

Health Ministry Announced on Sunday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to 129,629 With 80 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

President Ebrahim Raisi Tehran, In a Message on Sunday, Congratulated President Mohamed Ould Cheikh Mohamed Ahmed Ould Ghazouani and Mauritanian People On National Day of Mauritania

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Iran Foreign Trade Value At \$63b in 8 Months

TEHRAN (MNA) – Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance (MEAF) put the country's foreign trade value in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (from March 21 to Nov. 22) at \$63 billion. President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) and Deputy Economy Minister Mehdi Mir-Ashrafi made the remarks on Sunday, saying that Iran's foreign trade in this period hit \$63 billion, showing a 42 percent hike as compared to the same period of last year. In this period, Iran exchanged 110.3 million tons of goods, valued at \$63.1 billion, with its trade partners, he stated. A comparison of an eight-month trade of Iran with its trade partners indicates that country's trade with its partners from March 21 to Nov. 22 registered a 43.5 and 40 percent hike in terms of weight and value respectively. Of total 110.3 million tons of goods exchanged from March 21 to Nov. 22, \$83.7 million tons of which is related to Iran's export of products, valued at \$31.1 billion, showing a 10.5 and 42 percent hike in terms of weight and value respectively, Mir-Ashrafi added. **See Page 7**

Cooperation, Economic Partnership With Neighbors, Top Priority



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Islamic Republic of Iran attaches special priority to economic cooperation and partnership with Asian countries, especially its neighbors in South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Iran's President says. Speaking on Sunday morning at the 15th Summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) hosted by Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi said: "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers a special priority for economic cooperation and partnership with Asian countries, especially its neighbors in South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia and the Caucasus." The President emphasized: "Undoubtedly, strengthening the role and position of regional organizations as facilitators of bilateral and multilateral cooperation is one of our concerns and efforts, one of the clear manifestations of which is the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)." The President added: "In addition to enjoying the material features of power, such as the population of half a billion, the ownership of one third of the world's energy resources, the unique position for Europe-China connection with the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, the young and powerful human resources, the ECO entails a privileged identity called Islam." Raisi stated: "We are not only capable neighbors but also inheritors and at the same time promote a genuine identity emanating from Islamic culture that is able to lead the future of humanity in the brightest state and can also promote spiritual growth and vitality through the cooperation of all." "Over the years, good achievements and progress have been achieved in the ECO, but there is still a significant gap between the successes achieved and the real capacities and capabilities of the organization. For example, despite high trade potentials, intra-regional trade is still less than 10%," he said. The President stated: "The Islamic Republic of Iran, as an important country, seeks to improve the level of cooperation in ECO and to raise the rank and status of this organization in regional and international relations. We believe that there are effective tools for the promotion of the organization that, if the efforts of the members are shared, can ensure the well-being of future generations in addition to the material progress of the countries." Referring to the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the President said: "Now we need the collective intervention of member states to remove the destructive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the region and promote the relations and interactions between us with appropriate speed and with the help of experiences in the field of health and education and the production of medicine." He went on to say that the cruel sanctions imposed by the United States are too weak to undermine the determination of Iran to pursue the policy of maximum interaction with neighboring and regional countries. Raisi reiterated Iran's unconditional support for the ECO and its activities. He emphasized that the U.S.' cruel sanctions against Iran are too impotent to undermine Tehran's determination to proceed with its policy of maximum interaction with the neighbors and regional states. "By withdrawing from the JCPOA illegally, imposing the illegal and unilateral sanctions, and establishing the policy of 'maximum cruelty', the United States proved that its interests are incompatible with the collective interests of our region," Raisi added.

Tehran, Harare Expand Ties With Focus on Thwarting Sanctions

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Islamic Republic of Iran and Zimbabwe are expanding and developing bilateral ties in trade and economic fields with a focus on neutralizing sanctions imposed on both countries. The Director-General of Ministry of Labor, Cooperatives and Social Welfare for International Affairs in a meeting with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Zimbabwe David Musabayana on Saturday emphasized the expansion of relations between the two countries in trade and economic fields with the focus on neutralizing Western sanctions and preparing for 9th Meeting of Joint Economic Commission between Iran and Zimbabwe. During Iran-Zimbabwe Joint Economic Cooperation meeting, Hamed Forouzan the Director-General of Ministry of Labor and Cooperatives for International Affairs pointed to the long and deep political and economic cooperation between Iran and Zimbabwe and said that Iran has always been a strong supporter of anti-colonialist countries in Africa. **See Page 7**

ViewPoint Human Rights a Threadbare Pretext Against Iran

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

The Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979 and its foundation has faced a repeated accusation by the West and it has always been accused of violating the human rights while the Western countries are the real violators of the human rights in the world and even in their own territories. The Western-backed organizations come to the assistance and rescues of their mentors when they are called, and issue statements against the human rights condition in the Islamic Republic of Iran while they close their own eyes on what is going in the Western countries or in pro-West countries. Unfortunately the human rights body of the United Nations acts in favor of the Western countries and it usually follows the prescriptions of the West in condemning human rights condition in the anti-world arrogant countries like Iran. On Saturday a top Iranian human rights official lamented the exploitation of human rights issues by certain countries as a tool to pressure other nations, saying human rights will be the main victim should Western countries insist on applying double standards. "Unfortunately, some countries use human rights as a tool against others to achieve their foreign policy goals," Kazem Gharibabadi, the secretary general of Iran's Human Rights Office, said during a meeting with Wolf Dietrich Heim, the Austrian ambassador to Tehran. Pointing out that Western countries are not spared when it comes to human rights violations as there are many instances of rights violations in those countries, Gharibabadi added, "If double standards and politicization pervade in the field of human rights, the victim will simply be human rights itself." Earlier this month, the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) approved an anti-Iran draft resolution on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran by a vote of 79 in favor to 30 against, with 71 abstentions. Iran's delegate called the resolution – sponsored by Canada, the United States, and "the child-killer Israeli regime" – an "insincere political move" that exposes the deliberate hostile policy of incitement to "Iranophobia." The main proponents of "racism, occupation, and those behind the abhorrent murder of indigenous peoples have come together to lecture others on human rights," Zahra Ershadi, deputy permanent representative of Iran to the UN, said before the Third Committee on November 17. **See Page 7**

Iran, Russia, China Meet Ahead of Vienna Talks

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's negotiating team, led by Ali Baqeri-Kani, has held bilateral and trilateral meetings in Vienna, ahead of a resumption in talks to revive a 2015 nuclear agreement that would remove all sanctions imposed by the US on Tehran. "The Iranian team arrived on Saturday in Vienna and started meetings which continued on Sunday at an expert level with the heads of the Russian and Chinese negotiating teams, as well as the EU Coordinator Enrique Mora," Iranian diplomat Mohammadreza Ghaebi told ISNA news agency. The remaining signatories to the deal are set to resume talks after a five-month hiatus. Iran says it won't settle for anything less than the US sanctions removed all at once in a verifiable manner. Iran also wants strict guarantees that the US would not abandon the agreement again. The US imposed many rounds of sanctions on Iran after pulling out of the accord in 2018. In an interview ahead of his visit, Baqeri-Kani, who serves as Iran's deputy foreign minister for political affairs, stressed that any progress on a US return to the JCPOA must be preceded by the scrapping of all American sanctions and a guarantee that a future administration in Washington will not renege on the agreement once again. **See Page 7**

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Pakistanis Want Implementation of Barter Trade With Iran

KARACHI (Dispatches) - The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry's (FPCCI) Businessmen Panel has called for early implementation of barter trade mechanism signed between Pakistan and Iran during the 9th Joint Trade Committee meeting held in Tehran to jack up the bilateral trade to \$5 billion annually, a statement said on Saturday. Businessmen Panel chairman Mian Anjum Nisar said that Pakistan and Iran have signed an agreement early this month during the visit of Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce and Trade Abdul Razak Dawood to Tehran and the two countries had decided to initiate barter trade within a month. "All the relevant departments, particularly the central bank, instead of creating obstacles, should start working on [the] implementation of the barter trade through approved crossing points without any further delay, removing all bottlenecks for the smooth trade." The FPCCI's former president appreciated Islamabad, as well as Tehran for taking serious initiatives to remove hurdles to bilateral trade, asking Iran to also take benefits of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects. To meet the objective of barter trade mechanism both parties must finalise an international mechanism to remove the impediments in the barter trade. The barter trade is, in fact, a right decision, which could boost Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves through escalation in exports, he added. **See Page 7**

Iran, Kazakhstan Seek To Strengthen Relations

TEHRAN (IP) - During the meeting with his Kazakh counterpart, Iran's foreign minister stressed the importance of bilateral cooperation, urging the acceleration of establishing a joint commission for economic cooperation between the two countries.

On the sidelines of the ECO Summit, Shakhmat Nurishev, First Deputy Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, met with Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and presented a report on the

development of relations between the two countries in various political, economic, and cultural fields and the Kazakh side's views on the issue.

Amir-Abdollahian also stressed the importance of Iran-Kazakhstan cooperation in various fields, urging the acceleration of establishing a joint commission for economic cooperation between the two countries.

Development of Tehran-Ankara Relations Benefits All

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Presidents of Iran and Turkey stressed taking advantages of all capacities for the comprehensive development of Tehran-Ankara relations, emphasizing the development of cooperation and coordination between the two countries in bilateral and regional issues.

In a meeting with Turkish President on the sidelines of the 15th Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Summit in Turkmenistan, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi said: "Iran and Turkey can bring economic and political relations closer to the strategic level by improving the current level of trade and exchanges."

Referring to the wide and diverse areas of cooperation between Iran and Turkey in various sectors, including energy, banking, monetary issues, and trade and commerce exchanges, Raisi said: "We should facilitate the development of economic relations and in this regard, preferential tariffs can be reviewed."

Emphasizing the close cooperation and relations between Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey, Iran's President said: "The three countries have many cultural, religious and ideological commonalities, and these relations should not be allowed to be disrupted, but should be as close as possible to disappoint our common enemies."

"Terrorist groups not only cause insecurity in Afghanistan but also threaten the security of the region, so we should not allow terrorist groups such as ISIL and the PKK to threaten the security of countries in the region," he said.

The President said: "The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, and we believe that all groups and ethnicities of the Afghan people should have a role and participate in the future of Afghanistan."



Referring to establishing stability and security in Syria, Ayatollah Raisi said: "We should use our capacities to create peace and security in Syria."

Raisi stated: "The problems of the region must be resolved by the countries of the region, and the presence and intervention of outsiders will not only help solve the problems, but will complicate the situation."

Raisi also stressed the importance of stability, peace, and respect for the territorial integrity of Iraq, noting: "The Islamic Republic of Iran supports and emphasizes the establishment of a strong government accepted by the Iraqi people."

During the meeting, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also said that his country considers it necessary to develop and strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"We can make a leap in the relations between the two countries, especially in the economic sectors," he said.

"The White House is training and arming all terrorist groups in the region, including ISIL and the PKK, and providing them with terrorist equipment and tools to create insecurity," he said.

Erdogan added: "The Islamic Republic of Iran, Russia and Turkey can maintain security and stability in the region with the cooperation of other countries in the region."

Investigating Body Calls for Prosecution of Martyr Soleimani Assassins



TEHRAN (IFP) - A joint investigating committee formed by the Iranian and Iraqi judiciaries has issued a joint communiqué about the assassination of Iran's anti-terror icon General Qassem Soleimani and his entourage including Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

The committee convened in Baghdad and released the 5-point communiqué after the first round of their probe into the assassination.

The committee says all possible judicial and legal measures should be taken to prosecute and punish those involved in the assassination of General Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis and their companions, especially American agents and elements.

According to the communiqué, bilateral cooperation to complete the ongoing judicial investigations by the joint committee must continue and be boosted.

It added that all available capacities must be used to provide and complete the required information based on the "Agreement on Legal and Judicial Cooperation in Criminal Matters" between Iraq and Iran.

The joint investigation committee also says it must keep working in Iran and Iraq to ensure the completion of the information required in the judicial investigation.

The next session of the Joint Committee will be held in Tehran next month.

General Qassemi Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were martyred in a drone strike directly ordered by former U.S. president Donald Trump in January 2020. Following the terrorist attack, Iran launched a salvo of missiles at a U.S. base in northern Iraq in retaliation. Iran said its retaliatory acts would not be limited to the missile strike and it will pursue the matter through legal international channels.

Pakistan President Emphasizes Use of Barter Trade Mechanism With Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President of Pakistan Dr Arif Alvi expressing satisfaction on regular high-level interactions with the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasized utilization of barter trade mechanism with Tehran.

Pakistani Foreign Ministry in a statement on Sunday said that President Arif made the remarks during a meeting with President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi, on the sidelines of 15th Summit of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Ashgabat.

It said that President Alvi congratulated President Raisi on assuming the office after his victory in the recent elections. President Alvi underlined that Pakistan considered Iran as an important Muslim neighbor and brother based on deep-rooted historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural linkages between the two countries.

"The two leaders expressed satisfaction on the regular high-level interactions which had reinforced different avenues of bilateral cooperation," said the statement.

President Alvi highlighted that Pakistan accorded highest priority to geo-economics for shared prosperity and regional connectivity. He expressed satisfaction at the recent operationalization of International Road Transport (TIR) shipments from Pakistan to Turkey



and Azerbaijan, which would be beneficial for the entire ECO region.

The statement further said that while referring to recently held JTC meeting in Tehran, Alvi underscored the importance of regular convening of bilateral mechanisms for trade and economy. He also emphasized utilization of barter trade mechanism in this respect.

President Alvi thanked Iran for its consistent support to the Kashmir cause, particularly from Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei.

It said on regional situation, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, President Alvi noted the increased convergence of views among the neighboring countries, emphasizing the need for closely coordinated approach to achieve shared objectives of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

He laid emphasis on urgent provision of humanitarian and economic assistance to alleviate the sufferings of people of Afghanistan, stressing the de-freezing of Afghanistan's financial assets in this respect.

President Alvi reiterated the invitation for a bilateral visit to Pakistan to President Raisi at his earliest convenience.

The two leaders agreed to stay engaged on all issues of mutual interest.

Iranian, Uzbek FMs Agree on Tehran-Tashkent Cooperation Roadmap

TEHRAN (MNA) - In a meeting on the sidelines of the ECO summit in Ashgabat, the Iranian and Uzbek Foreign Ministers stressed the need to draw a roadmap for cooperation between Tehran and Tashkent.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met and held talks with his Uzbek counterpart Abdulaziz Kamilov on Saturday on the sidelines of the 15th ECO Summit in Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan.

During the talk, the two sides explored avenues for enhancing bilateral relations and also discussed the issues of mutual concerns. The Uzbek Foreign Minister also stressed the need to draw a roadmap for cooperation between the two countries and to promote bilateral relations.

Reviewing the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Uzbekistan in various political, cultural, and economic fields, Amir-Abdollahian stressed the need to expand relations in the interests of the two countries.

He also expressed Tehran's readiness to hold a joint commission cooperation meeting between the two countries in the near future. He also welcomed the Uzbek Foreign Minister's proposal to draw a roadmap for cooperation between the two countries, calling it a factor in boosting relations.

Iran's seriousness to reach a good, immediate agreement in the upcoming talks and the country's measures to lift all U.S. unjust and illegal sanctions was also among the issues raised by the Iranian Foreign Minister.

Vaccination of 4m Afghan Immigrants, Great Achievement for Iran

TEHRAN (IP) - The representative of the World Health Organization in Iran emphasized that four million Afghan refugees in Iran, regardless of nationality and residence status, have received vaccination services against coronavirus and this is a great achievement for Iran.

Jaffar Hussain, the World Health Organization representative and Head of Mission to the Islamic Republic of Iran, said on Sunday: "Immigrants living in Iran have been a big job for the Iranian government."

Speaking at the national conference in the Razi Conference Hall of Iran University of Medical Sciences, Jaffar Hussain added: "The World Health Organization, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health of Iran, is studying the effectiveness of Sinopharm, AstraZeneca and COVIran Barekat COVID-19 vaccines in order to extract its effectiveness."

The representative of the World Health Organization in Iran also said: "In Iran, good services have been provided with general vaccination, and with the arrival of vaccines and domestic products, full coverage has been provided in this regard."

Jaffar Hussain emphasized: "Iran is one of the leading countries in the region and West Asia which is capable of vaccinating publicly and sometimes injecting one and a half doses of vaccines on a daily basis."

Iran, Turkmenistan Stress Development of Transport Infrastructure to Boost Trade

TEHRAN (MNA) - Representatives of the private sectors of Iran and Turkmenistan have stressed the need for developing transportation and transit infrastructure at common borders as the prerequisite for the expansion of trade ties.

In a meeting between the Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Gholam-Hossein Shafei and the chairman of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan, Shafei said the growth of economic cooperation between the two countries depends on the development of such infrastructure.

As reported by the ICCIMA, the officials met on the sidelines of the meeting of the Economic Cooperation Union (ECO) member states in Ashgabat.

Speaking in this meeting, the Turkmen side emphasized that Turkmenistan is completely neutral in its relations with other countries and does not place any restrictions on the development of mutual cooperation.

"Iran is a large country with a long history of cooperation in various fields, and we would like to cooperate with the Iranian side in various fields of agriculture, industry, mining, and services," he said.

The official stressed the need for the development of relations between the two countries in various economic and trade sectors, saying that the private sectors of the two countries have the ability to develop various activities and this capacity can be used.

"Unfortunately, despite our interest in developing relationships, the outbreak of coronavirus has overshadowed some of these activities and we have not been able to make good use of our common capacities, which we hope will be remedied in the near future," he said.

Shafei for his part referred to the significant growth of privatization in Turkmenistan in recent years and noted that the friendly relations between the two countries could be the pillar of economic and trade relations between the two sides.

Criticizing the non-implementation of the agreements reached within the ECO framework, including the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), the Visa Facilitation Agreement, the ECO Transport and Transit Framework Agreement, etc., Shafei said: "I hope all countries will cooperate in the ECO trade forum so that the effective interaction of the private sectors and governments of the ECO members can pave the way for the development of cooperation within the region."

Iranian, Azeri FMs Confer On Different Issues

TEHRAN (MNA) - On the sidelines of the 15th ECO Summit in Ashgabat, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian held talks with Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Republic Jeyhun Bayramov on Saturday.

Amir-Abdollahian who accompanies Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in his visit to Turkmenistan met and held talks with his Azeri counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov in Ashgabat. During the meeting, the two ministers discussed issues of mutual interest.

Iranian foreign minister called the cooperation of the two countries in various political, economic, cultural and media fields 'important', saying that the recent visit of the Azeri Deputy Prime Minister to Tehran was positive.

He also called the cooperation of the officials of the two countries at various levels considerable.

Nouri Endorsed as New Education Minister

TEHRAN (IFP) - Yousef Nouri has secured a vote of confidence from Iranian lawmakers to become Iran's Education Minister.

Nouri made it to the top post with 194 votes in favor, 57 against and 17 abstentions.

He had been nominated by President Ebrahim Raisi for the post of Education Minister.

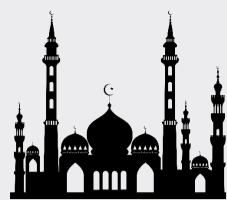
Speaking on Parliament floor during the confirmation session on Sunday, Noursi criticized the performance of the Education Ministry.

He said the Supreme Council of the Education Ministry did not do enough to counter

Education Document 2030, and that even some of the councilors supported that document.

"Those behind Education Document 2030 will have no place in the education system," he noted.

"During the second phase of the Revolution, we will take a leap toward new Islamic civilization, which requires the education of a generation with a model of new Islamic civilization," he explained. Two other nominees, namely Hossein Baghfoli and Masoud Fayazi, had previously failed to get the Parliament's approval.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	11:52
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:11
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:26
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:55

95. They said: "By Allah, truly thou art in thine old wandering mind."
96. Then when the bearer of the good news came, He cast (the shirt) over his face, and he forthwith regained clear sight. He said: "Did I not say to you, 'I know from Allah that which ye know not?'"

Surah 12, Joseph (95 - 96)

Official Refutes Report on Barter Trade of LPG for Rice

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) refuted reports that Iran intends to barter trade LPG for rice with Pakistan.

Addressing a press conference, Mohsen Khojastehmehr said that Iran does not intend to barter trade its LPG for rice in trade with Pakistan and said the country has no problem in repatriate its money for the sales of its LPG and sometimes the money is used for imports of some goods and it does not mean a barter trade.

He also said the company would welcome the arrival of foreign investment, saying: "If for any reason foreign investment is not materialized, different scenarios are on the table and we will not keep waiting for them."

Khojastehmehr added, "This company welcomes foreign investment, but if for any reason foreign investment, we have different scenarios on the table and we do not want to waste time." He added: "There is actual and potential power in the country and no one can hit its economy, which is the very economic resilience; i.e. full readiness under all sort of circumstances."

The NIOC CEO further stated that there are about 24 gas refineries, more than 130 processing and exploitation units and about 140 onshore and offshore drilling rigs in the country, adding: "Iran has a very good maritime capacity; in addition to being equipped with a fleet of vessels for carrying crude oil, petroleum products and gas condensate with high logistics capacity, we have an acceptable level of seafaring service."

He noted that NIOC has planned that, God willing, if the assumptions and requirements of these plans are provided, in the next 10 years, daily gas production will reach 1.5 billion cubic meters and crude oil production capacity will reach 5 million barrels. "According to the plan made to achieve this goal, about \$90 billion should be invested in the oil sector and about \$70 billion for the development of gas fields during these 10 years," he said.

Khojastehmehr continued: "God willing, by fulfilling the requirements and assumptions of these programs, we are ready to increase the country's crude oil export and refining capacity 1.5 times from before the sanctions. This shows that Iran's underground hydrocarbon capacity is high and we can produce oil and gas. This is Iran's biggest advantage in the oil industry."

He pointed to the high specialized capacity of the country's manpower in the upstream sector, equal to the top ranks in the world, and added: "The country has a young, agile, knowledgeable and skilled manpower, and everyone in the world recognizes this."

The CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company stated that the geopolitics and geography of the oil industry have made it possible for Iran to achieve sustainable



energy security in the region, the Middle East and the world, and this is Iran's advantage. "We have the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Oman and the Caspian Sea, and the political geographical position of the country is such that we will have the easiest way to transfer energy to the region, the Middle East and the world."

Khojastehmehr underlined definition of various investment packages in the National Iranian Oil Company, and said: "In the investment portfolio of the National Oil Company, an important share is considered for the foreign sector and this share in the investment portfolio is fully clarified."

He added that the share of hydrocarbon energy cannot be removed from the global energy mix in the short and medium terms due to its thermal value and importance.

Khojastehmehr further said that if the world is looking for stability and security of energy supply, it must participate in its investment, otherwise it will not be able to manage its industries, adding: "Of course, this is not only for the foreign environment, and if domestic industries also need feedstock, they have to use part of their profitability to provide their feedstock and the downstream part is ready to invest in the upstream sector."

He also announced that a very intensive program has been underway for the stability of winter fuel supply for the past two months until the first operational train of the South Pars Phase 14 onshore refinery is put into operation in December this year.

He added that in order to increase the export capacity and better marketing, a demercaptization project with a capacity of about 80,000 barrels of gas condensate was launched last week and has been put into operation.

The CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company also pointed out that by carrying out a jihadi work, God willing, next year the development plan of phase 11 of South Pars will be put into operation for maximum use of gas from the border phase.

Khojastehmehr continued: "It has also been approved that we start the 200-kilometer offshore pipeline for production from 14 wells from the Kish gas field, and now the basic studies for construction of this line have begun."

Emphasizing that the investment packages in the oil and gas sector are completely clear, he said: "Fortunately, we have started negotiations with some foreign companies and, thank God, the professional, executive and financial capacity of Iranian companies has reached such a level that investment and development of certain oil and gas projects in the upstream sector are entrusted to domestic companies."

Imports of All Brands of Korean Home Appliances to FTZs Forbidden



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Ahmad Jamali, the deputy secretary-general of the Free Zones High Council for the economic affairs, reiterated that the imports of any kind of Korean home appliances to the free trade zones and special economic areas of the country are forbidden.

Mr. Jamali said that in a communique all managers of the free trade zones have been informed on the ban on imports of the Korean home appliances to those zones.

He said managers have been asked to inform those who import goods to those areas. He reiterated by the way those orders for imports of South Korean products to the zones before October 16 are valid and the ban is applied from the date (October 16) when the Supreme Leader ordered the ban for imports of South Korean home appliances.

Iran, Iraq Sign 20 Tourism Agreements

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran and Iraq signed 20 cooperation agreements on the visit of Iraqi tourists to Mashhad.

A 3-day conference of Iranian and Iraqi activists in the tourism industry was held in Mashhad with the participation of 60 Iraqi companies active in the tourism industry and representatives of the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts.

On the sidelines of the conference, Iran and Iraq signed 20 cooperation agreements on the visit of Iraqi tourists to Mashhad.

According to one of the signed agreements between the two sides, more than 500 Iraqis will travel to Iran next week.

85% of Oil, Gas, Petchem Equipment Locally Manufactured



TEHRAN (Shana) - The chairman of the board of directors of the Association of Oil Industry Equipment Manufacturers said 40% of the manufacturing capacity of the association is empty, adding: "Currently, 85% of oil, gas and petrochemical equipment is produced inside the country."

Addressing a press conference Majid Mohammadpour said: "We expect the public sector to behave in the same way as with foreign dealers; we can do the same with domestic manufacturers. Today, despite the coronavirus and the sanctions, a lot of costs have been imposed on the manufacturers of oil industry equipment, however, we are not disappointed and we stand our ground."

He added: "The production of 10 items required by the oil industry will continue..., but the problems caused by hard currency fluctuations have increased the costs."

The chairman of the board of directors of the Association of Oil Industry Equipment Manufacturers stated that less than one percent of the association's capacity is allocated to exports, adding that the lack of certain standards has prevented exports.

President Urges Facilitation of Investment of Iranians Residing Abroad

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi has said that his government is responsible for Iranian expatriates and that grounds for their employment and investment should be prepared by Iran's embassies in different states.

Connection between the Iranians residing out of the country and the Islamic-Iranian culture and tradition should be preserved, President Raisi said during his meeting with the Iranian nationals residing in Turkmenistan.

The president has assured the assets of those who want to make investment in Iran will be guaranteed.

He further described the Iranians residing abroad as representatives of the culture and civilization of their great nation that has resisted against hegemony and pressures for over four decades.

As to relations between Iran and Turkmenistan, the President said the two enjoy ties beyond friendship.

Then, he called for fostering the current level of cooperation between Iran and Turkmenistan.

As he noted, gas, energy, oil, and transit are good grounds for promoting Tehran-Ashgabat ties.

Referring to the talks with his Turkmen counterpart, President Raisi said that the two are determined to remove the obstacles in the path of cooperation and develop the level of bilateral relations.

He hoped that the ways will be well prepared for furthering cooperation with regional and neighboring countries.

Iran Non-Oil Exports Up 42%

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Figures by Iran's customs office (IRICA) shows that non-oil exports from the country rose by 42% in value terms in March-November to a total of \$31.1 billion.

IRICA chief Mehdi Mir Ashrafi said that petrochemicals had accounted for 43% of the value and nearly a half of the volume of Iran's exports in the eight months to November 21.

Largest exports destination over the period included China with \$9.1 billion worth of purchases, followed by Iraq at \$6.1 billion and Turkey at \$3.8 billion, said Mir Ashrafi, adding that exports to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Afghanistan had amounted to \$2.9 billion and \$1.27 billion, respectively.

However, Iran had a trade deficit of \$900 million in March-November as imports into the country topped \$32 billion, an increase of 38% compared to the similar period last year, according to the IRICA figures.

Basic goods had accounted for 38% of the value of all imports into Iran in the eight months to late November, said Mir Ashrafi, adding that the government had provided some \$9.9 billion of funds to subsidize those shipments at an official exchange rate which is eight times lower than the current market price.

The UAE, the main re-exporting hub in the Persian Gulf, remained the largest supplier of goods to Iran in March-November with \$10.1 billion worth of exports to the country, followed by China at \$7.2 billion and Turkey at \$3.2 billion, said IRICA chief.

Germany and Switzerland were the fourth and fifth largest exporters to Iran over the same period with \$1.2 billion and \$1.1 billion worth of shipments, he said.

Afghan Exports to Iran Up by 50%

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Afghan exports to Iran have witnessed a 50 per cent rise this year as compared to the last year, according to Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce and Investment (ACCI). The export to Iran are mostly dried fruits agricultural products and coal, Tolo News reported. The Afghan export to Iran has reached \$17m.

"We have been exporting goods to Iran for 30 to 35 years, but still Iran does not import some important goods. Iran has put high tariffs on Afghan goods. We ask Iran to give us preferential tariffs like other countries," said Mohammad Younes Momand, head of the ACCI. "Iran had been one of the countries to which we export to the most. 40% of exports from the southwestern provinces, which includes marbles, dry fruit and agricultural products, have been exported to the Republic of Iran," said Mohammad Yunus Ghazizada, head of Herat's Chamber of Commerce and Investment.

According to ACCI statistics, Iran is the biggest exporter to Afghanistan, and this year exports have reached \$1.5 billion dollars.

Iran to Hold 2nd Special Fair in Syria

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran second special exhibition in Syria is scheduled to open in the presence of Iranian Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade Seyed Reza Fatemi Amin on Monday at the Damascus International Fair.

The 5-day exhibition, which is organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Silence of Iran as well as the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade of Syria, will be attended by dozens of Iranian companies in addition to one 150 investors and

industry owners from Iran.

The Iranian companies will showcase their products in the fields of hospital and medical equipment, medicine and treatment, construction industry, architecture, agriculture, husbandry and poultry, gas, oil and petrochemicals, police and security equipment, food and water and electricity in the exhibition.

Erdogan Orders Probe Into Turkish Lira's Slump

ISTANBUL, Nov 27 (Reuters) - Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has ordered an investigation into possible currency manipulation after the lira fell sharply to record lows against the dollar this week, the Anadolu news agency reported.

It said Erdogan had tasked the State Supervisory Council, an auditing agency which reports to the presidency, to identify institutions that had bought large amounts of foreign currency and to determine whether any manipulation had occurred.

The lira plunged to record lows this week after Erdogan pledged to stick with a policy of easing interest rates. It has lost as much as 45% of its value this year, with about half of those losses in the last two weeks.



New UAE Criminal Code Among 40 Legal Changes

DUBAI (Reuters) - The United Arab Emirates on Saturday said a new criminal code would come into force in January as part of what it called the most sweeping legal reform in the Persian Gulf state's history.

State news agency WAM reported the government is changing 40 laws this year. It did not make clear, however, which of the changes - which concern commercial companies, online security, trade, copyright, residency, narcotics and social issues - were new and which had been previously reported.

One change that appears new is the ratification of a Federal Crime and Punishment Law, effective from Jan. 2, 2022, designed to better protect women, domestic staff and public safety.



Spanish Police March in Madrid To Protest Against Reform



MADRID (Dispatches) - Thousands of Spanish police officers marched through Madrid on Saturday to protest against a proposed reform of a security law which they say will hamper their ability to do their work.

Politicians from Spain's three main conservative parties joined police officers in the protest against proposed changes to the 2015 Citizens Security Law, which critics say violates the right to protest and limits free expression.

Dubbed the "Gag Law" by those who oppose it, the legislation allows authorities to fine media organizations for distributing unauthorized images of police, strictly limits demonstrations and imposes heavy fines for offenders.

Spain's leftist government has proposed reforms including no longer classifying the taking of photographs or making of recordings of police at demonstrations as a serious offence.

Under the changes, police will also have to use less harmful materials at protests after a number of people were seriously injured by rubber bullets fired by officers.

The time that suspects who are arrested at protests can be held in custody will be cut from six hours to two and fines will be proportional to how much offenders earn.

"They should either leave the current law as it is or make it better for the police and for the citizens," Civil Guard officer Vanessa Gonzalez told Reuters.

Ivan Espinosa de los Monteros, of the far-right Vox party, said: "There is strong opposition against (the reform) of this law. It is against our police and we will not let it happen."

However, Isa Serra, spokeswoman for the far-left Unidas Podemos party, said at a rally in Cantabria in northern Spain that the law had done a "lot of damage to Spanish democracy".

Organizers said 150,000 people took part in the Madrid demonstration but the government put the figure at 20,000.

Algerians Vote in Local Elections

ALGIERS (Dispatches) - Algerians voted in local elections seen as key in President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's push to turn the page on the two-decade rule of late president Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

But despite official campaigns urging Algerians to "make their mark", the vote for municipal and provincial councils has sparked little public interest.

Observers are predicting a low turnout, as with a string of poorly attended votes since the Hirak pro-democracy protest movement that drove Bouteflika from power in April 2019.

The North African country's rulers are trying to "impose their will despite the embarrassing results of previous elections", said analyst Mohamed Hennad.

But he said voters saw the exercise as producing "an electoral mandate stripped of any political content".

Calm Returns to Solomons Capital After Deadly Riots

HONIARA (Dispatches) - A tense calm returned to the Solomon Islands' capital Honiara Saturday, after days of rioting left at least three dead and reduced swathes of the city to smoldering ruins.

A handful of petrol stations, shops and other businesses gingerly began to reopen, with Honiara residents flocking to buy basic provisions as the violent unrest ebbed.

"The situation is very tense and anything could happen anytime," said Audrey Awao, a working mother who worried there would soon be no food left in the shops.

What began as a small protest on Wednesday quickly descended into a violent free-for-all, with poor Honiara residents joining anti-government protesters to rampage through the shattered glass and burnt-out remains of businesses for things to eat or sell.

For three straight days, angry mobs cut through the usually sleepy seaside capital, demanding the removal of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

Two years of pandemic-induced closed borders have left the already ravaged Solomons economy in tatters, deepening widespread joblessness and poverty among the population of around 800,000. For three straight days, angry mobs cut through the usually sleepy seaside capital, demanding the removal of the prime minister

"Now PM need to step down" A self-employed 32-year-old who gave his name as Selson told AFP. "That's the demand for all citizens of the Solomon Islands."

Local police said a forensic team was working to identify the charred remains of three bodies found in a shop in the city's burnt-out Chinatown district.

A night-time curfew and the presence of roughly 150 foreign peacekeepers from Australia and Papua New Guinea appeared to cool tensions.

The scale of the recovery is now coming into sharp focus, even as the city remains on edge.

"It is very frustrating as it took me more than three hours to reach the fuel pump to get my vehicle fueled," Awao told AFP.

Many Solomon Islanders believe their government is corrupt and beholden to Beijing and other foreign interests.

"Most people are barely getting one meal a day, there are no tourists and very little economic stimulus," Douglas Kelson, chief officer at St John Ambulance Service, told AFP. "People do things they normally wouldn't when they are hungry," Kelson said.

Anger was channelled directly at Sogavare and his government, with mobs attempting to torch parliament and the prime minister's private residence as police fired tear gas and warning shots.



China Conducts Drills Near Taiwan Strait

BEIJING (Dispatches) - The Chinese army has carried out a naval and air force combat readiness patrol near the Taiwan Strait following a contentious visit to the island by a group of American lawmakers, a spokesman said.

Tensions between Beijing and Washington have soared over the fate of democratic self-ruled Taiwan, which China has vowed to one day retake, by force if necessary.

A group of American lawmakers arrived on the island Thursday offering support for the Taiwanese authorities, who Beijing accuses of seeking independence for the island.

In response, the Chinese army on Friday carried out "a naval and air force combat readiness patrol in the direction of the Taiwan Strait," a spokesman for the Eastern Theatre Command said in a statement.

"This is a necessary measure in response to the current situation in the Taiwan Strait," they added, pledging the army would "protect sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation."

"The army will continue to be on high alert and take all necessary measures to counter, at any time, any interference by external forces and any conspiracy by separatists aiming at the so-called 'Taiwan independence'."

No other information about the drills was given. China's foreign ministry on Friday expressed Beijing's "firm opposition" to the U.S. lawmakers' visit, the second by members of Congress to the island this month.

Led by Mark Takano, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the delegation met with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen Thursday in a show of support for a rare issue on which there is cross-party consensus in the U.S.

"Taiwan will continue to step up cooperation with the United States in order to uphold our shared values of freedom and democracy, and to ensure peace and stability in the region," Tsai said. China has intensified pressure on Taiwan since the 2016 election of Tsai, whose party has long advocated for the island's self-rule.

Beijing balks at any use of the word "Taiwan", or any references to the island as a "country" and diplomatic gestures that might lend a sense of international legitimacy to the island.

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Burkina Faso Police Fire Tear Gas at Protesters

OUAGADOUGOU (Dispatches) - Ouagadougou Police fired tear gas in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, on Saturday during a demonstration against the government's failure to stop a wave of violence by Islamist militants.

Opponents of President Roch Kaboré called for renewed protests in response to a recent surge of attacks in Burkina Faso, including one by al Qaeda-linked militants that killed dozens of military police officers and four civilians.

Anti-riot police on Saturday fired tear gas to prevent the demonstrators from gathering for the rally in a square in the centre of Ouagadougou, where substantial police and security forces had been deployed and all shops closed.

One of the protesters, 28-year-old Fabrice Sawadogo, said that "after seven years of failure to prevent the terrorist attacks... it is time to ask the government to go." The "incompetent" administration "has to admit it has failed," he said.

Security officers launched tear gas canisters to disperse about 100 protesters who were trying to march toward downtown Ouagadougou.

After retreating to side streets, the protesters began erecting barricades and burning tyres and trash cans.

The public's angry response to the latest attacks has unnerved the authorities, who cut mobile internet access a week ago and refused to authorize Saturday's demonstration.

An alliance of three groups called the November 27 Coalition had called for people to take to the streets on Saturday "in a peaceful atmosphere to denounce growing insecurity and demand the departure" of Kaboré.

But other civil society groups distanced themselves from the protests, refusing, they said, "to be complicit with those who want to push the country into chaos". Militant groups linked to al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) group have plagued the landlocked West African nation since 2015, killing about 2,000 people and displacing 1.4 million from their homes.

An attack on November 14 saw hundreds of fighters storm a gendarmerie camp at Inata in the north of the country, killing at least 48 military police officers and four civilians.



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WTO's Big Conference Postponed

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Next week's World Trade Organization ministerial conference, the global trade body's biggest gathering in four years, was postponed at the last minute Friday due to the new Omicron Covid-19 variant.

The WTO hoped the four-day gathering in Geneva would breathe new life into the crippled organisation, which has been stuck for years trying to make progress on resolving issues like fishery subsidies.

New director-general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was also hoping, against the odds, to conclude a deal on lifting Covid vaccine patents, proving the WTO had a relevant role to play in combating the pandemic.



Lebanon's Central Bank Vows To Cooperate With Audit

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Lebanon's central bank said that it would fulfil all data requests from the consultancy Alvarez & Marsal (A&M) for a forensic audit of its accounts amid reports that the firm was set to pull out due to a lack of cooperation.

The audit is seen as a key condition for an International Monetary fund support programme and other foreign aid to stem Lebanon's deepest economic crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war.

Little progress has been made to address the crisis since the pound began to decouple from its 23-year-old peg to the U.S. dollar in 2019.

Last July, it dipped to 24,000 to the dollar, and on Thursday it traded at more than 24,200.

The central bank and finance ministry held a virtual meeting with A&M on Thursday and underlined their "full cooperation" with completing the audit, a bank statement said.

Governor Riad Salameh said the Banque du Liban would honor all requests for information made before December 29, when a banking secrecy law suspended by parliament last year goes back into effect.

The central bank "is recommending that the forensic audit starts now", Salameh told Reuters.

"It is up to the ministry of finance and (A&M) to decide if the audit requires more information ... [The central bank] will comply."

A&M quit a similar audit a year ago over a lack of cooperation. An official source told Reuters on Wednesday that A&M had informed the presidency it would quit again amid delays in providing data.

An A&M spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government, formed in September after a year of tortuous negotiations among Lebanon's many various political parties, has struggled to carry out its business. It has not met for more than 40 days, hampered by a push by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement and its allies to remove the judge probing the calamitous Beirut port blast in August 2020 that brought down the previous government.

Salameh told Reuters in an interview on Tuesday that the government had not yet agreed about the financial figures it would present to the IMF, a basic requirement to begin negotiations.

UAE Considers Boosting Turkey Foreign Reserves With \$5b Currency Deal

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey is reportedly seeking to increase the foreign currency reserves possessed by its central bank, in a currency swap agreement with the United Arab Emirates that could amount to at least \$5 billion.

According to the London-based news outlet Middle East Eye, which cited an anonymous senior Turkish official, Ankara and Abu Dhabi are in the process of coming to an agreement which would see the Turkish central bank receiving more foreign currency reserves to aid its economic crisis.

"The negotiations in the coming days will finalize the amount but our initial estimate is that it would be at least a \$5 billion deal," the official said. A report by the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet which cited another official, however, put the amount to at least \$10 billion.

That deal, which enables the two countries' central banks to exchange currencies, would also reportedly allow the UAE to directly deposit US dollars, giving the central bank greater certainty for the future.

It comes at a time when Turkey is currently undergoing a significant economic crisis which has seen the value of its currency - the Turkish lira - plummet over the past year, due to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's opposition to high interest rates, the loss of foreign investment into the country, and also the lack of sufficient foreign reserves.

The restoration and improvement of Ankara's ties with Abu Dhabi after a decade of regional rivalry, therefore, is seen as a boost to the Turkish economy and a step to regain the trust of potential foreign investors. That is especially following the deals struck between the two countries earlier this week, in which the UAE agreed to invest \$10 billion into Turkey.

If the currency swap deal is true and succeeds, it will not be the first time the UAE has agreed to such an agreement, as the Emirates - along with other Persian Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait - has previously deposited billions of US dollars in Egypt's central bank over the years, which Cairo aims to repay by the end of 2023.

S. Korean Economy Forecast to Grow 3.2% in 2022

SEOUL (Dispatches) - The South Korean economy is likely to expand 3.2 percent on-year in 2022 on the back of a recovery in private consumption and brisk exports, a local think tank said.

The Korea Capital Market Institute (KCMCI)

also forecast the gross domestic product of Asia's fourth-largest economy to increase 4 percent this year from a year earlier.

"Private consumption is expected to show a marked upturn in the first half of next year thanks to a shift in anti-coronavirus measures and improving consumer sentiment," the think tank said in its latest outlook on the economy and the country's capital market.

"South Korea's overseas shipments are projected to remain strong in the coming year, bolstered by the global economic recovery."

The think tank painted a rosy growth outlook for the United States and China, the world's No. 1 and second-largest economies, respectively.

The KCMCI forecast 5.6 percent growth for the United States this year and an expansion of 4.2 percent for next year. Comparable figures for China are 8.2 percent and 5.3 percent, respectively.

It further projected the Bank of Korea, South Korea's central bank, to carry out two or three interest rate hikes in the coming year in an effort to fight rising inflation.

South Korea's consumer inflation rate is predicted to drop to 1.5 percent in 2022 from this year's 2.3 percent on a reduced impact of international raw materials prices.

The KCMCI expected the benchmark Korea Composite Stock Price Index (KOSPI) to move in a range of 3,050 and 3,350 next year, with the local currency changing hands in a band of 1,140 won to 1,180 won against the U.S. dollar.

"The KOSPI is expected to rebound gradually in 2022 following a correction during the second half of this year," the KCMCI said. "The South Korean won is likely to stabilize against the greenback from the second half of next year after remaining weak until June."

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan To Conduct Joint Industrial Policy In Border Territories



NUR-SULTAN (Dispatches) - The III Forum of Interregional Cooperation of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan completed its work in Turkestan, Kazakhstan on November 26.

During the Forum, representatives of the two countries discussed issues of trade and economic cooperation, held trade negotiations and outlined vectors of further cooperation in the near future, the Kazakh Ministry of Trade and Integration reported.

Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Askar Mamin noted the great potential for deepening cooperation between the two countries.

According to him, the interest in expanding bilateral relations on the part of the business community of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is indicated by the fact that 54 agreements and memoranda worth over \$611 million were signed during the Forum.

In recent years, there has been a positive dynamics of trade turnover between the two countries. Thus, over the past 5 years, the volume of bilateral trade has grown by 2 times and reached \$2.9 billion. By the end of 2021, it is expected that the volume of mutual trade will reach \$ 4 billion.

The head of the Kazakh government focused on the need to strengthen cooperation between the countries. He called for speeding up the work on the early launch of the International Center for Industrial Cooperation "Central Asia". According to him, it will become a driver for increasing not only mutual trade, but also strengthening cooperation between all countries of the region.

Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Abdullah Aripov in his welcoming speech noted that the two countries have every opportunity to increase mutual trade to \$10 billion in the next five years. To do this, the governments of the two countries need to develop a special Roadmap. At the same time, he believes that the trade turnover between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can reach \$5 billion already in 2022.

The Forum participants discussed proposals aimed at deepening the strategic partnership between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The Minister of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan Bakhyt Sultanov said that over 30 years of sovereignty, the two countries have been able to "build strong economies, raise the welfare of the population of their states, successfully gain a foothold as full-fledged players in the world political arena."

The Kazakh side proposed to develop a joint industrial policy in the border territories.

Croatia Signs Deal to Buy 12 French Fighter Jets



ZAGREB (Dispatches) - Croatia signed a deal to buy 12 French Rafale fighter jets worth nearly 1 billion euros (\$1.2 billion) that officials said will considerably strengthen its air force amid lingering tensions in the Balkans.

The contract for the used combat aircraft was signed during the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Croatia. It was the first visit by France's head of state to Croatia since it split from the former Yugoslav federation in the 1991-95 war.

"The purchase of the planes strategically is what we see as a game changer for Croatia," Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at a joint press conference with Macron after the signing ceremony.

"This will not only give us the ability to avert those who have any aspirations toward our territory but also to become the so-called exporters of security ... of stability in southeastern Europe," he said.

Macron said the aircraft deal will strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries and contribute to European defense.

Two Rafales made a low pass over the Croatian capital after the signing ceremony.

The selection of the French aircraft, announced in May, followed a long bidding process that was plagued by delays. Other offers had included new F-16s from the United States, new JAS-39 Gripen planes from Sweden, and used F-16s from Israel.

Eric Trappier, CEO of Dassault Aviation, which makes the Rafale jets, said they "will give the Croatian Air Force complete satisfaction, while actively contributing to the exercise of Croatia's national sovereignty".

Croatian officials said earlier that the purchase is worth 999 million euros and will involve 10 single-seater and two 2-seater F3R Rafale twin-engine aircraft. The first six Rafales are scheduled to be delivered in 2024, with the rest due the following year.

German Banks Vulnerable to Housing Bubble

FRANKFURT (Reuters) - Germany's banks are increasingly vulnerable to an overvalued property market and finance authorities should force lenders to build up capital buffers, the Bundesbank said in a regular stability report.

Germany cut the so-called countercyclical buffer for banks to zero at the start of the pandemic but economic growth is now robust and bank lending is rapid, so they should be forced to hold more capital in preparation for a rainy day, the central bank said.

"The countercyclical capital buffer should be built up again early on," Bundesbank Vice President Claudia Buch said in a statement.

The buffer, now at 0, was set 0.25% of banks' total risk exposure before the pandemic but current credit levels suggest that an even higher level may be needed, the Bundesbank added.

This buffer does not explicitly take into account the booming residential property market, which requires careful monitoring and potential action by regulators, the Bundesbank said.

Property prices continue to soar and indicators suggest that further rises are still ahead, leaving real estate overvalued as price and rent growth outpace incomes.

"Price exaggerations in the residential real estate market have tended to increase further," the bank said. "Bundesbank estimates put them at between 10% and 30% in Germany in 2020."

This means that banks may be overestimating the value of loan collateral, leaving them exposed to large losses in case of a price adjustment.

Banks are also vulnerable to interest rate rises as large chunks of their long-term lending is at fixed rates, particularly in the case of mortgages, the Bundesbank added.



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Formiga Bids Marvelous Goodbye to Brazil

BRAZILIA (Dispatches) - Brazilian football legend Formiga said an emotional goodbye to the national team Friday after racking up a series of records in a 26-year career that included seven World Cups and seven Olympics. The 43-year-old midfielder played her final match for the Selecao, going out with a 6-1 drubbing of India in a friendly in Manaus. "It was marvelous. It couldn't have been better," she said in comments published Friday by the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF).

Haaland Scores on Return From Injury

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Erling Haaland scored on his return from injury on Saturday as Borussia Dortmund knocked Bayern Munich off top spot in the Bundesliga with a 3-1 win at Wolfsburg. Haaland netted his 50th Bundesliga goal in as many games, just eight minutes after coming off the bench in the second half following a five-week absence with a leg injury. He fired in a Julian Brandt cross, adding to an Emre Can penalty and Donyell Malen goal for Dortmund after Wout Weghorst had given Wolfsburg an early lead.

Liverpool Rout Saints, Arsenal Cruise



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool crushed Southampton 4-0 to put pressure on Premier League leaders Chelsea, while Arsenal got back on track with a 2-0 win over Newcastle as Eddie Howe suffered his first defeat as Magpies manager. Diogo Jota scored twice for Jurgen Klopp's side to warm the Anfield faithful on a bitterly cold afternoon. Liverpool's third consecutive victory in all competitions since losing at West Ham moved them into second place. Third-placed Manchester City would go back above Liverpool if they beat West Ham on Sunday. Liverpool needed just two minutes to take the lead when Sadio Mane played in Andrew Robertson and the Scot's cross was perfectly weighted for Jota to finish from close range. Jota netted again in the 32nd minute with a simple finish from Mohamed Salah's pass for his eighth club goal this term. Having scored at least two goals in 17 successive matches in all competitions, Liverpool refused to take their foot off the gas. Thiago Alcantara had ended a lengthy goal drought in the midweek Champions League win over Porto and the Spain midfielder was back on the scoresheet in the 37th minute when his shot deflected in off Lyonco. Virgil van Dijk bagged Liverpool's fourth in the 52nd minute, the Dutch defender volleying his first goal in 14 months from Trent Alexander-Arnold's corner. Arsenal saw their 10-match unbeaten run in all competitions come to a painful end in last weekend's 4-0 thrashing at Liverpool. But second-half goals from Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli at the Emirates Stadium made it four wins from their last five league games.

Britain See Off France In Davis Cup, Kazakhs Close on Quarters

PARIS (Dispatches) - Britain opened their Davis Cup Finals campaign with a 2-1 victory over 10-time winners France in Innsbruck on Saturday, while Kazakhstan fought back to beat Sweden and edge towards the quarter-finals. British number one Cameron Norrie completed success against France in the second singles rubber, beating Arthur Rinderknech 6-2, 7-6 (10/8). Norrie, ranked 12 in the world, trailed 4-1 in the tie-break before rebounding to secure a match point at 6-5. The 71st-ranked Rinderknech saved it but then let two set points slip before Norrie took the rubber on his second match point. The matches in Austria are being played behind closed doors due to new coronavirus restrictions in the country. "For me, it's unbelievable to be back on the team playing for my country," said Norrie, who was playing just his third Davis Cup tie. "I really like being in a team and being in this atmosphere. I've really enjoyed the week so far with everyone. It is also nice to prove myself again, to keep the pressure on and keep playing big matches."

Rinderknech had little time to absorb his defeat as he had to partner veteran Nicolas Mahut in the doubles -- the latter's usual partner Pierre-Hugues Herbert withdrawing at the last minute. He helped Mahut keep their slim hopes alive of securing one of the two best runner-up spots available for the quarter-finals by outlasting Joe Salisbury and Neal Skupski 6-1, 6-4. Dan Evans had earlier given Britain a great start by beating Adrian Panatta 7-5, 6-4. Kazakhstan could be surprise quarter-finalists, if they beat a much-weakened Canada team on Sunday, after pulling off a 2-1 win over Sweden. The Swedish singles duo of brothers Elias and Mikael Ymer looked on course to win their second successive match after disposing of Canada 3-0 in the opener. Elias eased past Mikhail Kukushkin in straight sets 6-3, 7-6 (7/4). Younger brother Mikael was looking well poised at a set up and 4-4 in the second against the talented but unpredictable Alexander Bublik.

Written off after their poor start to the season, Mikel Arteta's side are fifth, level on points with fourth-placed West Ham, as they chase a berth in next season's Champions League. "I'm happy with the points after losing to Liverpool. You have to win straightaway," Arteta said. Howe was in charge in person for the first time after missing last weekend's 3-3 draw against Brentford due to a positive coronavirus test.

While the Saudi-led consortium that recently bought Newcastle have spoken about emulating the success of Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain under Middle Eastern ownership, Howe's only focus is saving the Magpies from relegation. Former Bournemouth boss Howe will need to drag much-improved performances from his winless team if they are to avoid a catastrophic slide into the Championship. Already languishing five points from safety, bottom of the table Newcastle face crucial games against fellow strugglers Norwich and Burnley over the coming week. "The game was decided in the incident with Callum Wilson and the penalty - a tough call against us - then they scored in the aftermath," Howe said. "Momentum in football is so important. We need to get that win as quickly as we can." Steven Gerrard earned his second successive win since taking charge of Aston Villa as the former Rangers boss masterminded a 2-1 victory at Crystal Palace. Exposing Palace's set-piece weakness, Villa went in front after 15 minutes when Matt Targett fired home for his first league goal since 2019 after the hosts failed to clear Ashley Young's corner. Villa's Douglas Luiz escaped a red card in the 72nd minute for a late tackle on Cheikhou Kouyate, the midfielder initially being sent off before the decision was overturned after a VAR check. John McGinn compounded Palace's frustration in the 86th minute as he grabbed Villa's killer second from Anwar El Ghazi's pass. Marc Guehi's 95th-minute goal was little consolation for Palace. Dean Smith, the man Gerrard replaced at Villa, remains unbeaten as Norwich boss after the second-bottom Canaries drew 0-0 with Wolves at Carrow Road.



James Fined for Obscene Gesture

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James was slapped with a \$15,000 fine for an "obscene gesture" and warned for swearing during a news conference by the NBA's disciplinary officials. "LeBron James has been fined \$15,000 for making an obscene gesture on the playing court and warned for using profane language during media availability," said league spokesman Byron Spruell in a news release. This is the second time this week that the league has disciplined James for an on-court incident.

James was hit with a one-game suspension for a bloody altercation with Detroit Pistons' Isaiah Stewart in a game last Sunday. It was the first suspension of James's career. The ban meant James missed the Lakers' 106-100 loss to the New York Knicks on Tuesday. He returned Wednesday to face the Indianapolis Pacers and scored 39 points in a 124-116 overtime win. Late in the fourth quarter, James drew the ire of league officials for making an obscene gesture after sinking a three-point basket that extended the Lakers lead to six points. James slammed the one-game suspension after the Pacers game, describing the punishment to reporters as "some bull----."

Guardiola Buoyed by Sterling Revival



26-year-old would consider a move away from the Premier League champions. Sterling's former club Liverpool, as well as Barcelona and Arsenal, were all linked with the star. But Sterling has scored in three of City's last four games, including the vital equalizer in Wednesday's Champions League victory over Paris Saint-Germain. Guardiola responded to the forward's renaissance by insisting it was only the first step as he looks to recapture the form that made him so feared in City's 2018-19 title-winning campaign.

LONDON (Dispatches) - Pep Guardiola has urged Raheem Sterling to maintain his recent revival after the Manchester City forward was the subject of fresh speculation about his future. England forward Sterling had struggled to break into the City team on a regular basis since the latter stages of last season. That led to renewed talk recently the 26-year-old would consider a move away from the Premier League champions. Sterling's former club Liverpool, as well as Barcelona and Arsenal, were all linked with the star. But Sterling has scored in three of City's last four games, including the vital equalizer in Wednesday's Champions League victory over Paris Saint-Germain. Guardiola responded to the forward's renaissance by insisting it was only the first step as he looks to recapture the form that made him so feared in City's 2018-19 title-winning campaign.

"I'm so glad for him, he's helped us for sure. He will fight to be better and better," Guardiola told reporters on Friday. "It is important for strikers and wingers to score and make assists. He was decisive in what we've done in recent years. "Scoring goals can give confidence for these type of guys but he has to do better, be aggressive, go one against one, arrive in the final third. This is the first step for him to come back." City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne remains unavailable for the Premier League clash against West Ham at the Etihad Stadium following his positive test for coronavirus last week. De Bruyne, who has been vaccinated, remains in isolation and Guardiola revealed the Belgian has experienced symptoms. "He's still tired, no taste -- the symptoms of Covid. Now he's done seven or eight days' isolation," Guardiola said. "A few more days and we will give him a PCR test and if it's negative then he will be back."

Blatter Quizzed Over Qatar 2022 World Cup Vote

PARIS (Dispatches) - Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter has been interviewed by French anti-corruption police investigating the controversial vote to award the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. Blatter, 85, was summoned to appear as a "witness" on Thursday and Friday, French police said, confirming a report in Le Monde newspaper. The inquiry is being led by France's OCLCFF anti-corruption unit. Part of its focus surrounds a November 23, 2009 dinner, nine days before the vote, at the Elysees Palace hosted by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy.



Sitting round the table that night were Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who became emir of Qatar on his father Sheikh Hamad's abdication in 2013, Qatar's then prime minister Hamad bin Jassim al Thani, and Michel Platini, then head of UEFA. Platini is suspected of having voted for Qatar at the request of Sarkozy, an allegation he denies. The former French football great's vote helped determine the result of 14 votes for Qatar against eight for the USA on December 2 in Zurich. Platini was questioned by French police over the affair in 2019 without being charged. He told a recent edition of Le Monde that he had made up his mind to vote for Qatar "very early" on and without any pressure from Sarkozy.

Kings Outlast Lakers in 3 OTs

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - De'Aaron Fox recorded 34 points and eight assists and Buddy Hield scored 25 points off the bench as the Sacramento Kings notched a dramatic 141-137 triple-overtime victory over the host Los Angeles Lakers. Tyrese Haliburton registered 19 points, nine assists, six rebounds and five steals for the Kings, who recovered from a 13-point, fourth-quarter deficit to improve to 2-1 under interim coach Alvin Gentry. LeBron James had 30 points, 11 assists and seven rebounds and Russell Westbrook added 29 points, 11 assists and 10 boards for the Lakers, who lost for the fifth time in their past seven games. Anthony Davis contributed 23 points, eight rebounds and four blocked shots, while Malik Monk had 20 points. Marvin Bagley's inside basket and Fox's hoop gave Sacramento a 135-128 lead with 1:52 left in the third overtime. The Lakers moved within 139-137 on Carmelo Anthony's 3-pointer with 9.4 seconds left before Hield hit two free throws with 6.5 seconds remaining to close it out. Devonte' Graham drained a clutch 3-pointer with 1.9 seconds remaining and Brandon Ingram scored 21 points to help New Orleans pull off an upset over Utah in Salt Lake City and win 98-97.

