

Health Ministry Announced on Saturday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to 129,549 With 87 More Iranians Killed by the Deadly Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Five Iranian and Turkish Prisoners Have Been Extradited to Their Homes Through Bazargan Border Point in Northwestern Iran, Attorney General Ahmadali Khadem Arab-Baghi Said on Saturday

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AEOI Chief Warns Zionist Regime of Threatening Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) – Head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI) Mohammad Eslami warned the Zionist regime of their threats towards Iran.

Mohammad Eslami in an interview with Al-Masirah said that the Zionist regime should notice its poor capability in the first place before threatening Iranian nuclear sites.

AEOI chief went on to say that in its national strategy, Iran has never sought and will not seek to acquire nuclear weapons, noting that the country acts in accordance with the standards and the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). No deviation has been observed in Iran's nuclear program during all of the inspections that have been carried out from Iran's nuclear sites so far, Eslami added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Mohammad Eslami pointed that arrogant powers think that they can bit the Iranian revolution by assassinating an Iranian nuclear scientist, saying that these actions not only have not succeeded in weakening Iran's nuclear program but also strengthened it and led to the development of its peaceful nuclear activities.

The upcoming Vienna talks will be about the return of the other sides to fulfill their obligations, not about nuclear issues, Eslami noted.

He added that while the other parties to JCPOA have not adhered to the commitments under the nuclear deal blame Iran.

Iran Resolute on Keeping Constructive Cooperation With IAEA

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian diplomat with the country's permanent mission to international organizations in Vienna has reiterated Iran's full commitment to the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA), saying Tehran is resolute on continuing constructive cooperation with the UN nuclear agency in line with its commitments under the CSA.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is committed to its commitments under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the [International Atomic Energy] Agency and has made its utmost efforts in this regard to remove the IAEA's technical concerns," Mohammad Reza Ghaebi, who serves as the acting head of Iran's mission in the Austrian capital and Tehran's charge d'affaires there, said on Friday.

He added that there is no safeguard issue about Iran's current nuclear activities as it has always been verified in various IAEA reports in the past.

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Iran Navy to Unveil Modern Maritime Equipment Soon



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's navy force will unveil its most modern maritime equipment in the very near future in line with meeting the domestic demands and thwarting the threats against the country, Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani said.

Iran has the highest capability and potential, equipped with the most modern technology in the field of operation, submarines and heavy- and light-destroyers in different classes, Irani stated.

Today, lifting or imposing sanctions in the military field has no value for Iranian people, the Iran's army navy force commander said.

Speaking in a news conference on the occasion of Iran's Army navy Day on Saturday, Irani pointed to the salient achievements of navy Force of the country and said that Iran's navy Force is shining like a gem in the Persian Gulf region.

7th of Azar (Nov. 27) shows the bravery and self-sacrifice of Iranian soldiers and combatants who managed to cut the malicious hands of enemies in a tough condition and unequal war during the eight years of Sacred Defense (Iraqi imposed war against Iran in 1980-1988).

Apart from carrying out its maritime operation from Strait of Hormuz to North Persian Gulf, today, Iran's navy Force is carrying out very vital and sensitive operations in depth of Indian Ocean and Red Sea and has shown excellent maritime operation in line with bringing about security for while region and the world, he emphasized.

In response to a question on the impacts of sanctions on defense industries, Iran's top navy commander noted that, benefitted from high potentials and capabilities, sanctions imposed against the country have not had any impact on Iran's navy force.

He then pointed to the joint Zolfaghar-1400 drill recently held in the country and added that Iran's navy managed to gain salient achievements in the drill in maritime sector successfully.

Stating that navy Force is an equipment-oriented, scientific-, political-, military- and international force, Irani stressed, "Accordingly, Iran's navy force will unveil most modern maritime equipment in the very near future in line with meeting the domestic demands and thwarting the future threats against the country."

The top commander has also unveiled plans to manufacture a new homegrown heavy submarine.

Irani said the navy is designing a new class of heavy submarine, called "Be'sat", adding the construction of the new submarine will begin soon.

Highlighting the navy's success in combating threats to Iranian vessels, the commander stressed the security of the trade ships has been provided a hundred percent.

Vowing Iran's continued strong presence in international waters, the commander noted Iran has maintained its naval equipment updated and seeks to develop new gear and increase the number of vessels.

Regarding the importance of Iran's Navy in the region, the naval commander noted that when Iran attends international summits, most participants admit how difficult it is for the Islamic Republic's Navy to be at sea despite sanctions.

"When an Iranian Navy fleet is present at sea, it independently provides security, which indicates a very high level of its [Iranian Navy] effectiveness," he said.

"In places where Iran has a full presence and escorts its ships, I dare say that many foreign ships cross the border where Iran's navy is present, and this indicates the high power of the country's scientists and craftsmen," he pointed.

He also said that all over the world, a vessel is the sign of a country's territory with its flag hailing, so when Iran escorts 2,000 kilometers away and maintains security, it means that Iran's economic border is 2,000 kilometers away.

New Iranian Oil Vessel to Reach Syria in Upcoming Days

TEHRAN (MNA) - Addressing a televised speech on Friday night, Hezbollah Secretary-General Seyed Hassan Nasrallah announced that a new Iranian oil vessel will reach Syria in the upcoming few days.

At the beginning of his speech, Secretary-General of the Lebanese Hezbollah Resistance Movement Seyed Hassan Nasrallah congratulated the Independence Day of Lebanon, Al-Manar reported.

"The issue of Independence Day controversy shall be settled, Lebanese shall make it a genuine one," he said.

"As long as Lebanon is abandoned from using its oil in such hard times or remains under daily Israeli threats, then we will remain in the heart of independence battle," he added. "We will undoubtedly achieve an undebatable independence and stability to our country." Referring to the blacklisting of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, Nasrallah said, "Blacklisting Hezbollah might be related to regional developments or the parliamentary elections."

"Blacklisting Hezbollah won't affect the resilience of Resistance fighters or its supporters," Hezbollah leader added. Elsewhere in his remarks, he pointed to the outbreak of the coronavirus in Lebanon, saying, "The hike in cases and fatalities is critical, we are ready to help the new Health Minister."

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U.S. Must Guarantee It Will Not Abandon Nuclear Deal Again

TEHRAN (PresSTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says the United States must provide "serious and adequate" guarantees that it will never again unilaterally leave the landmark nuclear deal of 2015.

Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in a phone call with the European Union foreign policy chief, Joseph Borrell, on Friday as Iran and the remaining parties to the historic nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), plan to resume talks in the Austrian capital of Vienna on Monday on the removal of U.S. sanctions.

"There must be a serious and sufficient guarantee that the US, which is not trustworthy, will not leave the JCPOA again," he said.

Pointing to the contradictory behavior of the United States and lack of consistency between its words and actions, the top Iranian diplomat said the White House has in recent weeks imposed new sanctions on Iranian entities and individuals while announcing readiness to rejoin the JCPOA.

"Therefore, all should in practice witness the will and serious action to completely lift the sanctions [against Tehran]," Amir-Abdollahian said.

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Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan Sign MoU On Railway Cooperation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy minister of roads and urban development and managing director of the railway company of the Islamic Republic of Iran announced the conclusion of a "tripartite memorandum of understanding between the three countries of Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan" and said that the MoU was concluded to increase rail input load to Turkmenistan and from there to Iran.

Miad Salehi said that in the joint meeting of the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, which was held on Friday on the sidelines of the summit of ECO member-states, the rail cooperation document was signed between the three countries.

He pointed out that this memorandum was signed following the agreement reached a month ago between him and Azat Muradov, the head of the Turkmen Railways.

Salehi said that according to this memorandum, it is stipulated that a joint working group be formed between the three countries to follow the goals of the memorandum and the growth of cargo passing through this transit route.

The deputy minister of roads and urban development added that given the geopolitical importance of Iran, the signing of these memorandums in the field of rail transport and transit can increase the activity of the north-south corridor and use the capacity of this corridor to develop economic and political relations.

Moscow Slams Washington For Threatening Diplomatic Escalation With Tehran

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia has lambasted the United States for threats to confront Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) next month unless the Islamic Republic improves what Washington calls cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog.

Russia's ambassador to the IAEA Mikhail Ulyanov warned at a joint news conference with his Chinese counterpart on Friday that Washington's threatening a diplomatic escalation would risk harming wider talks on Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, which is officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The U.S. on Thursday threatened that if Iran did not give way on at least one of several conflicts with the IAEA, particularly what it claimed to be Tehran's refusal to allow the agency to reinstall cameras at a workshop after an attack in June, Washington would confront Tehran at the watchdog in December.

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Russian Deputy FM to Visit Iran

MOSCOW (IRNA) - Mikhail Bogdanov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russia Federation, will travel to Tehran this week.

Iranian Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali had a phone conversation on Friday with Bogdanov who is also the Special Representative of the President of Russia for the Middle East.

They discussed bilateral ties, regional cooperation between Iran and Russia and developments in Syria.

Gov't Fully Supports Development of Space Industry

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Emphasizing the importance of the space industry in the world in producing power with economic, commercial, security components and meeting human needs for progress with practical and tangible effects in life today and in the future, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi said, "The space industry is one of the economic drivers and in the near future will be part of the governance infrastructure in various areas of trade, economics and security".

Speaking at the first meeting of the Supreme Council of Space in the 13th government, which was held after a decade of suspension Raisi referred to the role of the council in policy-making and drawing a roadmap for the development of the country's space industry, saying, "The fact that after nearly 11 years, the first meeting of the Supreme Council of Space is being held during this government's term of office shows its determination to develop the space industry".

The President thanked the activities of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces' Logistics, the IRGC and the Army in the field of space, and said, "Good efforts have been made in the space industry, but despite these efforts, we are far from a real position in this area".

The president emphasized, "Today, knowledge-based companies, industry, trade, agriculture and tourism can use space services for their development and growth in



overcoming climate problems, including water shortages and dozens of other areas".

He also emphasized the localization of the space industry and said, "All sectors active in this industry should work together to overlap and converge and use each other's experiences and avoid parallel work, and realize the Supreme Leader's wish for reaching the 36,000-km orbit".

Raisi added, "Of course, achieving this goal is a path of at least 10 years, but we are sure that with God's help, with the jihadist spirit of the country's experts and with the support of the 13th government, this path will be shorter and shorter".

Stating that despite the threats and sanctions and targeted pressure of the enemies in the space and military industries, we have had great achievements and progress in these areas, Raisi said, "Using the experience of scientists and efficient human resources in this area, we can resolve issues in other sectors such as the automobile industry, communications, telecommunications and home appliances and people's daily lives".

He then said, "If we want, we can certainly achieve advanced technologies with economic advantages in all these areas. We have to reach the established technology for LEO quickly and with accurate and coherent planning, and in the next step, we have to move quickly to the 36,000-km orbit (GEO) with careful planning and hard work".

Tehran Rejects Interim Deal On Sanctions Removal

TEHRAN (PressTV) – Iran has reiterated that all U.S. sanctions must be removed in one go, rejecting the idea of an "interim agreement" through the Vienna talks, three days before Iran and five major powers gather in the Austrian capital to discuss the removal of U.S. sanctions.

"All U.S. sanctions must be removed in one go, effectively and verifiably with [the U.S.] providing concrete guarantees" that it would not leave the nuclear deal again, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

On media speculations over a step-by-step removal of US sanctions through the Vienna format, Khatibzadeh said the position of the Islamic Republic on the matter has been clearly stated since a few months ago.

Last week, U.S.-based Axios news outlet reported that US national security adviser Jake Sullivan raised with his Israeli counterpart the idea of an "interim agreement" with Iran to buy more time for further negotiations.

Citing informed U.S. sources, Axios said the idea was that in exchange for a freeze from Iran (for example, on enriching uranium to 60%), the US and its allies could release some frozen Iranian funds or provide sanctions waivers on humanitarian goods. Khatibzadeh said the new Iranian administration of Ebrahim Raisi has clearly stated the Islamic Republic's rational positions.

Tehran, Damascus Enjoy Highest Level of Cooperation

TEHRAN (MNA) – Saying that Iran and Syria are allies of each other in the international arena, the Iranian ambassador to Damascus noted that the level of cooperation with Syria has reached the highest level.

The strategic relations between Iran and Syria include all areas, including military cooperation, Iranian ambassador to Syria Mehdi Sobhani said in an interview with Lebanese Al-Ahed.

This shows Iran's support for Syria and, in general, strengthens relations between the two countries, he added.

He went on to say that International relations and interactions have several levels including cooperation, partnership, and alliance.

According to him, Iran and Syria have passed the initial stages and levels and now they are allies of each other.

These two neighboring countries are developing their relations in proportion to their alliance, he noted.

The level of cooperation with Syria has reached the highest levels, he said, adding that there is a military cooperation agreement between the two countries.

This agreement includes all areas of cooperation and will be implemented if necessary, the envoy said.

Experts believe that Iran-Syria relations are the oldest political, economic, and military relations between Iran and one of the Arab countries in the West Asian region, Sobhani said.

The envoys noted that due to many commonalities, the leaders of the two countries have always maintained these relations. During this period, many Arab and Western countries tried to sour relation between Tehran and Damascus, but they never succeeded, and their pressure on Damascus did not work, he reminded.

Cultural Exchanges to Boost China-Iran Mutual Understanding

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Expansion of humanistic and cultural exchanges between China and Iran has helped increase mutual understanding and friendship between the two nations.

To reach this point, not only official exchanges but also personal efforts improved bilateral cultural understanding.

Mehrzad Karimi, an Iranian young man, coming from an art-loving family in Tehran traveled to China in 2012 to study art at the Fine Arts Academy of Shanghai University.

Karimi spends his holiday time in a mountainous village near the city of Hojo in Zhejiang province. The Iranian artist opened a painting studio in Daishi town.

According to China Radio International, Arezoo Shahmohammadi is an Iranian blogger, who has created an account on Chinese social media platforms, speaking about Iranian culture and clothing. Her stories on China-Iran exchanges have attracted around three million followers over two years. She is also a tour guide for Chinese-speaking tourists in Iran.

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties between China and Iran; so, expansion of economic and political relations is expected to be followed with more cultural cooperation by both sides.

A few weeks ago, Tehran hosted the second China Film Week recently in a bid to increase understanding of Iranian people from Chinese culture.

Despite the fact that certain Western media outlets have been busy for years portraying distorted images of China and Iran, some intellectuals from both nations have tried to show the real face of the two countries.

Tehran, Kuala Lumpur Discuss Bilateral Ties, Regional Issues



TEHRAN (IFP) - Iranian and Malaysian Foreign Ministers Hossein Amirabdollahian and Saifuddin Abdullah discussed bilateral ties, regional and international developments on Friday.

During a phone conversation which was described "friendly" by Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amirabdollahian conveyed President Ebrahim Raisi greetings and invitation to visit Iran to the King of Malaysia.

He also congratulated Malaysia on membership in Human Rights Council (HRC) and expressed hope that Malaysia would help promote human rights and address double standards regarding human rights.

Amirabdollahian clarified on the foreign policy of the new administration in Iran that takes priority over Asian countries.

The foreign minister said that Iran was ready to expand ties with Malaysia in all areas, including tourism, agriculture, technology, energy, science and university as well as finalizing the preferential trade agreement between the two countries.

Amirabdollahian added that the signing and implementation of extradition agreements and judicial assistance between Iran and Malaysia was important, highlighting the significance of prisoners swap between the two states.

He also thanked the Malaysian government for their support of Palestinian people.

The Malaysian foreign minister, too, conveyed the warm greetings of senior Malaysian officials to the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and highlighted the warm, friendly ties between the two countries.

He said that all the existing capacities were prepared to further expand Iran-Malaysia ties in all areas, including agriculture, tourism, technology, and scientific and academic cooperation.

Abdullah added that Malaysia was aware of the difficulties caused by the sanctions imposed against Iran, adding that nuclear technology was Iran's rights and he hoped that the talks to be held next week in Vienna to remove sanctions against Iran would be successful.

Iran Ready for Judicial Cooperation With Austria

TEHRAN (IP) - The Deputy for International Affairs of the Judiciary announced Iran's readiness for human rights talks and judicial cooperation between Tehran and Vienna.

Kazem Gharibabadi, Deputy for International Affairs of the Judiciary and Secretary-General of Iran's Human Rights Office, said during a meeting with Wolf Dietrich Heim, the Austrian Ambassador to Tehran: "Judicial diplomacy is a

way of understanding each other and helping to solve problems that are not possible through politics."

Emphasizing Iran's welcome for human rights talks with other countries, he criticized the political perspective on the issue of human rights and said: "Unfortunately, some countries use human rights as a tool against others to achieve their foreign policy goals."

Criticizing the West's approach in supporting Canada's resolution against Iran, Gharibabadi said: "Canada is one



of the main violators of human rights, a violator of the rights of indigenous peoples, a crime against children, a widespread violation of the rights of Iranians living in Canada by depriving them of services."

Gharibabadi called the human rights resolution against Iran a clear example of political action in human rights and stated: "While some countries do not even have a history of holding elections, or countries claiming human rights that themselves face widespread human rights abuses, they are immune to criticism, but under the pretext of human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran, a special rapporteur is appointed and a resolution is passed that is far from the realities of Iranian society."

He stressed that Western countries are not immune from human rights violations, and there are many cases of human rights violations in various fields in these countries.

Tehran Calls for Sisterhood Pact With Najaf

TEHRAN (IFP) - Tehran Mayor Alireza Zakani has sat down with Deputy Governor of the Iraqi province of Najaf, Hafez Abd-ul-Amir Habib Mazi, highlighting the deep attachment between the people of Iran and Iraq.

"We crave for a sisterhood agreement between Tehran and Najaf," said Zakani in the meeting held in Tehran on Saturday.

The mayor said Tehran is proud to be hosting the Iraqi delegation, adding, "You are our good religious brothers and we have the honor to be hosting you."

"There is attachment and bonds from the bottom of the heart between Iran and Iraq," the mayor noted.

He then called for closer cooperation between the two sides.

"Najaf and Karbala are not two ordinary Iraqi cities; rather, they are symbols from an ideological and international point of view, and we take pride in being at your service," Zakani said.

He called for Tehran and Najaf to have more interaction and exchange their experience in the domain of management.



Dual-Nationality Iranians Can Freely Return Home

TEHRAN (IFP) - An Iranian parliamentarian says there are no legal restrictions for Iranian individuals with dual nationality traveling to, or making investment in Iran.

"In fact, there are no impediments to Iranian expats returning to their homeland," said Aliraza Salimi, the chairman of the parliament's Iranian Expatriates' Caucus.

He said only minor red tape might exist, and added any bureaucratic restrictions should be eased.

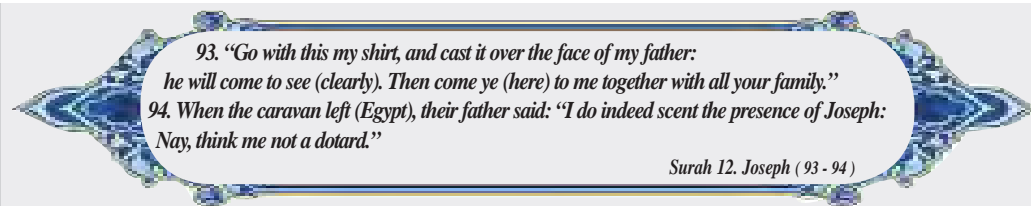
"The approach of the administration, the foreign ministry, the Judiciary and the eleventh Parliament toward Iranians residing abroad has changed and they follow up on the expats' affairs with special attention," said the lawmaker.

"Different organizations and institutions such as the foreign ministry and the Judiciary have taken giant steps toward resolving the problems facing Iranians residing abroad and [facilitating] their making investment in the country," he added. He said Iranian expats' affairs should be taken care of, and their return home should be facilitated.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	11:52
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:11
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:25
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:54



Iran, Turkmenistan Discuss Economic Cooperation

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mahdi Safari expressed Iran's readiness to transfer experiences to Turkmenistan in various fields including technical engineering, nanotechnology and biotechnology.

Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy of Islamic Republic of Iran met and held talks with Rasit Meredow Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister in his trip to Ashgabat to take part in the preliminary summit of the heads of the ECO Member States.

In the meeting, they reviewed cooperation in various fields including energy, shipment and transit of goods. They also underlined the effort to enhance economic diplomacy cooperation.

15th ECO Summit is scheduled for November 28, 2021, in Turkmenistan and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi will be attending the summit.

During the meeting, cooperation on various fields including energy, gas and electricity, shipment and transit of goods, export of technical and engineering services as well as healthcare and medical service were discussed.

Safari also underscored the Iranian President's policy to prioritize enhancing



relations with neighboring countries.

Safari, emphasizing Iran's economic, cultural and commercial capabilities, expressed readiness to transfer experiences in the fields of technical-engineering, nanotechnology and biotechnology.

"Iran's private sector is ready to cooperate on different projects in Turkmenistan" he added.

Meredow described his recent trip to Tehran and holding the joint Iran-Turkmenistan economic commission meeting as "constructive" and stressed Turkmenistan's intention to make agreements operational.

Earlier, Meredow traveled to Tehran to attend second Afghanistan's neighboring countries summit and Iran-Turkmenistan Joint Economic Commission meeting. Meredow also met and held talks with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on his trip to Tehran.

PGSR, an Example for Jihadi Management in the Country

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Vice President on Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaee after visiting the jihadi achievements of tireless staff of oil industry in the super refinery of gas condensates Persian Gulf Star Refinery and called the refinery as one of the best examples for the jihadi management in the country.



Rezaee on Thursday and during his visit to the super refinery of Persian Gulf Star hailed it as one of the examples for jihadi management in the country and said once some foreign countries were to build this refinery through holding a consortium of several European companies but after they left the project and the country amid the sanctions.

He added that then Iranian youths did their best and built one of the most complicated and advanced refineries of the world which currently produces over 45m liters of gasoline as well as several other oil products for the country.

Rezaee noted that now the people, the country and the government take advantage of the achievements of this national project and the great job done by the experts.

He reiterated that the technical knowhow of building such refineries is very important that we could attain it and currently Iranians have full experience and knowledge for construction and the launch of such gas condensate refineries and the country can build more of this type of refineries for better exports of energy.

Rezaee added that crude oil and gas sales are like setting the national wealth on fire and with construction of such refineries the country can save the national wealth of being wasted.

TCCIMA, TPO Explore Export Issues

TEHRAN (MNA) - Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) hosted a meeting with the head of the Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) on Saturday to discuss the issues faced by the country's exporters.

The meeting was attended by TCCIMA Head Masoud Khansari, the TPO Head Alireza Peyman Pak and a handful of the country's exporters and businessmen, IRIB reported.

Speaking in this gathering, Khansari underlined the significance of non-oil exports in the country's current economic condition, saying: "Export is the only way to save Iran's economy, and if we can solve the export problems, many of the country's problems will be resolved."

"We are facing the most difficult economic conditions of the country after the Islamic Revolution, which we can overcome by paying attention to exports, and one of the major players in the field of exports is the Trade Promotion Organization, which we hope will continue its supportive role in this field," Khansari said.

He mentioned some of the problems that the country's exporters have been facing over the past few years, and noted that the Central Bank of Iran (CBI)'s approach toward exports and exporters (mentioning the obligations created for exporters to return their foreign currency revenues to the country) created numerous challenges for them.

Elsewhere in the meeting, Peyman Pak for his part mentioned some of the Industry, Mining and Trade Ministry's plans for supporting non-oil exports, saying: "The main plan of the Industry Ministry is to create an export toll management fund; and the generated revenues from this fund should be spent on improving the export infrastructure."

"Currently, all issues and problems are clear, but operational solutions must also be considered and defined, in both micro and macro scales; Of course, solving macro problems is hard; we have to go back and even change some rules," the official said.

Iran Has No Direct Flight From S. Africa

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran does not have any direct flight from southern Africa, which is reported as source of new coronavirus variant, a senior official at Islamic Republic of Iran Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) announced on Saturday.

If needed, Iran CAO will impose restrictions on flight from countries in which the new variant is discovered, Hassan Khoshkhou said.

Khoshkhou went on to say that due measures will be taken if passengers are to enter the country.

To deal with the issue, CAO follows decisions to be taken at the National Task Force Against Coronavirus, the official noted.

As he underlined, coronavirus test and vaccination card are needed for all passengers entering Iran.

Reportedly, South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Eswatini are the countries in which the new coronavirus variant have been detected.

Iran's Steel Production Falls by 15%

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's steel production fell by 15 percent in October, following smaller declines earlier in the year resulting from lack of electricity, after years of growth.

The World Steel Association in its latest report showed Iran as the tenth largest producer in the world after Brazil but with a large drop, which dragged down overall steel production in the Middle East.

Iran has been suffering from an acute electricity shortage in recent years as its natural gas

production, feeding power plants, fails to keep up with domestic demand.

Iran has been counting on exporting more steel and other metals, including copper and iron ore to reduce dependence on oil exports.

The country produced around 29 million tons of steel in 2020, which was 16 percent higher than in 2018 and 141 percent more than a decade earlier.

Iran's Steel Producers' Association has also confirmed that production of metals fell between 3-13 percent since March 21, the beginning of the current Iranian year.

NIDC Drills 46 Oil, Gas Wells in 8 Months

TEHRAN (Shana) - The Deputy CEO of the National Iranian Drilling Company (NIDC) announced the drilling and completion of 46 oil and gas wells in the onshore and offshore oil-rich regions of the country in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year which began on March 21.

According to the National Iranian Drilling Company, Massoud Afshar stated: "Out of the total number of wells completed during this period, there were four production wells, four appraisal wells and 38 workovers."

33 of these wells were in the operational scope of the National Iranian South Oil Company (NISOC), 6 in the regions operated by the Iranian Offshore Oil Company (IOOC), one in the regions operated by the Iranian Central Oil Fields Company, one was ordered by the Petroleum Engineering and Development Company (PEDEC), three wells were projects by other NIDC clients and two were ordered by the exploration department of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), he said.

The Deputy Managing Director of the National Iranian Drilling Company stated that 51,046 meters of wells were drilled from March 20 to November 20, adding: "Currently, 9 heavy-duty onshore drilling rigs of the company's fleet are being moved to operational areas."

IME Enjoys New Records in Weekly and Daily Trade

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of more than 2 million tons of commodities, hitting a new record of almost \$669m.

According to a report by the IME's international affairs and PR the exchange posted growths of 4% in volume and 12% in value of trades compared to the figures of the previous week. The IME's previous weekly record in value of trades was \$665m.

Also, the exchange set an unprecedented daily record in value of trades on Wednesday, November 24, 2021, logging more than \$32m, which is an increase of 22% in daily value of trades in comparison to the last record of the exchange registered on September 26.

Commodities sold weekly on the IME's metals and minerals trading floor included 1,718,000 tons of commodities worth more than \$476m.

On this floor, the IME witnessed trade of 1,000,042 tons of cement, 558,496 tons of steel, 51,000 tons of iron ore, 49,500 tons of sponge iron, 10,400 tons of aluminum, 7,290 tons of copper, 1,930 tons of zinc, 21 tons of precious metals concentrate and 11 kg of gold bars.

Furthermore, the IME saw - during the same week - on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor trade of 310,230 tons of commodities valued at more than \$189m.

The IME's customers purchased on this floor 84,380 tons of bitumen, 77,363 tons of polymeric products, 74,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 35,000 tons of lube cut, 31,178 tons of chemicals, 4,718 tons of base oil, 720 tons of sulfur and 50 tons of argon.

Last but not least was the IME's side market with 4,720 tons of commodities traded on it.



BMI, KSC Explore Ways For Boosting Cooperation



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Bank Melli Iran (BMI) Dr. Mohammad Reza Farzin last week met the CEO of Khuzestan Steel Company (KSC) Mr. Amin Ebrahimi and some of senior officials of the company wherein both sides explored ways for boosting cooperation.

In the meeting, Farzin said that steel projects are the axis of the national economy and BMI is ready to support developmental projects of the company through required backings. He added that KSC is one of the leading companies in creating jobs and national development.

Then Ebrahimi, for his part, said that considering the outlook of the steel production in 2025 that Khuzestan Province accounts for 25 percent of the total production, the share of KSC is 13.6m tons, adding that it is predicted the total production volume of KSC by the end of next year to be 4.5m tons and by the end of 2031 to hit 13.6m tons. He noted that the company has 145 defined projects worth of 23,000b rials that the company has defined three mega projects of wide steel slab, construction of a 520-megawatt power plant and the oxygen plant.

He reiterated that banks are the main driving force in the national economy and the interaction between BMI and KSC will lead to development and blossom in the industry and then to the dynamism in the national economy.

He said that the big steel family with some 100,000 population with different financial expectations is one of the major concerns of KSC.

Then deputy head of BMI Mr. Mounesan, for his part, said that BMI has planned special packages for the steel group, purchasers and vendors on the Iran Mercantile Exchange which has been mentioned in the National Melli Festival, reiterating that one of the policies of BMI is to support those units which play role in value creation in the country and try to cut the dependence on overseas companies.

China Extends Maternity Leave to Boost Births

BEIJING (AFP) - Several regions in China have extended maternity leave by at least 30 days, in the latest attempt to encourage child-rearing as the country faces a demographic crisis fuelled by a record-low birth rate.

The changes follow the relaxation of strict family planning rules this year to allow families to have a third child -- as officials grapple with a rapidly ageing workforce and slowing economy.

On Friday, Beijing's city government announced that women can now take 158 days of maternity leave, a bump up of 30 days.

Shanghai authorities announced similar changes beginning a day earlier.



Kyrgyzstan Detains 15 In Coup Plot Before Vote

BISHKEK (Dispatches) - Security services in Kyrgyzstan said Friday they had arrested 15 people in connection with an alleged coup plot as tensions build ahead of parliamentary elections this weekend.

The poor, mountainous nation of 6.5 million people has seen repeated political chaos since gaining independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

On Friday, the state committee for national security said it had detained 15 people who were part of a plan to get "1,000 aggressive young people" to protest the results of the vote.



Italy, France Cement Ties With New Treaty



ROME (Dispatches) - France and Italy drew a line under recent tensions and signed a new treaty on Friday to formalize their relations, against the background of a European Union in flux.

French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi put pen to paper in a ceremony full of pomp at the Quirinale palace of President Sergio Mattarella.

An aerial acrobatic display by both countries' air forces followed, trailing the colors of the Italian and French flags across a clear Rome autumn sky.

Draghi said the treaty represented a "historic moment" and evoked among others the writer Umberto Eco and actress Claudia Cardinale, two Italians who have become cultural icons in France, as proof of the strength of ties between the two Mediterranean powers.

At a joint press conference, Macron said the treaty -- only the second of its type with an EU partner, after a 1963 treaty with Germany -- "seals a deep friendship". Italy and France have long been bound by historical, cultural and linguistic ties, their relationship deepened in recent decades by their memberships of both the EU and the NATO military alliance.

The treaty was signed just weeks before France takes over the rotating EU presidency in January, and at a time of change on the continent.

Britain's messy exit and rows between the EU's liberal democracies and their eastern neighbors have roiled the bloc, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who took a leading role in the EU, is bowing out following September elections.

Both Draghi and Macron emphasized their commitment to closer European integration, particularly in the realm of defense.

"As founding countries of the EU... we defend a more integrated, more democratic, more sovereign Europe," the French president said.

Macron denied Paris was looking for a "substitution" for its relationship with Berlin that has anchored the EU for more than 60 years, insisting the new Italian treaty was complementary.

The wide-ranging new Quirinale Treaty foresees greater cooperation in economic and industrial matters, diplomacy and defence, culture, education and climate change among others, aided by regular attendance by ministers from one country to the other's cabinet meetings.

Macron noted Italy and France had had "difficult moments", not least the diplomatic crisis in early 2019 when Italy's then populist government openly criticized the French president.

Ties improved with a new government in Rome later that year and have gone from strength to strength with the arrival in office earlier this year of Draghi, a former European Central Bank chief.

Jordanians Protest Against Water-for-Energy Deal With Israel

AMMAN (Dispatches) - Several thousand Jordanians protested on Friday against a water-for-energy deal with Israel and the United Emirates, calling on their government to scrap its peace agreement with Israel and saying any normalization was a humiliating submission.

Police were deployed heavily around a downtown area of the capital Amman leading to the Hussein mosque where demonstrators marched after Friday prayers.

"No to the agreement of shame," protesters chanted, some carrying banners such as "Normalization is Treason" in a protest organized by a mix of opposition parties including Islamists and leftists as well as tribal groups and unions.

Jordan, Israel and the UAE signed the deal last Monday in the presence of U.S. climate envoy John Kerry.

Under the agreement, Jordan would install 600 megawatts of solar power generating capacity to be exported to Israel, while Israel would provide water-scarce Jordan with 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water.

The UAE, which became the first Persian Gulf state to normalize relations with Israel last year, was expected build the solar plant in Jordan.

The initiative is subject to feasibility studies, but if it comes to fruition it will be one of the largest regional cooperation projects undertaken between Israel and Arab countries, Western diplomats say.

"This deal is aimed at linking Jordan with the Zionist entity completely. It is not a trade deal, it is a normalization deal that is shameful and humiliating," said Ali Abu Sukkar, a prominent Islamist opposition figure.

Turkish Police Fire Tear Gas at Women Protesters in Istanbul

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkish police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to push back thousands of people, many of them women, who took to the streets of Istanbul to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

The protests, part of a week of nationwide mobilization, came amid calls for Turkey to rejoin the Istanbul Convention, a landmark agreement to protect women that includes 45 countries and was signed in Turkey's largest city in 2011.

While Turkey was the first country to sign onto the convention, in July it also became the first to withdraw with the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan claiming the initiative had been "hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality".

Turkish women have held mass protests twice over the withdrawal, in March when Erdogan first announced his intention to withdraw, and again in July, when the move became official.

Erdogan has argued existing laws in Turkey already provide enough protection for women, but women's rights groups in the country say the convention provided a roadmap for important legislation that the government has never fully implemented.

At least 285 women have been killed by men so far in 2021 in Turkey, according to the We Will Stop Femicide platform, a non-governmental organization that tracks such incidents and lobbies for killers to be prosecuted.

On Thursday, Turkey's Interior Minister acknowledged his own ministry's statistics on femicides in the country showed this year was on track to exceed last year -- with 251 women killed by November 15, compared to 268 in 2020 -- but the government was working to bring that number down.

"These are not just statistics, this is a matter of human lives, and we need to address this issue quickly," Süleyman Soylu said at a meeting to review a national domestic violence reporting system. "We see violence against women as a humanitarian issue, and we cannot tolerate even one loss of life."

10 Police Hurt as Violence Spreads on French Caribbean Islands

FORT-DE-FRANCE (Dispatches) - Ten police officers were injured and several journalists shot at on the French Caribbean island of Martinique overnight Thursday to Friday as protests sparked by Covid-19 vaccine measures spread.

Fresh violence was reported on the territory despite a night curfew, following more than a week of unrest on the nearby French island of Guadeloupe.

Five police officers were injured by gunfire on Martinique and five others by objects thrown at them during operations, according to police figures sent to AFP.

French government spokesman Gabriel Attal called the unrest "totally unacceptable" and promised "firmness" in dealing with the rioters.

Four journalists, including an AFP photographer, were shot at by men on a motorbike late on Thursday as they worked in the main Martinique town of Fort-de-France. None was injured.

The protests on Guadeloupe were started by headline opponents of compulsory vaccination for health workers and fire fighters on the island -- a measure already implemented in mainland France.

The protests, which saw barricades set up on roads, have since morphed into a larger movement to express frustration at alleged neglect of the islands by Paris.

The territories are popular with moneyed tourists, but poverty levels and unemployment for locals are far higher than in mainland France, leading to long-standing grievances.

Vaccination rates in the territories also trail those on the mainland with less than half the population jabbed against Covid on Guadeloupe.

A strict night curfew was announced for Martinique on Thursday, mirroring a similar measure in place in Guadeloupe since November 19. Hundreds of police reinforcements have also been sent to the islands.

No government minister has visited the region since the protests began, but Overseas Territories Minister Sebastien Lecornu will travel "shortly", an aide told AFP.

The trip "cannot be organized under pressure and has to be part of an initiative to make clear and shared commitments", the aide added on condition of anonymity.

The leaders of the protest movement on Guadeloupe have asked for obligatory vaccinations to be dropped on the island, something ruled out by the French government.

The unrest comes at a sensitive moment in France's governance of its overseas territories, ahead of a third and final independence referendum in the Pacific territory of New Caledonia.

Pro-independence forces have vowed to boycott the December 12 vote.



Ukraine President Says Coup Plot Thwarted

KIEV (Dispatches) - Ukraine has uncovered a plot for an attempted coup with the involvement of Russians, due to have taken place next week, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said at a press conference.

Zelenskyy did not give full details of the coup plot and did not accuse the Russian state of involvement, though he also spoke at length at the press conference of a threat of Russian military escalation, and said Ukraine would be ready for it.

The Kremlin swiftly denied any role in any coup plot, saying it had no plans to take part in such acts.

Russia has been building up forces near its border with Ukraine. Kyiv, the United States and NATO have voiced concerns in recent days about a possible Russian attack -- a suggestion the Kremlin has dismissed as false and alarmist.

"We have challenges not only from the Russian Federation and possible escalation - we have big internal challenges. I received information that a coup d'etat will take place in our country on Dec. 1-2," Zelenskyy said.

Ukraine had audio recordings as evidence of the coup plot, Zelenskyy added. Moscow and Kyiv have traded blame for rising tensions in recent weeks, raising fears that a long-running conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists could erupt into renewed open warfare.

"We are in full control of our borders and are fully prepared for any escalation," Zelenskyy said.

The head of Ukraine's military intelligence told the Military Times outlet last week that Russia had more than 92,000 troops massed around Ukraine's borders and was preparing for an attack by the end of January or beginning of February.

Ukraine, which wants to join the NATO military alliance, received a large consignment of U.S. ammunition and Javelin missiles earlier this year, prompting criticism from Moscow.

Zelenskyy also said his chief of staff Andriy Yermak would soon be contacting representatives of Russia about the standoff between the two countries. Separately, Yermak said he would be contacting senior Kremlin official Dmitry Kozak.





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Saudi Arabia, Russia Consider Pausing Oil Production Increases

LONDON (Dispatches) - Top oil producers Saudi Arabia and Russia are considering a move to pause their planned oil production increases, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing people familiar with the discussions.

Other members of the OPEC+ group, including the United Arab Emirates, aren't convinced a pause is

necessary, the report added.

The Biden administration announced Tuesday it will release millions of barrels of oil from strategic reserves in coordination with China, India, South Korea, Japan and Britain, to try to cool prices after OPEC+ producers repeatedly ignored calls for more crude.



Spanish Gov't Feels Heat as Economic Recovery Lags

MADRID (Dispatches) - Spain's leftist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez started the year with a bullish economic outlook. Months later, he faces protests, strikes and an emboldened opposition as the recovery from the pandemic slump trails other European nations.

Gone is the optimism shown earlier this year when Sanchez forecast a strong comeback in 2021 for the eurozone's fourth-largest economy.

The country has since faced sluggish consumption, soaring energy prices and weak growth.

"Little by little, the climate changed and clouds gathered," said Rafael Pampillon, an economist at CEU-San Pablo University.

Anger over the state of the economy is now starting to spill out into the streets.

Hundreds of auto workers protested in Madrid on Monday to draw attention to the problems the sector faces, while in the southern city of Cadiz metalworkers have been on strike since mid-November to demand wage increases.

As Christmas approaches, truckers have threatened to go on strike to protest against rising fuel prices.

The government had initially forecast the economy would expand by 9.8 percent in 2021, one of the highest figures in the eurozone.

But in April it slashed its forecast to 6.5 percent, as Spain was hit by a third wave of Covid-19 infections. Most economists, however, believe growth will not surpass 5.0 percent this year.

In recent weeks, disappointing data regarding household consumption and investment have been released that have dampened Spain's economic outlook.

Revised figures show gross domestic product (GDP) expanded just 1.1 percent during the second quarter, less than half of the 2.8 percent initially forecast.

And growth was just 2.0 percent in the third quarter, instead of 2.7 percent.

"In absolute terms, it's not so bad, but we could expect better," said Pedro Aznar, a professor at Spain's ESADE business school.

He recalled that Spain's tourism-dependent economy contracted 10.8 percent in 2020, one of the worst results among industrialized countries, so it had "a lot of room to grow".

While Spain's GDP remains 6.6 percent below pre-pandemic levels, Italy has narrowed the gap to 1.4 percent, Germany to 1.1 percent and France to just 0.1 percent. Analysts blame soaring energy costs, supply chain disruptions and an overreliance on tourism for the slower growth in Spain.

Energy prices have risen across Europe, but the impact has been especially intense in Spain, since it relies heavily on energy imports, and the higher price of gas and electricity has "hurt consumption," said Aznar.

Higher energy prices have also contributed heavily to inflation, which reached 5.4 percent in October, a 29-year high.

And global supply chain problems have dealt a blow to Spain's key automaker sector, which accounts for 11 percent of economic output, said Pampillon.

"This forced many factories to close," he added.

Goldman Sachs, Others Raise India's FY22 GDP Growth Forecast

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Various analysts and brokerage houses have raised their projections for India's economic growth in the current fiscal year on a low base of 7.3 per cent contraction in 2020-21 due to pick-up in consumption and dwindling Covid cases.



Goldman Sachs in its recent Macro Outlook 2022 note revised upward its projection for gross domestic product (GDP) to 9.1 per cent, from the earlier estimate of 8 per cent for calendar year 2022. For 2021-22 (FY22), it pegged economic growth at 8.5 per cent.

"We expect consumption to be an important contributor to growth in 2022 as the economy fully reopens, driven by a notable improvement in the virus situation and adequate progress on vaccination. We also expect government capital spending to continue, seeing nascent signs of a private corporate capital expenditure recovery and a revival in housing investment," wrote Andrew Tilton, Goldman Sachs' chief Asia-Pacific economist in a co-authored report with Santanu Sengupta and Suraj Kumar.

This consumption-led growth, however, will come with its own set of challenges.

For one, Goldman Sachs expects a rise in core inflation as manufacturers pass on input cost increases to consumers. As a result, the global research and brokerage house has pegged the headline consumer price inflation in India at 5.8 per cent year-on-year in 2022, from 5.2 per cent in 2021. SBI Research upped its forecast of GDP growth to 9.3-9.6 per cent for the current fiscal year, from its earlier prediction of 8.5-9 per cent.

"We now believe that FY22 GDP growth rate could be in the range of 9.3-9.6 per cent. The reason for the upward revision is that India recorded only 11 per cent increase in Covid cases during the third quarter of 2021, second-lowest among top 15 most-affected countries, and the increase in cases has declined to 2.3 per cent in November over September," said Soumya Kanti Ghosh, chief economic advisor, SBI Group.

Citing faster-than-expected recovery, rising consumer confidence, and the resultant spending spike, Swiss brokerage UBS Securities recently revised upward its growth forecast for the current fiscal year to 9.5 per cent, from 8.9 per cent pegged in September.

The brokerage also saw the economy clipping at 7.7 per cent in 2022-23 (FY23), but moderating to 6 per cent in 2023-24 since it expects the benefit of a low-interest rate regime to end by the end of FY23.

However, CARE Ratings retained its projection to 9.1 per cent with an upward bias.

The Reserve Bank of India also forecasts 9.5 per cent GDP growth this fiscal year, while the average projection ranges between 8.5 per cent and 10 per cent. The government projection is around 10 per cent.

In this regard, Fitch Ratings is an outlier which had lowered its projection to 8.7 per cent, from its earlier forecast of 10 per cent in view of the impact of the second Covid-19 wave in the country.

German Business Morale Darkens on Supply Bottlenecks, COVID Wave

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German business morale deteriorated for the fifth month running in November as supply bottlenecks in manufacturing and a spike in coronavirus infections clouded the growth outlook for Europe's largest economy, a survey showed.

The Ifo institute said its business climate index fell to 96.5 from 97.7 in October. A Reuters poll of analysts had pointed to a November reading of 96.6.

"Supply bottlenecks and the fourth wave of the coronavirus are challenging German companies," Ifo President Clemens Fuest said. Company executives were less satisfied with their current business situation and their expectations for the next six months were more pessimistic, the survey showed.

Despite record high orders, German carmakers and other manufacturers are forced to scale back production due to a lack of raw materials and intermediate goods such as microchips.

"Industrial production is suffering from the shortage of materials, and with the brutal fourth coronavirus wave, a well-known stress factor for the service sector is now being added," VP Bank analyst Thomas Gitzel said.

Gitzel said all signs were now pointing to a decline in overall economic output in the final quarter of this year. Ifo economist Klaus Wohlrabe was a bit less gloomy, saying the economy was set to stagnate in the fourth quarter as supply chain bottlenecks showed no sign of easing up.

Wohlrabe told Reuters that the hospitality and tourism sectors were facing a tough few months ahead due to new restrictions across the country to stop the spike in COVID cases and protect hospitals from reaching capacity limits.

Investors Warn EU Against Badging Intensive Farming as Sustainable

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - A group of global investors representing more than \$3.5 trillion (RM14 trillion) in assets has urged the European Commission not to allow intensive farming to be badged as a sustainable activity in upcoming rules, a letter seen by Reuters showed.

The bloc is in the final stages of defining what activities can be considered climate-friendly, a move it hopes will incentivize more investment to help the region cut its emission of greenhouse gases.

It has been tough, however, to reach political agreement on what activities to include in the "taxonomy", with the nuclear, gas and farming industries all subject to lobbying by countries and trade bodies keen to retain access to finance.

After writing to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on October 5, the investor group said it was making its position public after a leaked paper circulated among EU governments proposed that a large chunk of agricultural subsidies should be labelled green.

Auditors say these subsidies often have dubious climate benefits, and some support intensive farming.

As well as carbon emissions, the letter said intensively reared livestock also had negative impacts on biodiversity, water use, antimicrobial resistance and soil health and "should not be included in the EU Taxonomy as it stands".

The Commission was not immediately available to comment when contacted by Reuters.

"It is critical that the EU Taxonomy only defines as green those sectors that are genuinely environmentally sustainable," said Helena Wright, Policy Director at the FAIRR Initiative, an investor group focused on the risks of intensive farming and which coordinated the letter to the Commission.

"It is deeply concerning to see a proposal that would count EU agricultural subsidies as green, when we know that many of these subsidies are harmful," she said.

Signatories to the letter include Britain's biggest asset manager Legal & General Investment Management, Aviva Investors, Storebrand and the international business of US asset manager Federated Hermes.

Farming is responsible for around 10 per cent of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions, yet its role in the EU rules is politically contentious given the large number of people it employs.

The letter was released a day after the European Parliament approved reforms to farming subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to give more money to smaller farmers using more sustainable farming methods.

New U.S. Jobless Claims Fall to Lowest Level Since 1969

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - New applications for U.S. unemployment benefits fell to their lowest weekly level in more than five decades, as filings slowed heading into the Thanksgiving holiday and with business struggling to recruit staff amid labor shortages.

State unemployment offices received 199,000 initial jobless claims on a seasonally adjusted basis last week, down from 270,000 the previous week, according to the labor department. That brought jobless claims to their lowest level since November 1969, and compares with a previous low of 205,000 in February 2020.

Claims also slipped more than economists had anticipated, with an average estimate of 260,000 for the week.

"It is fair to say that we didn't see that coming," said Mark Hamrick, senior economic analyst at Bankrate.

"Americans head into the heart of the holiday season with a reasonable expectation that an already tight job market will continue to tighten in the months ahead," he added.

Some economists cautioned against reading too much into the report, noting that last week's unadjusted figure for initial claims rose by 18,000.

"The drastic drop in weekly jobless claims reeks of seasonal adjustment noise," said Robert Frick, corporate economist at Navy Federal Credit Union. "Especially with Covid-19 cases rising, a drop seven times the recent average seems highly unlikely."

Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at MFR, also said the decline "appears to be due to a big difficulty with seasonal adjustment".

"This shift is due to the 'expectation' of the start of large seasonal lay-offs in construction employment as cold weather begins to envelop the northern tier of the country. However, with housing in great demand and the weather not yet having turned, this did not occur," Shapiro added.

There were 2m Americans actively collecting benefits as of November 13, below the 2.1m continuing claims recorded a week earlier. Continuing claims remain above pre-pandemic levels of about 1.7m.

Lay-offs have slowed as employers struggle to hire staff and keep the workers they already have, with a record number of Americans quitting their jobs in a tight labor market.

Over the past four weeks, the U.S. has averaged about 252,000 initial claims per week, down from 345,000 in early October.

IEA Chief Hopes OPEC + Will Address Artificial Supply Gap



LONDON (Reuters) - The head of the International Energy Agency Fatih Birol said oil markets are suffering from an artificial supply gap, and that he hopes OPEC+ producer countries will do more to bring down prices at an upcoming meeting.

"(A) factor I would like to underline that caused these high prices is the position of some of the major oil and gas suppliers," Birol said in an online presentation. "Some of the countries did not take, in our view, a helpful position in this context."

"Some of the key strains in today's markets may be considered artificial tightness... because in oil markets today we see close to 6 million barrels per day in spare production capacity lies with the key producers, OPEC+ countries."

OPEC+ - the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Russia and their allies - has ignored calls by the United States and some other consumers to pump more.

Birol said he hoped that when the producer club meets on Dec. 2 to discuss policy it would "make the necessary steps in order to comfort the global oil markets and help to bring the prices down to reasonable levels".

Russia can "easily" increase its gas exports to Europe by about 15% to ease a supply and price pinch there, Birol added.

Birol said that while the IEA understands the rationale behind a coordinated release of oil storage led by the U.S. and other top consumers this week to cool prices, the Paris-based agency only responds collectively to major supply disruptions.

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden announced on Tuesday it would release millions of barrels of oil from strategic reserves in coordination with China, India, South Korea, Japan and Britain. "We see where they are coming from," Birol said, but added: "This is not an IEA collective response, I want to make this clear. The IEA collective response system is in place in case of a major oil supply disruption."

“People of Iran” Exhibition Opens in Paris

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Photo Exhibition named “People of Iran; Colors and Happiness in Iranian Tribes” based on the works of Iranian artists was inaugurated at Iran’s Cultural Attaché Office in Paris. The opening ceremony of the exhibition was attended by the Iranian Ambassador to UNESCO and a large number of Iranian and French enthusiasts.

In this exhibition, 27 photos of 18 Iranian artists are being been displayed.

The “People of Iran; Colors and Happiness in Iranian Tribes” exhibition shows a beautiful image of Iranian ethnic groups, presents a unifying message of the coexistence of different ethnicities in the geography of Iran.



EU Proposes Booster Jabs for 2022 Travel

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - European Union residents will need to have COVID-19 vaccine booster jabs if they want to travel to another country in the bloc next summer free of tests or quarantines, the European Commission proposed on Thursday.

The EU executive also proposed accepting all vaccines approved by the World Health Organization for travel purposes, which would allow non-essential travel to the EU from outside the bloc for people vaccinated with Chinese shots and vaccines made in India.

The Commission wants to harmonize rules across the 27 EU nations to allow free movement, a cornerstone of the European Union, but is facing new restrictions as cases break records in Europe and many EU countries roll out booster doses.

It made its proposals as Europe again became the center of the COVID-19 pandemic even after successful vaccination campaigns, prompting some countries to consider new curbs on movement as the continent heads into winter.

EU governments, which will need to approve the Commission recommendation, kicked off debate on the topic on Tuesday. Greece proposed on Wednesday that people should in future be able to travel freely if they have received a dose in the past six months.

Accepting that immunity wanes, the executive Commission is proposing that people should be considered covered if the final dose of their primary vaccination was within the last nine months, and that this update should apply from Jan. 10.

Given most EU residents who were vaccinated received their final doses in the second and third quarters of 2021, their coverage would mostly expire by the middle of next year.

EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said the current vaccination coverage was 65% of the EU population.

“For everyone to travel and live as safely as possible, we need to reach significantly higher vaccination rates – urgently. We also need to reinforce our immunity with booster vaccines,” she said.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control on Wednesday recommended vaccine boosters for all adults, with priority for those over 40.

The Commission did say there were no studies yet expressly addressing the effectiveness of booster shots on transmission of COVID-19, but said it was likely that they provided longer protection than provided by initial shots.

EU coordination on COVID passes, which show if a holder is fully vaccinated or has had a negative test or recovered from an infection, has allowed an easing of curbs on travel.

The passes, typically viewed on mobile devices, are issued by individual countries, but are recognized across the bloc.

Under the new system, only vaccinated or recovered people would be able to enter



the EU for non-essential travel regardless of where they travel from. Currently travelers from countries deemed safe can enter with only a negative test, but the list of safe countries would be discontinued.

Separately, the EU commission urged EU governments to allow non-essential travel from outside the bloc for people vaccinated with jabs having completed the WHO emergency use listing process, as well as those vaccinated with EU-approved vaccines.

The EU has so far authorized vaccines produced by Pfizer-BionTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca (when produced in Europe), and Johnson & Johnson.

In addition to these shots, the WHO has approved also the vaccines produced by Chinese makers Sinopharm and Sinovac and by Indian company Bharat Biotech. It has also authorized the AstraZeneca vaccine made in India by the Serum Institute.

Currently, most EU countries do not accept people vaccinated with vaccines that have not been approved in the EU. As an additional safeguard, the Commission proposed requiring proof of a negative molecular test for all travellers who have been vaccinated with a WHO approved vaccine which is not approved in the EU.

It is unclear whether EU governments will heed this recommendation.

South Africa Detects New Covid-19 Variant



JOHANNESBURG (Dispatches) - Scientists in South Africa said Thursday they had detected a new Covid-19 variant with multiple mutations, blaming it for a surge in infection numbers.

“Unfortunately we have detected a new variant which is a reason for concern in South Africa,” virologist Tulio de Oliveira told a hastily-called news conference.

The variant, which goes by the scientific lineage number B.1.1.529, “has a very high number of mutations,” he said. “It’s unfortunately causing a resurgence of infections,” he said.

It has also been detected in Botswana and Hong Kong among travellers from South Africa, he said.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the variant was of “serious concern” and behind an “exponential” increase in reported cases, making it “a major threat”.

Daily infections shot to more than 1,200 on Wednesday, up from around 100 earlier this month.

Before the detection of the new variant, authorities had predicted a fourth wave to hit South Africa starting around the middle of December, buoyed by travel ahead of the festive season. The government-run National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) said 22 positive cases of the B.1.1.529 variant have been recorded in the country following genomic sequencing.

It said in a statement Thursday that detected cases and the percentage testing positive are “increasing quickly” in three of the country’s provinces including Gauteng, which includes Johannesburg and Pretoria.

A cluster outbreak was recently identified, concentrated at a higher education institute in the capital Pretoria, the NICD said.

Last year South Africa also detected the Beta variant of the virus, although until now its infection numbers have been driven by the Delta variant, which was originally detected in India.

The country has the highest pandemic numbers in Africa with around 2.95 million cases, of which 89,657 have been fatal.

Ten mutations

Scientists said the new B.1.1.529 variant has at least 10 mutations, compared to two for Delta or three for Beta.

“What gives us some concerns (is) that this variant might have not just have enhanced transmissibility, so spread more efficiently, but might also be able to get around parts of the immune system and the protection we have in our immune system,” said researcher Richard Lessells.

Immigration to UK Fell by Almost 90% in 2020

LONDON (Dispatches) - Net immigration to the United Kingdom fell by almost 90 percent last year to its lowest level since 1993 due to the impact of COVID-19 and Brexit, official figures showed on Thursday.

The Office for National Statistics released a first provisional estimate showing that 34,000 more people moved to the UK last year than emigrated, down from 271,000 in 2019.

“Immigration was much lower in 2020 than in previous years, likely caused by a combination of the coronavirus pandemic and Brexit,” the ONS said.

Concern about unrestricted immigration from the European Union – which exceeded 200,000 on a net basis in 2015 – was a major feature of 2016’s Brexit referendum.

More recently, businesses have complained of labour shortages due to a lack of immigrants.

The UK left the EU at the end of January 2020 – although EU citizens kept the right to move to the UK until the end of the year – but COVID caused foreign travel to grind to a halt from late March 2020.

The pandemic also severely hampered the ONS’s ability to collect migration data as it stopped its traditional practice of surveying passengers at airports and ports.

The provisional data is based on experimental statistical modelling and is likely to be revised, with plausible estimates for 2020 ranging from net immigration of 125,000 to net emigration of 58,000, the ONS said.

Looking at non-British EU nationals alone, there was a net emigration of approximately 94,000, the ONS estimated.

Unlike most European countries, the UK does not have a system of identity cards or compulsory registration for residents that would make it easy to check migration flows.

“Although there is no evidence of an exodus from the UK in 2020, global travel restrictions meant the movement of people was limited, with all data sources suggesting migration fell to the lowest level seen for many years,” ONS statistician Jay Lindop said.

IMF Recommends El Salvador Not Use Bitcoin as Legal Tender

MEXICO CITY (Dispatches)

- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) yesterday said El Salvador should not use bitcoin as legal tender, considering risks related to the cryptocurrency.

“Given bitcoin’s high price volatility, its use as a legal tender entails significant risks to consumer protection, financial integrity, and financial stability,” the IMF said in its staff concluding statement of the 2021 Article IV mission to El Salvador. “Its use also gives rise to fiscal contingent liabilities.”

The IMF regularly undertakes Article IV missions to member countries to consult with government officials before they request to use IMF resources.

In September, El Salvador became the first country to adopt bitcoin as legal tender, alongside the US dollar.

“Because of those risks, bitcoin should not be used as a legal tender. Staff recommends narrowing the scope of the bitcoin law and urges strengthening the regulation and supervision of the new payment ecosystem,” said the IMF.



The IMF statement came only two days after President Nayib Bukele announced El Salvador was planning to build the world’s first “bitcoin city”, which will be funded initially by bitcoin bonds.

Bukele said the city would get its energy supply from a volcano and would not levy any taxes except for value added tax.

Bukele has championed the adoption of bitcoin, arguing it will help millions of Salvadorans living abroad send remittances back home. He has also said it will bring financial inclusion, investment, tourism, and development.

“Although we obviously do not agree on some things, such as the adoption of #Bitcoin, the analysis it makes of our country is interesting,” Bukele said of the IMF statement.

The IMF also estimated El Salvador’s economy will grow around 10 per cent in 2021 and 3.2 per cent in 2022 and said it expects the Central American nation’s public debt to reach 85 per cent of its GDP by the end of 2021.

Iran Resolute on...

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“Iran has also voluntarily continued its various practical and constructive interactions with the IAEA and has cooperated closely with the IAEA to address issues related to a number of unimportant issues. Unfortunately, Iran’s positive and constructive approach has not been responded to properly by the IAEA, which could impede future interactions between the two sides,” the Iranian diplomat said.

He emphasized that Iran has never decreased its interactions with the IAEA under the CSA and noted that observing the principles of independence, impartiality and professionalism would play a very important role in serving the interests of Tehran and the UN nuclear watchdog alike.

Ghaebi urged all IAEA member states to heed the agency’s long-term interests and avoid any political interference.

U.S. Must...

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Earlier this month, the U.S. Treasury Department placed six Iranian persons and one institution on Washington’s sanctions list under the pretext of their trying to impact on the 2020 US presidential elections.

Elsewhere in the phone conversation, Amir-Abdollahian said participants in the Vienna talks can reach a “good and even immediate agreement” only if the sides return to full compliance with their obligations as per the JCPOA.

“If the opposing sides are prepared to return to their full obligations and the lifting of sanctions, it will be possible to reach a good and even immediate agreement.”

He emphasized that despite violation of obligations by the US and the three European signatories to the JCPOA -- Britain, France and Germany -- Iran “will participate in the Vienna talks with goodwill and seriousness and wants a good and verifiable agreement.”

The Iranian foreign minister said return to the JCPOA must constitute compliance to all its provisions and content in action.

He added that the Iranian negotiating team would consider all the issues that need to be settled as it is clear that no final outcome was achieved after six rounds of talks in Vienna.

Amir-Abdollahian emphasized that the Western side must adopt a “new and constructive approach” to the Vienna talks.

The EU foreign policy chief, for his part, said as coordinator of the Joint Commission, he has held talks with all sides and added that the Vienna talks must include detailed and intensive discussions about unsolved issues, particularly the removal of sanctions.

It is possible for all sides to return to the JCPOA in its original form, Borrell added.

New Iranian Oil...

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“I call on the government to revisit its decision to cut medicine subsidies,” he added. “Cuts could be applied to other unimportant things, medicine is an absolute priority to citizens.”

“We decided to activate our institutions and medical clinics to secure the highest number of medicine citizens need,” Nasrallah noted.

Secretary-General of the Lebanese Hezbollah Resistance Movement criticized the process of investigating the explosion of the port of Beirut, saying that this process will not lead to the finding of the truth.

“All available data confirms that judges in charge of Beirut Port blast case are under accusation and suspicion,” Nasrallah said, adding, “The course of a judicial investigation into the Port Blast case is discretionary and won’t achieve any results.”

“Continuing this course with Tayounch case is alarming, may drag the country into sedition,” he stressed.

Hezbollah leader also referred to the fuel crisis in the country, saying, “We’re not planning to replace oil companies, all we want is to ease the oil crisis. US pressures on the government urged us to import diesel via Syria despite difficulties.”

“The value of diesel grants provided by Hezbollah throughout the first stage reached \$2,600,000,” he added. “The value of the subsidy to selling diesel in the first stage reached \$7,750,000.”

“Some blocked minded sides accused Hezbollah of profiting from selling diesel, simple calculations to importing costs would prove otherwise,” Nasrallah highlighted. “During the first stage, we bore \$10 million of diesel aid costs to alleviate the sufferings of Lebanese.”

He went on to say, “A new Iranian oil vessel will reach Syria in the upcoming few days.”

“Documents circulated on social media alleging they’re issued by Hezbollah are fake... Unfortunately, some deal with these documents with a high level of absurdity, ignorance and triviality,” said Hezbollah Secretary-General.

F1 Renews Deal With Spain Until 2026

LONDON (Dispatches) - Formula One has renewed its contract with Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya for the Spanish Grand Prix until 2026, it announced.

F1 said in a statement that as part of the new agreement, improvements to the track and facilities will be made ahead of next season's race on May 22, 2022.

The improvements would include upgrades and improvements relating to the circuit's sustainability plans, the statement added.

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River Plate Win Argentine League Title

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - River Plate beat Racing 4-0 to win the Argentine first division with three games to spare and secure the only major domestic title that had evaded coach Marcelo Gallardo.

A first-half goal from Agustin Palavecino and three more in the second half from Julian Alvarez and Braian Romero's double gave River an unassailable 12-point lead at the top as they claimed the title in comfortable fashion, with the most goals scored and the least conceded.

Djokovic-Led Serbia Down Austria in Davis Cup Opener

LONDON (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic sped past Austria's Dennis Novak as Serbia thumped Austria 3-0 in their Davis Cup opening match at Innsbruck.

Djokovic took an hour to beat Novak 6-3, 6-2 after Dusan Lajovic saw off Gerald Melzer 7-6, 3-6, 7-5 behind closed doors due to a resurgence of the coronavirus in Austria.

Nikola Patic and Filip Krajinovic then beat Oliver Marach and Philipp Oswald 6-4, 4-6, 6-3.

Djokovic is attempting to end an already memorable year on a high after claiming three of the season's four Grand Slams.

"I love to play for my country, when they need me, I'm here," Djokovic said after his match.

Elsewhere Italy beat the United States 2-1 in Turin and Spain beat Ecuador in Madrid.

Backed by a hearty home crowd Italy raced into a 2-0 lead over the States thanks to wins from Lorenzo Sonego and Jannik Sinner.

Sonego, the world No.27, was ecstatic.

"I played the best tennis of my life," he claimed after seeing off Reilly Opelka 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

Sinner then pulverised a static John Isner 6-2, 6-0 in 62 minutes.

In the doubles rubber Rajeev Ram and Jack Sock struck back for the States in a 7-6 (7/5), 6-2 win over Simone Bolelli and Fabio Fognini to make it 2-1, while Colombia are the third team in Group E.

The 40-year-old Feliciano López opened Spain's title defence with a 6-3, 6-3 win over Roberto Quiroz of Ecuador.



"I think I did okay," he said, referring to the absence of Carlos Alcaraz, who went into quarantine on Thursday after testing positive for Covid-19.

On the opening day of the revamped 2021 finals brothers Elias and Mikael Ymer helped Sweden sweep aside Canada, France fought back to down the Czech Republic and Croatia crushed Australia.

The Davis Cup, which began life back in 1900 as a bilateral contest between Britain and the United States, was cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic.

This year's competition sees 12 qualifiers - Australia, Austria, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Sweden and USA - joined by the previous edition's semi-finalists - Spain, Canada, Great Britain and the Russian Tennis Federation.

These are joined by two wild card nations France and Serbia.

These 18 nations are divided into six groups of three, with winners and the top pair of second places going into the quarter-finals pot.

The semi-finals and December 5 final will all be played in the Spanish capital, reward for the team that won the title two years ago after 2020 was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rangnick Set To Manage Man United

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United are close to appointing Ralf Rangnick as their interim manager on a six-month contract following the departure of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, according to multiple reports in the British media.

The 63-year-old German, who is currently head of sports and development at Russian club Lokomotiv Moscow, will be given a two-year consultancy role once United find a permanent manager, reports said. A source at United told Reuters that nothing has been finalised and discussions are ongoing, adding that both the club and Rangnick were respectful of Lokomotiv.

Rangnick, however, will not be in the dugout for the Premier League game against Chelsea on Sunday due to work permit reasons, with Michael Carrick set to continue as caretaker boss. Rangnick has previously managed Hannover, Schalke, Hoffenheim and RB Leipzig in the Bundesliga.

Solskjaer was sacked as United manager last week after their 4-1 away defeat to Watford, a result that left them eighth in the league standings with 17 points from 12 games.



Bayern Turnover Tops €640m

BERLIN (Dispatches) -Bayern Munich's turnover for the fiscal year 2020-21 was just over €640 million (RM3 billion), a sharp decrease from the pre-Covid-19 levels of more than €750 million, the club said.

German Bundesliga champions for the last nine seasons, Bayern won six major titles in 2020 and although the Covid-19 pandemic affected their finances from March, 2020, the annual turnover was €643.9 million, with EBITDA at €98.4 million.

Bayern's turnover for 2018-19, the last fiscal year not to have been affected by the pandemic, had topped €750 million.

Bayern president Herbert Hainer told the club's annual general meeting the champions were in strong financial shape.

"We have no cent of debt, we own the Allianz Arena and the Bayern campus (training centre)," Hainer told the meeting.

"We are independent, going our own way, with our own strength. We are not being swept by this craziness out there," he said.

"Look at what happens at some other clubs. Barcelona have over €1.3 bln in debt. Juventus also recently published shocking financial figures." Barcelona, who had to let club great Lionel Messi leave due to "financial and structural obstacles" have a debt of more than €1.35 billion.

Italian club Juventus posted a loss of more than €200 million for 2020-21. "Bayern on the other hand are internationally competitive. We set standards and you, the members, can be proud of that," Hainer said.

Pochettino Never Asked to Leave PSG

PARIS (Dispatches) - Mauricio Pochettino has "never asked to leave" Paris Saint-Germain despite speculation linking the coach with Manchester United, the French club's sporting director Leonardo said on Friday.

The Brazilian also denied reports that PSG had approached former Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane, saying he has had "no contact" with the Frenchman. British media reports earlier this week suggested that former Tottenham boss Pochettino could be persuaded to leave Paris and join Man United mid-season.



Conte Warns He Is No Magician

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham manager Antonio Conte said he has quickly realized the level of his squad is "not so high" after an embarrassing 2-1 loss to Slovenian minnows NS Mura in the Europa Conference League.

Spurs will now likely have to beat Rennes at home in their final group game to avoid crashing out of Europe's third-tier competition.

And they can no longer catch Rennes at the top of the group meaning they would progress to the last 32, while the group winners are parachuted into the last 16.

Harry Kane started as one of just two players to be retained by Conte from Sunday's 2-1 win over Leeds in the Premier League, which had appeared to launch Conte's reign.

However, the Italian was given an early lesson into the strength of his squad with an

embarrassing night in Maribor against a club founded just nine years ago.

"After three weeks I am starting to understand the situation. It is not simple," said Conte.

"At this moment the level at Tottenham is not so high.

"I must be honest and tell you that after three-and-a-half weeks, I am starting to understand the situation. I can tell you that the situation is not simple."

Conte has won a league title at each of his previous three clubs during spells at Juventus, Chelsea and Inter Milan. His arrival has sparked hopes of a return to the Champions League next season via a top-four finish in the Premier League.

But he warned he will need time to lift standards around the club.

"Someone (might) think that a new coach arrives and Conte won in the past and then I am a magician. But the only magic I can do is to work," he added.

"To bring work and work to improve, to bring my methods, my ideas of football. But we have to understand that we need time."

Infantino Says Those Opposed to World Cup Change Scared

CAIRO (Dispatches) - FIFA president Gianni Infantino accused those opposed to altering the frequency of the World Cup to every two years of being scared of change and wanting to keep their elevated status in the game as Africa today backed the plans.

In a veiled dig at confederations in Europe and South America, who have come out against the plan to change the current four-year-cycle, Infantino said they did not want things to change because they were at the top of the sport.

He was speaking at the Confederation of African Football congress in Cairo, where African countries today unanimously voted for a resolution backing his plan to change the hosting of the World Cup to every two years.

"Those who are against it are those at the top. It happens in every sector of life when there are reforms and changes, those who are at the top don't want anything to change because they are at the top," said Infantino.

"And they are afraid maybe that if something changes, their leadership position is at risk.

"We understand that and we compliment and applaud them for having been so successful in reaching the top. This is fantastic, and they are an example for everyone.

"But at the same time, we cannot close the door, we need to keep the door open, we need to give hope and opportunities," he added.

Infantino insisted increasing the frequency of the hosting of FIFA's flagship event would offer more opportunities to countries outside of the top tier of the world game.



Portugal on Collision Course With Italy

ROME (Dispatches) - Italy and Portugal have been drawn in the same pathway for the European FIFA World Cup play-offs, meaning only one will be able to secure qualification for next year's tournament in Qatar.

Italy are the defending European champions, after beating England on penalties in the final of Euro 2020 in the summer. Portugal meanwhile won Euro 2016, overcoming France in Paris to win the tournament for the first time.

But one — or both — will miss out on a place in Qatar after Friday's play-off draw.

Italy host North Macedonia in their semi-final clash, with Portugal welcoming Turkey. The winners of the latter tie will have home advantage for the final.

"It's a very difficult draw for us," Italy head coach Roberto Mancini said immediately after the draw. "North Macedonia are a good team and after, if we win, we've got to play the final away in Turkey or in Portugal. It's very strong."

Elsewhere, home nations Scotland and Wales have also been drawn in the same pathway. Scotland will face Ukraine at home in their semi-final, with Wales hosting Austria.

Path B meanwhile sees Russia host Poland, with the winners taking on either Sweden or the Czech Republic. The draw involved the 12 nations who did not directly qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup during the first qualifying stage.

The dates for the play-off semi-finals take place next year during the March international break. The play-off semi-finals will take place on Thursday March 24, with the finals taking place one week later, on March 29.

