

Health Ministry Announced On Thursday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus in Iran Increased to 79,568 with 184 more Iranians Dying From the Deadly Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

The Culture Garden of the National Commission for UNESCO Was Opened in Karaj, the Capital of Alborz Province, West of Tehran. In Presence Senior Officials and President of the ECO Cultural Institute Sarvar Bakhti

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Iran Urges End to Support For Terrorists in Syria

NEW YORK (IRNA) - Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations, Majid Takht Ravanchi, has said that support for terrorists in Syria "must come to an immediate end."

Takht Ravanchi made the remarks at the United Nations Security Council session on "The situation in the Middle East (Syria - Political and Humanitarian)" held in New York.

As the ambassador stressed, "restoration of the unity and territorial integrity of Syria" should be supported.

The Iranian official further reiterated Iran's commitment to support the restoration of the unity and territorial integrity of Syria and noted that "in his recent visit to Damascus, our Foreign Minister conveyed this message to the President and Foreign Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic. He also reiterated Iran's support for the Syrian presidential elections and hoped for its success."

Committed to the peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis, we remain hopeful that the ongoing consultations would soon result in holding of the Constitutional Committee's sixth meeting. To that end, we encourage the Committee's co-chairs to engage constructively with Mr. Pederson, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria.

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Leader Urges Iranians to Participate In Presidential Election



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has backed up the Constitutional Council against recent criticism of its disqualification of some presidential hopefuls.

During a meeting via video-link with members of the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) on Thursday (May 27), the Leader said the Constitutional Council had carried out its duty.

"The respected Constitutional Council did what it had to do and what it deemed necessary to do as its duty, [and] determined the candidates," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

The Leader pointed to the criticisms that have been directed at the Constitutional Council and said the critical statements had been made with different motives. Some of the statements were made by people because they had real care for the people and concerns about a low participation in the election, he said, adding that some sides complained because their favorite candidate had not been approved.

Neither of those two groups can be found fault with, Ayatollah Khamenei said, explaining however that a third group of individuals were opposing the concept of the Constitutional Council altogether. "God will not have mercy on these people," the Leader said.

Iran's Interior Ministry released a list of approved presidential candidates - drawn up by the Constitutional Council after 10 days of vetting - on Tuesday. Several high-profile figures, including Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri and former Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani - were not found qualified to run. That sparked criticism of the Council, mainly by the Reformist camp, which had intended to field Jahangiri as its top choice.

The Leader referred to the concerns about the low participation of the people in the forthcoming election and said he did not believe that people were concerned about names.

"Rather, the people are looking for an individual who has high managerial capabilities and firm will and performance to solve the country's issues. And it doesn't matter to people what title that person holds or which party he hails from. Of course, that may be important to the political factions, but not to the general populace," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

The Leader thanked all the individuals who nominated to run. "Many of these people undoubtedly entered the scene because they felt a responsibility [before the people]."

Furthermore, Ayatollah Khamenei said, "I have to doubly thank those whose qualification was not approved and was not ascertained by the Council and who reacted nobly. Some of them even encouraged people to participate in the election."

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Japan Will Need Months To Resume Iran Oil Buys Even With JCPOA Deal

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japanese refiners will need at least three months to resume Iranian oil imports even if Tehran's nuclear talks with world powers lead to an agreement and a lifting of sanctions, the head of the Petroleum Association of Japan (PAJ) said.

"Even if the resumption of Iranian oil export is really going to happen, we'll have to consider it from then and it will take at least three months to resume import," PAJ President Tsutomu Sugimori told a news conference.

Eneos Holdings Inc, Japan's biggest oil refiner, has not started such a consideration yet, added Sugimori, who serves as chairman of the company.

The oil markets are watching the Iranian nuclear talks to see if sanctions on its oil exports would be lifted in full, with prices on both sides of the Atlantic easing amid concerns of possible return of Iranian supply.

Iran's government spokesman Ali Rabiei said this week that he was optimistic Tehran would reach an agreement with world powers soon, although Iran's top negotiator said serious issues remained.

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ViewPoint Exchanges of Claims

Although the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has reiterated that Iran will return to its the JCPOA commitments only all sanctions are removed and verified, and Majlis also has been serious in pursuing this demand, there are controversies in the remarks of officials participating in the Vienna JCPOA talks and everyday one party claims something which is denied by the other side.

President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday said that Iran has the upper hand in negotiations.

"Our negotiations now are different from the ones in 2013. Now, Iran has the upper hand in negotiations," said Rouhani, adding, "We are not talking about the JCPOA right now. The talks about the JCPOA is over and now we are talking about how to allow the United States to return to the deal," he said, adding, "We are now reviving the JCPOA."

"We agreed with the P5+1 on important and fundamental issues," Rouhani said.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Antony Blinken also denied Iranian President Rouhani's statement that there is already an agreement in principle, saying "that would be news to us.... It remains an unanswered question whether Iran is actually prepared to do what it needs to do to come back into compliance. The jury is still out on that."

In a contradictory remarks, Iran's chief negotiator at the Vienna talks says a number of hot-button issues remain to be resolved during discussions by the negotiating teams.

"The issues which have remained to be finalized and decided on are important issues," said Abbas Araqchi. "Of course, the number of these issues has decreased," he underlined.

He said good headway has been made with drawing up the text of an agreement.

"However, the remaining issues are key ones which should be decided on," Araqchi explained.

"Many of the delegations hope this will be the last round of talks and we will be able to reach a conclusion," he added.

"We can be hopeful that this will happen, but we should be a little cautious, too," Araqchi added.

He said Iran is seeking an agreement that would address its demands.

Meanwhile U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said her country will be careful in how it decides to lift sanctions from Iran if current talks in Austria on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, better known as JCPOA, bear fruit.

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Pakistani Mango Exporters Eyeing Iranian Market

ISLAMABAD (IRNA) - As mango season has started in Pakistan, producers of the fruit are ready to export the product to the international market with a special focus on the Iranian market for being a close neighbor of the country.

Pakistan is the fourth largest mango producer in the world and the second-largest mango exporter in the world. Producers of this popular fruit hope to increase exports abroad, including neighboring countries, especially Iran, as the closest destination to Pakistani mangoes.

Mango is known among the people of Pakistan as the 'King of Fruits', and according to statistics, 170 million hectares of the country's agricultural land is dedicated to the cultivation of this crop, and until three years ago, 8% of the country's horticultural crops were mangoes.

Last year, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenge of climate change led to a decline in mango exports of Pakistan, but Pakistani exporters are hoping to boost exports this year.

Exports of mango as a tropical fruit to Pakistan typically begin in late May, at the same time as the harvest season begins. Pakistan earned more than \$94 million from the export of this tropical fruit between 2014 and 2016, and according to official statistics from the Pakistani agricultural sector, the country between 2014 and 2015 exported mangoes worth \$45 million abroad.

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Bashar al-Assad Overwhelmingly Wins Syria's Presidential Election

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria's President Bashar al-Assad wins the country's presidential election by a landslide, securing 95.1 percent of the popular vote.

The senior parliamentarian said Assad had earned a total of 13,540,360 votes, extending his tenure for a fourth consecutive term.

The election turnout, Sabbagh noted, stood at 14,239,000.

Assad was contesting the polls alongside two other candidates, opposition figure Mahmoud Ahmad Marei and former MP and minister, Abdullah Sallum Abdullah.

Marei came second in the race by winning 3.3 percent or 470,276 of the ballots, while Abdullah secured 1.5 percent of the vote or 213,968 ballots.

Upon scoring a win, any given president is given a seven-year mandate in Syria.

Assad, whose father Hafez used to serve the Syrian people in the same position, first won incumbency in 2000 following his father's demise and provisional presidency of Abdul Halim Khaddam.

Right in the middle of his second term, an avalanche of foreign-backed militancy and terrorism started to sweep through the country.

The violence sought to sow chaos in the Arab country and depose Assad. In perspective, though, it also sought to damage the interests of Damascus' allies in the Arab country, and have the chaos sweep through the region.

The crisis gave way to the presence of Takfiri terrorist outfits, such as Daesh, in 2014. Unsurprisingly, the United States and dozens of its allies used the situation as an excuse to invade the country. The US-led invasion and regular attacks by the Israeli regime on Syria's defenses started to significantly interrupt Damascus' efforts to restore the situation back to normal.

The violence turned the biggest part of Syria into scenes of bloodbath and havoc.

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More Than 1.3m Iranians Are First time Voters

TEHRAN (MNA) – A spokesperson for the Election Office of the Iranian Ministry of Interior announced that in the upcoming presidential election, more than 1.3 million people will cast their votes for the first time.

It is expected that the 2021 election will be more attractive with the participation of the young generation who are enthusiastic to vote for the first time, Seyed Ismail Mousavi added.

He went on to say, “According to the election laws, all candidates have been allowed to do their campaigning activity, however, some campaign activities are not allowed, they are in violation of laws.” A very important point in this regard is the issue of health protocols that must be observed in all campaign activities, he also stressed.

Tehran Blames Israel For Violence in Region

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A high-ranking Iranian diplomat says the Middle East region will never live to witness an end to the current vicious cycle of violence as long as the Israeli regime is allowed to carry on with its atrocities with impunity.

Esmail Baghaei Hamaneh, Iran’s permanent ambassador to the UN office in Geneva, made the remarks on Thursday during a special United Nations Human Rights Council session. The gathering had been formed to address “the grave human rights situation” in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

The regional turmoil, he said, would bubble up, while the “criminals” keep avoiding accountability because of this impunity and the occupation of Palestine sustains as a result of “compromise or silence,” he said.

Instead, administration of justice and pressing of the regime to answer for its crimes against the Palestinians should turn into the international community’s urgent demand, noted the official.

Hamaneh said the regime’s supporters, who try to explain its savagery, under the pretext that it should be able to “defend itself” must also be held to account for their emboldening it and obstructing justice.

He reiterated the Islamic Republic’s assertion that “the only sustainable” way out of this crisis is holding of a referendum among all of Palestine’s residents and those who



have been displaced from the land as a result of Tel Aviv’s occupation and aggression. Such vote would enable Palestinians to exercise “their right to self-determination,” he concluded.

The session came after weeks of Israeli escalation against Palestinian worshippers and protesters across the occupied West Bank, including the holy city of al-Quds, that killed scores of Palestinians.

The regime then ramped up its attacks against the Tel Aviv-blockaded Gaza Strip that had risen up in protest against the escalation, killing more than 250 others there too.

Good Measures Taken To Hold Elections

TEHRAN (IP) - The Iranian presidential election office secretary says good preparations have been made for the upcoming election, especially in election-specific health protocols.

On the sidelines of the drawing for the radio and television debate programs of the candidates for the 13th presidential election, Esmail Mousavi stated in an interview with Iran Press: “The National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus has approved health protocols for the presidential election.”

He said the polling station finding application is developed to help people identify the nearest polling station and that voting time (7 am to 2 am (next day) has also been increased.

He said people should be confident that what was needed to hold a healthy election had been done and that there was no need to worry about health.

Iran, New Zealand Hold Bilateral Talks on Human Rights

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran and New Zealand held the first round of bilateral human rights talks on Wednesday through video conference.

The virtual meeting was co-chaired by Director General of the Women and Human Rights Department at the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the Director General of the United Nations, Human Rights, and Commonwealth Division at the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Iran and New Zealand held the talks with the purpose of getting familiar with the human rights situations of the two countries, building a better understanding of the existing realities, and exchanging experiences in the field of human rights.

During the meeting, the Iranian side elaborated on the Islamic Republic’s approach to the issue of human rights and human dignity based on Islamic principles and the Constitution as well as the developing trend of supporting and promoting human rights principles in different fields, the website of Iran’s Foreign Ministry reported.

The New Zealand side, in turn, expounded on Wellington’s efforts to promote human rights, especially in the fields of women rights and the rights of indigenous people.

Talks on the situation of women and the rights of people with disability were among other issues discussed in the meeting.

The two sides also conferred on a list of issues of mutual interest including the impact of climate change on human rights, combating xenophobia and Islamophobia, the right to development, the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, combating human trafficking, combating contemporary forms of slavery, combating child sexual abuse, combating absolute poverty, and enjoying the appropriate standards of living as possible areas for mutual cooperation at different levels, especially at the United Nations.

At the end of the meeting, the two sides expressed their interest in continuing the talks in the future.

1 Killed, 2 injured in Pipeline Blast in Asaluyeh

TEHRAN (PressTV) - One person was killed and two others were left injured after an explosion in a pipeline used by petrochemical plants in the port of Asaluyeh, located on the southwestern Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf.

Local authorities in the province of Bushehr said that they had launched an investigation into the incident that took place earlier in the day on the oxygen pipeline run by Mobin Petrochemicals.

A mobile camera footage circulating on the social media showed bystanders watching a thick black plume of smoke rising into the sky of Asaluyeh. People could be heard in the video saying that the explosion was related to Mobin.

Mobin is one of the main providers of utility services to petrochemical plants in Asaluyeh, a port where some of Iran’s largest petroleum installations are based.

The oxygen pipeline that exploded on Wednesday was for the transfer of oxygen from Mobin to two petrochemical plants in the region, according to local officials.

However, Mobin’s PR office said the facility had not been involved in the incident, adding that all units in the plant were operating normally.

Asaluyeh governor Abdolnabbi Yusefi said that the oxygen pipeline explosion had been caused by welding work.

Yusefi said two people injured in the explosion had been transferred to a nearby hospital to receive treatment for burns.

Non-fatal incidents have been reported in the Iranian oil and gas facilities in recent weeks amid a new heat wave affecting southern provinces of the country.

Election Season In Iran Is Springtime For Foreign Media



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says foreign media outlets go into overdrive at the time of elections in Iran, each time churning out new untruthful content in an attempt to drive a wedge between the Iranian people and government.

Ramezan Sharif said in a meeting with media and online activists in Tabriz City on Thursday that every media outlet follows an agenda, and foreign media seek to tarnish Iran’s image.

“Since the Islamic Revolution (of 1979), the position of the foreign media vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic has been clear, and they carry out their activities against Iran each time with new content,” Sharif said. “The election season in Iran is springtime for foreign media.”

The IRGC spokesman said hostile media always attempt to kill people’s hope in the ruling establishment by raising matters like people’s remorsefulness about having risen up in the Islamic Revolution, the lack of a bright future in Iran, and the existence of crisis-like conditions.

Sharif warned that the virtual space is too vast and there is no control on the Internet, asking parents and families to protect their children online.

Iran is holding a presidential election on June 18. Seven candidates have been approved to run. Some high-profile figures, including Vice President Es’haq Jahangiri and former Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, were not approved by Iran’s Constitutional Council to run. That sparked mainly Reformist criticism of the vetting process, and foreign media outlets have been covering the matter almost single-mindedly.

Iran Advises U.S., UK FMs to Focus on Reviving JCPOA

TEHRAN (MNA) – Addressing the US and British foreign ministers and their efforts to satisfy the Zionist regime, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman said that instead of eroding their credibility, focus on reviving the JCPOA.

Referring to the visit of the U.S. and British foreign ministers to the occupied territories, Saeed Khatibzadeh in a tweet on Thursday wrote, “To appease the sworn enemy of JCPOA, UK/US FMs spin goals of #ViennaTalks. Disappointing!”

“The brutal Israeli regime you try to placate has done its utmost to torpedo the deal,” he added.

“Instead of eroding your credibility, focus on reviving the original deal—the ONLY solution on the table,” the Iranian diplomat said.

During their visit to the occupied territories, the U.S. and British foreign ministers met with the Zionist officials and made remarks about the JCPOA.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized the strong alliance between Washington and Tel Aviv against Iran and tried to blame Tehran for the current state of the agreement.

During a meeting with his Zionist counterpart in occupied Quds, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stressed the need for a stronger nuclear deal with Iran.

Referring to his meeting with Gabi Ashkenazi, Dominic Raab in a tweet on Wednesday wrote, “Reiterated Britain commitment to a two-state solution, the importance of a stronger nuclear deal with Iran & our commitment to Israel’s security in my meeting with @Gabi_Ashkenazi today.”

Gov’t Bans Interprovincial Travel From June 1 to June 7

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The National Coronavirus Headquarters in Iran banned traffic between the provinces during the holidays of June 4 and 5.

According to the Coronavirus Headquarters resolution, interprovincial traffic is prohibited from 12:00 on Tuesday, June 1 to 12 noon on Monday, June 7.

Corona Headquarters has not yet released information about possible fines if it violates the law.

Earlier, however, with the announcement of a travel ban on orange and red cities, it was announced that the

offending vehicles would be fined 1 million tomans if they entered the red cities and 500,000 tomans if they traveled to orange cities.

Corona Headquarters had previously announced during the Eid al-Fitr holiday that non-native cars would also be fined if they traveled to yellow cities.

However, statistics indicated that more than five million vehicles were transported on the country’s roads during the five-day Eid al-Fitr holiday.

Following the Nowruz trips, the new coronavirus uprising in Iran set new records on the death toll.

Impossible to Stop Virus Behind the Borders

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman for the National Taskforce for Combating Coronavirus says it is impossible to limit the COVID-19 virus behind the borders; the virus will surely spread and surge.

In a press conference on the sidelines of ‘No Tobacco Week,’ Alireza Raisi said that Bushehr, and Hormozgan provinces were the first infected places with two African and Indian viruses.

In Busher 14, West Azerbaijan 4, and Hormozgan, about 10 cases of S-African and Indian virus were identified, Alireza Raisi highlighted.

Fortunately, these provinces performed very well to contain the viruses and about 400 people who may have been in contact with infected ones, identified and tested. In total, so far, we have found about 84 cases in the country; there maybe even more,” he said.

Raisi said: “As for the domestic vaccines, two domestically-produced COVID-19 vaccines, ‘Covo-Pasteur’ and ‘CovIran-Barakat’ are at a clinical trial, but speaking on the volume of production, ‘CovIran-Barakat’ vaccine is much higher to be used for the general vaccination of the country, but the vaccines we are looking for will enter the market from mid-July which we will receive five million doses of them.”

Regarding the ‘Covo-Pasteur’ vaccine, although it is very successful, considering the production line and volume, it may not be able to be delivered more than 2 million by September or maybe 4 million

by the end of the current Iranian year, but from next year, the production will definitely be much higher, Raisi stressed.

“Expressing hope it reaches the mass production,” said that Sputnik V is a joint project, that we are working on it.

According to Raisi, five Iranian vaccines have received the ethics code and have entered the clinical trials and phases 1 and 2.

Overall, based on the plans, it is predicted to vaccinate all target groups by the end of this year, the spokesman for the National Headquarters for Coronavirus Control said.

Iran Considers Lebanon’s Security as Its Own Security

TEHRAN (MNA) – A senior Iranian Parliamentary advisor says Tehran attaches great importance to Lebanon’s security.

The withdrawal of the Zionist regime from southern Lebanon made the Lebanese believe in their Resistance, and this victory conveyed an important message that the Zionist enemy understands only the language of force, the Iranian Parliament Speaker’s Special Aide for International Affairs said.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in an interview with Lebanese Alahed News, on the occasion of the 21st Liberation Anniversary of Southern Lebanon.

He went on to say, “This victory and other victories of the Resistance took place in the shadow of the unity of the Lebanese army, nation, and Resistance.”

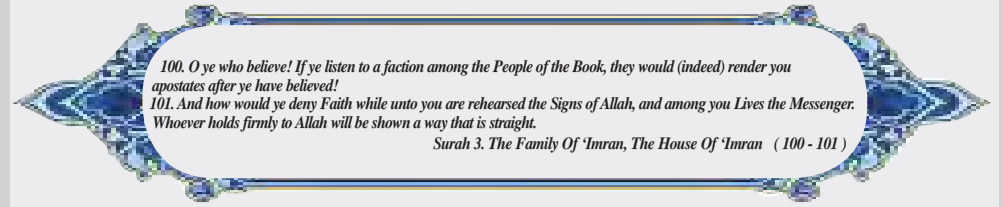
Referring to the coincidence of the Liberation Anniversary of Southern Lebanon and with the great victory of the Palestinian Resistance in the 12-day war, he said, “Today, Resistance’s voice is unity, not division; It is the voice of victory, development, and security that comes out of the throat of Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah.”

The Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to provide any assistance for the development and progress of Lebanon, considering the security and progress of Lebanon as its security and progress, he noted.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:01
■ Evening (Maghreb)	20:33
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:07
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:50



Tourism, the Source of Prosperity and Wealth in Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – President Hassan Rouhani called Tourism the source of prosperity and wealth in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Speaking on the sidelines of the inauguration of the national projects including 526 cultural heritage and tourism projects in Iran, Rouhani called the economy based on the tourism industry as the source of prosperity and growth and development for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

526 cultural heritage and tourism projects in Iran with an investment value of 2537 billion Tomans will be inaugurated on Thursday via Video conferencing by the President.

Iran's President in his speech also expressed hope that by the end of the current year through public vaccination the tourism will prosper.

The President said: "We hope that next year, with the public vaccination that will be carried out and the full observance of health protocols, we will see new conditions in Iran, and the tourism industry will prosper.

Rouhani on in the 69th week of the inauguration of important national projects, which was held via video conferencing, added: "When the number of hotel and accommodation beds across the country increases from 219,000 to 465,000, it means that we are seeing a boom in domestic and foreign tourism."

"In the first six months of 1400 (Current Year corresponding to 2021), we also face problems, but at the same time I promise that the tourism situation will improve in the last months of this year when vaccinations will be carried out across the country," he said, referring to coronavirus related difficulties which had affected tourism.

Rouhani thanked the officials of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and



Handicrafts and private sector investors in these areas and emphasized: "We hope that Nowruz will flourish next year with the Public vaccination and in full compliance with the health protocols that are observed and we will see new conditions in the country."

The inauguration ceremony was held through a video conference based in Tehran.

The projects which are located in north and west of the country will provide employment for 2,697 people.

A five star hotel in the gracious landscape of Heiran as well as renovation project of Amjad palace in Talesh both located in the northern province of Gilan are among the projects inaugurated today.

33 renovation projects together with two major tourism centers in western province of Lorestan were also officially opened by President Rouhani.

At his remarks, the president referred to return of 2,723 Iranian historical works and antiques from US and Europe to the country during past eight years.

As he stressed, such return was kind of fulfillment of the Iranian people's rights.

Every week, the president opens several important projects on petrochemicals, oil, industry, tourism, sports, infrastructure, development and health to follow goals behind "Surge in Production" which is the name of the past Iranian year (March 20, 2020- March 20, 2021) declared by the Supreme Leader.

Transparency of Affairs, Main Pillar of Development in Free Zones



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Secretary of Iranian Free Zones High Council Hamidreza Momeni says transparency in affairs, activities and performances is one of the main pillars free zones' move towards developing sustainable economy.

Speaking in the meeting of councils of the legal managers of the free zones organization, Momeni referred to the importance of the stance of legal management in the intra-organizational and extra-organizational issues and emphasized that some of criticisms regarding the transparency in the free zones are right, and to resolve it, the pathology regarding the legal cases in the free zones in terms of issue and the number should be prioritized in the free zones organizations, and move in direction of transparency and should insist on this approach.

He went on to say that the legal managers in the organizations of the industrial-trade free zones should not let any misuse of treasury happen, and this concern should be the principle for observing the public rights.

Momeni went on to say that in the field of legal, the industrial-trade free zones should help improve the quality of it, sharing of experience and exchange of information, increase the level of its cooperation and participation.

He then pointed to the recent approvals of the Expediency Council in creating seven new free zones and said that the existing free zone organizations should put on agenda the viewpoints regarding reforming the free industry-trade zones laws in the seventh plan as well as the new seven zones and required supervisions should be done regarding the new special economic zones.

Momeni also said any decision leading to financial loss of the organization due to negligence of managers or assistants of the free zone organizations should be dealt strongly and they should be accountable for compensating the losses.

Tehran, Moscow Call for Joint Investment In Agriculture



MOSCOW (IRNA) - Minister of Agriculture-Jahad Kazem Khavazi and Russian Agriculture Minister Dmitry Patrushev in a meeting in Moscow on Thursday emphasized the development of cooperation between the two states in the field of agriculture.

He said that Iran urges Russia's help in hastening to start the open negotiations between Iran and Eurasia, as well as Iran's private sector's joint investment with Russian businessmen.

Regarding Iran and Russia's views on the expansion of cooperation between the two countries in different fields, he went on to say that the new developments with priority over the agricultural sector should begin and expand.

Khavazi at the head of a delegation arrived in the Russian capital on Thursday morning to hold talks on ways to widen bilateral cooperation in agriculture.

Upon arrival in Moscow, Khavazi told reporters that his visit is aimed at expanding agricultural cooperation and exchanging technical knowledge.

Iran and Russia enjoy considerable agricultural capacities that can be used for further cooperation, the minister said. He went on to say that he will meet with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Patrushev to review potential areas for development trading agricultural products.

Visit to fishing sectors in Russia and meeting with members of Iranian companies active in Russia are among Khavazi's Moscow plans.

Russia annually imports 20 billion dollars of agricultural products.

Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali says that problems for infrastructure of dispatch of products is the main obstacle to Iran-Russia trade.

Iran, China to Cooperate in Cultural Heritage Conservation in Asia

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian deputy tourism minister Mohammad-Hassan Talebian has said that the plan to protect the cultural heritage of Asia could increase the confidence and unity of the Asian countries in introducing and protecting their valuable cultural heritage.

During the signing ceremony of the joint statement of cooperation between the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China held via a video conference, Talebian said that an effective step will be taken towards deepening bilateral ties and strengthening joint cultural cooperation, as well as protecting cultural heritage and developing sustainable increase between Iran and China, by this initiative and constant cooperation between the two states.

The Iranian deputy minister added that the strengthening of joint cultural activities between the two states must happen by holding conferences and workshops between experts and cultural heritage specialists in the field of conservation and restoration of cultural and historical monuments.

It is an opportunity to exchange information and share experiences in the context of tangible and intangible heritage and to achieve mutual interests to both states, he noted.

Talebian further noted that holding museum exhibitions and providing the necessary infrastructure for specialized meetings in the field of conservation and restoration of cultural and historical objects, cooperation in sharing



mutual experiences in the field of underwater archaeology, and holding an exhibition of cultural and historical objects resulting from exploring the Silk Road route can be another cultural activity to develop relations between the two states and other Asian countries.

Iran's Ambassador to Beijing Mohammad Keshavarz-zadeh also attended this ceremony.

He said that there are signs of cooperation between Iran and China as a common cultural heritage, including the Silk Road Caravanserai built during the Safavid era in Iran.

The two countries have suitable experiences and knowledge in the field of restoration, archaeology, and conservation of historical monuments, he added.

He pointed out that they hope that they will witness joint cultural events between the two states on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and China, for this purpose they have considered a variety of programs such as holding a mutual dedicated exhibition of museum works.

Iran and China on Saturday signed a joint statement which is expected to pave the way for further protection in the arena of Asian cultural heritage.

The joint statement was signed by Mohammad-Hassan Talebian and Chinese director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration Li Qun in the presence of the head of China Affairs Department in Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abolfazl Olamaie-Far, in the Fajr Hall of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts via videoconference.

30% Reduction in Inflows of Tehran Dams

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The province's dam inflows have fallen by 30 percent this year compared to last year, according to a Tehran Water Company executive.

Mohammad Shahriari, director of Tehran's hydroelectric and hydroelectric facilities operation office, warned of a serious shortage of water resources in the coming months, especially in the fall, on Thursday, May 27, with an unprecedented reading of this volume of rainfall reduction in April over the past 53 years.

Mohammad Reza Janbazan, managing director of the country's water and wastewater engineering company, announced yesterday that in more than 210 cities, the amount of water production and consumption is equal.

Referring to the red state of dehydration in more than 100 cities of the country, Mr. Janbasht said that this means more than 20 percent of the shortage of water consumption in the country, which is due to the possibility of temperature, the number of red cities is increasing.

The CEO of The National Water and Wastewater Engineering Company also announced the possibility of definitive water in cities with red status in the months ahead.

The head of the National Flood Assessment Committee of Iran's Major Dams Committee said earlier in May, referring to the "water bankruptcy" in the country, that about 96 billion cubic meters of water is consumed annually in Iran, while the country's total renewable water resources are about 90 billion cubic meters.

Mostafa Fadaeifard cited the reason for the water crisis in Iran as not "dehydration and drought" but "mismanagement of water resources."

Iran Among 3 World Producers of Petrochemical Catalysts

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Producing polypropylene and high-density polyethylene (HDPE) catalysts in an Iranian knowledge-based company known as Iranian Petrochemical Research and Technology Company (PRTC), has put Iran among three world producers of petrochemical catalysts.

On April 16, 2021, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani inaugurated the knowledge-based projects for the production of polypropylene and high-density polyethylene (HDPE) catalysts, which have been implemented for the first time in the country with Iranian technical knowledge.

All the equipment and machinery used in the mentioned catalyst production units have been made inside the country by capable Iranian engineers and experts. The production capacity of the polypropylene catalyst unit is reported to be 12 tons per year, equivalent to 30 percent of the needs of the country's petrochemical industry; this unit can be further expanded to fully meet the needs of the country.

2nd Phase of Razi Cov-Pars COVID-19 Vaccine's Clinical Trial Kicks Off

TEHRAN (IP) - The second phase of the clinical trial of the Razi Cov-Pars COVID-19 vaccine kicked off on May 27 at Rasoul Akram Clinic in Tehran.

"The promising results obtained from the first phase aiming to reassuring the vaccine's safety, having no serious side effects, and finding the right dose," an infectious disease specialist and the leading researcher of the 'COV-Pars COVID-19' project said.

Saeed Kalantari stated that in the first phase, the vaccine was injected in 3,5,10, and 20 doses, and based on the results obtained from the study, it seemed that 10-dose injection had the best results.

"In the 2nd phase, 500 volunteers in two groups of 250 got the jab. The first group has received a 10-dose, while the next group only received 'Adjuvant' (An adjuvant is a drug or other substance, or a combination of substances, use to increase the efficacy or potency of specific medications)," he noted.

"The vaccine's effectiveness depends on antibodies, and more or less than two months is needed to determine the outcome of the second phase, then the third phase will begin after ensuring that the vaccine is safe," he concluded.

Somalia to Hold Elections Within 60 Days

MOGADISHU (AFP) - Somalia's government announced that delayed elections would be held within 60 days, following months of deadlock over the vote that erupted into violence in the troubled country.

President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed and state leaders had been unable to agree on the terms of a vote before his term lapsed in February, triggering an unprecedented constitutional crisis.

The political impasse exploded into violence in April when negotiations collapsed and the lower house of parliament extended the president's mandate by two years, sparking gun battles on the streets of Mogadishu.



Nigerian Rescuers Pull Dozens of Bodies From Water

NGASKI (AFP) - Nigerian rescue workers had on Thursday pulled three dozen bodies from the water after an overcrowded river boat sank leaving more than 150 people missing and feared drowned.

Survivors and officials said only 20 people were rescued on Wednesday when the wooden boat ferrying passengers to a market broke apart and sank between central Niger state and Wara in northwest Kebbi state.

"Five bodies were recovered yesterday and 31 bodies today, and the recovery operation is ongoing. More bodies are expected to be found," Abubakar Shehu, a local official supervising the rescue operation, told AFP.



Israeli Strikes on Gaza May Be War Crimes



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The U.N. high commissioner for human rights said on Thursday that Israel's deadly strikes on Gaza might constitute war crimes and that Islamist group Hamas had violated international humanitarian law by firing rockets into Israel. Michelle Bachelet said her office had verified the deaths of 270 Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including 68 children, during violence this month. Most were killed in Hamas-controlled Gaza, where Israel fought militants for 11 days. The conflict ended with a ceasefire.

Hamas rockets killed 10 Israelis and residents.

She was addressing a special session of the U.N. Human Rights Council, held at the request of Muslim states who have asked for a U.N. commission of inquiry to investigate possible crimes and to establish command responsibility.

The resolution, presented by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Palestinian delegation to the U.N. Human Rights Council, was to be voted on later on Thursday. The United States, Israel's closest ally, did not sign up to address the talks, where it has observer status, appearing to shun the ninth session held on Gaza since 2006.

"Regrettably, the self-professed global champions of human rights continue to shield the occupier from global accountability, and literally provide arms and ammunitions for its widely reported war crimes and crimes of apartheid against the Palestinian people," Pakistan's ambassador to the OIC, Khalil Hashmi, said, speaking on behalf of the Islamic group.

The conflict erupted after Hamas demanded Israeli forces leave the Al Aqsa mosque compound in East Jerusalem and later launched rockets towards Israel.

Bachelet said "indiscriminate" strikes from rockets launched by Hamas constituted "a clear violation of international humanitarian law".

She said Israel's strikes in Gaza, including shelling, missile strikes and attacks from the sea, caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and fatalities.

"Despite Israel's claims that many of these buildings were hosting armed groups or being used for military purposes, we have not seen evidence in this regard," Bachelet said.

"If found to be indiscriminate and disproportionate, such attacks might constitute war crimes," she added.

Meirav Eilon Shazar, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, said Hamas was a "jihadist, genocidal, terrorist organisation" and accused the group of using Palestinian civilians as human shields to conceal its rockets.

"Each one of these rockets constitutes a war crime," she said, in reference to what Israeli officials have said were 4,400 rockets fired into Israel, most of which they said were intercepted by Israel's missile defence shield.

Hamas says it is struggling for Palestinian rights against Israeli oppression and denies using civilians as human shields. It says Israel's actions against Gaza are part of a strategy of collective punishment.

Biden Orders Intelligence Report on Covid Origins Within 90 Days

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Joe Biden ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to report to him in the next three months on whether the Covid-19 virus first emerged in China from an animal source or from a laboratory accident.

Agencies should "redouble their efforts to collect and analyze information that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion, and to report back to me in 90 days," Biden said in a statement released by the White House.

According to Biden, agencies are currently split over the two possible sources for the virus that swept the planet over the past year, killing more than 3.4 million people -- a figure experts say is undoubtedly an underestimate.

Biden's order signals an escalation in mounting controversy over how the virus first emerged -- through animal contact at a market in Wuhan, China, or through release of the coronavirus from a highly secure research laboratory in the same city.

The answer has immense implications both for China, which says it is not responsible for the pandemic, and for the United States. Representative Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, called on China to be forthcoming and for "premature or politically-motivated conclusions" to be avoided.



Armenia Says Six Soldiers Captured by Azerbaijan at Border

YEREVAN (Dispatches) - Six Armenian soldiers were captured by Azerbaijan Thursday, the latest in a series of escalating border incidents after last year's war over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The capture of Armenia's soldiers comes at a delicate time for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan ahead of snap elections next month.

Pashinyan described the situation as "tense and explosive" and called for international observers to be placed on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The Armenian defense ministry said that its forces were carrying out engineering work in a border region when Azerbaijan's army "surrounded and captured six servicemen".

However, Azerbaijan's military described the Armenian soldiers as a "reconnaissance and sabotage group".

It said the Armenian soldiers had "tried to mine supply routes leading to Azerbaijan army positions" and "were surrounded, neutralized and taken prisoner". "The situation is tense and explosive," Pashinyan said during his visit to the eastern Gegharkunik region, where the soldiers had been captured.

Speaking separately at a meeting of his security council, the prime minister suggested that international observers be placed on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The incident on the border between the historic rivals was just the latest in several months and puts additional pressure on a ceasefire brokered by Russia last year.

Last year, the two ex-Soviet countries in the Caucasus region fought for six weeks for control of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian region in Azerbaijan that had been controlled by separatists for decades.

Some 6,000 people were killed in the conflict which ended after Moscow brokered an agreement between Yerevan and Baku that saw Armenia hand to Azerbaijan large sections of territory it had controlled for decades.

The ceasefire, monitored by some 2,000 Russian peacekeepers, has largely held but tensions have persisted.

Russians Spurn Sputnik Shots

MOSCOW (AFP) - Like many Moscow residents, Davlatmo Khadamshoyeva has her doubts about coronavirus vaccines developed in Russia, and is in no hurry to be immunized.

"I haven't got the jab yet. I don't really trust it," the 23-year-old, not wearing a mask, told AFP outside an iconic shopping center on Red Square.

"The vaccine hasn't been fully tested yet," the international relations student said.

Russia -- with great fanfare -- registered the world's first coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V in August 2020.

Named after the world's first satellite launched by the USSR in 1957, Sputnik has been touted by President Vladimir Putin as "the world's best" jab, while leading independent medical journal, The Lancet, deemed it effective in a study published in February.

In addition to Sputnik, Russian scientists have also developed two more vaccines.

Still, authorities in Moscow and other cities are facing an uphill battle to win over skeptics like Khadamshoyeva.

Putin on Wednesday urged Russians to cast their doubts aside and get vaccinated, saying Russia's shots were "the most reliable and safest" in the world.

"The most important thing is health. Please think about it," 68-year-old Putin said.

Russians cite a variety of reasons for not getting vaccinated -- from the belief they will be injected with a tracking microchip to fears it will cause genetic mutation.

But independent sociologists said vaccine hesitancy was a sign of deep social woe and was evidence of a breakdown in trust between Russians and the authorities after decades of Kremlin propaganda.

"Vaccine refusal is a consequence of the relationship between Russians and the authorities," said Alexei Levinson, a senior researcher at Levada-Center, Russia's leading independent pollster.

Much of the mistrust stems from people's belief that for the authorities, politics trump health concerns, he told AFP, and that the development of the vaccine was rushed to boost the Kremlin's foreign policy credentials.

In Moscow, vaccines are available for free to Russians who want them, with vaccination centers set up at prominent places including parks and malls. At the GUM shopping center on Red Square, a jab comes with a free ice cream.

The authorities have also introduced some incentives to encourage people to get vaccinated, including free airline miles and small cash payouts to the elderly.

In a video last week, Mayor Sergei Sobyenin implored Muscovites to get immunized, saying the percentage of people vaccinated in Moscow was the lowest of any European city.



Turkey Pushes NATO Allies Into Softening Outrage Over Belarus Plane



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey pushed NATO allies into watering down an official reaction to the forced landing by Belarus of a passenger plane and the detention of a dissident journalist on Sunday, two diplomats familiar with the matter told Reuters.

NATO's 30 allies released a two-paragraph statement on Wednesday condemning the forcing down of a Ryanair flight to arrest journalist Roman Protasevich but did not include any punitive steps that Baltic allies and Poland had pressed for.

The statement was also less strident than NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's public remarks. He called the incident a "state hijacking" and "outrageous".

Ankara insisted that any mention of support for more Western sanctions on Belarus, and calls for the release of political prisoners there, would be left out of the text, the two diplomats said. Language threatening a suspension of NATO's cooperation with Belarus was also removed, they added.

Turkey's motives were not immediately clear.

Diplomats said Ankara might be trying to preserve ties with Moscow, Belarus' closest ally, and maintain economic relations with Belarus via Turkish Airlines, which has daily flights to Minsk. Another possibility could be Turkey's keenness to welcome Russian tourists this summer after the COVID-19 pandemic.

A spike in coronavirus infections last month and a flurry of foreign travel warnings have wiped out many early bookings and raised prospects of another lost tourist season for Turkey, which relies on the cash inflow to fund its heavy foreign debt.

The Turkish foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. A NATO official said: "The statement by the North Atlantic Council on Belarus was agreed by all 30 Allies by consensus. We do not go into the details of discussions in the North Atlantic Council, which are confidential."

One of the diplomats said Stoltenberg had won the agreement of all allies, including Turkey, for the final text, published on NATO's website, to avoid further public divisions. Turkey's insistence on a watered-down text upset a number of allies, particularly Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, which had pushed for tougher wording, the diplomats said. A third diplomat said Ankara's pushback was mainly aimed at using a different wording to that of the European Union, which detailed proposals for sanctions. These included a ban on the overflight of EU airspace by Belarusian airlines, preventing Belarusian airlines from using EU airports and calling on EU airlines to avoid Belarus.

Shanon
(adviser)

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J, balcony
marble fl
Fully Furn

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1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
S, J, & pkg
green yard
Fully Furn

Parsian

(\$2400)
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S/p, S, J, pkg
balcony, & F.F

Niavaran Apts
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(\$3000) 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, & F.F
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Cryptos Turn Choppy as Bounce Momentum Ebbs

LONDON (Dispatches) - Cryptocurrencies slipped but without falling through recent lows, as enough traders clung to hopes that the asset class can claw its way back from last week's plunge. Bitcoin dropped 4% in Asia to about \$37,600 and the next biggest crypto token, ether, was down 7.5% at \$2,676 - leaving both well above deep week-ago troughs but miles shy of the record highs they scaled in April. Some analysts said the falls felt relatively modest compared with recent volatility and pointed to a market finding a floor, though it is clear regulatory attention and wavering enthusiasm from Tesla boss Elon Musk are going to remain major risks.



EU Could Hit Key Belarus Exports Over Plane Hijacking

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - The EU is intent on making Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko pay a high price for the forced landing of a European airliner to arrest regime opponents, the bloc's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told AFP.

"The heads of state and government asked us on Monday (at a summit) to propose sectoral economic sanctions, something that we are not used to doing in the EU, and there are some that immediately come to mind," Borrell said in an interview Wednesday in Lisbon on the eve of an informal meeting of foreign ministers.

"Belarus is a big exporter of potash: \$2.5 billion. Everything goes through the Baltic countries. It's easy to control it, if you really want to," he said.

"One can also imagine that the gas which arrives in Europe via Belarus could come to Europe via another pipeline, and Belarus would lose the transit fees, which is not negligible," he added.

Lukashenko sparked international outrage by dispatching a fighter jet Sunday to intercept a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius carrying dissident reporter Roman Protasevich, 26, and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega.

EU leaders hit back at Minsk, agreeing to ban Belarusian airlines from the bloc and urging EU-based carriers not to fly over its airspace.

The leaders also tasked Borrell with coming up with further "targeted economic sanctions" against the Belarusian authorities to add to the 88 regime figures and seven companies already on a blacklist over a crackdown on the opposition.

"Hijacking a plane to stop a passenger, that required a strong reaction. We made decisions on the spot Monday for air transport and they will hurt. But the European leaders have asked for more. If we did not now employ the language of power, that would have been proof that we did not want to do it," Borrell said.

"Europeans are still hesitant about economic sanctions, but this time, we really have to take measures that Lukashenko will feel," he stressed.

"I don't think it will take a long time to decide. If we want to do it, we can do it quickly," he insisted.

EU foreign ministers meeting in Portugal on Thursday were set to begin discussions on the Belarus sanctions -- but no decision was expected immediately, Borrell said.

While the forced landing of the plane in Minsk has thrust Belarus to the top of the EU's agenda, Borrell warned that in the longer-term, the bloc faces more problems working out how to deal with Lukashenko's key backer Russia.

"Everything cannot be achieved through sanctions. With the dynamic 'I sanction you, you sanction me', we are entering a spiral," he said.

France, Germany Push for Historic Agreement On Global Corporate Tax Rate

BERLIN (Dispatches) - France and Germany pushed for a "historic" agreement among major economies on a minimum tax rate for multinational corporations, hoping to shore up support after skeptical European countries expressed opposition to the plan.

Spearheaded by U.S. President Joe Biden, the proposal for a 15 percent minimum tax rate has hit turbulence after Ireland's finance minister expressed "significant reservations" over it.

"The change of (U.S.) administration offers a historic opportunity... and we have to seize opportunities when they present themselves. It's now. It's now that we must act," insisted French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire at a joint press conference ahead of the upcoming Franco-German Economic and Financial Council.

His German counterpart Olaf Scholz said he was "optimistic" about the chances of sealing an agreement he said would end "disastrous fiscal competition" between countries.

"We are very close to concluding an international agreement" which will lead to "a revolution in international corporate taxation," Scholz added.

Biden's administration last week called for agreement on a unified tax rate of a minimum of 15 percent in negotiations with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the G20. But on Tuesday Ireland's Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe said the country had "a really significant concern" about a global rate that meant "only certain countries, and certain size economies can benefit from that base".

The objection carries weight because Ireland hosts an outsized number of technology and pharmaceutical firms that were attracted to the country for its lower tax rate.

Last month, Dublin's finance ministry released a projection saying it could lose two billion euros (\$2.4 billion) each year in revenue starting in 2025 if a global minimum tax rate is enacted.

Donohoe's concerns were echoed by Hungary's foreign minister on a trip to Dublin on Tuesday.

"Like Ireland, Hungary is in favor of a low level of tax," Peter Szijarto said.

Ireland's corporate tax rate is currently 12.5 percent and Hungary's is nine percent -- whereas France and Germany impose rates of almost 30 percent, according to OECD calculations. Luxembourg, also home to myriad multinational companies, said it was in favor of "minimum taxation" in order to create "conditions for fair competition" between countries -- but has not commented specifically on the proposed 15 percent rate.

Finance ministers from the G7 group of advanced nations -- consisting of Germany, Canada, the United States, France, Italy, Japan and Britain -- are set to meet next week in London, where they could endorse the US proposal. Le Maire said he, Scholz and British Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak had agreed to do "their utmost" to draw up an agreement at the meeting.

They will then build upon on that at the larger G20 session in July in Venice, Le Maire said, adding that "step by step we will manage to convince all of our partners".

Local Lockdowns Temper India's Economic Activity in April

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India's economic activity showed signs of beginning to cool off in April as several states resorted to lockdowns to control a deadly second wave of the coronavirus.

Although the three-month weighted average scores of eight indicators tracked by Bloomberg News showed the pace of activity was unchanged from March, the single month reading pointed to weakness setting in.

Even more recent data from this month confirmed the softening trend in activity. A basket of high-frequency, alternative and market indicators such as retail activity and road congestion pointed to weakness in the week to May 16, Abhishek Gupta, India economist at Bloomberg Economics, said in a report.

The growing economic pain may render next week's gross domestic product numbers a sideshow. Data on Monday will probably show the economy grew near about 1% from a year earlier in the March quarter, and faster than the 0.4% expansion in the prior three months, before India became the global hotspot for virus infections.

Activity in India's dominant services sector moderated for a second straight month in April. The IHS Markit India Services PMI eased to 54 from 54.6, with a reading above 50 signaling growth. A similar survey for the manufacturing sector showed expansion picking up just a tad.

At the same time, input costs have been rising with implications for headline inflation. That is likely to come up for discussion at next week's Monetary Policy Committee meeting to decide interest rates. Exports soared in April, mainly because of a low base the year earlier when a nationwide lockdown crippled economic activity. Shipments jumped 196%, while imports increased 167% year-on-year. Sequentially though, both measures moderated.

Top China, U.S. Trade Officials Hold Candid First Talks

BEIJING (AFP) - Top U.S. and Chinese trade officials have held their first "candid" talks since Joe Biden became president, the two sides said Thursday, as Washington scrutinizes whether Beijing is sticking to a key agreement forged during a bruising tariffs battle between the economic superpowers.

Trade relations between the two will be a major plank in the new U.S. leader's foreign and economic policy as he looks to maintain

the pressure on China imposed by predecessor Donald Trump, while looking to tread a more diplomatic line.

The countries signed a so-called "phase one" pact in January last year, in which Beijing pledged to increase its purchases of American products and services by at least \$200 billion through 2020 and 2021.

The deal came at the end of long-running negotiations during a trade war that saw each hit the other with punitive tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars worth of goods and damaged relations.

But top US trade negotiator Katherine Tai has said she is analyzing whether the terms of the pact have been met by China, with some experts saying Beijing is falling up to 40 percent short on its agreement.

On Thursday, China's commerce ministry said Vice Premier Liu He and Tai held "candid, pragmatic" talks and "constructive exchanges in an attitude of equality and mutual respect".

Under the agreement, the pair are meant to check in every six months on the progress of the agreement.

It commits China to buying tens of billions of dollars' worth of American agricultural goods -- from pork and beef to blueberries and avocados -- energy and services in exchange for slashing Trump's tariffs on \$120 billion of imports from China.

The deal also knits China into guarantees to protect intellectual property -- addressing a major US gripe that patents, trademarks and copyright are routinely flouted by Chinese businesses -- while also ensuring American banks and insurers have wider access to China's financial markets.

However, it did not deal with a 25 percent levy on a further \$250 billion of Chinese goods remains, which is potential target of a long-trailed "phase two" deal.

A short statement from the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative confirmed the "introductory virtual meeting" between Tai and He.

S. Korea's Central Bank Raises 2021 Economic Outlook to 4%

SEOUL (Xinhua) -- South Korea's central bank on Thursday raised its 2021 economic growth outlook to 4.0 percent, 1 percentage point higher than the estimate unveiled three months earlier.

The Bank of Korea (BOK) revised up its growth forecast for 2022 by 0.5 percentage point to 3.0 percent.

The 2021 outlook was lower than the estimates by local economic think tanks. The Korea Capital Market Institute and the Korea Institute of Finance upgraded their forecasts to 4.3 percent and 4.1 percent respectively.

The upward revision came after the BOK decided earlier in the day to keep its benchmark interest rate on hold at an all-time low of 0.50 percent. The bank lowered the rate to the current level in May last year to tackle an economic downturn amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The BOK upgraded its 2021 headline inflation outlook by 0.5 percentage point to 1.8 percent, leaving the forecast for next year unchanged at 1.4 percent. BOK Governor Lee Ju-yeol told a press conference that whether to hike the policy rate within this year depends on economic situations, indicating a possible rate hike later this year.

Lee noted that the central bank would not be in a hurry nor miss an opportunity to normalize the policy rate.

The country's real gross domestic product (GDP), adjusted for inflation, expanded 1.6 percent in the January-March quarter from the previous quarter, recovering to the pre-pandemic level.

The BOK lifted this year's export growth outlook for goods to 9.0 percent from 7.1 percent estimated three months earlier. The forecast for goods import was revised up from 6.4 percent to 8.3 percent.

Export, which accounts for about half of the country's export-driven economy, surged 41.1 percent in April from a year earlier, marking the fastest increase in the years since January 2011. For the first 20 days of May, the outbound shipment spiked 53.3 percent compared to the same period of last year.



Outlook for this year's current account surplus was set at 70 billion U.S. dollars, up 6 billion dollars from the forecast unveiled in late February.

Private consumption was expected to grow 2.5 percent this year. It was 0.5 percentage point higher than the figure three months earlier.

Domestic demand showed signs of recovery as the mass vaccination against COVID-19 was launched in late February. The government's stimulus measures were also forecast to contribute to the domestic demand recovery. Outlook for this year's facility investment expansion was revised up from 6.4 percent to 8.3 percent.

The number of jobs was predicted to rise 140,000 this year. It was higher than the earlier forecast of 80,000. Forecast for jobless rate was revised down from 4.0 percent to 3.9 percent.

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2nd Step of Islamic Revolution Happens in Election Turnout

TEHRAN (IP) - Candidate of the 13th round of the Presidential Election, Ebrahim Raisi, said the participation of people in the upcoming presidential election would pave the progress in the second step of the Islamic Revolution in the economic, cultural, and social arenas. On the sidelines of explaining his future plans at IRIB, Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi stressed people and political parties' participation in the election

despite all complaints about the current situation of the country. Raisi highlighted the country's numerous economic capacities and said through using the potentials the country would witness economic growth and employment of one million unemployed people in a year. "We enjoy the marine economic capacity of which only 3 or 4 percent has been used so far," he noted as an example.



EU Privacy Groups Set Sights on Facial Recognition Firm

PARIS (Dispatches) - Privacy organizations on Thursday complained to regulators in five European countries over the practices of Clearview AI, a company that has built a powerful facial recognition database using images "scraped" from the web.

Clearview's use of images -- including those from people's social media accounts -- to offer biometrics services to private companies and law enforcement "goes far beyond what we could ever expect as online users", Ioannis Kouvakas, legal officer at Privacy International, said in a statement.

While Clearview touts its technology's ability to help law enforcement, its critics say facial recognition is open to abuse and could ultimately eliminate anonymity in public spaces -- pointing to cases like China's massive public surveillance system.

Facial recognition has also been attacked for failing to distinguish non-white people's faces and women as well as it can identify white, male images -- potentially leading to false positives.

Alongside three other digital rights organizations, PI has filed complaints with data regulators in France, Austria, Italy, Greece and Britain.

"We expect them to join forces in ruling that Clearview's practices have no place in Europe, which would have meaningful ramifications for the company's operations globally," PI said.

In February, Canada's privacy commissioner found that the firm's activity "is mass surveillance and it is illegal" under the country's privacy laws. And British and Australian privacy watchdogs last year launched a joint probe of their own.

"Just because something is 'online' does not mean it is fair game to be appropriated by others in any way they want to -- neither morally nor legally," said Alan Dahi, a data protection lawyer at Austrian privacy group Noyb.

Clearview came to public prominence in a January 2020 New York Times report that detailed how it was already working with law enforcement, including the US FBI and Department of Homeland Security.

On its website, it boasts the "largest known database of 3+ billion facial images sourced from public-only web sources, including news media, mugshot websites, public social media, and many other open sources".



Founder Hoan Ton-That acknowledged to the NYT at the time that Clearview was breaching the terms of service of Facebook and other social media sites by gathering users' photos.

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Google) and LinkedIn (Microsoft) have all protested against Clearview's practices.

And last year, tech firms including Microsoft and Amazon suspended sales of facial recognition software to police forces when confronted with 2020's Black Lives Matter movement.

Amazon last week extended the original one-year moratorium "until further notice".

But "tools for conducting facial recognition are widely available" even outside the big tech companies, according to journalist Nicolas Kayser-Bril, who compiled a report on the technology for advocacy group AlgorithmWatch last year that found at least 10 European police forces using it.

Exchanges of Claims...

FROM PAGE 1

Yellen made the remarks on Thursday while answering questions about Iran and its support for Palestinian groups in the Committee on Oversight and Reform in the United States House of Representatives, according to a report by the IRNA news agency and other international outlets.



The remarks showed that the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden would have second thoughts about lifting sanctions imposed on Iran by his predecessor Donald Trump more than three years ago when he decided to abandon the JCPOA.

Talks involving Iran and six other parties to the JCPOA have continued in Vienna in an effort to bring Tehran and Washington back to compliance with the deal.

However, Yellen said the U.S. will decide what sanctions it will deem appropriate to lift if Iran resumes compliance with the nuclear deal.

"So we will carefully review what sanctions relief would be appropriate if Iran takes the appropriate steps," she said.

Yellen had made the remarks while clarifying U.S. position on Iran's support for Palestinians resisting Israeli occupation nearly a week after a war between Israel and the Gaza-based resistance group Hamas ended in a ceasefire.

It seems the war of attrition and exchange of refusing claims will continue and Iran should take its firm stand against this behavior of the West and especially the U.S.

Iranian negotiating team should not retreat any inch from the red lines set by the Supreme Leader and it should not fall in trap of void pledges of the West like the 2015 talks and signing the deal which was one-sidedly violated by the U.S.

Although it seemed the West is trying to prolong the talks in favor of a moderate and reformist government to come into power in the June presidential election, the recent developments in Iran and announcement of the final hopefuls for the election may accelerate the talks because there is no chance for a reformist government to take power and the Westerners have to come to terms with a principality and revolutionary government which will not bow down to the West's pressure.

The negotiating team should wrap up very fast the talks to take the country out of this current indecisiveness, as the economy and trade is in a stand-by condition tied to the JCPOA talks' outcome. The sooner, the better will be for the future of the country.

Iran Urges End to...

FROM PAGE 1

Parallel efforts must also be made to ensure the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria through ending the occupation of its territory including the occupied Syrian Golan, withdrawing of all uninvited foreign forces from that country, ceasing to support any separatist tendencies or illegitimate self-rule initiatives, and preventing the violation of Syrian sovereignty particularly by acts of aggression of the Israeli regime, which Iran condemns strongly.

More importantly, shielding the terrorist groups in certain parts of Syria must come to an immediate end. Attempts to portray some terrorist groups as moderates or to categorize them as good and bad terrorists must stop. They must neither be shielded nor be allowed to use civilians as a shield.

Alleviating the sufferings of Syrian people is imperative and requires constructive cooperation of the entire international community. The Council must go beyond the old debate on the so-called "cross-line and cross-border access"; depoliticize the humanitarian assistance-related subjects; and focus on measures that can actually and quickly lessen the sufferings of those in need, ensure fair distribution of aids to people under or outside the Government's control, and, more importantly, encourage and ensure the soonest return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes. Obviously, in so doing, the sovereignty of Syria must be fully respected and ensured.

In this context, once again we call for the removal of unilateral sanctions on Syria. They are irresponsible, immoral and unconstructive. Such unlawful and unjust measures only prolong the sufferings of the people, delay the return of refugees and displaced persons, hamper the reconstruction efforts, and adversely impact the political solution.

We condemn weaponizing food and medicine through sanctions, and as our foreign Minister stated in his recent visit to Damascus, we will support the Syrian government's efforts in resisting this economic terrorism."

Takht Ravanchi concluded by stressing that Iran "will continue efforts in assisting the people and Government of Syria to overcome the enormous challenges they face."

China's Industrial Profits Growth Slows in April

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Earnings at China's industrial firms grew at a slower pace in April, with high commodity prices and weaker performance in the consumer goods sector limiting overall profitability from manufacturing.

Profits at China's industrial firms rose 57% year-on-year in April to 768.63 billion yuan (\$120.22 billion), down from 92.3% in March, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed on Thursday.

For the January-April period, industrial firms' profits grew 106% from the same period a year earlier to 2.59 trillion yuan, bolstered by a virus-related plunge in activity early last year. "The improvement of corporate performance is still uneven," said NBS official Zhu Hong in a statement accompanying the data.

"The profitability of some consumer goods industries has not yet recovered to pre-epidemic levels; coupled with the high prices of bulk commodities, this has increased the pressure on the production and operation of midstream and downstream industries."

Chemical products and metals processing firms recorded some of the highest year-on-year profit increases over the first four months, according to NBS data, recovering from the COVID-19-induced slump in economic activity in the same period last year.

Profits surged 484% over January-April in the non-ferrous metals smelting and pressing industry. Synthetic fibre manufacturing posted a 650.2% profit increase.

Fast profit growth for metals processing has been spurred by higher metal prices, said Iris Pang, chief economist for Greater China at ING.

"But this good time may not last as the government is clamping down on high commodity prices," she said.

China's government watchdogs warned industrial metals companies to maintain "normal market order" during talks on significant gains in metals prices this year, China's top economic planner said on Monday.

Weaker garment and textile manufacturing profits reflect a still gradual global economic recovery amid uncertainties about COVID-19 cases in Asia, said Pang.

China's economy posted record growth in the first quarter as it emerged from the pandemic although analysts expect the brisk expansion to moderate later this year.

Officials warn the foundations for economic recovery are not yet secure amid emerging problems, including pressures on firms caused by higher raw material costs as international commodity prices rise.

Japan Will Need...

FROM PAGE 1

On Tokyo 2020 Olympics, for which Eneois is an official partner, Sugimori said he was aware that many people have concerns about holding the Games, but that it was the company's "role to support the Tokyo Olympics as a partner".

Several polls have shown the majority of the public is opposed to holding the Games this summer as Japan struggles to contain a fourth wave of infections and prepares to extend a state of emergency in much of the country.

The head of a Japanese doctors' union has even warned that holding the Games, due to begin in eight weeks, could lead to the emergence of an "Olympic" strain of the coronavirus here.

Leader...

FROM PAGE 1

The Leader said the fact that the Constitutional Council had not been able to ascertain the qualification of certain candidates did not mean that those individuals were not qualified — "they may even be highly qualified" — what it meant was that the Council had not been able to determine such a qualification based on its own recognition, reports, and the available tools.

The election is a race to serve the people, said the Leader, urging the candidates to view the election as such.

Ayatollah Khamenei also advised the candidates to refrain from mud-slinging and leveling accusations against others, or making unfeasible pledges.

"Moral considerations should seriously be taken into account. If the candidates really observe Islamic ethics in the debates and in the interviews that they give, this [behavior] will spread over to the society," he said.

The Leader also advised the candidates against attempting to break the taboos.

"To be seen and heard more, certain parties come up with the solution of breaking customs, 'violating the red lines of the establishment' — as they would say themselves. The Islamic Republic is firmly in place and is there to stay; it is an establishment that has been settled in place; the main contours of the establishment are clear. People should not attempt to somehow earn themselves a position by violating the important boundaries of the Islamic Republic. No status will be earned that way," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

The Leader also urged the Iranian people to turn out to vote in the election.

"Dear Iranian nation! Election takes place in one day, but its outcome is there for several years. Participate in the election! Consider the election as belonging to yourselves, because it does belong to you," the Leader said.

"Do not heed the words of these people who propagate that '[taking part] is futile, let's not go- we won't go to the ballot box.' These don't have the people's interests in mind. Anyone who does would never ask people not to go to the ballot box," Ayatollah Khamenei added.

The Leader said virtual space and foreign policy were not the immediate concerns of the people.

"Presently, the main and the urgent issue of the country is the economy, and the candidates should present their plans to solve the economic issues to the people and convince them that they can resolve those problems," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

Pakistani Mango...

FROM PAGE 1

In addition to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Canada, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Japan, South Korea, China, and European countries are major importers of Pakistani mango.

Patron-in-chief of Pakistan Fruit and Vegetable Exporters Association (PFVA) says Pakistani producers exported 20,000 tonnes of mangoes to Iran last year despite the challenge of the coronavirus outbreak and this year too they are eyeing the Iranian market for the development of trade ties between the two states.

"The export of 18,000 tonnes of mango to Iran is very desirable and promising compared to previous years, and we are pleased that Iran is a popular destination for Pakistani mango," Waheed Ahmad told IRNA in Islamabad on Wednesday.

He stressed this year, we plan to export 150,000 tons of mangos to different countries and we are confident that at the same time, exports to Iran will increase as compared to 2020.

The Pakistani trade activist said that 55% of mango exports from Pakistan are made by sea, 25% by air, and 25% by land; however, exporters want effective facilities, especially on land and air.

He added the situation on the borders of Iran and Pakistan is stable, at the same time we ask the customs of the two countries to agree on the issuance of licenses for Pakistani trucks carrying mangos to their final destination anywhere in Iran.

Waheed Ahmad said unloading and reloading mangoes at the Iranian-Pakistani border is a major challenge to fruit quality and may affect the cargo reaching its final destination. "If the cargo is transported by trucks from Pakistan to the final destination inside Iran, it will help to stabilize the quality of the product and satisfy Iranian traders," he noted.

He added the approval of Pakistani companies for the health and treatment of mango by the Islamic Republic of Iran is encouraging and will motivate mango exporters.

In June of last year, the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture and Pakistan's Department of Plant Protection agreed to recognize six Pakistani companies for exporting mangoes to Iran.

According to official sources in Pakistan's agricultural sector, the country produces about 1.8 million tons of mangoes annually.

Bashar al-Assad...

FROM PAGE 1

Amid the direct and indirect war efforts, Syria enlisted the assistance of its allies Iran and Russia to reinforce its anti-terror struggle. Tehran has been providing Damascus with military advisory assistance, while Moscow has been lending air support to the Syrian army's operations. The support has helped the country take great strides towards resolving the foreign-backed crisis.

The assistance began to help Syria reverse the militants and terrorists' advances and eventually defeat Daesh in late 2017. Now, the country has restored its sovereignty over almost its entire expanse, and held the presidential race to the consternation of the same foreign and regional states that have been supporting the violence.

Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad says the Western states' criticism about the presidential election in the Arab country shows they are detached from reality.

Prior to announcement of the results, Syrians took to the streets and voiced their satisfaction with the electoral process.

The elections, which had started at 07:00 a.m. local time (04:00 a.m. GMT), had been supposed to last for 12 hours. However, zealous popular reception of the event had the authorities keep the polling stations open for five more hours.

Announcement of the results were followed by scenes of jubilation throughout the country.

Andreescu Pulls Out of Strasbourg

PARIS (Dispatches) - With the French Open just days away, world No.7 Bianca Andreescu pulled out of a key claycourt warmup event in Strasbourg on Wednesday as a precaution after feeling abdominal pain.

The Canadian, who is top seed in the tournament, felt a twinge during her 6-1, 6-4 win against Maryna Zanevska of Belgium.

"I will be pulling out of my next match, because I did feel a little bit of an ab tear, and I don't want to push it at all for Roland Garros," the 20-year-old said. "I don't want to take any risks. Nothing serious though. It's a little discomfort."

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Donnarumma to Leave AC Milan as Free Agent

MILAN (Dispatches) - Gianluigi Donnarumma will leave AC Milan this summer, club director Paolo Maldini announced, with the Italy goalkeeper set to pick his new club as a free agent.

Donnarumma's Milan contract expires at the end of the month and he has been linked with moves to La Liga giants Barcelona and Real Madrid, Manchester United and even bitter Serie A rivals Juventus. "We need to show respect for someone who has given a lot to Milan, he has never disrespected us. We're going our separate ways but I can only wish him the very best," Milan legend Maldini said on social media platform Twitch.

Villarreal Win Europa League In Epic Shootout

LONDON (Dispatches) - Villarreal defeated Manchester United 11-10 on penalties to win their first major trophy after a 1-1 draw in the Europa League final as goalkeeper David de Gea missed the decisive spot-kick in a remarkable shootout.

Gerard Moreno gave Villarreal the lead 29 minutes into the Spanish club's first European final, but Edinson Cavani equalized early in the second half before Unai Emery's team prevailed on spot-kicks, extending United's four-year trophy drought.

"It's a disappointed dressing room. That's football for you. Sometimes it's decided on one kick -- and that's the difference between winning and losing," said United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

"We have to learn from it, taste this feeling and make sure we don't get it again."

He added: "We didn't turn up. We didn't play as well as we know we can."

Villarreal midfielder Francis Coquelin was delighted that the victory also led to a place in next season's Champions League.

"It feels really good. To play against a very good side like Manchester United, we knew it would be tough," Coquelin told BT Sport.

"We didn't manage to get to the Champions League through the league so to get it through the Europa League is something special -- and a first title for the club as well -- something amazing." Eric Bailly replaced the injured Harry Maguire in central defence, with the United captain surprisingly named among the substitutes despite suffering ankle ligament damage two weeks ago.

Osaka, Medvedev Looking To Avoid Joining Flops

PARIS (Dispatches) - Roland Garros has been a happy hunting ground for many of the greatest Grand Slam champions, but rising stars Naomi Osaka and Daniil Medvedev are hoping to avoid joining the list of tennis' big names who could never conquer the Parisian clay.

For every Rafael Nadal, bidding for a 14th Roland Garros triumph this year, there is a Pete Sampras -- the 14-time major winner who never even reached a French Open final.

The gruelling challenge posed by playing on clay makes the calendar's second Grand Slam event a very different test to the other three.

Sampras won Wimbledon seven times, while John McEnroe, a seven-time major victor, just once reached the French Open final only to lose an epic five-set clash with Ivan Lendl.

Japan's Osaka is already a four-time Grand Slam champion, at the age of 23, but is still yet to reach the second week at Roland Garros, or Wimbledon.

All her WTA Tour titles have come on hard courts and clay is the only surface the world number two has never reached a professional final on.

"I'm just not that comfortable on it (clay) still, and I'm not sure if it's because I need to play longer on it or if I just haven't grown up on it," Osaka admitted ahead of the Italian Open earlier this month, when she lost in her first match to world number 31 Jessica Pegula.

"Mentally it's a bit harder because you have to structure the points differently.

"There are bad bounces and stuff. I get quite frustrated. So, yeah, mentally I think it's a bit more taxing."

The difficulty of adapting to all three major surfaces is shown by the fact only 18 players -- eight men and 10 women -- have completed the career Grand Slam in history.

But Osaka may take inspiration from the last woman to achieve the feat, Maria Sharapova, who did not reach the Roland Garros final until the 10th time of asking, but eventually made it the only major tournament she won twice. Traditionally, it has been the players who rely on a big serve and net play who struggle more on clay.



Geronimo Rulli with a dipping effort from distance.

Jeremy Pino, who at 18 years and 218 days broke Iker Casillas' record as the youngest Spanish player to start a major European final, scuffed wide on the counter, but Villarreal were soon ahead.

Dani Parejo swung in a free-kick from the left and Moreno peeled away from Luke Shaw and Victor Lindelof, steering beyond De Gea as the Swede desperately tugged at his shirt.

Moreno's 82nd goal for Villarreal equaled the club record of former Manchester United forward Giuseppe Rossi. But it also sparked a reaction from United, as a battling Scott McTominay watched his shot deflected over before Mason Greenwood burst into the area and sent in a fizzing cross that Raul Albiol nearly diverted into his own net.

Another Parejo set-piece caused panic in the United box right after half-time, Manu Trigueros crossing back towards goal before the ball was scrambled clear with Moreno and Carlos Bacca lurking dangerously. Alfonso Pedraza was perhaps fortunate no further action was taken when he appeared to catch Greenwood in the Villarreal area, although United benefitted from a slice of luck to level.

A headed clearance at a corner dropped to Rashford, whose dragged volley ricocheted into the path of Cavani to stab home with Rulli unable to recover after anticipating the initial shot. It was the Uruguayan's sixth goal of the competition this season, all coming in his past four matches, and one that handed United the momentum.

Weariness and a raft of substitutions slowed the tempo in the closing stages as the rain intensified with penalties almost inevitable. The first 21 penalties were successfully converted before De Gea had his attempt palmed away by Rulli as United lost for the sixth time in seven shootouts, handing Emery a record fourth Europa League crown.

Zidane Resigns as Real Madrid Coach

MADRID (Dispatches) - Zinedine Zidane has resigned as Real Madrid manager with immediate effect, the Spanish club said Thursday just days after they were beaten to the La Liga title by Atletico Madrid.

The Frenchman's departure comes at the end of a disappointing campaign for the 13-time European champions, who also lost to Chelsea in the Champions League semi-finals, as they failed to win a trophy for the first time in 11 seasons.

"We must now respect his decision and express our gratitude for his professionalism, dedication and passion over the years and what he means to Real Madrid," a club statement said.

"Zidane is one of Real Madrid's great icons and his legacy extends beyond what he has achieved as a coach and player at our club."

Only 10 days ago Zidane, who has a contract until 2022, denied press speculation he had already told his players he would be leaving at the end of the season.

"How am I going to tell my players that I am going now? It's a lie," he said after a 1-0 win at Athletic Bilbao.

"I'm focused on this season. There is a game left and we are going to give everything. I only care what happens in this finale," he said at the time.

But, perhaps tellingly, he added: "The rest, we will see at the end of the season."

The announcement marks the end of Zidane's second spell in charge of the Spanish giants.

Allegri Agrees to Coach Juventus



It would mark the end of a disappointing year in charge for Pirlo, who was appointed last summer with no prior coaching experience and could only lead Juventus to fourth

ROME (Reuters) - Juventus have sacked coach Andrea Pirlo and replaced him with former manager Massimiliano Allegri, Italian media reported on Thursday.

Sky Italia said that Allegri will return to the Turin club for a second spell two years on from his departure, after reaching an agreement with the Juve hierarchy.

place following nine consecutive title wins.

Juve pushed to complete the deal overnight amid concerns that other clubs could make a move for Allegri, Sky Italia reported, after Inter Milan terminated Antonio Conte's contract and Spanish media reported Zinedine Zidane is leaving Real Madrid.

Confirmation is expected to arrive once the two parties agree on whether Allegri will sign on for three or four years, according to reports.

Reuters has contacted Juventus for confirmation.

Allegri won five Serie A titles in a row in his first spell in Turin between 2014 and 2019, as well as lifting the Coppa Italia four times and finishing as Champions League runners-up twice.

76ers Rout Wizards to Seize Control

LOS ANGELES (AFP) - Ben Simmons silenced the critics with a 22 point, nine rebound, eight assist performance as the Philadelphia 76ers routed the Washington Wizards 120-95 to grab a 2-0 playoff series lead.

Joel Embiid also scored 22 points and grabbed seven rebounds as the heavily-favored Sixers got contributions from a number of players including starting power forward Tobias Harris, who had 19 points and nine rebounds.

Simmons scored 12 of his 22 in the first quarter, delivering a breakout playoff performance after being criticized for scoring just six points in Sunday's game one of the series.

"I'm here to win and I'm doing what I need to do to help my team win, whatever it is. I'm not trying to prove anybody wrong or anything like that. I'm trying to do my job to win," Simmons said. The top-seeded 76ers now have a firm lead in the best-of-seven East series with game three scheduled for Saturday in Washington.

"I told him, 'You've got all the space and all the time in the world. Just attack,'" said Embiid of Simmons. "He's physical and he's athletic and he can make plays."

The Wizards weaved their way into the postseason by grabbing the eighth and final seed, but it hasn't been an easy road.

Their frustrations mounted when Russell Westbrook left the game with an injury and then had a run-in with a Philadelphia fan as he was walking down the tunnel.



Rashford Receives Barrage of Racial Abuse Online

LONDON (Reuters) - Manchester United forward Marcus Rashford said he has been subjected to "at least 70 racial slurs" on social media following Wednesday's defeat by Villarreal in the Europa League final.

United were beaten by Villarreal 11-10 in a shootout after a 1-1 draw following extra time in Gdansk.

"At least 70 racial slurs on my social accounts counted so far," Rashford tweeted. "For those working to make me feel any worse than I already do, good luck trying."

United tweeted after the game players were subjected to "disgraceful racist abuse" and urged users to report any form of abuse or discrimination through their online reporting tool.

A host of players at Premier League clubs have been targeted in the past few months, including United's Anthony Martial, Manchester City's Raheem Sterling, Liverpool's Trent-Alexander Arnold and Sadio Mane, and Chelsea's Reece James.

In February, English football bodies sent an open letter to Facebook and Twitter, urging blocking and swift takedowns of offensive posts, as well as an improved verification process for users.

Instagram has announced new measures and Twitter vowed to continue its efforts after taking action on over 700 cases of abuse related to soccer in Britain in 2019.

