

Iran's Health Ministry Announced On Monday the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic In Iran Exceeded 77,222 With 286 More Iranians Who Died From the COVID-19 Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

In a Letter to the Minister of Health, The Head of Iran's Emergency Services Announced Iran's Readiness To Transfer the Victims of The Israeli Regime's Brutal Attacks On Gaza to Iran for Medical Treatment

VOL. XXVII, No. 7224 TEHRAN Price 40,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

TUESDAY MAY 18, 2021 - ORDIBEHESHT 28, 1400

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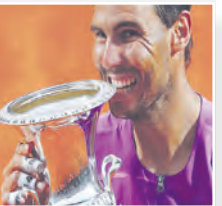


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Iran Calls for All-Encompassing JCPOA Deal

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has ruled out a "preliminary agreement" within the format of the ongoing Vienna talks, saying there would be only one agreement encompassing all aspects of measures that need to be taken to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.

"In the current situation, there is no such thing as a preliminary agreement and no agreement would be reached unless everything is agreed upon," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said at a Monday weekly press conference in Tehran.

Khatibzadeh explained that there have been progress as well as differences in separate aspects of the talks that began early last month between Iran and the remaining parties to the 2015 nuclear pact, officially known as the JCPOA, with the aim of bringing the US back into compliance with the deal, three years after it unilaterally left the accord.

He said Iran's lead negotiator Abbas Araqchi met with European diplomats on Sunday, and decided to expedite concluding the works of the three working groups that were formed to address different issues surrounding the revival of the deal.

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Offshore Farzad B Gas Field To Be Developed by Iranians



IRANN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Tehran — The National Iranian Oil Co. signed a \$1.78 billion deal with a domestic company to develop the Farzad B gas field in the Persian Gulf.

The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) has planned to award Petropars company a \$1.87 billion contract to develop Farzad B Gas Field.

According to the National Iranian Oil Company, with regards to the policies of the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum to tap the capacity of Iranian companies, the buyback contract for the development of Farzad B Gas Field will be signed with the NIOC as the employer and Petropars Company as the contractor on Monday, May 17.

The goal of this \$1.78 billion contract is to achieve a daily production of 28 million cubic meters of sour gas in the field over five years.

The gas produced in this field will be transferred to the onshore facilities of Pars 2 in Kangan region for processing. In the onshore facility, gas condensate is first separated from the sour gas and then transferred to the South Pars refinery of phases 12 and 19 for stabilization.

The contract entails drilling eight production wells, construction and installation of two main and secondary wellhead platforms, construction of liquid separation facilities on the main platform, construction of a 36-inch offshore pipeline of approximately 230 km to transfer sour fluid from the main platform to onshore facilities, construction of a 10-inch offshore pipeline approximately 230 km long to transport condensate to land, construction of a 20-inch pipeline connecting the 3 platforms with a length of 3 km, construction of offshore facilities including receiving equipment for the produced sour fluid and condensate separation along with ancillary facilities and onshore pipelines for the transfer and distribution of sour gas and condensate to refineries located in the Pars 2 region.

According to the Pars Oil and Gas Company, the amount of in place gas at Farzad B Field is estimated at 23,000 billion cubic feet, with gas condensate estimated at 5,000 barrels per billion cubic feet of gas.

The Farzad B joint gas field is located in the Farsi bloc on the border between Iran and Saudi Arabia and at a distance of about 20 km from the Farsi island.

Petropars, Iran's leading general contractor, inked a buyback deal with NIOC to produce 28 million cu m/d of sour gas over five years from reserves shared with Saudi Arabia. The gas condensates and sour gas produced will be sent to southern South Pars gas plants.

Farzad B's gas in place is around 23 Tcf and its gas condensates amount to around 5,000 barrels/Bcf.

An ONGC Videsh-led consortium discovered Farzad B gas within the Farsi offshore gas block in 2008 together with Oil India and Indian Oil. The consortium had signed a preliminary exploration-development deal with Iran in 2000, while only the exploration was done. In 2016, Iran said it was examining the Indian proposal but that an agreement was unlikely because of the difference between Iran's demanded gas price and India's offer.

On the sidelines of the ceremony, veteran Iranian oil minister Bijan Zanganeh said he will not continue in his role once a new president is inaugurated after elections scheduled next month.

"I am retired," said Zanganeh, 69, a technocrat politician with 20 years of service in various ministerial offices. "But I will remain in politics."

His departure comes at a critical moment for Iran's oil industry, which is poised to return unrestricted to the market pending an agreement on nuclear sanctions with international powers. Amid negotiations, Tehran has ratcheted up production in recent months and succeeded in finding customers from its crude in China, according to market sources.

Iran Among Front-Runners in Championing Palestinian Cause

TEHRAN (PressTV)- The head of the political bureau of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has offered his warm gratitude to Iran, saying the Islamic Republic is one of the front-runners in championing the cause of Palestine and al-Quds.

"Through your Excellency, I would like to send my regards to the Leader and the people of Iran and emphasize that the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the leading countries in supporting the cause of Palestine and Holy al-Quds," Ismail Haniyeh said in a phone call with Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

Haniyeh pointed out that an extensive battle is ongoing for the liberation of al-Quds and said resistance is a symbol of sacredness and purity which has unified all Palestinians to support al-Quds and al-Aqsa Mosque.

"We ask God to make Islam and Muslims victorious both in Palestine and in Iran," he added.

Velayati also thanked Palestinians for their struggle, courage, prudence and perseverance in the face of Israeli crimes, voicing hope that a meeting will be held in Iran soon after the Palestinians' victory.

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Israel Committing Gravest Int'l Crimes Amid UNSC's Deadly Silence

TEHRAN (PressTV)- Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations says the Israeli regime is busy committing the full range of gravest international crimes amid United States-enabled silence on the part of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Majid Takht Ravanchi made the remarks on Sunday, speaking at an emergency UNSC meeting held to address the heart-wrenching bloodletting and destruction that has been brought about across the Palestinian territories as a result of the regime's brutality.

Tel Aviv, he said, was simultaneously engaged in genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression against the Palestinians owing to the Security Council's mum on the savagery. The envoy said the Council's inaction had increasingly emboldened the regime in the atrocities.

Takht Ravanchi cited the U.S.'s patronage for the brutal regime as a key factor behind its sustained avoidance of accountability for the atrocities on the international arena.

The U.S. has been "systematically" shielding the regime against international condemnation, whether under the Democrats or the Republicans, he said, citing Washington's blocking of 44 anti-Israeli draft resolutions during the UNSC's history.

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Iran, Iraq Nearing Historic Agreement on Connecting Railway Systems

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Talks between Iraq and Iran to build a short railway link between the southern port city of Basra and the town of Shalamjah, just across the border, are nearing completion, according to a tweet from the office of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, Iraq's prime minister.

Although the line would run for only 30km and cost around \$150m, it would be the only rail connection between the two countries and would vastly improve communications in the wider region by connecting China's Belt and Road lines to Iraq and bringing Iran closer to Syria.

The office of the Iraqi prime minister tweeted: "The negotiations with Iran to build a railway between Basra and Shalamjah have reached their final stages, and we have signed 15 agreements and memorandums of understanding with Jordan and Egypt regarding energy and transportation lines." Funding for the project, which was approved by the Iraqi cabinet in April, will come from Iran's Mostazafan Foundation, which is described as a "semi-government charity".

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Export of First Oil Shipment from Jask Terminal by June

TEHRAN (Shana) - Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh said Iran's first crude oil shipment will be exported from Jask Terminal by June, adding construction of the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline has been completed.

Speaking to reporters on Monday morning, Mr. Zanganeh said the contract for developing the Azadegan oil field would be signed "with a group of domestic companies and soon."

In response to a question about why he did not wait until the end of the Vienna talks and the conclusion of the Farzad Field contract to be determined, he said: "This issue caused delays in the work. According to the signed contract, there is no problem for the presence of a foreign partner. Optionally, foreign companies can enter into this contract."

Zanganeh further said he wouldn't talk about Iran's crude oil production and exports.

"If they offer the presidency, I will not accept it and I will retire from any government position, but I will stay in politics, because politics is like life and cannot be separated from it. But I will not have a government job or position," he further said about his decision about staying in politics after the upcoming presidential elections in Iran.

Hamas Fires Rockets at Ashkelon, Be'er Sheva

GAZA (Dispatches) - Hamas' military wing says it has fired rockets at the Ashkelon and Be'er Sheva areas after the deadliest night of Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip since the beginning of relentless attacks on the besieged enclave last Monday.

In a statement early Monday morning, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades announced that it targeted areas in the southern Israeli-occupied territories with rockets in response to the Israeli regime's continued onslaught against Palestinians in Gaza.

Israeli media reported rocket warning sirens in the Ashkelon area as well as in communities surrounding Gaza and in Netivot following the Hamas rocket attack.

Warning sirens were also heard in the southern city of Be'er Sheva and several nearby communities.

The retaliation came after the Israeli military unleashed a fierce bombing attack on Gaza on Sunday. Reuters reported that the aerial bombardment involved more than 100 strikes.

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Zarif, Pope Francis Hold Private Meeting in Vatican

TEHRAN (MNA) – A private meeting was held between the Iranian Foreign Minister and the Leader of World Catholic Church Pope Francis in the Vatican City, Italy.

On Monday, the Iranian Foreign Minister met privately with Leader of World Catholic Church Pope Francis in the Vatican City, the correspondent of the National Catholic Registry in Rome reported.

Another reporter tweeted that Zarif has discussed the Middle East crisis in this meeting.

The Iranian top diplomat also met with Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States.

Tehran Hails Baghdad Role in Resolving Regional Disputes

TEHRAN (MNA) – In a phone talk with Iraqi PM, the Iranian president hailed Iraq’s role in resolving regional disputes.

Supporting the presence of Iraq as an important member of the Arab League, President Rouhani welcomed Baghdad’s positive role in mediating to resolve disputes between countries in the region.

He named the ISIL terrorist group as a significant security threat in the region and underlined that cooperation between the two countries is essential to counter this terrorist group.

Expressing discontent about the recent incidents in Iranian diplomatic sites, he stressed the need for the Iraqi government to respond decisively and quickly to these attacks.

“The United States has always played a destructive role in the region, and their presence in Iraq will not contribute to the stability and security of this country,” he said, noting that the United States has a dual role in the fight against terrorism and that its actions on the Iraqi-Syrian border are ambiguous.

Welcoming Iraq’s stance on Palestine and its condemnation of the Zionist regime’s recent atrocities in the occupied territories and Gaza, he stressed: “We expect Iraq, given its capacity in the Arab League, to make the body play a bigger role in the Palestinian issue.”

He also called for further developments in Iran-Iraq ties.



The Iraqi PM, for his part, strongly condemned the recent atrocities committed by the Zionist regime in Palestine, as well as the aggression and killing of defenseless people in Gaza. “In our consultation with the leaders of the Islamic countries and the Arab League, we will certainly take a firm position in this regard.”

He also stressed the need to seriously confront the terrorist acts of the ISIL terror group in the region and appreciated the cooperation of Iran with Iraq in this regard.

Expressing regret and apology for the recent encroachment on Iran’s diplomatic sites in Iraq, he stressed that this issue is being pursued and the perpetrators will be recognized and dealt with seriously.

Rouhani, Erdogan Say World Must Show Powerful Response to Israeli Aggression

TEHRAN (IFP) - President Hassan Rouhani and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan have called for a “strong” global response to the Israeli attacks against Palestinian people.

In a telephone conversation on Sunday, Rouhani referred to Israel’s recent “acts of aggression” in the Holy Quds and the “cowardly” killing of the oppressed people of Palestine, and said, “The issue of Palestine is the most important common issue of the Islamic community and confronting these crimes and the rapid termination of brutal attacks and killing of oppressed, defenseless people is a must.”

“Islamic countries, especially Iran and Turkey, as two important and effective countries in the region, should collaborate with each other and take advantage of all international potentialities, including the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to confront the aggressions and crimes of the Zionist Regime,” he noted.

He also stressed the importance of taking common stances and developing Tehran-Ankara relations for resolving regional crises, including in Syria and Yemen, adding, “The continuation of this cooperation within the framework of the Astana Process negotiations can facilitate the settlement of the crises.”

Rouhani also referred to the successful holding of the recent meeting of the Joint Economic Commission of Iran and Turkey, expressing hope that the economic and commercial relations, including the facilitation of banking cooperation and the activity of the two countries’ border crossings, would further facilitate.

The President went on to refer to the negotiations in Vienna for revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), stating that the Islamic Republic of Iran has laid the groundwork for the revival of the deal by showing its good will.

“Today, the entire world, including the United States as the party that has imposed sanctions on Iran, has come to the conclusion that sanctions and maximum pressures have failed.”

He said the only solution is the lifting of sanctions and observing international rules and regulations and the full implementation of the JCPOA.

“There is no doubt that if the parties to the international agreement, especially the US, have serious and good will, these negotiations will have positive and constructive achievements.”

Rouhani also referred to the conditions of Iran and Turkey amid the outbreak of coronavirus, and Iran’s achievements in controlling the fourth wave of the disease, stressing the two countries’ cooperation by sharing experiences in fighting the pandemic.

Erdogan, in turn, said, “Unfortunately, these days we are witnessing Israel’s crimes and brutal attacks in Palestine, which is very worrying.”

“The international community must show powerful, deterrent reaction to Israel’s insolent attacks on the oppressed people of Palestine,” he added. Referring to today’s extraordinary meeting of the Executive Committee of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Erdogan expressed hope that an appropriate decision would be made at the meeting to end these crimes and brutal killings.

Referring to the recent meeting of the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation between the two countries, the Turkish President stressed the need to strengthen and deepen economic and trade relations between Turkey and Iran, as two friendly and neighbouring countries, and expressed hope that the meeting of the two countries to develop strategic cooperation would be held in the near future.”

All Political Views Represented in Election

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The council responsible for vetting Iran’s presidential election candidates said that all political views have nominees in the election.

Iran’s Guardian Council spokesman Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei said on Sunday that nearly 600 people have run for office, from which only 40 have delivered sufficient documents, suggesting that others would not be considered as valid nomination.

The Guardian Council had notified Ministry of

Interior, the body responsible for candidate’s registration, of an enactment specifying several standards for nomination, though the administration announced that it would act according to the existing law as the council wasn’t qualified to legislate.

However, Kadkhodaei underlined that the council would consider valid only those who have the requirements specified by the council.

The spokesman said that the council would begin vetting nominees from Monday in accordance with the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and they would announce final results 5 days later.

The vetting process wouldn’t be affected by political views of members of the Guardian Council, he said, adding that he has seen no such approach in the past 20 years.

He said that those who weren’t qualified for the previous elections would be treated the same way in this round again, although they have the right to register.

Kadkhodaei said that the election system would move towards electronic system according to the law, however, the electronic system couldn’t be implemented in this election, as it requires specific infrastructures.

The 13th presidential election in Iran will be held on June 18.

FM Holds Talks With Italian Counterpart in Rome



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has met with his Italian counterpart Luigi Di Maio in Rome to discuss the expansion of mutual ties and international cooperation in areas of common interest.

The meeting on Monday came a day after Zarif arrived in Rome on the second leg of his official visit to Europe to hold talks with Italian and Vatican officials, following a visit to Spain, where he discussed mutual issues, regional cooperation and international developments with Spanish officials.

“During this meeting, we had good talks about bilateral relations,” Zarif said after meeting his Italian counterpart, adding that they explored ways for Italian companies to return to Iran once the negotiations in Vienna to revive the 2015 nuclear deal have concluded.

“Italian companies had set up about \$30 billion in contracts and \$5 billion in credit for their presence in Iran,” before the United States unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, Zarif said.

“Now those opportunities needed to be reconstructed... and the ground be prepared for Italy, as an old partner of Iran, to return to the country’s economic scene,” he noted.

The two top diplomats also discussed issues related to the current JCPOA discussions in Vienna as well as those related to Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq and cooperation with Persian Gulf states.

The Italian foreign minister for his part expressed his country’s interest for expanding bilateral ties with Iran, particularly in political, economic and cultural fields.

Defense Ministry to Deliver Modern Drones to Army

TEHRAN (MNA) – According to an agreement signed between the Iranian defense ministry and Army, modern drones will be delivered to the Army.

The agreement was signed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Major General Abdolrahman Mousavi and Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami on Monday.

In the first phase of implementing this agreement, the ministry will deliver 1,000 modern drones to the Army in the near future.

“This agreement will play a key role in improving the quantity and quality of UAV power of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Armed Forces,” Mousavi said.

Emphasizing that today UAVs have a very important role in various aspects of combat, he added: “Today, Iran is ranked fifth or sixth in the world considering its drone sector and we are self-sufficient in manufacturing the advanced drones we need.”

Conference to Be Held to Mark National Iranology Day

TEHRAN (IP) - Vice President for Information and International Cooperation of Iranology Foundation announced the holding of the “International Conference on Iran and Global Civilization - A Series of Global Dialogues on Iranology in the 15th Century” on the eve of National Iranology Day.

According to Dr. Hamed Forouzan, this conference will be held to expand studies in various fields of Iranology and will examine the role of Iran in a global civilization in three stages of ancient Iran, Iran after Islam, and Iran after the Islamic Revolution.

In order to expand studies in various fields of Iranology and with the approach of introducing Iran and the civilizational manifestations of this land, Iranology Foundation will focus on a series of virtual international conferences with the participation of domestic and foreign Iranologists.

For this purpose, this foundation has decided to explain the role of Iranian and Islamic culture and civilization and the position of Iranian civilization as well as the impact of this great civilization - in comparison with other world ones.

Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Khamenei, President of the Foundation, will deliver a speech during the conference. It will be accompanied by the virtual presence of prominent Iranologists from Iran and other countries.

The conference is also accompanied by the participation of the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Allameh Tabatabai University, University of Tehran, Tarbiat Modares University, the association of Persian language teachers, and the Iranian-Islamic Identity and Development Institute of Jarfa Center for Strategic Cultural Studies.

Armenia Expects Iran’s Assistance In Ending Azerbaijan’s Incursion

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Armenia

expects Iran’s assistance in ending Azerbaijan’s incursion into its territory and Baku’s efforts to destabilize the region, Yerevan’s ambassador to Tehran



Artashes Toumanian said at a meeting with Mohammad Eslami, the Minister of Roads and Urban Developments of the Islamic Republic.

Toumanian provided details from the province of Syunik where a group of Azerbaijani troops are still stationed. Negotiations for their withdrawal are ongoing.

Both the Armenian ambassador and the Iranian Minister reaffirmed the need to preserve the territorial integrity of countries and the security of borders.

On the morning of May 12, the armed forces of Azerbaijan violated the border of Armenia in the southern province of Syunik, advancing 3.5 kilometers and surrounding Sev Lake, which is situated on the border between the two countries but is predominantly a part of Armenia. On May 13, the Azerbaijani military committed more border violations against Armenia, advancing near Vardenis (Gegharkunik province) and Sisian (Syunik province).

They also discussed the establishment of the Persian Gulf-Black Sea international transit corridor, which Esmali said will contribute to both economic development and regional security.

Ambassador Tumanian stressed the need to strengthen the North-South transport corridor, noting that this is in the interests of all countries involved in the program and will help curb regional instability.

Iran, Iraq Discuss Expansion Of Agricultural Ties

BAGHDAD (IRNA) - Iran’s Ambassador in Iraq Iraj Masjedi explored ways of expanding relations in the agricultural sector with Iraqi minister of agriculture Karim al-Khafaji on Sunday evening.

The two officials discussed a variety of issues, including expansion and improvement of relations in agriculture between the two neighboring countries.

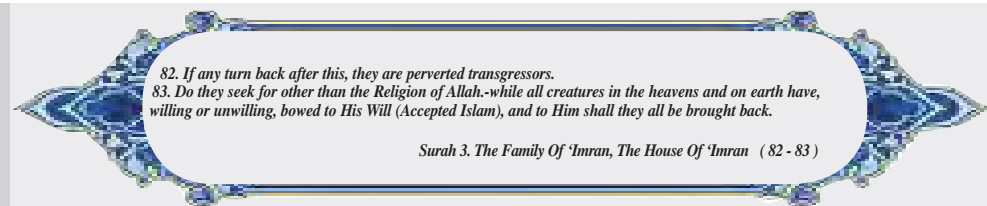
They also reviewed methods of enhancing cooperation in agriculture, as well as al-Khafaji’s trip to Iran and presence of Iraqi economic missions in Isfahan’s poultry and livestock exhibition in the future.

Ban on export of apples from Iran to Iraq was among other issues discussed in the meeting. It was decided the necessary measures be taken by the Iraqi party.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:00
■ Evening (Maghreb)	20:25
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:16
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:56



Iran Trade With P5+1 Slumped By 19% in Past 4 Years

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The spokesman of Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) says some 38.6m tons of goods worth \$24b were traded between Iran and the P5+1 countries last year that Iran's share of exports to those countries is 28m tons and worth of \$9.83b while the country's imports stood at 10.54m tons worth \$14.16b which shows 14 and 19 percent slumps in terms of weight and value.

According to ILNA, touching upon on the exports of Iranian goods to the P5+1 states, Seyed Ruhollah Latifi said that last year Iran exported 26.95m tons of goods worth \$9.07b to China which accounted for 96 percent of Iran's total exports to the P5+1 states in terms of weight, and 92 percent in terms of value.

He added that before the U.S. pullout of the JCPOA, China by purchasing 35.13m tons of goods worth \$9.1b was Iran's top trade partner which accounted for 98 percent of Iran's total exports in terms of weight and 91 percent in terms of value.

He added that this notion that the U.S. pullout from the JCPOA could reduce the share of the U.S., UK, France, Russia and Germany in favor of China and Russia is not right because Iran's exports to China have also declined last year by 8m tons but it soared \$50m in terms of value.

Latifi went on to say that Russia was the second destination for Iranian goods with 1.05m tons in weight and \$504m in value which accounts for 3.7 percent of Iran's exports in terms of weight and 51.1 percent in terms of value which shows 100 percent growth in terms of weight and 72.5 percent in terms of value comparing to the pre-U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.



He noted that Iran's exports to France last year were 2,911 tons valued at \$8.76m, and the amount of exports to the UK was 7,293 tons and worth of \$13m, to Germany were 39,197 tons worth \$233m which all indicate Iran's exports to these countries have slumped comparing to the post-JCPOA.

On the exports to the U.S., he said that 4 years ago and before the U.S. pullout of the JCPOA, Iran's exports to the U.S. were around 3,554m and worth of \$132.3m that the figure fell to 66m tons and worth of \$136,539 last year.

On the imports from the P5+1 countries, he said Iran's total imports from those five countries stood at over 10.5m tons worth of \$14.1b. He added that the value of the imports last year slumped by 29 percent comparing to the pre-JCPOA era due to the country's policy of banning imports of the luxury goods.

Latifi added that last year China with exporting 3.5m tons of goods to Iran was the major exporter to Iran. Its value stood at \$9.8b which accounted for 33.7 percent of Iran's total trade with those six countries

He added that despite increasing the weight of exports to Iran, Germany's exports to Iran slumped by 40 percent in terms of value.

Iraq Accounting for 56% of Iran's Footwear Export

TEHRAN (MNA) – In the last Iranian calendar year, Iran's shoe export hit 105 million dollars which have increased by about 36.6 percent in terms of value and 29 percent in terms of weight.

Ali Lashgari, a high-ranking official with the Association of Managers and Experts of the Iranian Shoe Industry (known as ASSOMES) gave some detail about Iran's footwear export to foreign countries.

According to Lashgari in the last Iranian calendar year, Iran's shoe export hit 105 million dollars which have increased by about 36.6 percent in terms of value and 29 percent in terms of weight.

90% of Iran's footwear is being exported to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan, he said, adding, "Iraq alone accounts for 56% of Iran's exports."

26% of these shoes are being exported to Afghanistan and the rest to Azerbaijan, he added.

However, fluctuations in currency prices and rising prices of domestic products have reduced Iran's share in \$374 million Iraqi markets, from 25 percent in 2013 to about 15.7 percent in 2020, he added.

Construction of 2 Important Projects by Chadormalu Begins

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The executive operation for construction of iron ore concentrate plant of Asr-e Novin Bahabad with capacity of 4 million tons as well as the construction of the side railway lines from Bahabad Station to the pelletizing complex of this town began in collaboration of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company, Iran Railway Company and Ghadir International Industries and Mines Development Company.

According to reports, in the inauguration ceremony, governor general of Yazd Province, members of board of directors of Ghadir Company and senior officials of Chadormalu Company were present.

Meanwhile the latest development in the mega project of pelletizing complex of Bahabad was inspected by the guests and officials of the three companies. Chadormalu owns 30 percent of the Company.



During the inspection, governor general of Yazd Province hailed the developing actions of Chadormalu Company in the province and emphasized exploitation of mega projects in the underprivileged area of the town of Bahabad and creating sustainable jobs and improvement of the economic condition in the region.

Isfahan to Host 14th Exhibition of Gems and Jewelry

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The Managing Director of Isfahan Province International Exhibition Company (IPIEC) says Isfahan will host the 14th Gems, Jewelry and Related Machinery and Equipment on 26-29 May at the Isfahan International Fairground.

Speaking at a presser, Mr. Ali Yarmohammadian revealed more details on the exhibition and said the exhibition will be held on May 26-29 with observing all sanitary protocols. He said the exhibition has enough space comparing to the malls for observing the social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He said IPIEC in line with its social responsibilities and in interaction with Isfahan Medical Sciences University and the health center of the province has given the former fairground to the anti-COVID-19 prevention headquarters in order that people can be vaccinated comfortably.



He added that the company equipped the former fairground for allocating it for vaccination of Isfahan citizens and people can drive in for vaccination.

Yarmohammadian added that the first exhibition of the year in this city with be the 14th Gems and Jewelry Exhibition and experts are

being invited to visit the exhibition and major producers of gems machinery and equipment are to attend the exhibition and some brainstorming meetings will also be held on the sidelines of the exhibition with major officials of the industry in presence.

He noted although the decision for hiding the exhibition was made late but all should work together for better holding of it with observing all sanitary protocols.

He reiterated that participants in the exhibition do not need to be concerned about paying taxes and they are not to pay taxes for this attendance.

Strategies for Implementing Islamabad-West Petchem Project Outlined



TEHRAN (Shana) - The strategies of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) for implementation of Islamabad-West Petrochemical Project were outlined at the opening meeting of the EPCC contract in the presence of the NPC CEO and senior executives of the company.

According to the National Petrochemical Company, Behzad Mohammadi, speaking on Saturday (May 15) at the meeting to start the EPCC contract for the GTPP project of Islamabad-West Petrochemical Plant, said: "Today's meeting is an important one, the employer and the contractor will work together as a management and implementation team and will move in line with the goals of the project; only their plans are different."

Regarding the features of the project, he said: "The Islamabad-West project is the first project to be built after privatization by the National Petrochemical Company with the technical savvy of the Petrochemical Research and Technology Company (PRTC). It is hoped that the activities will proceed according to the plan and reach the desired results."

The CEO of the National Petrochemical Company stated that this important and national project will be built for the first time in the country with the aim of producing propylene using available natural gas. "In the past years, several licenses were issued, but due to lack of technical knowledge, implementation stage was never reached, but now this project is being implemented with the local technical knowhow."

Construction of Islamabad-West Petrochemical Project, as the first project to produce polypropylene from natural gas in the country with an annual production capacity of 120,000 tons of final polypropylene product, began by the order of the First Vice President on February 7th.

This \$545-million project will be constructed by the National Petrochemical Company on a 54-hectare land in the Zagros Special Economic Zone with the technical knowhow provided by the Petrochemical Research and Technology Company.

During construction phase, the project will create 4,500 direct and indirect jobs.

Gov't Considering \$250m in Cheap Loans for Beekeepers

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Ministry of agriculture (MAJ) is pressing for over \$250 million in government loans for beekeepers in the country in a bid to offset losses that could afflict the world's fourth largest honey maker because of a current dry season.

MAJ's beekeeping contractor Hossein Akbarpour said that the 58 trillion rials worth of loans could help boost honey harvest this season and allow farmers to replace bee colonies that may suffer because of the lower precipitation.

Iran produced 112,500 metric tons of honey in the year to March, the fourth largest output in the world. The country has 10.6 million registered bee colonies.

Akbarpour said beekeepers would be able to use the government loans to improve their stocks of sugar and feed to compensate for lower raining this spring that could afflict their produce. He said farmers would also access cheap loans to replace their lost colonies. Reports over the winter had suggested that weather conditions had caused almost half of bee population in some of the Iranian provinces to die.

Akbarpour rejected the figure, saying bee death rate in the winter was 10-20% which he said was normal and consistent with global figures. The MAJ supplied some 15,000 tons of ultracheap sugar to beekeepers over the winter, according to government figures which shows another 17,000 tons are currently available to the farmers at a higher subsidized rate.

Iran has introduced massive schemes to encourage higher agricultural output in recent years as the country seeks to rely more on the sector for both exports and for job creation.

The government has reported an average growth rate of nearly 10% in the agriculture sector in the past three years.

Total farming output reached 130 million tons this March, up by nearly a third against March 2013.

Stock Market Able to Provide Necessary Investment for Refining Industry

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Head of Iran's Securities and Exchange Organization (SEO) has said the country's refining industry requires \$30 billion of investment for completing semi-finished projects and the capital market is the best place to provide this funding.

Speaking in an online meeting with the heads of the country's major companies active in the mentioned industry on Sunday, Mohammad-Ali Dehqan Dehnavi said the stock market can provide solutions to finance petrochemical companies and increase investment in this area.

He mentioned forming expert desks as a productive way for discussing and resolving the issues of various industrial sectors and noted that SEO is seeking to establish expert desks for all the industrial sectors active in the stock market.

MAPNA Group Producing Over 200 High-Tech Industrial Products

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Managing Director of Iran's MAPNA group has said his company is currently producing over 200 types of high-tech industrial products.



Speaking on the sidelines of a visit to Wagon Pars Company in Arak city, known as industrial capital of Iran, Abbas Ali-Abadi said: "MAPNA Company strives to establish a constructive interaction with its subsidiaries, and in this due, tries to establish connections not only in terms of structure but also in terms of culture, work ethics, and capacities."

MAPNA Group is a group of Iranian companies involved in the development and execution of thermal and renewable power plants, oil and gas, railway transportation, and other industrial projects as well as manufacturing main equipment including gas and steam turbines, electrical generator.

The company is currently collaborating with several domestic manufacturers for producing high-tech machinery and equipment needed in various sectors.

One of the companies that MAPNA is working with is Wagon Pars which is currently manufacturing 1,000 wagons for MAPNA. MAPNA took over Wagon Pars in December 2020.

Wagon Pars has a plan for manufacturing 2,500 wagons over the next five years under the supervision of the parent company MAPNA.

The group has also prepared a package to be used in the production line of electric cars or to turn regular cars into electric ones.

India Promises More Vaccines

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Some Indian states said on Sunday they would extend COVID-19 lockdowns to help contain the pandemic, which has killed more than 270,000 people in the country, as the federal government pledged to bolster vaccine supplies.

The number of deaths from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours in India has risen more than 4,000 for the fourth time in a week, with Sunday's 311,170 new infections representing the lowest single-day rise in more than three weeks.

Federal health officials warned against any complacency over a "plateauing" in the rise of infections, however, and urged states to add intensive care units and strengthen their medical workforces.



Ecuador Indigenous Party Wins National Assembly Presidency

QUITO (Dispatches) - Ecuador's National Assembly on Saturday evening elected a representative of the Pachakutik indigenous political party as its president for the next two years, with the support of allies of conservative President-elect Guillermo Lasso.

Lawmaker Guadalupe Llori won the National Assembly presidency with 71 votes in the 137-seat chamber. She previously served as a local official in Orellana province in the Amazon region and was jailed during former President Rafael Correa's government on terrorism and sabotage charges after organizing protests against oil companies.

Llori was later granted amnesty and calls the charges politically motivated.



Muslim States Condemn Israel's Barbaric Attacks Against Palestinians



DUBAI (Reuters) -The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) called on Sunday for an immediate halt to what it described as Israel's barbaric attacks on Gaza and blamed "systematic crimes" against the Palestinians for hostilities now in their seventh day.

The OIC statement came after a virtual meeting in which Saudi Arabia condemned the violation of the sanctity of Muslim holy sites and evictions of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem.

The 57-member body accused the United Nations Security Council of inertia. Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei issued a separate statement on Sunday, tweeted by Malaysia's premier, calling for an emergency U.N. General Assembly meeting.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates called for a ceasefire. The UAE and Bahrain had along with other Arab states last year broken a longstanding taboo in the region by establishing formal ties with Israel, with tacit approval from Persian Gulf power Riyadh. "De-escalation and the highest degree of restraint are important to avoid dragging the region to new levels of instability," said UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation Reem al-Hashimy.

Pre-dawn Israeli strikes in the centre of Gaza City on Sunday brought the death toll in Gaza to 181, including 47 children, health officials said. Israel has reported 10 dead, including two children.

Palestinian militants began rocket assaults on Israel on Monday after weeks of tensions over a court case to evict several Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and in retaliation for Israeli police clashes with Palestinians near the city's Al-Aqsa Mosque during the holy month of Ramadan.

Israel has retaliated with air and artillery strikes into densely populated Gaza.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud opened the OIC meeting by urging the global community to end the escalation in violence and revive peace negotiations based on a wo-state solution.

Israel sees all of Jerusalem as its capital. Palestinians want the eastern section as a capital of a future state. Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem is unrecognized internationally.

Turkish foreign ministry sources said Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called for an international protection mechanism for Palestinian civilians and told the OIC that Israel should be held accountable for war crimes and that the International Criminal Court could play a role.

His Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif urged the international community to start a "political and legislative" campaign against Israel, Iranian state media said.

Fighting Resumes in Southern Afghanistan as Ceasefire Ends

KANDAHAR (AFP) - Fighting between the Taliban and Afghan government forces resumed Sunday in the restive southern province of Helmand, officials said, ending a three-day ceasefire agreed by the warring sides to mark the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

There were clashes on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand, which has seen intense fighting since the United States began its final troop withdrawal from Afghanistan earlier this month, an Afghan military spokesman and a local official said. "The fighting started early today and is still ongoing," Attaullah Afghan, head of the Helmand provincial council, told AFP.

He said Taliban fighters attacked security checkpoints on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah and other districts. An Afghan army spokesman in the south confirmed fighting had resumed. "They (Afghan forces) started the operation... do not put the blame on us," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP.

The three-day truce initiated by the Taliban and swiftly agreed to by the Afghan government had largely held during the Eid holidays that ended on Saturday. The calm was broken on Friday by a blast at a mosque on the outskirts

of the Afghan capital, which killed 12 people including the imam leading Friday prayers.

The Taliban denied it was behind the attack which has been claimed by the Islamic State group, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist groups.

The truce was only the fourth agreed pause in fighting in the two-decades-long conflict. Violence had previously surged in several provinces of Afghanistan -- including former insurgent bastions Helmand and Kandahar.

It comes after negotiators from the Afghan government and Taliban said they had met in Doha on Friday to discuss speeding up peace talks, which opened in September but have made little headway.

"Both sides agreed to continue the talks after (Eid al-Fitr)," the Taliban tweeted.

As violence has soared, including a wave of targeted killings on Afghanistan's educated class, international efforts had been made to jump start the talks -- including a one-day conference in Moscow in March.

Turkey was also scheduled to hold an Afghanistan conference in late April but it was postponed indefinitely because the Taliban -- angered by Washington's withdrawal delay -- declined to attend.



UN Chief Warns of Uncontainable Crisis

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Sunday pleaded for an immediate end to deadly Israeli-Palestinian violence, warning a Security Council meeting that the fighting could plunge the region into an "uncontainable" crisis.

"Fighting must stop. It must stop immediately," Guterres said as he opened a Security Council session delayed by Israel's ally the United States, calling the violence that has killed nearly 200 people over the past week "utterly appalling."

"It has the potential to unleash an uncontainable security and humanitarian crisis and to further foster extremism, not only in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, but in the region as a whole," he said.

Guterres condemned the fresh violence on Sunday which killed 40 Palestinians, the worst death toll since the unrest broke out.

"This senseless cycle of bloodshed, terror and destruction must stop immediately," Guterres said.

He also renewed criticism of an Israeli strike on Saturday that destroyed the Gaza offices of two major news outlets, Al-Jazeera and the Associated Press.

"Journalists must be allowed to work free of fear and harassment. The destruction of media offices in Gaza is extremely concerning," Guterres said.

Israel launched its air offensive after Hamas, the Islamist militant movement that controls Gaza, began firing rockets in response to the Jewish state's moves in Jerusalem.

"Rockets and mortars on one side and aerial and artillery bombardments on the other must stop. I appeal to all parties to heed this call," Guterres said.

He also voiced alarm at the rise of extremist Jewish movements whose push to expel Palestinians out of Jerusalem helped trigger the crisis. "In Israel, violence by vigilante-style groups and mobs has added a further horrendous dimension to an already deteriorating crisis," Guterres said. "Leaders on all sides have a responsibility to curb inflammatory rhetoric and calm the rising tensions."

Six Rebels Killed by Myanmar Military

YANGON (Dispatches) - Six opposition rebels have been killed by the military after days of clashes in Myanmar, an anti-coup defence force made up of civilians said Sunday, as the United Kingdom and the United States condemned the military's violence against civilians.

Since the military seized power in a February 1 coup, detaining and deposing civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, a nationwide uprising has refused to back down on its demands for a return to democracy.

Bombings are reported daily and local militias have been formed to confront the army, while anti-military protests have been maintained across the Southeast Asian country and strikes by opponents of the coup have paralysed the economy.

In the western state of Chin, the town of Mindat has emerged as a hotspot for unrest, where some residents have formed the Chinland Defence Force (CDF).

"Six members of our CDF who tried to protect the security of the people in Mindat attacked [the military] and sacrificed their lives for the national revolution," said a CDF statement on Sunday.

A spokesman also told the AFP news agency that more than 10 members have been wounded this week, while five Mindat residents were arrested by the military.

With mobile data blocked across the country, details about the fighting have been slow to come out, and on-the-ground verification is made harder as locals are fearful of retaliation.

The spokesman, who declined to be named, said CDF fighters set fire to several army trucks, destroying them, and ambushed reinforcement troops, while the military has attacked the town with artillery.

By Sunday, the CDF had retreated into the jungle, he said.

"We will not stay any more in the town ... but we will come back to attack soon," he said. "We only have homemade guns. This was not enough."

He added that residents remaining in Mindat -- which has been under martial law since Thursday -- were afraid to leave their homes for fear of being targeted by the military.

The U.S. and UK embassies in Myanmar sounded the alarm on Saturday on the unrest in Mindat, calling for security forces to cease violence.

"The military's use of weapons of war against civilians, including this week in Mindat, is a further demonstration of the depths the regime will sink to hold onto power," the US embassy said in a tweet on Saturday.



Palestinian FM Slams Moves to Normalize Relations With Israel

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki has criticized countries that moved to normalize relations with Israel last year, as violence escalates between the Palestinians and Israeli forces.

"Normalization and running towards this colonial Israeli system without achieving peace and ending the Israeli occupation of Arab and Palestinian lands represents support for the apartheid regime and participation in its crimes," Maliki told an emergency meeting of foreign ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on Sunday.

"This colonial occupation must be confronted, dismantled, ended, and banned. The recently accelerated normalization will not have an impact on the sentiments of the Arab world or change their assessment."

Since violence flared on Monday, at least 192 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have been killed, including 58 children. More than 1,200 others have been wounded. In the occupied West Bank, Israeli forces have killed at least 13 Palestinians.

Israel has reported 10 dead, including two children, from the thousands of missiles fired from Gaza by Hamas and other Palestinian groups, many of which were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome air defence system.

There has also been widespread violence across Israel between Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel amid the escalation.

This has put Arab countries that have normalized ties with Israel -- Sudan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain -- in a particularly embarrassing position, having premised their peace accord with Tel Aviv on the notion that normalized relations would serve in the interest of the Palestinian cause.

The OIC's emergency meeting was hosted by Saudi Arabia, which has not formally normalized ties with Israel but is known to maintain clandestine relations.



Shanon
(adviser)

Parsian

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A billboard for IRAN NEWS PUBLISHER OF NEWSPAPERS ADVERTISING. The billboard is white with black and red text. The word 'IRAN' is in large, bold, red letters with a green-to-red gradient. Below it, 'NEWS' is in large, bold, black letters. Underneath 'NEWS', 'PUBLISHER OF NEWSPAPERS' is written in smaller, black, sans-serif capital letters. At the bottom, 'ADVERTISING' is written in large, bold, black letters, with each letter containing a small, colorful image of a newspaper cover. To the right of the main text, contact information is listed: 'TEL: 44253448-50', 'FAX: 44253234', and 'ADIRANNEWS@GMAIL.COM'. The background of the billboard features a faint, stylized image of a newspaper. The billboard is mounted on a metal structure, and the background shows a city skyline with various buildings under a clear blue sky.

Tunisia's Economy Shrinks 3% in Q1 of 2021

TUNIS (Dispatches) - Tunisia's gross domestic product shrank 3 percent in the first quarter of 2021 from a year ago, the State Statistics Institute said on Saturday, showing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the country's tourism industry.

Tourism accounts for about 8 percent of Tunisia's GDP and is a major source of foreign currency. In the first

quarter of 2020, Tunisia's GDP had contracted 1.7 percent from the same period a year earlier.

For the latest headlines, follow our Google News channel online or via the app. Tunisia, which has seen its debt burden rise and economy shrink by 8.8 percent last year in real terms, has started talks with the International Monetary Fund to seek a financial assistance package.



Inflation Fears Lurk in S. Korea As Consumer Prices Rise

SEOUL (Dispatches) - Because of rising food prices, Lee Jung-min, a 30-year-old Seoul resident, has recently turned to home gardening to substitute buying vegetables from supermarkets.

One of her main crops is green onions. By slicing off the roots of leftover green onions and putting them into a pot filled with soil and compost, Lee has successfully regrown a number of green onions enough for her to eat for a month.

"I was shocked by the price of green onions, which surged to nearly 6,000 won (\$5.31) earlier last month, when they were previously around 3,000 won, so I decided to grow them by myself," Lee said. "Green shoots have continued to emerge from the sliced roots. Over the past month, I estimate that I saved 20,000 won or more on food thanks to home gardening." Lee is among a growing number of South Koreans who have been striving to counter skyrocketing food prices by growing vegetables at home.

According to data from Statistics Korea, prices of agricultural, livestock and fisheries products rose 17.9 percent on-year in April, with prices of green onions advancing 270 percent.

Soaring prices of farm products have driven up restaurant prices, with the related index climbing 1.9 percent on-year to 113.02 in the same month, the sharpest gain since June 2019.

"Consumer prices rose amid a short supply of agricultural products and the outbreak of bird flu. Prices of petroleum products also jumped as oil prices picked up," said Eo Woon-sun, a senior Statistics Korea official. Driven by soaring food prices, the nation's consumer price index rose 2.3 percent in the same month from a year earlier, accelerating from a 1.5 percent gain in March.

The figure, which exceeded the Bank of Korea's annual inflation target of 2 percent, was the fastest on-year gain since August 2017, when the price index climbed 2.5 percent, raising concerns that Asia's fourth-largest economy may face growing inflationary pressure. The government vowed to guard against inflation risks, while seeing limited chances of inflation for the time being.

"Inflation growth picked up in March and April due largely to a low-base effect from last year when inflationary pressure remained muted amid the pandemic," First Vice Finance Minister Lee Eog-weon said on a radio program. "Given that the local economy is on a modest recovery track led by robust exports, it's too early to worry about inflation."

However, market experts say the possibility that consumer prices will further pick up over the next few months remains, in the wake of a hike in raw materials prices. "Consumer prices could rise by about 3 percent between May and June due to rising raw materials prices, coupled with the base effect from last year, when inflation slowed," said Ju Won, chief economist at Hyundai Research Institute.

Prices of petroleum products rose 13.4 percent on-year in April, the fastest since March 2017, as oil prices picked up amid a global economic recovery. Also, prices of Dubai crude, South Korea's benchmark, reached an average of \$62.8 per barrel in April, sharply up from \$20.4 the previous year, according to data from the Ministry of Economy and Finance. The central bank's monetary easing is another possible driver of inflation. Last month, the BOK froze its key interest rate at a record low of 0.5 percent amid concerns of another wave of coronavirus infections. As households and companies took out large bank loans amid the ultralow interest rate environment, the country's money supply stood at 3,313.1 trillion won as of end-March, up 11 percent from a year earlier, BOK data showed.

Uzbekistan's Economic Growth Expected to Rebound This Year

TASHKENT (Dispatches) - Uzbekistan's economic growth is expected to rebound this year and in 2022 as industry, services and investments recover following the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, but there is a remaining risk of a protracted pandemic and associated uncertainty abroad, according to a new Asian Development Bank (ADB) report.

In its annual economic publication, Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2021, the ADB projects GDP growth for Uzbekistan of 4% in 2021 and 5% in 2022.

"While the pandemic and related restrictions slashed growth in Uzbekistan in 2020, growth is expected to rebound this year and next—but a timely vaccine rollout and strong containment measures remain critical for the country's economic recovery," said ADB country director for Uzbekistan Cindy Malvicini. "Uzbekistan must also look to improve how it assesses fiscal risks, particularly from state-owned enterprises, and mobilize private sector capital for public-private partnerships to strengthen the recovery and ensure sustainable, long-term growth."

Investments are expected to remain a major driver of growth, rising on average by 9% in both 2021 and 2022, driven by the government's efforts to upgrade industrial facilities and develop social and urban infrastructure. Private consumption is



expected to grow by 7% as a result of higher wages and slowing inflation.

Inflation is projected to decelerate to 10% in 2021 and 9% in 2022 given that tariffs for electricity and natural gas are expected to remain stable. With inflation declining, the central bank has kept the policy rate at 14%. The monetary authorities are further expected to reduce lending at preferential rates, allowing market forces to determine all lending rates.

The report also called for Uzbekistan to continue improving transparency around its external borrowing. Public communication of the government's outstanding debt and contingent liabilities, as well as its terms, would help raise the public's understanding of the government's prudent debt management approach, it said.

Taiwan Upbeat on Economic Prospects

TAIPEI (Reuters) - Taiwan's economic prospects are bright and growth this year will come in as expected as long as the COVID-19 situation can be brought under control quickly, the government said on Sunday, adding that the impact of a recent spike in cases was limited.

Export-dependent Taiwan raised its coronavirus alert level in the capital, Taipei, and the surrounding city on Saturday, imposing two weeks of restrictions that will shut many venues and limit gatherings after a rise in community transmissions.

In a statement after Premier Su Tseng-chang called a meeting of top economic officials, including central bank governor Yang Chin-long and Economy Minister Wang Mei-hua, Taiwan's Cabinet said they all agreed the outlook was good. The profits of listed companies have increased significantly over last year, and export orders are also performing well, it added.

The current pandemic situation is having a short-term impact on consumers, but as long as infections can be controlled soon, added to a proposed T\$210 billion (\$7.51 billion) in government spending support, expectations for 2021 economic growth can be maintained, it said.

The Cabinet proposed the new spending on Thursday, though it still needs parliamentary approval. The sudden rise in domestic cases last week spooked Taiwan's stock market.

Su urged all departments to keep a close watch on market developments and "take necessary steps for the normal operation of financial institutions and order and stability of the stock and foreign exchange markets", the Cabinet added. Taiwan's economy grew at its fastest pace in more than a decade in the first three months of 2021 as the "work from home" boom sparked strong global demand for the island's hi-tech exports.

In March, the central bank raised its 2021 estimate for gross domestic product (GDP) growth to 4.53% from 3.68% forecast in December and has said further upward revisions are likely.

Taiwan's manufacturers, such as the world's largest contract chip maker, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co Ltd, are a key part of the global supply chain for technology giants such as Apple Inc.

Sri Lanka, World Bank Sign \$80.5m Additional Financing

COLOMBO (Dispatches) - Sri Lanka and the World Bank have signed an 80.5-million-U.S. dollar additional financing to help Sri Lanka access and distribute COVID-19 vaccines and to strengthen the country's vaccination system and pandemic response, a statement from the

World Bank said.

Faris Hadad-Zervos, World Bank country director for Sri Lanka, said the World Bank remained responsive to the health priorities of Sri Lanka as well as emergency needs.

Effective deployment of the vaccines would help Sri Lanka protect people, build human capital and facilitate inclusive economic recovery, Faris said.

The second additional financing to the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health System Preparedness Project is to purchase and deploy safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines that meet the World Bank's Vaccine Approval Criteria, to strengthen relevant health systems that are necessary for successful deployment, and to prepare for the future, the World Bank statement said.

"The government of Sri Lanka is committed to protecting our population from the impacts of the pandemic, and we have placed a high priority on strengthening and expanding the COVID-19 vaccination program," Sri Lankan Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi said. "This useful and timely resource will help us to ensure equitable vaccine deployment among the eligible population of Sri Lanka."

The COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health System Preparedness Project with a total of 298.07 million U.S. dollars has contributed to Sri Lanka's pandemic management and prevention efforts.

Project funds have supported the provision of essential works, goods, services, and consultancies for emergency pandemic management and prevention activities, including the procurement of medical and surgical consumables.

Malaysia's GDP Contraction Softens in Q1

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Malaysia remains on course to recovery this year after easing the decline in its economic output in the first three months of 2021.

The country's gross domestic product made a 0.5% contraction in the first quarter, government statistics released last week showed, extending the economic slump to five quarters as the Covid-19 pandemic persists. The figure, however, is better than the 3.4% fall in the last three months of 2020.

The perceived improvements in local demand and "robust" exports performance helped soften the continuing economic contraction, the country's central bank claimed.

"The better overall performance reflects the improvement in domestic demand and the strength in our exports, Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) governor Datuk Nor Shamsiah said in a press statement. Total domestic demand, which accounts for 94% of GDP, fell 1% in the January-March period, easing from the 4.5% decline in the previous quarter.

Exports surged 11.9%, which in turn lifted the manufacturing sector – reporting an output growth of 6.6%. Meanwhile, headline inflation inched up 0.5% from the 1.5% slump recorded in the final quarter of 2020 driven by the positive yet low uptick in fuel prices following base effect. The central bank sees another spike in the next quarter's print given a lower base from the low fuel prices recorded in the same period last year.

The ringgit fell 3.5% in value against the US dollar as the latter strengthens amid the rise in US Treasury yields, spurring the rebalancing of investment portfolio among global investors. The currency is expected to "remain exposed to periods of heightened volatility," according to BNM. With an ongoing third wave of Covid-19 infections, Malaysia reimposed a month-long lockdown across the country from May 12. This further "clouds the economic outlook ahead," according to ING senior economist Prakash Sakpal in a research note.

Covid-19 cases in the country rose above 450,000 with deaths nearing 2,000.

Given tighter restrictions, ING slashed its year-on-year GDP growth forecast for the second quarter to 13.9% from 16.7%. Yet, the central bank remained optimistic about the economy's growth prospect as it permits business activities during the lockdown.

"Despite the recent re-imposition of containment measures, the impact on growth is expected to be less severe than that experienced in 2020, as almost all economic sectors are allowed to operate," it said.

BNM notes that overall growth recovery is hinged on "better global demand, increased public and private sector expenditure as well as continued policy support." The economy is also poised to benefit from its recovering labor market, higher production in manufacturing and oil and gas and the rollout of vaccines against Covid-19.

WB Recognizes Ehsaas Emergency Cash Among Top 4 Social Protection Interventions Globally



TEHRAN (Press Release) - The World Bank has just released a report on "global social protection responses to Covid-19". This report is called the "living paper" and it is a partnership effort involving 18 coauthors and a large number of contributors. The report states that there has been "an exponential growth in social protection measures between March 20, 2020 and May 14, 2021 and that a total of 3,333 social protection measures have been planned or implemented in 222 countries or territories".

Pakistan ranks 4th globally in terms of the number of people covered and 3rd globally in terms of percentage of population covered amongst those that covered over 100 million people; the World Bank has stated that only "select countries have attained impressive six-digit levels" in this regard. Pakistan's Ehsaas Emergency Cash is one of them. The lead author of the paper is Ugo Gentilini, lead of Social Protection at the World Bank.

According to the report, Pakistan's Ehsaas also ranked high amongst the programs that did well in terms of Planned versus actual coverage rates.

Pakistan adopted an innovative hybrid targeting approach to enroll new beneficiaries combining emergency assistance for the known vulnerable with demand-based support for the "new poor". The system was end-to-end Data-driven, fully automated, rule-based, transparent, and politically neutral. Payments were biometrically verified. Ehsaas Emergency Cash delivered cash stipends of Rs. 12,000 to 15 million households last year, which meant helping over 100 million people or half the country's population.

In terms of global experience sharing, the case of Pakistan provides useful lessons for other countries that utilize unique personal identification systems. It shows that by combining phones, internet connectivity, national IDs and commercial payment systems, a digital and innovative demand-based social protection system can be created to enable those in distress to seek social support during crises. Ehsaas Emergency Cash also demonstrated how cash transfer programs can be deployed to counter socio-economic fallout due to external shocks such as COVID-19 which present a long-term predicament. The approach can also address rising inequality and advance attainment of SDGs in a post COVID-19 world.

"The Cow" to Go on Screen at Germany

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian film ‘The Cow’ by Dariush Mehrjui will be screened in Germany.

The film will be screened at Transtopia cultural center in Berlin, Germany on the sidelines of the new wave program of Iranian cinema.

This program will be held in late May 2021.

‘The Cow’ is a 1969 Iranian film directed by Dariush Mehrjui, written by Gholam-Hossein Saedi based on his own play and novel, and starring Ezzatollah Entezami as Masht Hassan.

The movie is very well-known because of its psychological and social criticisms. There are several psychological messages behind the main character’s delusion of being a cow.



China to Keep Up Momentum With Broadening Recovery

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China’s robust economic momentum looks likely to have carried into the second quarter as its factory-led recovery broadened to the consumer -- while further adding to global inflation pressures.

Industrial output probably rose 10% in April from a year earlier, while retail sales expanded 25% in the period, according to analyst estimates for data due today.

Combined with this month’s report showing a continued export boom even amid slower credit expansion, such evidence of a more widespread rebound taking hold would point to China continuing to be one of the main driving forces for global growth this year.

The country has cemented its role as the world’s factory, producing and selling everything from oxygen concentrators and masks to cellphones and home renovation supplies.

Its swift recovery from the coronavirus crisis last year not only boosted the domestic economy but also the profits of international companies, even as sales of cars, consumer and luxury goods slumped in their home markets.

As the first major nation to have entered and exited pandemic lockdowns, China’s numbers will provide a guide as to what global data may look like as economies in the developed world normalize.

“China’s April activity data should show the recovery extending into the second quarter. Investment likely picked up, adding to strong external demand in supporting industrial production. Consumption probably rebounded further as more people traveled during a major holiday.” Elsewhere this week, Japanese output data are set to reveal a first-quarter contraction and U.K. numbers will probably show inflation spiked in April. The euro area and Canada issue financial stability reviews, and central banks in South Africa, Iceland and Zambia hold rate decisions.

Central bankers will likely field intensifying questions this week about the pace of inflation after U.S. consumer price data soared past estimates. Federal Reserve Vice Chair Richard Clarida as well as regional Fed presidents including Raphael Bostic and Jim Bullard are scheduled to speak. Investors will also pour through minutes of the Fed’s latest meeting, due to be released on Wednesday. Other U.S. economic data to watch include housing starts, weekly jobless claims and existing homes sales.

Investors will be watching for the latest reading of weekly U.S. jobless claims

Meanwhile in Canada, inflation data and a press conference on financial stability by Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem are the main highlights of the week.

Japan finds out Tuesday how much the economy was rocked by a second state of emergency in the first quarter. Economists expect a 4.5% contraction, but if more resilience is shown, that’ll boost the chances of the country avoiding a double-dip recession as a renewed emergency gets extended.

Trade figures released there on Thursday should show that global demand is continuing to prop up the economy while virus restrictions limit local consumption, and inflation figures on Friday are likely to show the kind of price pressures globally that are making markets jittery remain a long way off for Japan.

Australia’s first quarter wages report on Wednesday and April jobs data due Thursday will give a pulse check on the labor market, which both the government and central bank are seeking to run hot with their stimulus double shot. New Zealand announces its budget on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Singapore and Taiwan, success stories in containing Covid-19, are both rapidly imposing aggressive restrictions at home -- and tightening travel between each other.



With the Bank of England now predicting a lower peak for U.K. unemployment as the rebound from the coronavirus crisis gathers pace, evidence of that outlook starting to materialize may be confirmed with labor-market data due on Tuesday.

Consumer prices -- possibly showing a temporary inflation spike -- along with retail sales and an index of purchasing managers are among other reports that might provide further signs of the economy’s improving health in tandem with loosened restrictions and advanced progress on vaccinations.

Meanwhile in the euro zone, whose recovery is less ripe than that of the U.K., another gauge of expansion at factories and services may help European Central Bank policy makers determine if their assessment of a pickup in the current quarter is correct.

Monetary officials scheduled to speak include ECB President Christine Lagarde and Chief Economist Philip Lane, and, in addition, the institution will release its financial stability review on Wednesday at a time of mounting global concern at elevated asset prices.

Elsewhere in Europe, Iceland will deliver its latest monetary decision, while Russian data may show that the economy there contracted 1.2% in the first quarter, just as its central bank turns more hawkish against rising inflationary pressures. Israel will also report first-quarter GDP on Tuesday -- the Bank of Israel has said it expects strong growth for 2021 at 6.3% in one of the world’s first economies to reopen after vaccinations.

In Africa, Zambia, with its currency at a record low, and Mozambique, after tightening aggressively in January, will probably both keep key interest rates unchanged on Wednesday. South Africa on Thursday should hold its repurchase rate as its economic recovery remains fragile.

On Monday in Peru, the Lima unemployment report for April may show a better reading while national economic activity for March might have jumped on improving conditions and because of the annual comparison to last year’s lockdown freeze.

Argentina’s economic activity indicator for March will also likely surge due to the same so-called base effect.

Iran to Receive 1.4m Doses of Italian-Made COVID-19 Vaccine

TEHRAN (IFP) - Spokesman for Iran’s Food and Drug Organization says the country received 1.4 million doses of the Italian-made AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine on Sunday night.

According to Kianoush Jahanpour, the vaccines will

be imported as part of Iran’s purchases from the UN-backed COVAX program.

Earlier in the day, Iran received one million doses of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine.

According to Jahanpour, these two deliveries increase the

total number of jabs imported into Iran to 5.6 million doses. So far, according to the Health Ministry’s statistics, 2.26 million doses of vaccines have been administered.

Some 1.9 million people have so far received the first shot, and more than 370,000 have received both doses.

Pfizer Boss Declines Sharing Vaccine Formula



LONDON (Dispatches) - Pfizer’s (PFE) top UK executive has hit out at calls for the pharmaceutical firm and others to forgo patents on COVID-19 vaccines, ruling out an intellectual property waiver.

Pfizer leader Ben Osborn said that sharing it could lead to a shortage of raw materials “across multiple countries” and may even mean that other vaccines may be unable to fulfil their obligations. In remarks reported by the Sunday Times he said supplies would “see a very rapid short-term impact” as a result of sharing it.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) had previously proposed to plug a gap in global vaccinations where poorer countries have fallen behind the likes of the UK and US, by letting generic vaccines onto the marketplace. The call was widely supported, attracting backing by the Biden administration as well as more than 100 countries.

The Covax scheme has so far delivered 49 million vaccine doses, but a further \$35bn-\$45bn (£25bn-£32bn) is needed over the next year to make sure most adults are immunised, the director general of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said. Pfizer has previously outlined plans to profit from the vaccine, although it sells to low-income nations at cost price.

The news comes alongside new research from Oxford University that shows both the Pfizer and AstraZeneca (AZN.L) vaccines create enough antibodies to be effective against the B.1.617.2 strain of the virus, which is a faster-spreading variant.

Hamas...

FROM PAGE 1

According to the AP, explosions rocked the city from north to south for ten minutes, lasting longer and targeting a wider area than previous air raids.

Later on Monday, Palestinian media reported that Israeli artillery shells hit the FOMCO sponge factory in northern Gaza, sparking a fire.

A resident of Jabalia was reportedly killed and another wounded in the Israeli artillery shelling.

International calls mounted for a ceasefire on Sunday, as the UN Security Council tried to issue a joint statement with that aim, only to be blocked by the US – a close ally of the Israeli regime.

Israel pounded security buildings and roads leading to hospitals in Gaza on Sunday, a day after the Tel Aviv regime targeted a tower that housed offices of news agencies, such as the AP and Al Jazeera.

With the commencement of the holy month of Ramadan, clashes erupted in the occupied West Bank after Israeli forces and settlers harassed Palestinian worshippers at al-Aqsa Mosque and elsewhere. The regime’s military also tried to force Palestinians out of their homes in Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood to build more illegal settlements.

So far, at least 197 Palestinians, including 58 children and 34 women, have been killed in Israeli air raids, and more than 1,200 people have been injured. The Sunday raids solely killed 42 Palestinians, including 10 children, according to the Gaza health ministry.

The ministry also said two doctors were killed as a result of the Israeli airstrikes.

“Today we commemorate Doctor Ayman Abu al-Auf, a knight from the knights of health workers, a scientist, skilled doctor and a model human being,” it said in a statement.

The Gaza health ministry said it would name an education hall at al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza after Abu al-Auf. The other medic killed was identified as Moean Alalol. In a Sunday press briefing, Yusuf Abu al-Reesh, the secretary of the Gaza health ministry, denounced Israeli attacks targeting health and humanitarian workers, saying the attacks have had “devastating impacts on people and the environment.”

“Residential buildings have been destroyed, schools, places of worship, roads, media offices, government buildings and business and electronic lines,” Abu al-Reesh said. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli officials have said the regime’s acts of aggression against Gaza will not conclude soon, rejecting international calls for an end to the atrocities.

The Israeli military claimed it tried to avoid civilian casualties, blaming Hamas for “intentionally locating its military infrastructure under civilian houses, thus exposing civilians to danger.”

Israel...

FROM PAGE 1

The current American administration was similarly trying to protect the regime, and had even prevented the Council from issuing a simple press release urging cessation of its bombardment of the Gaza Strip, he said.

The issue of Palestine would not be resolved without adherence to the principles of justice and the international law, Takht Ravanchi concluded, and also warned that the UNSC’s inaction concerning the Israeli regime’s brutality had done disservice to the international body’s reputation and credibility.

Iran Calls for...

FROM PAGE 1

The spokesman said a high percentage of the final draft’s blank spaces has been filled within the working groups, but what remains to be filled is also significant.

On a looming deadline set by Iran for the removal of US sanctions, Khatibzadeh said there have been talks to extend the deadline if the negotiations remain on the right path by that day.

Khatibzadeh said even if the deadline is extended, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will not be able to conduct short-notice inspections beyond the Safeguards Agreement, as Tehran has already suspended its voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol.

“A few points should be noted. First, the law of the Majlis (parliament) is binding and what has been agreed between Iran and the IAEA is within the same framework. The law of the parliament stopped the Agency’s access beyond Safeguards Agreement, and this began three months ago. And now the International Atomic Energy Agency does not have any access beyond Safeguards Agreement. We also agreed that the footage should be recorded, but not made available to them. This was a domestic decision made inside Iran,” he explained.

He added that the footage can be deleted at the end of the three-month deadline, or the agreement can be extended for one month or so. Khatibzadeh also said that Iranian negotiators insist on the country’s firm stance in their talks with the other parties.

Iran has repeatedly said that the restoration of the JCPOA must include, as first and second steps, the US removal of all of its sanctions in a way that can be verified by Iran, and then, followed by Tehran’s reversal of all of its nuclear measures as the third step.

“While we do not want the talks to be attritional, we certainly do not want an agreement to be reached that is not within the framework of the [Iranian] establishment’s high-level policies and executive instructions,” he said.

“If the conclusions reached [in Vienna] require delegations to return to their capitals, this may happen over the weekend,” he said. “We must wait for the next one or two days to see where these technical negotiations will lead.”

Asked whether he would confirm a Middle East Eye report that said Iran had asked Saudi Arabia to help sell its oil and circumvent US sanctions in exchange for limiting Yemeni attacks on the kingdom’s oil facilities”, Khatibzadeh rejected the claims as untrue and fake news.

“Our talks with Saudi Arabia are about bilateral, regional and international issues, and this news is not true,” he said.

Iran Among...

FROM PAGE 1

“The honorable people of Palestine have resisted the crimes of the occupying Zionist regime for more than a quarter of a century. They have fought and offered martyrs to show that they are the flag-bearers of the Islamic awakening,” said Velayati, who is also the secretary general of the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening.

On Sunday, Velayati told Ziyad al-Nakhalah, the secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, that Iran will continue to fully support Palestine against the Israeli regime’s atrocities.

He predicted that the divine promise on the liberation of all occupied Palestinian lands and Jerusalem al-Quds will come true.

Nakhalah, for his part, hailed Ayatollah Khamenei’s brave stance on the Palestinian issue and said no other country has adopted such a position.

Iran, Iraq...

FROM PAGE 1

The link, which has been discussed for many years, was first announced in November 2018, when Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (RAI) announced that it hoped to build a line between the two cities.

The Al-Monitor news site reported at the time: “The railway is part of Syria’s reconstruction deal ... promoting religious tourism among Iran, Iraq and Syria. Syrian opposition parties, however, have rejected the railway, believing it will entrench Iranian influence and help provide the logistic services necessary for its presence in Iraq and Syria.”

Iran’s IRNA news agency reported that Iraj Masjidi, Tehran’s ambassador to Baghdad, argued that the rail line could make Iraq a regional transport hub.

He said Iraq could become one of the “largest transit countries in the region”, and that “Iraq can be connected to China through the railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran and increase its strategic importance in the region”.

Bremen Replace Kohfeldt With Schaaf

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Werder Bremen on Sunday sacked head coach Florian Kohfeldt and replaced him with club legend Thomas Schaaf for their final league game this season after the club slipped into the bottom three of the Bundesliga.

After four years in charge, Kohfeldt, 38, has been shown the door with just next Saturday's home game against Borussia Moenchengladbach left as Bremen fight to stay in Germany's top flight.

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ISSN 1024-6053

P.O. Box: 15875-8551

Address: No 13, Pajouhesh St., Golestan II St, Golestan St.Marzdaran Blvd., Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Printed by: Honar Sarzmin Sabz

Distributed by:

Cities of Iran Cultural and Artistic Institute

Managing Director: Fereydoon Taherpour Asl

Bernal Takes Giro Lead With Stage Nine Triumph

LONDON (Dispatches) - Colombia's Egan Bernal soared into the Giro d'Italia overall lead on Sunday when he accelerated away from his key rivals to win stage nine's mountaintop showdown.

The Ineos leader and winner of the 2019 Tour de France pulled away from a select group on a gravel ski slope above the clouds with the other overall contenders only able to watch as he skipped away.

Nadal Beats a Tired Djokovic for 10th Italian Open Title

ROME (AP) — Rafael Nadal beat a tired Novak Djokovic 7-5, 1-6, 6-3 for a record-extending 10th Italian Open title on Sunday.

The Spaniard recovered from a potentially dangerous fall after tripping over a raised line to take the latest installment of the most-played rivalry in modern men's tennis.

It also re-established Nadal as the overwhelming favorite for the French Open, where he will be aiming for an even harder-to-believe 14th title starting in two weeks.

Nadal beat Djokovic in straight sets in last year's Roland Garros final.

"It's amazing I have this trophy in my hands for a 10th time, something impossible to imagine," said the world number three who also equalled Djokovic's record of 36 ATP Masters 1000 titles in his 12th Rome final.

"I remember the first final I won here in Rome back in 2005 against (Guillermo) Coria which lasted five hours," recalled the 34-year-old of his five-set battle past the Argentine.

"I really wanted this title. This had been one of the most important titles in my career. I'd won 10 in Monte Carlo, Barcelona and Roland Garros and really wanted it here too," added Nadal.

The top-ranked Djokovic spent nearly five hours on court Saturday, when he had to rally for a rain-delayed quarterfinal victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas before winning another three-setter over local favorite Lorenzo Sonego in the semifinals. Nadal played only once on Saturday, beating Reilly Opelka in 1 1/2 hours.

In the women's final, reigning French Open champion Iga Swiatek routed Karolina Pliskova with a "double bagel" 6-0 6-0.

It was the 57th meeting between Nadal and Djokovic, which is the most matches



between two men in the Open era. It was also their ninth meeting in Rome, where they have played more than anywhere else.

Djokovic now holds the slimmest of edges in the all-time series, 29-28, while Nadal holds a 6-3 advantage in Rome overall and 4-2 in Rome finals.

The 10,500-seat Campo Centrale stadium was only a quarter full due to the coronavirus pandemic. But those lucky few in attendance on an overcast day at the Foro Italico made themselves heard, shouting Djokovic's nickname, "Nole, Nole," on the big points, or "C'mon Rafa."

For the second time this week, Nadal tripped over a line that appeared slightly raised on the center court of the Foro Italico. The incident, which resulted in a bloody scrape near the Spaniard's left knee, made Nadal livid.

At 3-3 in the first set, Nadal chased down a short ball from Djokovic and whipped a cross-court passing shot for a winner. Then his momentum made him slide into the doubles alley and his left foot tripped over the outside line, causing him to roll over onto the clay.

Nadal got up immediately and jabbed his arm into the air angrily and had a word with the chair umpire, who called on court workers to hammer the line further into the clay court.

Nadal had a similar fall in his quarterfinal victory over Alexander Zverev.



ROME (Dispatches) - Polish teenager Iga Swiatek crushed Czech ninth seed Karolina Pliskova 6-0, 6-0 to win the Italian Open on Sunday before the men's 57th career showdown between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal.

The 19-year-old reigning French Open champion took just 45 minutes to dispatch the 2019 Rome winner two weeks before she opens her title defence in Roland Garros.

Swiatek, ranked 15, claimed her third WTA title having followed her Roland Garros success with a win in Adelaide in January.

"I'm overwhelmed, at the beginning of this tournament I would not have dreamed of winning it," said an emotional Swiatek, who will break into the Top 10 as a result of her run in Rome.

"When I was playing I didn't even know what was the score."

"When my coach told me it was 6-0, 6-0, I was, like, Really? Isn't that a mistake?"

"The key is just to not to think about it and just, you know, play."

"Because when you're gonna think about the score, you can actually like ruin your mindset and ruin your attitude."

North Korea Pull Out of World Cup Qualifiers

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea have pulled out of next month's qualifying matches for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the Asian Football Confederation said Sunday.

"The Asian Football Confederation has today confirmed the withdrawal of the DPR Korea Football Association from the Asian Qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022," the AFC said in a statement.

No reasons were given for the withdrawal but South Korean media reported earlier this month that Pyongyang had said it would skip the qualifiers over coronavirus fears.

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced most of the second round of Asia's preliminary tournament for the Qatar World Cup to be postponed until June.

The AFC said last month it would change the format of the tournaments so that each group of five nations would play in one host country.

South Korea was selected as the centralized venue host for Group H, which is led by Turkmenistan and also included the two Koreas, Lebanon and Sri Lanka.

North Korea were fourth in Asian qualifying Group H, but only a point behind Group H leaders Turkmenistan with three games still to be played before their withdrawal.

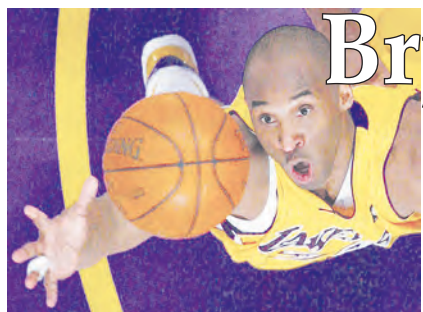
The AFC said a decision would be made later on the standings in Group H after referring the matter to FIFA's organizing committee for competitions.

The tournament doubles up as qualifiers for the 2023 Asian Cup, to be held in China.

Pyongyang's decision to pull out comes nearly a month after the country said it would not go to this year's Tokyo Olympics, citing concerns over the pandemic.

North Korea was one of the first countries to close its borders more than a year ago to protect itself from the virus that first emerged in neighboring China.

Bryant Enshrined in Hall of Fame



daughter and seven others, shocking the world of professional sport and sending his legions of fans into mourning.

Bryant's widow Vanessa, who started dating Kobe when she was 17, offered an

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Los Angeles Lakers legend Kobe Bryant was inducted posthumously to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame on Saturday, as the class of 2020 was enshrined after months of delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The five-time NBA champion died last year aged 41 in a helicopter crash alongside his

acceptance on his behalf as presenter Michael Jordan stood nearby.

"Dear Kobe, thank you for being the best husband and father you could possibly be," she said. "Thank you for never giving up on us. Thank you for all of your hard work."

The 18-time All-Star joined the NBA straight out of high school and would go on to enjoy one of the most decorated careers in the history of the sport, claiming NBA Finals MVP honors twice and earning the adoration of fans for his larger-than-life persona.

Bryant, the fourth-highest scorer in league history with 33,643 points, grew up idolizing the five-time league MVP Jordan and the two superstars' careers overlapped by a handful of years.

"Kobe would thank all of the people who helped him get here, including the people that doubted him and the people who worked against him and told him he couldn't attain his goals ... after all, he proved you wrong," said Bryant, prompting a grin from Jordan.

Liverpool Keeper Alisson Scores Winner At West Brom

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker scored a 95th minute winner as the Reds beat West Brom 2-1 on Sunday to keep a place in next season's Champions League in their own hands.

Jurgen Klopp's men would have needed favours from Leicester and Chelsea in their final two games of the campaign had they failed to beat the already relegated Baggies.

But the Brazilian was sent forward for a corner deep into stoppage time and headed home Trent Alexander-Arnold's delivery.

Liverpool moved one point behind fourth-placed Chelsea and three behind Leicester.

With Leicester and Chelsea still to face off in a repeat of the FA Cup final, won 1-0 by the Foxes on Saturday, victories over Burnley and Crystal Palace will take Liverpool into the top four.

Alisson's father died in February after drowning in a swimming accident in his native Brazil.

"It's too emotional. For these past months for everything that happened to me, to my family, but football is my life," Alisson told Sky Sports.

"I play since I remember with my father. I hope he was here to see it, but I am sure he saw it with God on his side and is celebrating." A first victory away to Manchester United in seven years on Thursday kept Liverpool's top-four fate in their own hands.



Late Suárez Goal Moves Atlético One Win From League Title

MADRID (Dispatches) - Luis Suárez scored an 88th-minute winner as Atlético Madrid rallied to beat Osasuna 2-1 on Sunday and move one win away from claiming its first Spanish league title since 2014.

Atlético enters the final round two points in front of Real Madrid, which stayed in contention by winning 1-0 at Athletic Bilbao. Madrid has a better head-to-head tiebreaker against its city rival.

Barcelona dropped out of contention for the title after losing 2-1 to Celta Vigo at home. After Osasuna took the lead with a goal by Ante Budimir in the 75th minute, Atlético rallied with a goal by Renan Lodi in the 82nd and Suárez's winner from near the penalty spot in the final minutes of the game.

Atlético's last match is against relegation-threatened Valladolid, while Madrid hosts seventh-place Villarreal.

Real Madrid kept their La Liga hopes alive following a 1-0 win at Athletic Bilbao.

Nacho Fernandez scored the only goal of the game midway through the second half to leave the defending champions two points adrift of rivals Atletico Madrid ahead of next weekend's concluding round of fixtures.

Real host Villarreal next Sunday, while Atletico travel to Real Valladolid.

