation of trade attachés abroad are of great importance for exports. Because businessmen know the markets better, can reduce export-related costs with the help of trade attachés and benefit from their advice on increasing exports," he said.

Reportedly, Mehdi Babaei has been appointed Iran's trade attaché to Azerbaijan.

Army Airborne Unit to Continue Increasing Power

TEHRAN (FNA)- Army Airborne Commander General Yousef Qorbani said that his forces have been ordered to continue development of new products and systems in the new (Iranian) year (started on March 21), saying that Iran is in possession of the largest helicopter fleet in the Middle-East.

"Today we have the largest helicopter fleet in the Middle-East, and our helicopter training center is unique in the region, and we have the ability to defend the achievements of the revolution," General Qorbani said on Saturday.

He underlined the Airborne Unit's capability to produce different parts for helicopters and planes, and said, "We make the parts ourselves and overhaul helicopters and equipment inside the country."

"This year, we will be at least 50% ahead of the last year in development of weapons systems, and we will do the same in the field of parts manufacturing," General Qorbani said, adding that 750 parts for helicopters have so far been produced by the Iranian experts.

In relevant remarks in February, General Qorbani said that the country's experts are capable of building and overhauling different types of helicopters.

Iran, Russia, China Representatives Hold Talks in Trilateral Meeting

TEHRAN (IP) - Russia and China Representatives met and held talks with Iran Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi on Friday.

The heads of the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese negotiating delegations met and held talks in a trilateral meeting.

Earlier in the morning, following the consultations between the Iranian and P4+1 delegations in Vienna, the heads of the three European delegations (Germany, Britain, and France) met and held talks in a joint meeting with Araqchi, IRNA reported.

Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi held talks with Deputy of European Union Foreign Policy Chief Enrique Mora on Friday.

Mora said yesterday that despite last week's incident at the Natanz nuclear site and Iran's counter-decision to enrich 60 percent, JCPOA members remain ready for negotiations to progress.

He wrote on his Twitter account that the P4+1 is engaged in consultations in line with its former goals, namely re-accession of the US to the JCPOA and full implementation of the deal.

Tehran Expresses Grave Concern Over Recent Incidents in Iraq

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh has expressed deep concern over the incidents that happened in Iraq in the past few days.

In a statement on Friday, Khatibzadeh said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran has always supported the security, stability and territorial integrity of Iraq, and strongly rejects any move that threatens these inviolable principles."

"Iraq is moving towards domestic development and playing an active and constructive role in the region but certain individuals seek to prevent the realization of such goals in Iraq by carrying out acts of terrorism, fueling insecurity, and creating crisis," he added.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said Tehran believes Baghdad can overcome all these difficulties considering the capacities it has.

"We regard Iraq's security and stability as an inseparable part of the security and stability of Iran and the region, and will spare no effort to support the friendly and brotherly country of Iraq," he noted.

At least five civilians lost their lives and nearly two dozen others sustained injuries in a powerful blast near a marketplace in the al-Habibiya area of Sadr City in the eastern flank of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad on Thursday. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the deadly attack, but such assaults bear the hallmark of those carried out by remnants of the ISIS Takfiri terrorist group.

Iraqi President Barham Salih condemned the car bomb explosion in Baghdad in a post published on his official Twitter account.

Meanwhile, Hassan Salem, an Iraqi lawmaker affiliated to the anti-terror Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq group, which is part of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), said evidence indicates the involvement of Israel's Mossad spy agency in Baghdad's car bomb attack as well as the attack on the 30th Brigade of the PMU fighters in the northern Iraqi province of Nineveh.

Drug-Smuggling Gang Dismantled in Semnan

TEHRAN (MNA) - Police forces of Semnan province identified and dismantled a large drug-smuggling band in the province.

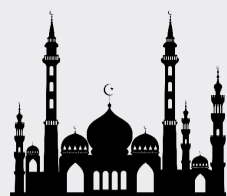
Police Chief of Semnan province, Second Brigadier General Abdollah Hassani made the announcement on Saturday, saying that following extensive intelligence operations, the police forces of Semnan province were informed of the activities of members of a large drug-trafficking gang in the province.

8 smugglers have been arrested in this regard in addition to the confiscation of 510 kilograms of opium, he added.

Iran, which has a 900-kilometer common border with Afghanistan, has been used as the main conduit for smuggling Afghan drugs to narcotics kingpins in Europe.

The country is at the forefront of the fight against drug trafficking and thousands of Iranian forces have been so far martyred to protect the world from the danger of drugs. Despite high economic and human costs, the Islamic Republic has been actively fighting drug trafficking over the past decades.

Iran has spent more than \$700 million on sealing its borders and preventing the transit of narcotics destined for European, Arab, and Central Asian countries.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:04
■ Evening (Maghreb)	19:59
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:57
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:26

42. Behold! the angels said:
"O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee - chosen thee above the women of all nations."
43. "O Mary! worship Thy Lord devoutly: Prostrate thyself, and bow down (in prayer) with those who bow down."
Surah 3. The Family Of 'Imran, The House Of 'Imran (42-43)

FTZs Enjoy Positive Trade Balance in Past 2 Years

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Secretary of Iranian Free Zones High Council Hamidreza Momeni said the trade balance of the country's free and special economic zones has been positive in the past two years despite the negative balance of the country's foreign trade, IRNA reported.

Momeni made the remarks in a meeting with the deputies and managers of Imam Khomeini Airport City (IKAC) on Thursday.

Today, the free zones are in a good condition trade as wise and positive development measures have been taken which have led to significant growth in these zones, the official said.

He further announced the establishment of a finance council in the Iranian Free Zones High Council, saying that soon advisory groups will be sent to all of the country's free zones and the zones can access sustainable financial resources for implementing new development programs.

According to the official, the country's free and economic zones should become more productive in order to be able to fund their own development projects in the future.

Mentioning the trade advantages of IKAC as a free zone, Momeni said IKAC can benefit from the experience of other free zones across the country in order to maximize its capacities.

Earlier this month, Momeni had said that removing the problems of the private sector active in the country's free and economic zones is the new approach of this council.

The development of free trade zones and special economic zones through production, exports, and investment is one of the goals of creating these zones in the country.



To achieve this target, different measures were taken in the past two years, such as attracting innovative and technological units to these areas and introducing investment opportunities and advantages in these zones.

The establishment of free trade zones in Iran dates back to the Iranian calendar year 1368 (March 1989- March 1990) following the fall in the country's oil income in the preceding year which prompted the government to promote non-oil exports.

The first two free trade zones of Iran were established in the south of the country. The first one was Kish Free Trade Zone established in 1368 on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf and the second one was Qeshm Free Trade Zone established the year after on Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz.

Some five other free trade zones have been also established in the country since then, including Chabahar in southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan Province, Arvand in southwestern Khuzestan Province, Anzali in northern Gilan Province, Aras in East-Azarbaijan Province, and Maku in West-Azarbaijan Province, both in the northwest of the country.

Iran's Relations With Iraq Expanding

BAGHDAD (IP) - Iran's Ambassador to Iraq, continuing his consultations to expand relations with the Iraqi officials of this friendly and neighboring country, had two separate meetings with the Ministers of Justice and Communications of Iraq.

During the meeting of Iraj Masjedi, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Iraq, with the Minister of Justice of Iraq, Salar Abdul Sattar Mohammad, they discussed various issues between the two countries and stressed the development of judicial and legal relations.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed the expansion of judicial and legal cooperation between Tehran and Baghdad, the follow-up of the visit of the head of the Iranian judiciary to Iraq last year, and other issues of mutual interest.

The Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, thanked the neighboring country for its judicial cooperation in transferring Iranian prisoners and presented the invitation of the Minister of Justice of Iran, Alireza Avaei to Salar Abdul Sattar Mohammad.

The ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Iraq also met with the Iraqi Minister of Communications Shahab Ahmad Kazem al-Sheibani.

In this meeting, ways to expand bilateral relations in telecommunications, Internet services, communication facilities and other issues were discussed.

The Iranian official stressed the readiness of the Islamic Republic of Iran to exchange specialized delegations and export technical and engineering services in the mentioned fields and transfer our country's experience in various fields, especially scientific achievements, to Iraq.

IME Posts Weekly Trade Growth

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) traded 18,000 tons of commodities with a total trading value of nearly \$435m last week, showing 36 and 7 percent of growth in volume of trades respectively, as compared to the previous week.

According to a report by the IME's international affairs and PR, there were 602,142 tons of commodities traded on both open auction and mineral & industrial trading floors of the IME worth more than \$221m.

On these two floors the IME sold 290,762 tons of steel, 2,540 tons of copper, 8,520 tons of aluminum, 120 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 200 tons of cast iron and 300,000 tons of iron ore.

Furthermore, the exchange saw trade of 415,336 tons of commodities valued at almost \$215m on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor.

Commodities purchased on this floor included 124,500 tons of vacuum bottom, 142,964 tons of bitumen, 74,529 tons of polymeric products, 38,105 tons of chemicals, 33,200 tons of lube cut, 2,592 tons of base oil, 150 tons of argon, 250 tons of insulation and 1,190 tons of sulfur.

There was also 1,038 tons of commodities traded on the IME's side market.



Lahore, Iranian Cities to Renew Agreements on Sister City

ISLAMABAD (IRNA) - A delegation of Pakistan's Indus Foundation and Director of Iran's Cultural Center in eastern city of Lahore have decided to renew Sister City agreements of Lahore with Mashhad and Isfahan.

Sajjad Haider Rizvi, Executive Director of Indus Foundation for Human Development leading the delegation met with Director Khana-e-Farhang Jafar Ronas in Lahore on Saturday.

They decided to develop cultural, educational and tourism ties and renew sisterhood agreements of Lahore with Isfahan and Mashhad.

Haidar Rizvi said that this NGO can work in the field of educational cooperation between the two neighboring countries within the framework of the ECO Memorandum of Understanding.

Rizvi pointed to the importance of the activities of Iranian Khana-e-Farhang in introducing rich Iranian culture and civilization to the people of Pakistan.

He noted although information technology and cyberspace in the last 20 years has grown dramatically in Pakistani society but this has not been able to properly bring the nations of Iran and Pakistan closer together as Muslim and neighboring countries.

He added that skilled experts and researchers working with the Indus Foundation, can accelerate cooperation of the higher education institutions, including universities and cultural institutions of the two countries, and ultimately strengthen and grow people-to-people relationships.

Rizvi pointed to the common cultural, historical and civilizational heritage between Lahore, the capital of Punjab province with great cities of Isfahan and Mashhad.

He added there is a great potential for cultural, educational, tourism and artistic exchanges between Lahore and the two cities of Isfahan and Mashhad.

Jafar Ronas announced the readiness of Khana-e-Farhang in cooperation with the Indus Foundation to revive the sisterhood agreements within the framework of the ECO Cultural Institute.

He said that in the first step, communication will be established with the international departments of the three municipalities.

MSC Supporting Construction of First Olympic Village in Post-Islamic Revolution Era

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

ISFAHAN- Head of Development Affairs of General Administration of Sport and Youth Isfahan Province Province hailed Mobarakeh Steel Company (MSC) for completing Naghsh-e Jahan Stadium



after 30 years of waiting, adding that Sports Ministry paved the ground for finishing the incomplete sport projects and MSC did its best to complete this super national sport project.

Hossein Zibae said that since Naghsh-e Jahan is considered in the comprehensive urban plan as the Olympic village, some actions have been taken by the sports ministry and Mobarakeh Steel Company to get 170 hectares of land in order that the company could construct new sport projects like cycling piste.

He added unfortunately the sport per capita of Isfahan Province is very low and arrival of MSC into building sport facilities has improved the sport per capita of the province and also sport infrastructure of the country, and a big standard sport complex with capacity of 75,000 people has been built for domestic and international events.

Zibae noted that observance of social responsibility of the company is revealed in completing an incomplete project after 25 years of idleness, adding that this super sport project with 60 percent of physical progress had an indecisive future that Mobarakeh Steel Company stepped in to complete it and it handed over an international standard stadium to the country.

He expressed hope due to efforts of Mobarakeh Steel Club and Company this super project of building Olympic village to be finalized and to come on stream as soon as possible.

He added that the process of completing the Olympic Village would take 3 to 5 years.

Iran, Nakhchivan Officials Confer on Ways to Expand Oil, Gas Ties

BAKU (IRNA) - Consul General of Iran in Nakhchivan on Friday called for expansion of oil and gas ties with Nakhchivan.

Ahmad Hosseini made the remarks in a meeting in Nakhchivan with Chairman of Nakhchivan Institute of Oil and Gas Supply Behrouz Azimov.

Hosseini briefed Azimov on the latest developments between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, including the recent visits of the Iranian Foreign Minister and the delegation of Iranian Parliament to Nakhchivan to develop relations with neighboring states including the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Hosseini explained Iranian principled stances in relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially in the recent Nagorno - Karabakh conflict which led to the liberation of the country's land.

Azimov said for his part that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a great and important country in the region and thanked Iranian explicit and strong positions in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

He added that the major part of Nakhchivan requirements in the oil and gas sector is provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and fortunately, with no problems.

PERMIT NO : 55/00/1564

DATE : 18/04/2021

FIRST ANNOUNCEMENT



INVITATION TO RENEWAL OF ONE STEP INTERNATIONAL TENDER



AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT SERVICES COMPANY

Agricultural Support Services Company, hereinafter will be referred as ASSC, affiliated to Ministry of Agriculture-Jahad of I.R of Iran, is considering the purchase of the below item of technical, through renewal of one step international tender.

ITEM	Name	PACKING	Quantity KG
1	Fipronil Tech (18.8-21.2) pct. (premix 20%)	200 kg drum	5500

All of the qualified and interested companies are invited to receive tender documents from Sunday dated 18/4/2021 until Monday dated 26/4/2021 (7 working days) from our purchasing committee (located at the 9th floor, no. 1, fourth alley, Gandhi st., Tehran, Iran).

The bidders are requested to submit their letters of introduction, along with remittance bill of I.Rials 1,200,000 to ASSC's account no. 4001039704005791 with SHEBA no. IR250100004001039704005791 at the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran through payment order of SATNA or PAYA with the 30 character identification code of 358039782263500650000000000006.

The bidders are requested to submit their sealed and stamped envelopes containing offers latest on Saturday dated 29/5/2021 (during official working hours) to our security office located on the 8th floor. Meanwhile the meeting for the opening of the envelopes will be held on Sunday dated 30/5/2021 at 2:00 PM with the presence of bidder's representatives at our purchasing committee hall (9th floor, no. 1, Fourth Alley, Gandhi st., Tehran, Iran).

We would like to emphasize that the bid bond amount should be in bank guarantee as follow:

1- € 20583 for Fipronil Tech(18.8-21.2) pct. (premix 20%) equivalent to Iranian Rials 5765000000.

- The bid bond value will be in Euro or in equal value of any other foreign currencies, except US dollar, based on Telegraphic Transfer rate in Sana rate website, www.sanarate.ir. It should be noted that this site lists the currency transactions, executed in Integrated Currency Transactions System [Nima website] on 12/04/2021.

For more information, you may refer to our website www.assc.ir, and <http://ets.mporg.ir> or contact us by phone no. 00982188776325.

PR & Intl Affairs Dept of Agricultural Support Services Company(ASSC)

At Least 21 People Die After Boat Sinks Off Tunisia

TUNIS (Dispatches) - At least 21 people have died after their boat sank off Tunisia's coast as they tried to cross the Mediterranean to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa.

"The boat sank during a trip that started late on Thursday from Sfax... so far, the coastguard has recovered 21 bodies and the search is still continuing," Mouard Mechri, director of Tunisia's civil protection service, told Reuters news agency on Friday.

The Tunisian port city has become a major departure point for people fleeing conflict and poverty in Africa and the Middle East and seeking a better life in Europe.



Tens of Thousands Flee Attacks On Northeast Nigerian Town

GENEVA (Dispatches) - As many as 65,000 people have fled the northeastern Nigerian town of Damasak following a series of attacks by an armed group, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said.

Fighters from the so-called Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) stormed the town in Borno state three times in a week to strike a military garrison, burning homes and a UN office, and killing at least 12 people, the UNHCR said on Friday.

In the latest violence on Wednesday, the fighters attacked the garrison before being forced back into the town itself, military sources and residents said.



Kremlin Welcomes Biden Call for Dialogue, Criticizes Sanctions



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - The Kremlin said Friday it was "good" that US President Joe Biden was seeking dialogue with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin but criticised the United States for a fresh bout of sanctions on Moscow.

Biden's offer earlier this week of a summit between the leaders amounted to a peace offering as tensions between Russia and the West were escalating over the conflict in Ukraine and the new penalties levied by Washington.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Friday said that Putin has long talked about the importance of normalising relations between Moscow and Washington. "He has repeatedly said that we are ready to develop our dialogue to the degree that our counterparts are ready for this," he said.

"It is indeed good that the points of view of the two heads of state coincide on this".

But Peskov also blasted a new round of penalties imposed by Washington on Moscow Thursday, saying America's "addiction for sanctions remains unacceptable."

The Kremlin spokesman noted that Putin last month had suggested that he and Biden hold virtual talks that did not come to fruition as Washington did not respond to the proposal.

He said that the Kremlin was still considering Biden's offer for a summit, as Finnish President Sauli Niinisto on Friday offered his country as a venue for the possible meeting.

Earlier this week Niinisto said he and Putin had spoken and the two discussed "the planned meeting" with Biden.

Tensions have been rising sharply between Washington and Moscow in recent weeks as Russia massed forces on Ukraine's northern and eastern borders, and on the Crimean peninsula it annexed in 2014.

U.S. forces in Europe raised their alert status in response, while NATO issued warnings to Moscow.

Despite the call for cooling tensions, Washington on Thursday angered Moscow by imposing a new round of sanctions on Russia for alleged election interference and hacking.

The penalties widened restrictions on US banks trading in Russian government debt, expelled 10 diplomats who include alleged spies and sanctioned 32 individuals accused of meddling in the 2020 US presidential vote.

Biden on Thursday described the sanctions as a "measured and proportionate" response to Moscow's hostile actions with the United States and said Washington is "not looking to kick off a cycle of escalation and conflict".

The Kremlin responded to the penalties on Thursday saying they will not "help" plans for a potential summit.

But analysts say that even though sanctions were the toughest in several years, they do not pose a threat to the Kremlin.

"The Russian market felt some relief," the Renaissance Capital investment bank said in an analyst note Friday, because the sanctions were "moderate."

China's President Slams EU Carbon Tax Plan in Call With Macron, Merkel

BEIJING (AFP) - Chinese President Xi Jinping slammed the European Union's plan for a carbon tax system Friday in a call with the leaders of France and Germany, state media reported.

The European Parliament on Wednesday endorsed the creation of a carbon border tax that would shield EU companies from cheaper imports from countries with weaker climate policies.

The scheme is seen as a key part of the EU's Green Deal, an ambitious push to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and meet the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement.

"Tackling climate change is a shared responsibility... and should not become a geopolitical bargaining chip or used to attack other countries (or impose) trade barriers," Xi told France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Angela Merkel on the sidelines of a virtual climate summit Friday, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Xi also urged developed countries to "set an example in reducing emissions" and help poorer nations to deal with the fallout from the climate crisis by sharing technology and increasing funding for green projects.

China last year announced bold plans to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and become carbon-neutral by 2060.

Transitioning from a carbon peak to carbon neutrality in three decades would be "a tough battle", Xi said.

The Chinese leader's comments come as US climate envoy John Kerry is in Shanghai to drum up support from the world's biggest polluter for America's drive to address environmental challenges.

Kerry is in China for meetings with his counterparts until Saturday -- the first visit by an official from the new U.S. administration.

The main purpose of his travels to China and elsewhere is to rally support for a virtual climate summit hosted by U.S. President Joe Biden next week. China has not announced whether Xi will participate.

China in recent years has taken over the mantle of global climate leadership left vacant when former US president Donald Trump withdrew from the Paris agreement to address the catastrophic effects of global warming.



Merkel Pushes for Widening of Powers as COVID Surges

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Chancellor Angela Merkel has urged the German parliament to pass a bill granting her government new powers to force coronavirus lockdowns and curfews in areas with high infection rates, as case numbers continue to climb.

Addressing legislators in the lower house on Friday, Merkel warned that Germany was "firmly" in the grips of a "third wave".

"The situation is serious, very serious, and we need to take it seriously," she said, noting that most citizens were in favor of introducing stricter measures.

Merkel's speech came as Germany recorded 25,831 new cases of COVID-19 overnight and 247 more deaths, according to the Robert Koch Institute disease control center. She said intensive care workers were "sending one distress call after the other" amid the surge.

"Who are we to ignore their pleas?" Merkel said. "We cannot be permitted to leave the doctors and nurses alone."

Merkel wants to amend the Infection Protection Act so federal authorities can tighten restrictions, even if regional leaders resist them.

The move seeks to end the patchwork approach that has characterised the pandemic response across Germany's 16 states to date.

Lockdown measures are currently decided at the state level and many have expressed frustration and confusion in recent months as governors interpreted rules agreed with the federal government in different ways, despite having similar infection rates. If it comes into effect, the change would allow the federal government to impose an "emergency brake" in regions when the spread of the coronavirus becomes too rapid, and more than 100 new weekly cases per 100,000 inhabitants are being recorded.

Currently, the infection rate across Germany stands at just above 160 cases each week per 100,000 residents. The "emergency brake" would lead to a uniform set of rules entailing the closure of stores, cultural and sports facilities, limits on personal contacts, and nighttime curfews.

Opponents of Myanmar Coup Form Unity Gov't

YANGON (Dispatches) - Opponents of Myanmar's junta announced a National Unity Government on Friday including ousted members of parliament and leaders of anti-coup protests and ethnic minorities, saying their aim was to end military rule and restore democracy.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the Feb. 1 coup that ousted a civilian government led by democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi which had held power for five years and was starting its second term after a landslide election victory in November.

People have taken to the streets day after day to demand the restoration of democracy, defying crackdowns by the security forces in which more than 700 people have been killed, according to a monitoring group.

At the same time, political leaders, including ousted members of parliament from Suu Kyi's party, have been trying to organize to show the country and the outside world that they and not the generals are the legitimate political authority.

"Please welcome the people's government," veteran democracy activist Min Ko Naing said in a 10-minute video address announcing the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG).

While setting out few positions, Min Ko Naing said the will of the people was the unity government's priority, while acknowledging the scale of the task at hand.

"We're trying to get this out from the roots so we have to sacrifice a lot," he said, referring to the junta.

A spokesman for the junta could not be reached for comment. The generals justified their takeover with accusations of fraud in the November election won by Suu Kyi's party, though the election commission dismissed the objections.

One of the unity government's primary objectives will be to win international support and recognition.

"We are the democratically elected leaders of Myanmar," said the unity government's minister of international cooperation, Dr Sasa, who goes by one name.

"So if the free and democratic world rejects us that means they reject democracy."

International pressure has been building on the Myanmar military, particularly from Western governments that have imposed limited sanctions, though the generals have a long record of dismissing what they see as outside interference.

The unity government released a list of office holders including members of ethnic minorities and protest leaders, underlining the unity of purpose between the pro-democracy movement and autonomy-seeking minority communities, some of whom have battled the central government for decades.



EU, UK Step Up N. Ireland Talks

LONDON (Dispatches) - The European Union said on Friday that Britain should not change trading rules in Northern Ireland on its own and that the bloc would continue its legal case over unilateral British action in the province for as long as necessary.

European Commission vice president Maros Sefcovic, who hosted UK negotiator David Frost for talks on Thursday evening, said only agreements by joint bodies established by the Brexit divorce deal could provide stability in Northern Ireland.

The British-ruled province has remained in the EU single market for goods since Brexit to ensure an open border with EU member Ireland and so requires checks on goods coming from other parts of the United Kingdom.

Britain in March unilaterally extended a grace period on certain checks to minimise supply disruption, a move Brussels said breached the Brexit divorce deal known as the Withdrawal Agreement and the specific protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

Sefcovic said in a statement on Friday there was no space for unilateral action. He said both sides had to agree on how to comply fully with the protocol, including "clear end-points, deadlines, milestones and the means to measure progress".

Frost said the British government was committed to working through joint bodies and that all solutions had to respect the Good Friday peace agreement "in all its dimensions" and to ensure minimal disruption to everyday lives in Northern Ireland.

Both agreed that Thursday's discussion took place in a constructive atmosphere, that talks needed to intensify and that they would jointly engage with business groups, civil society and others in Northern Ireland.

Frost said some "positive momentum" had been established. "But a number of difficult issues remained and it was important to continue to discuss them," the British government said in a statement.



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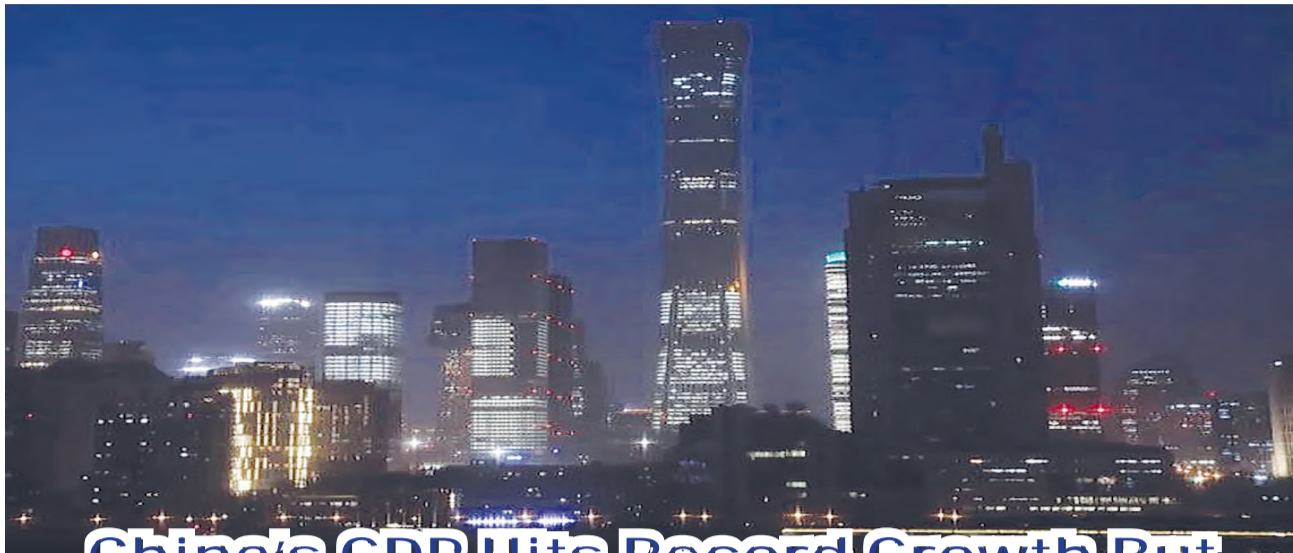
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India's March Trade Deficit Widens to \$13.93b

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - India's trade deficit in goods widened to \$13.93 billion in March from \$9.98 billion during the same period a year earlier, revised trade data released by the government on Thursday showed.

Merchandise exports rose 60.29% in March from a year earlier to \$34.45 billion, while imports were up 53.74% to \$48.38 billion, the data showed. For the whole fiscal year ended on March 31, the goods exports were down 7.26% to \$290.63 billion while imports fell 18.02% to \$398.18 billion from a year earlier, the data showed.



China's GDP Hits Record Growth But Post-COVID Recovery Seen Losing Steam

BEIJING (Reuters) - China's economic recovery quickened sharply in the first quarter to record growth of 18.3% from last year's deep coronavirus slump, propelled by stronger demand at home and abroad and continued government support for smaller firms.

But the brisk expansion, heavily skewed by the plunge in activity a year earlier, is expected to moderate later this year as the government turns its attention to reining in financial risks in overheating parts of the economy.

While the jump in gross domestic product (GDP) undershot the 19% forecast by economists in a Reuters poll, the official data showed it was the fastest growth since quarterly records began in 1992 and up from 6.5% in the fourth quarter last year.

"The upshot is that with the economy already above its pre-virus trend and policy support being withdrawn, China's post-COVID rebound is levelling off," said Julian Evans-Pritchard, senior china economist at Capital Economics. "We expect quarter-on-quarter growth to remain modest during the rest of this year as the recent boom in construction and exports unwinds, pulling activity back towards trend."

Aided by strict virus containment measures and emergency relief for businesses, the economy has recovered from a steep 6.8% slump in the first three months of 2020, when an outbreak of COVID-19 in the central city of Wuhan rapidly became a crippling pandemic that has killed about 3 million worldwide.

China's rebound has been led by exports as factories raced to fill overseas orders and more recently a steady pickup in consumption as shoppers returned to restaurants, malls and car dealerships.

Retail sales increased 34.2% year-on-year in March, beating a 28.0% gain expected by analysts and stronger than the 33.8% jump seen in the first two months of the year.

Other data, however, showed a moderation in expansion with quarter-on-quarter growth slowing to 0.6% in January-March from a revised 3.2% in the previous quarter, missing expectations for a 1.5% increase.

Factory output grew 14.1% year-on-year in March, slowing from a 35.1% surge in the January-February period and lagging a forecast 17.2% rise.

National Bureau of Statistics spokeswoman Liu Aihua told a news conference on Friday while the economy started 2021 on a firm footing, the services sector and smaller firms still faced challenges, while consumer inflation was likely to remain moderate.

Data last week showed consumer prices rising at only a modest pace in March, even as factory gate inflation hit a near three-year high.

"Looking forward, the trend of normalisation may continue for the rest of the year, and domestic consumption is expected to be the major growth driver," said Chaoping Zhu, global market strategist at J.P. Morgan Asset Management in Shanghai.

"In terms of policy response, the central bank and fiscal authorities are returning to a more neutral stance, although some selective measures might be continued in order to support the small and medium-sized enterprises."

Li Wei, economist at Standard Chartered in Shanghai, expected second-quarter growth to slow to 7%.

Italy to Spend 40b More to Help Virus-Hit Economy

ROME (Dispatches) - Italy's government has agreed to borrow another 40 billion euros (US\$48 billion) this year to help mitigate the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic, a prime ministerial source said Thursday.

The money "will be used for new measures to support businesses and the economy," the source said after a cabinet meeting. The move comes just three months after the last expansion of the budget deficit, by 32 billion euros, as Italy seeks to recover from its worst recession since the end of World War II.

Prime Minister Mario Draghi has been under pressure to offer more relief to businesses struggling with coronavirus restrictions, after protests from a wide range of groups, from entertainment workers to restaurant owners.

On Thursday, the government also adopted new economic targets, according to the source from Draghi's office. It expects gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 4.5 percent in 2021 and of 4.8 percent in 2022, after a record fall of 8.9 percent in last year — the biggest in postwar history.

It also projected a rise in the 2021 public deficit to 11.8 percent of GDP, from 9.5 percent in 2020 and 1.6 percent in 2019 — but falling to 5.9 percent in 2022 and 4.3 percent in 2023.

As for public debt, which in 2020 jumped year-on-year by more than 20 percentage points, to 155.6 percent of GDP, government forecasts see it peaking at 159.8 percent in 2021 and falling gradually in later years.



Pakistan Appoints Fourth Finance Minister in Two Years

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) - Pakistan appointed Shaukat Tarin as its fourth finance minister in two years on Friday, part of a shake-up of the government's economic team as it enters a key period of budget-making and implementation of IMF reforms.

Tarin, a former banker, held the finance minister's portfolio for about a year in a previous government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), now in opposition to the ruling party of Prime Minister Imran Khan. His predecessor, Hammad Azhar, had been in the role for less than three weeks.

Khan also shuffled other key economy-related ministries, his office said, including the economic affairs and power portfolios. Tarin takes on the job as just weeks before the annual budget is due, with economists saying Pakistan is likely to record its biggest ever deficit as a result of uncertain government policies aggravated by coronavirus pandemic. The third wave of COVID-19 currently sweeping through the country will create additional uncertainty in areas such as revenue collection, making the budget estimates more difficult.

Pakistan expects its economy to grow 3% in the current fiscal year which ends June 30, having revised its forecast higher from a little above 2%. Last year, GDP contracted by 0.4%.

The International Monetary Fund projects 2020/2021 GDP growth of 1.5% and the World Bank see a 1.3% expansion. IMF country chief Ernesto Ramirez Rigo said on April 8 that good data in January and February had suggested growth could beat its forecast but that the pandemic's third wave meant "perhaps we might ... need to dampen a bit our expectations".

Pakistan will also need to adjust its annual budget, he said.

The IMF approved a \$500 million disbursement to Pakistan last month for budget support after competing delayed reviews of a \$6 billion Extended Fund Facility programme.

GDP growth was 5.8% when Khan took power in 2018.

Japan's March Exports Likely Grew at Fastest Pace

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's exports likely posted their strongest growth in more than three years in March as overseas demand recovered, a Reuters poll showed on Friday, but more disruptions from the coronavirus crisis threatened to slow the growth of shipments.

The recovery in the world's third-largest economy has been led by improving output

and exports, but slow vaccine rollouts and a renewed surge in COVID-19 cases are clouding the outlook for consumption.

Next week's key data includes core consumer inflation, which is expected to fall for the eighth consecutive month as price pressures remained low due to weak consumer demand.

Exports likely rose 11.6% in March from a year earlier, which would mark the sharpest rise since January 2018, the poll of 16 economists showed.

Imports were forecast to have grown 4.7% in March from a year earlier, which would result in a trade surplus of 490.0 billion yen (\$4.5 billion).

Japan's economy suffered greatly from a shakeout in global trade due to the pandemic in the first quarter of last year, when it entered a recession for the first time in 4-1/2 years.

"Exports are again expected to turn positive compared to a year earlier, as they started to decline greatly in March last year due to the impact of the coronavirus," said Kenta Maruyama, an economist at Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting.

"While the rising trend that is driven by strong demand for capital and information-related goods continues, it is slowing down slightly."

The finance ministry announces trade data at 8:50 a.m. on Monday (2350 GMT Sunday).

The core consumer price index (CPI), which includes oil products but excludes volatile fresh food prices, is expected to have fallen 0.1% in March compared to the same month a year earlier, according to the Reuters poll.

The pace of decline, however, was expected to remain moderate as rising energy prices increasingly offset the downward pressure from lacklustre consumer spending due to the pandemic.

Over 440 Finance Firms Move Jobs out of UK And £900b Flees to EU

LONDON (Dispatches) - Banks and insurers have moved almost £1tn (\$1.4tn) out of Britain and shifted thousands of jobs to Europe due to Brexit, according to a "sobering" new report on the impact of leaving the EU on Britain's financial services sector.

More than 440 financial services firms have shifted jobs to the EU as a result of Brexit, according to a new report from think tank New Financial, and firms have moved £900bn to the EU. The think tank said more jobs and assets were likely to leave Britain in the coming months and years.

The think tank said its report was the most comprehensive measure of the impact of Brexit on the City of London so far.

The study, published on Friday, identified over 440 companies that "have moved or are moving part of their business, staff, assets or legal entities from the UK to the EU." New Financial estimated that around 7,400 staff have been shifted out of London since the 2016 Brexit vote. That is in-line with EY's Brexit tracker, which last month estimated that 7,600 roles had been moved.

Dublin has been the biggest winner when it comes to job re-locations, followed by Paris, Luxembourg, Frankfurt, and Amsterdam have also been popular re-location destinations. New Financial said this scattering of jobs across the EU had "wound the clock back by about 20 years."

"While this is higher than previous estimates, it underestimates the real picture — and the potential longer-term impact," the report's authors warned.

"The bigger issue is not jobs leaving the UK but new jobs in the EU being created in future that might otherwise have been created in the UK." New Financial estimated that £900bn in bank assets — roughly 10% of the UK banking system — has either been shifted to the EU or been earmarked to move.

New Financial said it expected move jobs and assets to shift to the continent as part of a "drip-feed of business and activity from the UK to the EU."

"As the EU takes a tougher line on the location of activity and individuals we expect these headline numbers to increase in future," the report said.

Earlier this month the chief executive of JPMorgan (JPM) said he may be forced to move all EU-facing jobs out of London as a result of "uncertainties" around regulation.

The trade deal struck between the UK and EU in December did not cover services and finance has been left in limbo as both sides continue negotiations over a potential supplementary deal.

EU officials have been pressuring finance firms in London to relocate jobs and assets to the EU now that Brexit has taken effect. This has alarmed the Bank of England, which has argued that Brussels is being too demanding.

New Financial said it believed the EU was unlikely to grant access to financial services firms based in Britain.

Turkey Bans Crypto Payments Citing Risks



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Bitcoin tumbled more than 4 per cent on Friday after Turkey's central bank banned the use of cryptocurrencies and crypto assets for purchases citing possible "irreparable" damage and transaction risks.

In legislation published in the Official Gazette, the central bank said cryptocurrencies and other such digital assets based on distributed ledger technology could not be used, directly or indirectly, to pay for goods and services.

The decision could stall Turkey's crypto market, which has gained momentum in recent months as investors joined the global rally in bitcoin, seeking to hedge against lira depreciation and inflation that topped 16 per cent last month.

Bitcoin was down 4.6 per cent after the ban, which was criticized by Turkey's main opposition party. Smaller coins ethereum and XRP, which tend to move in tandem with bitcoin, fell between 6 per cent-12 per cent.

In a statement, the central bank said crypto assets were "neither subject to any regulation and supervision mechanisms nor a central regulatory authority", among other security risks.

"Payment service providers will not be able to develop business models in a way that crypto assets are used directly or indirectly in the provision of payment services and electronic money issuance" and will not provide any services, it said.

"Their use in payments may cause non-recoverable losses for the parties to the transactions ... and include elements that may undermine the confidence in methods and instruments used currently in payments," the central bank added.

This week Royal Motors, which distributes Rolls-Royce and Lotus cars in Turkey, became the first business in the country to accept payments in cryptocurrencies.

Cryptocurrencies remain little-used for commerce even as they become increasingly mainstream global assets, although companies including Tesla Inc and travel site Expedia Group Inc do accept such payments.

Intelligence Forces Identify Natanz Incident Perpetrator

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian intelligence forces identified the perpetrator of the incident that took place in a part of the electricity distribution network of Shahid Ahmadi Roshan facility in Natanz.

According to IRIB News Agency, Reza Karimi, accused of sabotage in Natanz, who fled abroad, has been identified as the perpetrator of the Natanz incident.

Karimi, 43, was identified by intelligence forces at the Ministry of Intelligence. He fled abroad before the incident. Iran's police have already issued an arrest warrant to the Interpol. The spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Behrouz Kamalvandi said last Sunday that an incident took place in a part of the electricity distribution network of Shahid Ahmadi Roshan facility in Natanz.



EBRD Aims to Fully Align With Paris Agreement Goals Within 20 Months

LONDON (Dispatches) - The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has said the bank aims to fully align its activities with the goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation, adaptation and finance within the next 20 months.

"Our proposal is that by the beginning of 2023, everything we do will be aligned with the Paris Agreement," EBRD President Odile Renaud-Basso said on April 15 in a keynote speech marking the 30th anniversary of the Bank's establishment. She said the EBRD management would work with the Board of Directors in the coming weeks to prepare a resolution to put before the Board of Governors at the Bank's 2021 Annual Meeting on June 28 – July 2.

"This would be a landmark step in our approach, and we will further support all the economies in which we invest in their low-carbon transition," Renaud-Basso said.

Under its current strategy, the EBRD has committed to dedicating most of its investments to support the transition to a green economy by 2025, the bank said, adding that alignment with the Paris Agreement would commit the Bank to only making investments consistent with the goals of the 2030 Agenda, namely, holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit that increase to 1.5°C. "We are putting our full weight behind the net zero transition", President Renaud-Basso emphasized.

She also underscored that combatting climate change was both an urgent and long-term effort, with different solutions required for each country. "Thirty years ago, our countries of operations faced the challenge of transitioning from a command economy to a market economy. In the coming 30 years, they face the huge challenge of transitioning from an economic model overwhelmingly reliant on hydrocarbons to one of net zero emissions. We recognise that each country will have a different path in that transition, but our goal is to support them every step of the way."

According to the EBRD, one of the major challenges for governments today is to raise the amount of money going to climate finance from billions to the trillions the low-carbon transition requires. The EBRD's focus on mobilising the private sector gives the Bank a unique role to play in making this happen. "The Bank's founding premise is that well-regulated markets can unlock the scale and ingenuity of the private sector to solve our biggest problems," the EBRD President stressed.



Support for the private sector was one of the founding principles of the EBRD when it was established 30 years ago today to "foster the transition towards open market-oriented economies and to promote private and entrepreneurial initiative", as stated in Article I of the Agreement Establishing the Bank.

When the EBRD began its work, it invested in 8 countries in central and eastern Europe and had 48 shareholders around the world. Today, the Bank invests in 38 economies in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, the southern and eastern Mediterranean, central Asia and the Caucasus and has 71 global shareholders. "Our character is both multilateral and strongly European," the President said. In the coming weeks, the EBRD expects to pass the €150 billion investment mark.

The most urgent crisis now is overcoming the coronavirus pandemic and securing the recovery, the EBRD said, adding that the bank invested a record €11 billion in 2020 in response to the crisis and will continue to stand by its clients and the economies where it invests. The Bank will continue to address the urgent needs of businesses, support a strong and sustainable recovery and help its countries of operations and clients to build back better. "The EBRD must continue to help shape the destiny of its regions," Renaud-Basso stressed.

OPEC Fund's \$50m Loan to Increase Efficient Power Generation Capacity in Uzbekistan



VIENNA (Dispatches) - The OPEC Fund for International Development (the OPEC Fund) has signed a \$50 million term loan agreement with ACWA Power to support the construction and operation of a 1.5 GW combined cycle gas-turbine power plant in Sirdarya, Uzbekistan. The new plant, located near the border with Tajikistan, will replace an ageing, less efficient thermal power facility, resulting in lower operating costs and a significant reduction in GHG emissions.

The OPEC Fund's US\$50 million loan to ACWA Power will support the construction and operation of a 1.5 GW combined cycle gas-turbine power plant in Sirdarya, Uzbekistan. Photo Credit: ACWA Power.

Although Uzbekistan is well electrified and electricity demand is increasing, the efficiency of its power plants is low due to outdated infrastructure and technologies. The country experiences regular power outages, which undermine the productivity of businesses and the delivery of energy to households. The new Sirdarya plant is projected to boost generation efficiency and reduce GHG emissions by a minimum of 2.2 million tonnes / year. Upon completion, it is expected to meet 15 percent of power demand in Uzbekistan and comprise 8 percent of all installed power capacity. The adoption of modern technologies will provide a reliable, more consistent delivery of energy.

The Uzbek government is committed to modernizing and strengthening its electricity generation base across the country and has initiated a number of reforms that lay the foundation for encouraging private sector investment. The upgrading of the Sirdarya power plant represents the largest single private-sector-led project in Uzbekistan's energy sector to date, with a total project cost of about US\$1 billion. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH (DEG) and commercial banks led by Standard Chartered Bank are also participating in the project. The commercial bank tranches will benefit from a political insurance cover provided by the Multilateral Investment Agency (MIGA) of the World Bank Group.

OPEC Fund Director-General Dr. Abdulhamid Alkhalifa said: "We are pleased to contribute to Uzbekistan's massive efforts to upgrade and modernize the country's power generation capacity with reliable and efficient infrastructure. Private sector participation in the energy sector will expedite this process and landmark projects such as Sirdarya will pave the way, setting examples of great cooperation among governments, development finance institutions and the private sector."

Europe's Pandemic-Stricken Economy Could Return to Pre-Crisis Levels

LONDON (Dispatches) - Europe's economy is on track to return to its pre-crisis levels in 2022, the International Monetary Fund said on Wednesday, though this projection depends on the region's Covid-19 vaccination campaign.

European countries have been forced to introduce new restrictions or tougher previous public health measures in recent weeks as Covid infections have surged. This led to a 0.2 percentage point drop in the IMF's growth forecast for this year, which currently stands at 4.5%.

"On the assumption that vaccines become widely available in the summer of 2021 and throughout 2022, GDP growth is projected at 3.9% in 2022, bringing Europe's GDP back to the pre-pandemic levels," the IMF said in its latest regional economic outlook.

However, uncertainty over how the pandemic will evolve continues to cloud the outlook, particularly when it comes to potential new variants and the speed of the vaccination rollout.

"There's an unknown on how quickly the third wave can be defeated, that we don't have in the forecast and that is certainly a downside risk," Alfred Kammer, director of the IMF's European department, told CNBC's Joumana Berceche Wednesday. "A downside risk is also if the vaccination would be slower than we all currently expect," he said, before adding: "We need to be ready that the virus is going to surprise us again."

In fact, the 27 members of the European Union received some further bad news this week, after Johnson & Johnson said it would delay the rollout of its vaccine in Europe after authorities in the U.S. raised concerns about extremely rare blood clot complications.

Taliban...

FROM PAGE 1

Zarif described a decision by the administration of US President Joe Biden to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan by September 11, two decades after Washington and its allies invaded the country under the pretext of fight terrorism.

The invasion ended the rule of the Taliban's "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan, but never managed to end the violence and militancy that ensued. The chaos caused by the American intervention has even paved the way for the emergence of Daesh and Takfiri terrorists in the country.

Having remained bogged down in what is known as the longest war in American history, Washington signed a peace deal early last year with the Taliban, who now have control or wield influence over about half of the Afghan territory.

Zarif said Washington's announcement "has to be taken in light of the realities of our region that the presence of foreign forces has never contributed to peace and stability in our region. The [withdrawal] will leave, at least, less ground for violence."

The top Iranian diplomat further advised the Taliban against using the vacuum that could potentially follow the pullout of foreign forces to step up their campaign of violence, saying such a situation would be "disastrous" and would serve as the "recipe for a new war" in Afghanistan.

"I think the Taliban should not use this opportunity to increase violence," said Zarif, emphasizing that the Afghan people's wish for an end to violence should be respected.

The Iranian minister warned that Iran, which hosts some three million Afghan refugees, and the broader will not tolerate more violence in Afghanistan.

Violence continues in Afghanistan even as the Kabul government and the Taliban have been holding on-and-off talks to reach a peace deal. Little progress has been made in meetings between the two sides since the talks started on September 12, 2020.

Both sides have routinely accused each other of stepping up hostilities and killing civilians.

This vaccine was one of four that the bloc was relying on to speed up its vaccination campaign in the second quarter of 2021. The J&J shot was particularly sought-after by many governments given that it only requires one inoculation.

This is not the first delay to vaccine distribution in Europe and the EU has faced sharp criticism over the pace of its rollout to date. In addition to issues with the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, Europe's drug regulator has been blamed for taking too long to approve new vaccines, to name one of the recent problems.

The IMF said it expected to see high prices in the continent throughout 2021.

"Inflation, currently contained by economic slack, is projected to edge up by 1.1 percentage points to 3.1% in 2021, partly due to higher commodity prices," the Fund said in its report.

Iran Accuses (P)GCC of...

FROM PAGE 1

The GCC states should take into account the dangers of hundreds of Israeli nuclear warheads and Tel Aviv's refusal to join the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which is the biggest threat to peace and stability in the region, Khatibzadeh said.

In letters sent to the foreign ministers of the permanent members of the UN Security Council on Wednesday, GCC Secretary General Nayef Al-Hajraf said the nuclear talks in Vienna must address the concerns and interests of the Persian Gulf countries to enhance security and stability in the region.

He also claimed that Iran's announcement of its plan to ratchet up uranium enrichment is a dangerous and worrying indicator for regional and international security.

In similar interfering remarks, Secretary General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit has also expressed his deep concerns over Iran's decision to increase its enrichment of uranium to 60 percent, claiming that it is a dangerous development and a clear step toward developing a nuclear weapon.

In response to the allegations, the Iranian spokesperson said, "Secretaries general of these bodies should know that Iran is a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency and all nuclear activities of the Islamic Republic are under the supervision of this organization's Safeguards [Agreement]."

Khatibzadeh emphasized that Iran would continue to expand its nuclear activities in accordance with its legitimate rights and national interests in order to meet its peaceful requirements.

He recommended that the two bodies stop overlooking the existing realities and focus their attention on the parties that have violated the JCPOA and the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorses the nuclear deal.

Tehran Slams UN...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran's permanent envoy to the UN pointed to some examples that prove the dual approach adopted by the Western member states of the UNSC regarding the WMD and non-proliferation and disarmament regimes.

Takht Ravanchi said the UNSC was "dead silent" when Iraq's former dictator, Saddam Hussain, killed thousands of Iranian and Iraqi citizens by using chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.

"It was the case when Iraq was invaded by Western countries based on completely false WMD-related claims. The Council is again silent when Syria has been under extreme pressure in recent years because certain powers are abusing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to advance their illegitimate interests in that country," he added.

Takht Ravanchi also said Iran, likewise, was put under unprecedented UN sanctions until 2016 just because certain Western powers, under the so-called proliferation concerns, accused Iran of seeking nuclear weapons, while Tehran has repeatedly said that it only pursue a peaceful nuclear program.

Nevertheless, Israel, which has already developed all types of WMDs and refused to join international treaties prohibiting such deadly weapons, is not held accountable by the UNSC since it is shielded by the United States, he further said.

"We also strongly reject all efforts undermining the CWC's authority and the OPCW's credibility and call for the balanced, full, and non-discriminatory implementation of the CWC and upholding the authority of the OPCW," Takht Ravanchi concluded.

Ukraine...

FROM PAGE 1

They are instead trying to making political gains by linking the tragedy to their woes at home or their ties with other countries, said Khatibzadeh, adding that such "political abuses" are not acceptable at all.

The plane was shot down with 176 people aboard on January 8, 2020, by Iran's air defenses, which mistook the aircraft for a military target amid military tensions between Tehran and Washington following the U.S. assassination of Iran's Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq days earlier.

Hours before the tragedy happened, Iran had launched a retaliatory missile strike against a US-run base in western Iraq and then put the country's air defenses were on high alert due to increased American aerial activity in the aftermath of the strike. Iran acknowledged days later that the mismanagement of an air defense unit's radar system by its operator was the key human error that led to the accident. Tehran has promised that all those culpable in the incident will face trial and said it has allocated 200 million Euros for compensation of the survivors.

"Iran stands ready to engage in talks with all sides within the framework of international law and norms and advises all the parties involved not exit the boundaries of reason and law when making remarks," he said.

Similarly, the spokesman of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) roundly rejected Danilov's claims and said the Islamic Republic said Iran "has explicitly announced that the Ukrainian plane's crash incident had been unintentional and due to human error." Keyvan Khosravi pointed to a meeting held in February last year between Danilov and SNSC Secretary-General Ali Shamkhani over the case and said during that session, which was also attended by officials with the two countries' aviation organizations, the Ukrainian security chief was "offered comprehensive technical explanations" and it was emphasized that the incident had been accidental.

During the meeting, he added, Shamkhani presented Danilov with the findings of "comprehensive and meticulous" investigations into the case and firmly rejected any other possibility or theory that may have led to the downing of the jet.

"Spreading untrue news based on Danilov's wrong interpretations of Shamkhani's clear statements, at a time when a court has started handling the case, ...merely strengthens the suspicion that people have been commissioned to make these remarks with the aim of diverting the public opinion and creating a hype based on fake material," the official said.

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Coleman's Suspension Cut to 18 Months

GENEVA (Dispatches) - World 100m champion Christian Coleman's two-year ban for missing three doping tests has been reduced by six months to 18 months, the Court of Arbitration for Sport said Friday.
The 25-year-old American will still miss the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics this year as his ban runs until November 14. Coleman will, however, be eligible to defend his world indoor and outdoor titles next year.
CAS "partially upheld" the Athletics Integrity Unit's ruling but found Coleman's "degree of negligence to be lower".

Stokes Out for Up to 12 Weeks With Broken Finger

LONDON (AFP) - England all-rounder Ben Stokes will be sidelined for up to 12 weeks after fracturing his left index finger while on Indian Premier League duty, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced on Friday.
"Stokes, who is currently in India with Rajasthan Royals in the Indian Premier League, will fly home tomorrow," an ECB statement said. "He will have surgery in Leeds on Monday."
"The injury occurred while fielding during Royals' opening match against Punjab Kings on Monday when he completed a catch in the deep to see off West Indies batsman Chris Gayle."

Brown Scores 40 as Celtics Dump Lakers

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Jaylen Brown scored 40 points and grabbed nine rebounds as the Boston Celtics closed out a perfect road trip with a 121-113 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers.

Brown finished 17 of 20 from the field and at one point made 11 straight shots. The Celtics, who ended 3-0 on the trek and earned their fifth straight win overall, never trailed. Marcus Smart and Payton Pritchard each scored 15 points.

Getting the start in place of Andre Drummond (bruised right big toe), Los Angeles center Marc Gasol had a hot shooting night, finishing 4 of 6 from the 3-point arc and totaling 18 points. Talen Horton-Tucker added 19 points for the Lakers, who allowed fans into Staples Center for the first time this season.

While the Lakers have lost five of their past nine games, the team received good news. Anthony Davis, who has missed 28 games with a right calf strain, received an evaluation from club doctors and was cleared for full-contact practices, which means the versatile big man is close to returning to action.

Bucks 120, Hawks 109

Jrue Holiday scored 23 points, Brook Lopez 19 points and 12 rebounds and visiting Milwaukee slowed surging Atlanta to earn its third straight win.

A balanced scoring effort, with seven Bucks finishing in double figures, powered Milwaukee to a lead it held almost the entire night. Giannis Antetokounmpo returned from a six-game absence caused by a knee injury to score 15 points, almost 14 fewer than his season average.

Trae Young, returning from a calf injury that sidelined him for two games, scored 15 points with nine assists, but he committed six of the Hawks' 11 turnovers and shot just 3-for-17. Bogdan Bogdanovic led all scorers with 28 points, and Clint Capela added 16 points and a game-high 16 rebounds.

Colombia Insists Copa Will Go Ahead

COLOMBO (Dispatches) - The Copa America will be played "with or without fans," regardless of Covid-19, Colombia's sports minister said shortly after less optimistic comments from the president of co-host Argentina.

"The Copa America is still as planned from the start: Argentina and Colombia," Ernesto Lucena told El Tiempo newspaper.

"The analysis of the president of Argentina is relevant," continued Lucena, who is recovering from Covid-19, before saying that the president of CONMEBOL, South American football's governing body "has repeated: the Copa will be held with or without an audience."

Earlier on Thursday, Argentina President Alberto Fernandez said the pandemic cast doubt over the Copa.

"I don't want to spoil the Copa America show but I think we have to be very sensible and careful," he said. "We still have time to see how things develop and how we can deal with this problem."

Argentina are due to host the opening match of the South American tournament on June 13. The final will be played in Colombia on July 10.

It is the first time in the tournament's 105-year history that there are two host countries. Lucena said that "it is not envisaged" that Colombia would host the event alone.

The Copa was meant to take place last year but was postponed by 12 months due to the pandemic.

Guest participants Australia and Qatar have pulled out leaving just the 10 members of CONMEBOL to take part.

Closed-door matches have become the norm in Colombia since March 2020 but in March this year, Lucena said he thought Colombia's stadiums would be filled to 30 per cent capacity. In recent weeks, the Colombian government has imposed, and then tightened, a series of restrictions to stem a third wave of infections that is bringing its health system to the brink of collapse.

A curfew has been in force in Argentina since early April.

On Tuesday, CONMEBOL announced that it would distribute 50,000 doses of a Chinese anti-Covid vaccine Sinovac to South American footballers ahead of the Copa.



Suns 122, Kings 114

Deandre Ayton scored 26 points on 10-of-11 shooting and collected 11 rebounds to lead red-hot Phoenix to a victory over visiting Sacramento.

Devin Booker added 23 points as Phoenix won its fourth straight contest and 14th in its past 16 games. Chris Paul recorded 13 points, 11 assists and three steals.

De'Aaron Fox registered 27 points and eight assists, but the Kings fell to match their season-worst losing skid of nine games. Buddy Hield added 24 points and Delon Wright had 16.

Warriors 119, Cavaliers 101

Stephen Curry once again led Golden State, scoring 33 points to help the Warriors beat host Cleveland for their fourth straight win.

Despite struggling a bit early from 3-point range (4-for-13 for the game), Curry recorded his ninth consecutive game with 30-plus points. He also finished with five assists, four rebounds and two blocks.

Collin Sexton returned after missing the previous two games with a left groin strain and led the Cavaliers with 30 points, but Cleveland lost for the third time in four games.

Tsitsipas Moves Into Monte Carlo Semis



MONACO (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas advanced to the semi-finals of the Monte Carlo Masters when his quarter-final opponent Alejandro Davidovich withdrew after losing the first set 7-5.

Tsitsipas, the world number five, will play his sixth Masters 1000 semi-final on Saturday, and his first in the principality, against Englishman Dan Evans, who battled past Belgian David Goffin 5-7 6-3 6-4 on Friday.

Struggling with an injury to his left thigh, Spaniard Davidovich tried an underarm serve when facing set point. Tsitsipas pounced to hit a winning backhand return.

Until he was hurt, Davidovich gave his Greek opponent problems.

But at 3-3, Davidovich called for the doctor to treat his left thigh. He immediately managed the first break of the match, as Tsitsipas began to show signs of irritation, to the point of receiving a warning for swearing.

"The level of play was high at the beginning," said Tsitsipas. "We played a lot of long rallies, and the intensity was high in every one of them." Tsitsipas immediately broke back and as Davidovich struggled, broke again to end the set and the match.

PSG Wait for Happier Neymar to Sign Contract Extension



"For me there is no debate, it is obvious that I feel very comfortable here and at home at Paris Saint-Germain. I feel happier than I did before," the world's most expensive player said.

His current contract, signed following his arrival from Barcelona for 222 million euros

(€264m) in 2017, runs out at the end of next season, at the same time as Kylian Mbappe's deal. It has been reported in France since the Bayern game that PSG are hoping to be able to announce Neymar's new deal before facing Manchester City in the first leg of a blockbuster Champions League semi-final on April 28.

The Qatar-owned club will then hope that can persuade Mbappe to accept an extension of his own rather than opt to join one of their major rivals.

"Kilian and Neymar have no excuse for wanting to leave," insisted PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi after Tuesday's match.

There is no indication Neymar is lying when he states how happy he is now.

Two years ago a return to Barcelona seemed inevitable, but now the Catalans appear unable to afford the Brazilian anyway, and PSG are confirming their potential in the Champions League too.

There is no longer any need for him to want away, and PSG will hope he can now go on to play a leading role in the final weeks of the season as they target success at home and abroad.

Pogba Accuses Mourinho of Going Against Players

LONDON (Dispatches) - Paul Pogba has attacked Jose Mourinho's man-management style, accusing him of "going against players" and making them feel like "they don't exist any more".

After Mourinho's appointment as Manchester United manager in 2016, he made Pogba the world's most expensive player.

Pogba was instrumental as United claimed a League Cup and Europa League double in 2017, but the pair had an uneasy relationship before Mourinho was sacked in December 2018 and succeeded by Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

Mourinho's relationship with some of his players deteriorated following that first campaign and there were reports of a training ground spat with Pogba after the France midfielder was stripped of the United vice-captaincy in September 2018.

"What I have now with Ole is different because he wouldn't go against the players," Pogba said in a Sky Sports interview.

"Maybe Ole wouldn't pick them, but it's not like he puts them on the side like they don't exist anymore. That's the difference between Mourinho and Ole.

"Once I had a great relationship with Mourinho. Everybody sees that and the next day you don't know what happened.

"That's the strange thing I had with Mourinho. And I cannot explain to you because, even me, I don't know."

Pogba's comments came after United piled the pressure on Mourinho with a 3-1 win at Tottenham last Sunday.



Boots Messi Wore For 644th Goal to Be Sold at Auction

MADRID (Dispatches) - The boots Messi wore when he scored his record-breaking 644th goal for FC Barcelona are to be sold at auction for charity.

Soccer fans, take note! Christie's has announced the sale by online auction of the boots worn by Lionel Messi when he scored his 644th goal for FC Barcelona, setting a new record for the highest number of goals scored by a single player for any club. The legendary Argentinian forward's footwear is expected to fetch between 57,500 and 80,500 euros.

On December 22, 2020, in the 65th minute of a match between FC Barcelona and Real Valladolid, Lionel Messi scored yet another goal, having been served by a clever backheel from Pedri. The Argentinian's lethal finish, which gave his team a 3-0 victory, also made history. With this 644th goal in 749 official matches for Barcelona, Messi broke Pele's long-standing record for the highest number of goals by a player for a single club.

Initially exhibited by the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, the boots worn by Lionel Messi on that historic occasion, a pair of Adidas Nemeziz Messi, will shortly be auctioned off, with the proceeds being donated to the Arts and Health Project of the Vall Hebron University Hospital in Barcelona.

"Achieving the record of 644 goals for the same club made me very happy, but the most important thing is being able to give something back to all the kids fighting for their health," commented Lionel Messi in a press release.

Signed and accompanied by a certificate of authenticity, the legendary soccer international's footwear will be the most closely watched lot in an online sale that will take place April 19-30 on Christies.com. The boots are expected to fetch a price of between €50,000 and €70,000 (approximately 57,500 to 80,500 euros).

