

Health Ministry Announced on Monday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to 131,434 With 34 More Iranians Killed by the Deadly Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Before the Resumption of the New Round of Sanction Removal Talks in Vienna, the Iranian Top Negotiator Held a Trilateral Meeting With the Heads of the Russian and Chinese Delegations

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2

DOMESTIC

Oil and Non-Oil Revenues Increased In Recent Months



> SEE PAGE 2

3

DOMESTIC

Iran Seeks Opening 4 Banks in Africa



> SEE PAGE 3

4

INTERNATIONAL

Moscow Considering NATO Proposal to Hold Talks on Jan. 12



> SEE PAGE 4

8

SPORTS

Curry Powers Warriors Past Suns



> SEE PAGE 8

Tehran Insists on Oil Exports as Talks Start

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has insisted that the United States and its allies promise to allow Tehran to export its crude as negotiations on restoring the tattered nuclear deal were to resume in Vienna.

The remarks by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian signal that Iran is pressing its position ahead of the negotiations over reviving the landmark 2015 nuclear deal.

The talks were adjourned earlier this month after a round marked by tensions over new demands from Tehran.

Speaking to reporters in Tehran, Amirabdollahian said Iran wants the upcoming round of talks to focus on achieving the "point where Iranian oil is being sold easily and without any barriers and its money arrives in Iran's bank accounts."

Tehran's landmark accord with world powers granted the nation sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

But in 2018, then-President Donald Trump withdrew America from the deal and imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran, including against its oil sector -- the lifeline of its economy. Iran's crude exports plummeted and international oil companies scrapped deals with Tehran, weakening its economy.

As the parties to the 2015 atomic deal prepared to convene in Vienna, Amirabdollahian said Iran wanted to "be able to enjoy full economic concessions under the nuclear deal."

"Guarantee and verification (of the removal of sanctions) are among topics that we have focused on," he said.

Maduro Hails Iran's Supreme Leader

TEHRAN (MNA) - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro voiced his admiration for Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, describing him as a man of great wisdom and great intelligence.

"Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran have always been really good," said Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro in an interview with Al Mayadeen.

Maduro said he agreed on several new plans with President Ebrahim Raeisi, and the intergovernmental committee of both countries is working on these new projects which include networking and cooperation between Iran and Venezuela.

The Venezuelan president also voiced his admiration for Ayatollah Khamenei, describing him as a man of great wisdom and great intelligence.

See Page 7

Iran GDP Stands at \$1tr Despite Economic War



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its report has put the Islamic Republic of Iran's GDP at 1 trillion dollars in the year 2021.

According to the IMF's World Economic Outlook report released in October 2021, Iran is even ranked higher than regional countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey as two heavyweight economies, which are members of the G-20 group.

The statistics come as Iran has been under the heaviest illegal sanctions in history when Donald Trump officially withdrew the United States from the 2015 nuclear deal - JCPOA - in May 2018 under his "maximum pressure" campaign against the Islamic Republic.

When Trump abandoned the JCPOA, his top hawkish diplomat Mike Pompeo said the U.S. will impose "the strongest sanctions in history" on Iran. Also in November 2018, John Bolton, who was the White House national security advisor at the time, said, "It's our intention to squeeze them (Iranians) very hard... until the pips squeak."

The Trump administration imposed as many sanctions as possible to the extent that his treasury secretary Steven Mnuchin announced that the U.S. is running out of options for more sanctions on Iran.

However, the data by the IMF proves that the illusions were wrong.

The chief reason may be that Iran has built an economy based on resistance with the least reliance on oil incomes. In other words, Iran has turned into a self-reliant economy with a primary focus on domestic capacities and knowledge-based companies.

The figures by the IMF show that 1-trillion-dollar GDP in the current year happened despite the fact that Iran has been among the hardest-hit countries by the Covid-19 pandemic in the world. The disease, among many malaises, also brought Iran's income from tourism to nearly zero.

Facing political and economic pressure from the West, the Islamic Republic has also sought to develop economic and trade ties with Eurasian Economic Union countries. It was also admitted as a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September 2020. Through reliance on domestic capacities and developing ties with regional blocs, Iran has proven that the world is not just the West.

According to the report, Iran would be overtaking the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Switzerland in the top 20 list. The United States and China would occupy the first two places in both methods' GDP ranking.

It also said China will remain the world's largest economy on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis over the next few decades as 2nd ranked U.S. is growing slow and 3rd ranked India is way behind.

In the nominal GDP list, there would be no change in the top 10.

Among the top 50, the economic rank of South Africa would move up by eight positions, while Egypt would lose four places.

In the PPP ranking, there would be no change in the top 10 list. Other changes in the top 20 would be Taiwan overtaking Australia. Among the top 50, Ireland will climb three spots.

In the list of top 50, all economies will experience a positive growth rate in 2021. Ireland is the fastest-growing economy with 14.04%, followed by Chile (11.00%). Thailand has the lowest growth rate of 0.96%, followed by the United Arab Emirates (2.24%) and Japan (2.36%).

Troika Summit Aimed at Achieving Progress on Syria

NUR-SULTAN (Dispatches) - The agenda of the Astana format summit (Russia, Iran, Turkey) will be aimed at achieving more tangible progress in efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria, Russian Special Presidential Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev said in an interview with TASS.

"The agenda is the following: if a summit takes place, the parties consider the situation in efforts to resolve the Syria issue and interaction between the three guarantor countries in this direction. This is the main agenda that will be there. Our presidents will discuss what needs to be done to ensure more tangible progress with regard to the Syrian settlement. Accordingly, they will later instruct their envoys to continue this work," he pointed out.

Lavrentyev confirmed that the summit might take place in the Iranian capital of Tehran in early 2022. "It will be held early next year, that's for sure, though the process has slowed down due to coronavirus restrictions. The decision to hold the next summit in Tehran was confirmed a year and a half ago. However, we cannot announce a specific month and day," the envoy added.

At the same time, in his words, the summit will have to be held in person. "An online summit took place in July last year. A year and a half have passed since then so we believe that it is necessary to hold an in-person meeting. Our president [Vladimir Putin] has talked about it with Iranian President [Ebrahim] Raisi and Mr. [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan," Lavrentyev noted. According to him, the summit is likely to be preceded by an in-person meeting of the foreign ministers of the guarantor countries.

See Page 7

Iran, Iraq Strike Deal on Linking Shalamchah-Basra Railway

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Roads and Urban Development Minister Rostam Qasemi has announced the signing of a deal between the Islamic Republic and Iraq for completing the Shalamchah-Basra railway, the news portal of the ministry reported.

The connection of the railway from Iran's southwestern Shalamchah to Basra province in Iraq has been among the issues pursued by the governments of the two countries for many years.

The contract was signed on the sidelines of Qasemi's visit to Iraq, during which he held talks with Iraqi counterpart Nasser Hussein Bandar Al-Shibli, President Barham Salih, and Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi.

Elaborating on the details of the deal, Qasemi said: "The agreement has a clear timetable, and one of its clauses is that implementation of the project will actually begin within the next month."

"For almost 20 years, we have had numerous negotiations with the Iraqi side to implement Shalamchah-Basra railway, and there were even many memorandums signed in different periods, which never reached the desired result," Qasemi said.

See Page 7

Russian Official Welcomes Recent Remarks By AEOI Chief as Positive

TEHRAN (MNA)- The Russian envoy to the Vienna talks has welcomed the recent remarks by Head of Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) M. Eslami as positive ahead of the next round of talks.

Russia's Permanent Representative to the Vienna-based international organizations Mikhail Ulyanov wrote in a tweet on Sunday that "The Head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran M.Eslami announced that Tehran will not exceed 60% uranium enrichment."

Ulyanov further described the message by the AEOI's chief as "a positive message on the eve of the 8th round of the #ViennaTalks which will start tomorrow."

Eslami revealed in an interview with Russian news agency Sputnik that Tehran does not intend to exceed 60 percent uranium enrichment, even if the negotiations in Vienna fail and the United States does not lift its sanctions.

He stressed that Tehran's nuclear program aims to support the country's industrial production needs, as well as the needs of Iranian consumers for certain goods.

Pakistan Gov't Asked to Check Influx of Cheap Iranian Cooking Oil

KARACHI (Dispatches) - Pakistani producers have warned that the flooding of cheap smuggled Iranian cooking oil is not only affecting the market share of the local edible oil industry but also causing revenue losses to the exchequer.

A number of market players or middlemen, using social media platforms, have been offering Iranian cooking oil and canola oil at Rs240-325 per litre saying "the prices are negotiable" while the locally produced cooking oil is being sold between Rs380-400 per litre.

They have also shown their desire to sell the Iranian products in bulk to only small local producers of cooking oil. The demand for cheap Iranian oil has been growing in the last one month in Karachi and upcountry markets due to a high tax of Rs80 per kg or Rs80,000 per tonne on the import of edible oil in Pakistan.

The Pakistan Vanaspati Manufacturers Association (PVMA) through its Dec 17 letter had informed Finance Adviser Shaukat Tarin and Director General of the Pakistan Standard Quality Control Authority (PSQCA) Ali Bux Soomro that due to the high tax structure on import of edible oil, the cross-border smuggling through porous borders has been thriving.

See Page 7



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Tehran Condemns Terrorist Attack in Burkina Faso

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran's Foreign Ministry condemned a terrorist attack that has killed dozens of people in Burkina Faso.

In a statement on Monday, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh condemned the recent attack by armed groups in Burkina Faso that has claimed 41 lives. He also expressed sympathy with the government and people of Burkina Faso and the families of victims of the attack.

The Iranian spokesman also slammed the "benefits that certain countries get from insecurity and instability" as the root cause of spread of terrorist groups in that region.

Oil and Non-Oil Revenues Increased In Recent Months

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - According to the report of the Governor of the Central Bank, along with the increase in oil and non-oil revenues of the country in recent months, the amount of foreign exchange supply to the market has increased compared to year 1399 (2020-2021).

The Cabinet's Economic Coordination Board convened a meeting on Sunday night under the chairmanship of President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi, and according to the report of the Governor of the Central Bank, \$40 billion have been supplied to the market in the last 9 months, while during the year 1399, this amount \$36.5 billion.

In this meeting, the Statistics Centre of Iran also reported on the inflation rate in November and announced that the growth of the monthly inflation rate in recent months has decreased by continuing the downward trend of one and seven tenths of a percent.

During the meeting, the Minister of Health and Medical Education issued a report on the status of the drug and its price.

Referring to the report, the President reiterated the need to allocate the time needed for the supply of medicine and the necessary forecasts in this regard.

Earlier Sunday afternoon and referring to the need for accurate and effective monitoring of prices, the President said, "I want to emphasize once again to all my colleagues in the government, from ministries to governorates, that they must seriously and effectively monitor the prices of all goods."

Raisi said, "Several measures have been taken to control prices and monitor the market, but the current situation in the market tells us that a solution must be found



immediately to manage prices".

He further emphasized the need to save gas consumption and said, "Due to the cold weather, observing gas consumption saving patterns is very important to maintain the stability of the network and prevent gas outages, and the media, especially the IRIB, should encourage people to save gas more than the past".

In another part of his speech, referring to the government's plan to make a change in the administrative organization of the country, the President stated, "To make this change, we should not miss even one day and the necessary changes in the administrative organization of the government should lead to the efficiency of the administrative system".

He continued, "Also, all administrative bodies, in addition to trying to fight corruption, unhealthy relations and bribery, must implement the resolution of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in the field of hijab".

Stating that according to statistics, the country's non-oil exports have increased by about 40% this year compared to last year, Raisi said, "When the government focused on expanding economic interactions with neighboring countries and has been successful in this direction, it is natural for the ill-wishers to seek to sabotage Iran's relations with its neighbors, which should be taken into account".

U.S. Assassination of Soleimani Manifestation of State Terrorism



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry says the US assassination of top Iranian anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani, which occurred in January 2020, is a manifestation of "state terrorism."

The U.S. assassination of Qassem Soleimani and his companions is "a true example of a terrorist attack and state terrorism" which was committed in an organized way by the U.S. government, and was planned and conducted upon on a direct order from this country's former president Donald Trump, Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

He made the remarks at a weekly news conference on Monday, days before the second martyrdom anniversary of Soleimani.

Khatibzadeh also said the assassination of the prominent anti-terror commander proves the double standards and the untruthfulness of those claiming to be combating terrorism.

He also emphasized that the Islamic Republic "will not spare any effort to bring the perpetrators, commanders, and advisers of this terrorist act to justice."

The spokesman noted that the incident was not only a violation of human rights and international law, but also "an act of aggression against the sovereignty" of an independent country, namely Iraq.

General Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and his Iraqi trenchmate Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's PMU, were martyred along with their companions in a U.S. drone strike authorized by former President Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Both commanders were highly popular because of their key role in fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

"General Soleimani was a hero of fighting terrorism," Khatibzadeh said, adding that the US assassination was aimed at "taking revenge on this great general" for his key role in the fight against terrorism.

Value of Iran-Russia trade Grew 87% in 2021

TEHRAN (IFP) - Russian ambassador to Tehran says the value of trade between Iran and Russia reached 3.6 billion dollars in 2021, up by 87 percent compared to last year, in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a meeting on Sunday with Assadollah Abbasi, the governor of Iran's northern Gilan Province, Levan Dzhangaryan said the 87-percent growth in the volume of bilateral trade, which was attained under coronavirus restrictions, was a "significant achievement."

The senior Russian diplomat said his country stood ready to further promote bilateral interactions with Iran, calling for joint efforts to facilitate interactions between businessmen of the two countries.

Dzhangaryan said in a tweet after the meeting that the



two parties "discussed a number of issues of interregional cooperation, including the expansion of interaction between the Astrakhan region and the province of Gilan."

In turn, Gilan's governor said the province under his watch served as Iran's gateway to Eurasian markets, and that the value of exchanges between Gilan and Russia, alone, currently stood at 700 million dollars.

Abbasi expressed hope that the upcoming visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Moscow would open a new chapter in ties between the two sides.

"Given the activities related to ship manufacturing in Astrakhan, it is necessary to launch the Rasht-Astrakhan airline and expand the tourism industry," added the governor.

FM Expresses Hope for End of Yemeni Crisis

TEHRAN (MNA) - Foreign Minister expressed hope that with the efforts of all countries in the region, especially Iran and Oman, the necessary ground will be prepared for the end of the Yemeni crisis.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks on Monday in his meeting with Omani Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalifa Al Harthy who has traveled to Tehran to participate in the meeting of the Joint Strategic Consultation Committee.

During the meeting, the Iranian Foreign Minister said that the expansion of Iran's relations with neighboring countries is the priority of the Iranian president's foreign policy, adding that Oman has a special place in Iran's foreign policy.

Amir-Abdollahian also emphasized the need for the two sides to make effort to enhance bilateral and trade relations.

He said that Iran is committed to negotiations and adopting political solutions for the bilateral and regional problems, expressing Iran's readiness for negotiations with regional countries to promote bilateral relations.

Iran's top diplomat expressed hope that with the efforts of all countries in the region, especially Iran and Oman, the necessary ground will be prepared for the end of the Yemeni crisis.

Al Harthy, for his part, expressed hope that the Yemeni crisis would end as soon as possible, adding that his country welcomes and supports peaceful ways to reduce regional problems.

Iran Trying to Improve Relations With Neighbors

TEHRAN (IP) - Iranian envoy to Armenia stressed that the government of President Raisi is trying to improve relations with neighbors and pay more attention to Iranian abroad.

Abbas Badakhshan Zohoori, Iran's ambassador to Armenia on Sunday in a meeting at Yerevan with Iranian students studying in Armenia universities, stressed: "Paying attention to better relations with Iranians abroad and neighbors is one of the important policies of Iran's government."

At the beginning of the meeting, Badakhshan Zohoori expressed his satisfaction with the reunion

with the students and wished for a faster end to the Corona epidemic, expressing hope that the conditions would be created for more meetings with the students.

The Iranian ambassador to Armenia called the students one of the critical links between the two countries that can help them gain new experiences and international scientific exchange.

Zohoori also said that Iran's embassy in Yerevan is ready to receive the comments, suggestions, and problems of the Iranian students and will follow up on their issues.

Rationality, Key to Unity Among Muslims

ISLAMABAD (IP) - The Secretary General of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought emphasized the use of rationality as the key to achieve unity among Muslims.

According to the public relations of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, heading a delegation, Hamid Shahriari met with Seyyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Pakistan, emphasizing that the price must be paid for the formation of justice. Shahriari also said that this can be achieved by standing up to oppression.

Pointing out that Late Imam Khomeini (RH) was the founder of the formation of unity in the Islamic world, Shahriari stated: "In this direction, as soldiers, we must work to achieve Islamic unity, and in this regard, intellection is very important.

This professor of the seminary and university elaborated: "In religious teachings, infidels have always been forbidden from irrationality, and believers have been instructed to thought and reason, and the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has said that rationality is the key to achieve the unity among Muslims."

Emphasizing the use of rationality to achieve unity, the senior cleric said: "We should not link our minor differences to general matters because there is consensus on general principles, and general principles of religions would serve as guide toward the path of human guidance."

Shahriari considered it useful to resolve minor disputes through the rational method and said that the order to kill a human is against the principles of the divine religions and that conflict and takfir should be avoided because it is not within the rational principles.

Stating that scholarly, elite relations and in the third layer of the general public is our goal for achieving unity, the professor of the seminary and the university added: "Meeting and presenting views with scholars and elites is useful to reach a single Islamic Ummah."

Hamid Shahriari arrived in Pakistan's capital Islamabad on Sunday morning to meet with Pakistani religious leaders and figures. In addition to Islamabad, the delegation is scheduled to visit Lahore and Karachi during the trip.

Tehran University to Launch China, Saudi Arabia Studies Majors

TEHRAN (MNA) – Vice-president of University of Tehran (UT) for Educational Affairs Dr. Nahid Pour Rostami said that the UT Faculty of World Studies is going to open new major fields of China and Saudi Arabia studies.

"In addition to being a trade and political partner for Iran since ancient times, China has a special place in Asian civilization. China is a world power on the international stage, so it is extremely important to launch the major field of Chinese studies and to train capable and expert specialists in this field who are proficient in various historical, cultural, political and economic of China," Dr. Nahid Rostami, Vice-president of University of Tehran (UT) for Educational Affairs said.

"The role of China Studies experts is also effective in developing economic and political relations with that country," she added. As regards Saudi Arabia's major field of study, the UT official said the field will be at the master's degree level and that the university is preparing the necessary curriculum and the courses.

She also said that Saudi Arabia studies will be part of the West Asia Studies department at World Studies Faculty.

26 Patients Detected With Omicron Variant in Iran

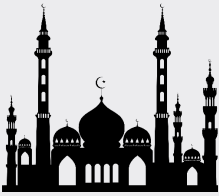
TEHRAN (IP) - Head of the Center for Infectious Diseases Management of Iran's Health Ministry says the Omicron variant is raging in the world, adding that it is currently in the early stages in Iran.

Attending an online presser held at Health Ministry on Monday, Mohammad-Mehdi Gooya stated that efforts had been made to establish more vaccination centers in order to streamline the vaccination process.

He noted that there are special centers for patients with weakened immune systems, and if one needs to receive a particular vaccine, they will receive the vaccine recommended by their doctor without a delay. So far, a center has been set up for this kind of vaccination in each city.

Gooya said: "It is too early to judge the new variant, highlighting that the scientists are working on it."

"We have the opportunity in the country to identify the two-way combination of Delta and Omicron, but perhaps in the future we can talk about the issue more decisively," he added. Mohammad-Mehdi Gooya pointed out that the Omicron variant is raging in the world, and it is in its early stages in Iran; he expressed hope for Iran to be able to prevent the fast spread of the virus.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)

■ Evening (Maghreb)

■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)

■ Tomorrow's Sunrise

12:06

17:19

05:43

07:13

31. And We have set on the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with them, and We have made therein broad highways (between mountains) for them to pass through: that they may receive Guidance.

32. And We have made the heavens as a canopy well guarded: yet do they turn away from the Signs which these things (point to)!

Surah 21. The Prophets (30 - 31)

Iran Seeks Opening 4 Banks in Africa

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Hasan Khosrojerdi, the head of Iran-East Africa Joint Chamber of Commerce, says Iran has tried to open four banks in Africa through the chamber of commerce in order to grant required credit to traders especially to Iranian businessmen.

Speaking to ILNA, Khosrojerdi said that the chamber is working to open four Iranian banks in Africa in order to help business activists especially Iranian traders because African banks are unable to work with Iranians because Iran is not connected to the SWIFT and Iranian banks can grant credit to Iranian traders and support them.

Touching upon the latest condition of Iran's trade with East Africa, he said Iran's exports to Africa are mostly towards East African states like oil products, bitumen, construction materials like tile, concrete and ironware. He noted that in return Iran has imported food stuff from these states like tea and coffee.

Khosrojerdi went on to say that Iran's trade volume with Africa is around \$700m officially and around \$3.5b unofficially via Dubai, and East Africa accounts for around 60% of this amount.

On the cooperation with Africa and especially with Senegal especially in the field of auto making, he said Senegal has shown its good will in the field of auto and they imported some cars from Iran but unfortunately Iranians faced problem in providing



the auto parts and therefore auto exports to Africa came to a halt and now some talks have been held foe resumption of this cooperation.

He also admitted that some policies in African countries especially in the banking sector are not good and Iran has been unable to take advantage of excellent opportunities in Africa. He said the chamber proposed for the launch of a transportation company in Africa with Iran providing it with Iranian vehicles but it was not welcomed because of lack of interest shown by African banks.

Khosrojerdi went on to say that two giant Iranian carmakers SAIPA and Iran Khodro intended to enter the field of oil in Africa and to establish an oil company in this continent for more earning. He admitted that currently cooperation in the auto sector between Iran and Africa is not good at all and African countries show no eager for import of Iranian cars because of the problems regarding the provision of spare parts.

He also said that Iranian busses do not fit African countries because they want more spacious buses. He reiterated that although Iranian goods are cheaper and good, they cannot compete with Turkish rivals in Africa, adding that most Iranian exporting companies in Africa have low investment and Turkey has chosen 4 to 5 companies and grant them enough credit to be active in the target country and the current problem of Iranian exporters is lack of investment and knowledge about Africa.

Khosrojerdi said Turkey and China provide required capital for their exporters while there is no sign of it in Iran. He said the launch of Iranian banks can help to some extent Iranian traders in Africa.

KSC's Proposal on Energy Consumption Pattern

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Khorasan Steel Company (KSC) Mr. Kasra Ghafoori offered a proposal on the energy consumption pattern and said KSC was the first steel company which faced the gas consumption restriction this year.

Ghafoori said steel industry is the propelling industry and it has capability of investment in different sectors, adding that big companies of this field have invested huge amount of money for transfer of water and now they should invest in the field of energy but it needs more cooperation from other sectors.

He went on to say that as soon as the gas pressure drops, the gas of the steel industry is cut while there is no replacement for gas in the steel industry, reiterating that Khorasan Steel Company was the first steel company which faced restriction in gas consumption while it is unable to use the fossil fuels and production of sponge iron requires gas and gas outage will sharply decrease the production in this industry.

Ghafoori noted that cutting gas flow for industries for the sake of household consumption is a mistake and the country can involve other consuming sectors in this issue. He noted that according to the national law, in case of gas and electricity outage which leads to loss in the production, the government is obliged to compensate but it never happens in the country.

He said that cutting gas of steel industry is a win-win decision both for the government and steel companies. He then raised his proposal for resolving this problem and said the most important solution for this problem in short term is to import gas and the company pursued this idea in the Iranian Steel Producers Association (ISPA) but it failed to bear fruit due to some reasons. He reiterated that steelmakers can be custodian of gas import for their own consumption, adding that after imports, storage of gas is the other priority.

Ghafoori added that today the country needs \$40b of investment in gas sector and it needs at least \$20b of investment for sustainability of the current condition.

He also called for efficient energy consumption in the households and the consumption pattern in this sector should be corrected to avoid overconsumption in the households which causes problems for supply of gas for industries.



ECO Container Train Resumes Operation After 10 Years



ZAHEDAN (IRNA) - Director-general of southeastern district of Iran's railway Hossein Masoumi said that the first cargo train of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) rail corridor entered Iran on Sunday, carrying 150 tons of pink rock salt.

The train left Islamabad, Pakistan last Tuesday to reactivate the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul after a 10-year gap. It entered Iran through Mirjaveh rail border cross in southeastern Iran on Sunday noon.

The re-launch of the corridor was accomplished thanks to efforts made by the officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Masoumi said, noting that the last train that passed through the corridor departed from Istanbul and went to Islamabad in 2009.

The significance of the corridor was exemplified in the high-level presence in the inauguration ceremony held in Islamabad when the train was leaving for Istanbul. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Minister for Railways Azam Khan Swati, Adviser to Prime Minister of Pakistan for Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood, Ambassador of Iran Mohammad Ali Hosseini, and ambassadors of Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, had attended the event.

In that ceremony, Qureshi said that the inauguration of the train was the beginning of what was visualized by the ECO, as a project to reach economic integration.

"I want to promote economic diplomacy", Qureshi said, promising the launching of the ITI passenger train in the future.

The idea was first raised in 2007, according to Masoumi who said that it has been put on the agenda in the 7th transportation ministerial meeting of ECO in 2008 with the intention of expanding transit in the region and beyond through rail connection between Pakistan and Iran and thence through Turkey to Europe.

Regular operation of the rail route could increase the volume of trade between the three countries and even between Asia and Europe, he said, adding that there would also be social benefits, including jobs and facilitation of humanitarian aid transport.

475 containers of over 5,000 tons of the United Nations humanitarian aid was sent from Turkey to Pakistan through 16 trains to help the flood-hit people, Masoumi mentioned. The corridor cuts transportation time to less than half of the maritime route, i.e. to 15 days which could even be reduced to 11 days.

The corridor covers 1,990 km inside Pakistan, passing through Quetta into Taftan at the Iranian border and on to Tehran and Tabriz covering about 2,570 km and thence to Istanbul after traveling 2,000 km in Turkey.

Iran to Dispatch 40 Tourism Advisors to Other Nations

QESHM (IRNA) - The Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts has coordinated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to dispatch 40 economic consultants active in tourism to other countries, Iranian officials said.

Iran's deputy tourism minister Ali-Asghar Shalbafian said in a meeting with directors of hotel owners associations on Sunday night that the dispatching plan would become operational in order to activate Iranian tourism agencies overseas.

The tourism ministry also plans to prepare attractive contents in different languages to be used by Iranian embassies in other countries, Shalbafian noted.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the deputy minister said that reopening of Iran's airspace for foreign tourists was an important development after 20 months since the outbreak of the coronavirus in the country, adding that the tourism ministry will make efforts to pave the way for reopening of land borders to foreign travelers.

However, he warned that entry from eight African and four European states has been banned as a result of spreading of new variant called Omicron.

According to the official, all Iranian overseas consulates are able to get informed of residential units and hotels of foreign tourists when they issue visas.

The governor general in Hormozgan Province has prepared a draft for four islands, which would flourish tourism in the southern province if verified by the cabinet, Shalbafian said.

The meeting of directors of hotel owners associations was held on Sunday in Qeshm Island, the largest Iranian island in the Persian Gulf. Along with the deputy minister some provincial officials and religious figures attended the gathering.

Iran-KRG Economic Relations Need to Expand

TEHRAN (MNA) – The governor of West Azerbaijan stressed the need to enhance the level of economic relations between Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

Mohammad Sadegh Motamedian, governor of West Azerbaijan in northwest Iran made the remarks in a meeting with the governor of Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, on Sunday evening in Urmia.

The Iranian governor said during the meeting that “The relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the Iraqi Kurdistan region are strong, and we hope that meetings of this kind will further enhance the relations between the two sides.”

Emphasizing increasing the level of economic relations between West Azerbaijan and the Iraqi Kurdistan region, Motamedian noted, “Due to the existing similarities, economic and cultural relations between Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan region are extensive.”

The governor of Erbil, Iraq, Omid Abdolrahman Hassan, for his part, said in the meeting, “One of the priorities of Erbil province in Iraq is the development of economic and trade relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Saying that most of the commodities in Erbil province are imported from, Erbil governor added, “We welcome the presence of Iranian companies in Erbil.”

He further reminded that the trade and economic relations of West Azerbaijan with Erbil province through the Haj Omran border crossing in Iranian Piranshahr County in the province of West Azerbaijan are very important, adding that these relations should be expanded.

West Azerbaijan shares a thousand kilometers of border with the three countries of Turkey, Iraq and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Gas Use at Iranian Iron Sector Up by Nearly 14% in 4 Years to 2020

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Oil Ministry official says gas usage at Iranian iron sector rose by nearly 14% in four years to 2020.

Iran's iron sector has been responsible for the largest chunk of gas usage increase in the country in recent years, according to a senior Oil Ministry official who insists that the sector should contribute more to investments needed to raise natural gas output in Iran in the upcoming years.

Deputy Oil Minister for Planning Houshang Falahatian said on Sunday that gas consumption by Iranian steelmakers and sponge iron producers had increased by 13.7% in the four years to 2020.

Falahatian said that the increase was nearly double the figures seen in other industries and nearly triple the average rise in the total amount of gas usage in Iran.

The official insisted that the Iranian iron sector, which is one of the largest in the world in terms of output, should contribute more to a projected investment of \$80 billion needed for expansion and maintenance of natural gas production in the country in the years to come.

Figures show that Iran and India are responsible for more than half of the global supply of sponge iron, a product that is widely used in the steelmaking processes around the world. However, unlike India where coal is mostly used to reduce iron ore, Iranian manufacturers normally burn natural gas to produce sponge iron.

Falahatian said that production of steel ingot in Iran is also dependent on electricity generated in gas-fired power plants.

He said lack of investment in natural gas production by Iranian steelmakers would leave them struggle with restricted supplies during cold or warm months of year when demand for natural gas in the household sector reaches record levels.

MOP Inks Deals With ACECR

TEHRAN (Shana) – Iranian Oil Minister has signed 6 memoranda of understanding and two contracts with Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR).

The deals were signed in a ceremony held in the presence of Iranian Minister of Petroleum Javad Owji between ACECR and a number of MOP subsidiaries on Monday.

Accordingly, the National Iranian Drilling Company (NIDC) and the Iranian Offshore Oil Company (IOOC) signed deals each concerning their focus of operations with ACECR.

Meanwhile, Petroleum Engineering and Development Company (PEDEC) signed a 4-year contract for the purchase of crude oil processing services using rapid processing equipment for the construction of a factory by the method of construction, ownership and operation with a value of about \$71 million, and the Construction Support and Goods Procurement Department of the MOP signed another deal worth €5 m for a period of 2 years.

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan Reject Iranian Produce Over Pesticide

TEHRAN - Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have rejected large shipments of Iranian potatoes, citing dangerous contamination with agricultural pesticides and chemicals..

Heydar Sakenborji, the head of the Fruit and Vegetables Association of the city of Mashhad, in Khorasan Razavi province, told Tejarat news that the low quality of the pesticides used is the main culprit.

He elaborated that after harvest, most agricultural produce should be quarantined for a specific period for pesticides to naturally become less harmful, but pesticides used in Iran stay longer on fruits and vegetables making them toxic for humans.

“According to the investigations, pesticides used in these agricultural products are imported from China,” Sakenborji said, speculating that these pesticides don't have the required standards and quality.

He also said that in about ten days Pakistan took over these Central Asian markets from Iranian fruits and vegetables.

The Uzbek government has reportedly returned around 3,500 tons of the potatoes to Iran and destroyed other 775 tons.

Recently, a trade representative in Tehran said various countries have banned imports of Iranian fruits and vegetables due to mold or high pesticide residues, adding that India, Russia, Uzbekistan, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar and some others no longer accept certificates issued by Iran.

Iran exported \$6.5 billion in agricultural products last year.

Former Greek President Dies at 92

ATHENS (Dispatches) - Former Greek President Karolos Papoulias, who served two terms between 2005 and 2015, died on Sunday at the age of 92, the presidency said.

Papoulias, who was also foreign minister in 1985-89 and 1993-96, was a high-ranking member of socialist PASOK party and a close associate of its late leader and former Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu.

President Katerina Sakellariopoulou paid tribute to Papoulias for his role in the resistance against Nazi occupation during World War Two and against Greece's 1967-74 military junta.



China Replaces Xinjiang Communist Party Chief Chen

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China has replaced Chen Quanguo, who as Communist Party chief in the Xinjiang region oversaw a security crackdown targeting ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslims in the name of fighting religious extremism.

Chen, in his post since 2016, will move to another role and Ma Xingrui, governor of the coastal economic powerhouse Guangdong province since 2017, has replaced him, the official Xinhua News Agency said on Saturday. It gave no other details.



Moscow Considering NATO Proposal to Hold Talks on Jan. 12



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia has received a NATO proposal to commence talks on Moscow's security concerns on Jan. 12 and is considering it, TASS news agency quoted the Foreign Ministry as saying on Sunday.

Russia, which has unnerved the West with a troop buildup near Ukraine, last week unveiled a wish list of security proposals it wants to negotiate, including a promise NATO would give up any military activity in Eastern Europe and Ukraine read more .

"We have already received this (NATO) offer, and we are considering it," TASS quoted the foreign ministry as saying. The United States and Ukraine say Russia may be preparing an invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbor. Russia denies that and says it is Ukraine's growing relationship with NATO that has caused the standoff to escalate. It has compared it to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the world came to the brink of nuclear war.

President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday Russia wanted to avoid conflict but needed an "immediate" response from the United States and its allies to its demands for security guarantees. Moscow has said it expects talks with U.S. officials on the subject to start in January in Geneva.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has said some of Russia's security proposals are obviously unacceptable, but that Washington will respond with more concrete ideas on the format of any talks.

In an interview on CBS' "Face The Nation" television show, Vice President Kamala Harris said Washington has been in direct conversations with Moscow about the issue and reiterated the U.S. commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity.

"We've been very clear that we are prepared to issue sanctions like you've not seen before," Harris said, but declined to elaborate on the specifics of the sanctions.

The United States, the European Union and the Group of Seven have all warned Putin that he will face "massive consequences" including tough economic sanctions in the event of any new Russian aggression.

The Kremlin's demands contain elements - such as an effective Russian veto on future NATO membership for Ukraine - that the West has already ruled out.

Others would imply the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe and the withdrawal of multinational NATO battalions from Poland and from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that were once in the Soviet Union.

A Biden administration official in a call with reporters on Friday said Washington has taken note of the concerns that Moscow has raised and was ready to engage with Russia as soon as early January but a specific date and location were yet to be set.

Anti-Apartheid Icon Archbishop Desmond Tutu Dead at 90

JOHANNESBURG (Dispatches) - South African anti-apartheid icon Desmond Tutu, described as the country's moral compass, died on Sunday aged 90, President Cyril Ramaphosa said.

"The passing of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is another chapter of bereavement in our nation's farewell to a generation of outstanding South Africans who have bequeathed us a liberated South Africa," he said in a statement.

"Desmond Tutu was a patriot without equal; a leader of principle and pragmatism who gave meaning to the biblical insight that faith without works is dead," he said.

"A man of extraordinary intellect, integrity and invincibility against the forces of apartheid, he was also tender and vulnerable in his compassion for those who had suffered oppression, injustice and violence under apartheid, and oppressed and downtrodden people around the world."

A tireless activist, Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for combatting white minority rule in his country.

Famously outspoken, even after the fall of the racist apartheid regime, Tutu never shied away from confronting South Africa's shortcomings or injustices.

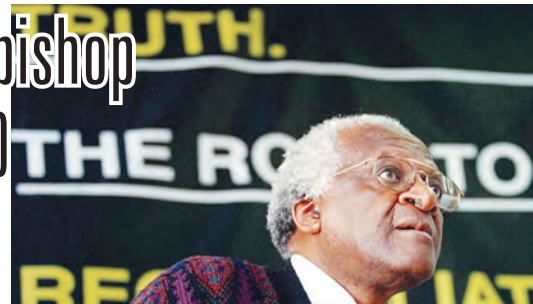
It was Tutu who coined and popularized the term "Rainbow Nation" to describe South Africa when Nelson Mandela became the country's first black president.

However in recent years, Tutu slammed even the ruling African National Congress (ANC) -- the vanguard of the fight against white-minority rule -- for cronyism and nepotism after apartheid ended in 1994.

In the past, he has confronted homophobia in the Anglican Church, challenged Mandela over generous salaries for cabinet ministers and stridently criticised the corruption that mushroomed under ex-president Jacob Zuma.

Ordained at the age of 30 and appointed archbishop in 1986, he used his position to advocate for international sanctions against apartheid, and later to lobby for rights globally.

Tutu was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1997 and underwent repeated treatment.



Trudeau Calls for Western Unity Against China

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in an interview that Western countries must form a united front to counter Beijing's economic statecraft.

"We've been competing and China has been, from time to time, very cleverly playing us off each other in an open market, competitive way," Trudeau said, according to Reuters.

"We need to do a better job of working together and standing strong so China can't play the angles and divide us one against the other," he went on.

Cool relations between Ottawa and Beijing have yet to thaw since the Canadian government detained Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou (孟晚舟) due to a U.S. extradition warrant in 2018. China's ruling Chinese Communist Party detained two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, shortly afterward and denied it had anything to do with the Meng case.

Meng was sent back to China in September after the extradition case came to an end. Despite the fact the "two Michaels," as they had come to be known, were released within hours of the settlement, Beijing still denied it had engaged in hostage diplomacy.

Ottawa's repeated rhetoric concerning human rights has irritated Beijing too. To further emphasize its opposition to human rights abuses in China, this month Canada decided to join the diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics due to take place in Beijing in February.



Cuba Celebrates Anniversary of Revolution in the Neighborhoods

HAVANA (Dispatches) - The "Cuba Va" celebrations will take place in this capital, and more than 100 artistic groups and units will perform in 46 vulnerable communities from the 15 municipalities until December 29.

Initiatives like this will also take place in central places such as the parking lot next to the Coppelia Ice Cream Parlor, the John Lennon Park, and the Corner of Prado and Neptuno Streets.

On Jan.1, Havana residents will be able to go dancing at concerts, and the next day, the western province of Matanzas will be the seat of the longest show, performed by Teatro de las

Estaciones (Seasons Theater).

On the other hand, there will be a Cuba Baila show (Cuba Dances) in Pinar del Rio province, west of the capital, on Jan.1 and 2.

There will also be provincial singer songwriting festivals, end-of-year dinners, music shows and cultural galas in other territories, Granma daily reports.

The Cuban Revolution triumphed on January 1, 1959, under the leadership of Historic Leader Fidel Castro and brought about a process of transformations to change the economic and social grounds, placing the human being at the center of development.



Taliban Bans Women From Travelling Longer Distances Without Male Relative



KABUL (Dispatches) - Afghanistan's Taliban authorities said Sunday that women seeking to travel anything other than short distances should not be offered transport unless they are accompanied by a close male relative.

The guidance, issued by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, also called on all vehicle owners to offer rides only to those women wearing Islamic hijabs.

"Women travelling for more than 45 miles (72 kilometres) should not be offered a ride if they are not accompanied by a close family member," ministry spokesman Sadeq Akif Muhajir told AFP on Sunday, specifying that it must be a close male relative.

The guidance, circulated on social media networks, comes weeks after the ministry asked Afghanistan's television channels to stop showing dramas and soap operas featuring women actors. The ministry had also called on women TV journalists to wear hijabs while presenting.

Muhajir said Sunday that the hijab would also be required for women seeking transport. The ministry's directive also asked people to stop playing music in their vehicles.

The Taliban's interpretation of the hijab -- which can range from a hair covering to a face veil or full-body covering -- is unclear, and the majority of Afghan women already wear headscarves.

Since taking power in August, the Taliban have imposed various restrictions on women and girls, despite pledging a softer rule compared with their first stint in power in the 1990s.

In several provinces, local Taliban authorities have been persuaded to reopen schools -- but many girls still remain cut off from secondary education.

Early this month, the Islamist group issued a decree in the name of their supreme leader instructing the government to enforce women's rights.

The decree did not mention girls' access to education.

Activists hope that the Taliban's battle to gain international recognition and get aid flowing back into one of the poorest countries in the world will lead to them making concessions to women.

Respect for women's rights has repeatedly been cited by key global donors as a condition for restoring aid.



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J, balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

Niavaran Villa (\$4000)
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4bdrs, S/p
S, J, & yard
green yard
Fully Furn

Parsian

(\$2200)
Darrous Villa
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S/pool, Sauna
Jacuzzi, pkg
Fully Furn

Farmanieh (\$2400)
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(\$10000)
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Japan to Pay Companies to Keep Sensitive Patents Secret

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan will compensate companies to keep secret patents with potential military applications under proposed legislation, the Nikkei reported on Sunday, without citing sources.

The patents under review in the proposed economic security legislation will include technology that can help develop nuclear weapons, such as uranium enrichment and

cutting-edge innovations like quantum technology, the financial daily said.

The Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Secretariat and Japan Patent Office were not immediately available for comment outside business hours when contacted by Reuters. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida last month pledged that he will makethe nation's economic security a policy priority.



World Economy Set to Exceed \$100tr for First Time Next Year

RIYADH (Dispatches) - The world's economic output next year is forecast to exceed \$100 trillion for the first time, according to a report by the British consultancy Cebr.

The report also said that China will take longer than previously expected to surpass the United States as the world's largest economy. It predicted that China will occupy this place in 2030, compared to 2028 in the earlier report, according to Reuters.

It is also likely that Germany's economy will outperform Japan's in 2033. Russia is set to become one of the 10 biggest economies in the world by 2036 and Indonesia is looking forward to the ninth place in 2034, the report added.

The head of Norway's wealth fund said that financial markets are set to experience weak returns in the next decade and that inflation is the main hurdle ahead.

The fund had an average rate of return of 6 percent for a quarter century, but lower returns are now expected and might turn negative, according to Bloomberg.

He stated that inflation is affecting multiple fronts such as freight rates, metal and food prices, construction costs and potentially wages. The CEO of the largest wealth fund in the world added that inflation could be more consequential than is widely currently believed.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the country won't rely on raising interest rates to combat inflation, indicating that some of the policies he launched last week stabilized inflation in less than a day.

The government will shift its focus to economic growth, emphasizing investment, employment, production, exports and a current account surplus, Bloomberg reported, citing Erdogan.

Annual inflation rate in Japan hit 0.6 percent in November, accelerating from 0.1 percent in the previous month, official data showed.

The rise in consumer prices was attributed to a 9.2 percent hike in costs of fuel, light and water charges, as well as a 1.4 percent increase in food prices. If fresh food and energy prices are excluded, the yearly rate would actually reflect a deflation of 0.6 percent.

In monthly terms, overall consumer prices in the country went up by 0.3 percent in November. Mexico's GDP narrowed by 0.2 percent in October compared to a month ago, as the country continued to grapple with pandemic-related issues which stretched into the fourth quarter of this year.

In addition, this was the third consecutive monthly slump in economic activity, Reuters reported, citing figures from the country's official statistics agency INEGI.

The country's exports, in seasonally adjusted terms, hit an all-time high of \$43.9 billion in November, inducing the first deficit in six month, valued at \$463 million. The People's Bank of China, the Chinese central bank, said that the country's real economy is set to receive more support, and that monetary policy will become more forward-looking.

The bank also aims to prop up the property sector's growth, safeguarding the home buyers' rights, and helping in meeting housing demand, according to Bloomberg.

Bangladesh to Become 24th Largest Economy by 2036

DHAKA (Dispatches) - The Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) disclosed the findings in its annual World Economic League Table (WELT 2022) report on Sunday, stating that Bangladesh has been among the world's fastest growing economies over the last decade

Bangladesh is set to become the 24th largest economy out of 191 countries by 2036 owing to its ability to attract large foreign investments, the rising RMG demand, and macroeconomic stability, says the CEBR.

The Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) disclosed the findings in its annual World Economic League Table (WELT 2022) report on Sunday, stating that Bangladesh has been among the world's fastest growing economies over the last decade.

The country is forecast to place 41st in 2022 up from its current position of 42, reaching the 34th place in 2026, before eventually jumping to 24th in 2036. This represents an economic boom during the ongoing, as well as, the next decade.

Previously, the nation held 58th, 59th, and 46th positions in 2006, 2011, and 2016 respectively, indicating an upward trend in economic performance and consistency in growth.

As of 2021, the think tank classifies Bangladesh as a lower middle-income country.

In the report, the Bangladesh government's efforts to maintain a low debt-to-GDP ratio and operate a fiscal deficit of 5.9% in FY21 was mentioned in glowing terms.

On the other hand, the Covid-19 mortality rate was observed to be comparatively lower than most countries worldwide – as of mid-December 2021 – with more than half of the residents vaccinated with at least one dose. It stated that the nation's vaccination drive was in line with global standards.



Apart from rising international demand for ready-made garments (RMG), which ensures a hefty amount of income from exports, the report mentioned that a large volume of foreign investments is entering the country's telecommunication industry driven by a competent workforce skilled in information and communication technology.

Over the last few years, China has invested heavily in Bangladesh's economy as its strategic location provides an ease of trade accessibility via the Indian Ocean.

India Imposes Antidumping Duty on 5 Chinese Goods for 5 Years

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India has imposed antidumping duties on five Chinese products, including certain aluminium goods and some chemicals, for five years to guard local manufacturers from cheap imports from the neighbouring country.

According to separate notifications of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC), the duties have been imposed on certain flat rolled products of aluminium; sodium hydrosulphite (used on dye industry); silicone sealant (used in manufacturing of solar photovoltaic modules, and thermal power applications); hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) component R-32; and hydrofluorocarbon blends (both have uses in refrigeration industry).

These duties were imposed following recommendations of the commerce ministry's investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR).

The DGTR in separate probes have concluded that these products have been exported at a price below normal value in Indian markets, which has resulted in dumping.

The domestic industry has suffered material injury due to the dumping, the DGTR has said.

"The anti-dumping duty imposed under this notification (on Silicone Sealant) shall be levied for a period of five years (unless revoked, superseded or amended earlier) from the date of publication of this notification in the Official Gazette and shall be payable in Indian currency," the CBIC has said.

The CBIC has also imposed the duty on a vehicle component - Axle for Trailers in CKD/SKD (complete and semi knocked down) to protect domestic makers from cheap Chinese imports.

Gazprom Ready to Send More Gas to Europe

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Gazprom remains ready to send additional gas supplies to Europe under long-term contracts which are cheaper than the out of control spot prices currently plaguing the continent, company spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov has indicated.

"All accusations against Russia and Gazprom that we are supplying too little gas to the European market are absolutely groundless, unacceptable, and untrue, or put more simply - are lies and falsehoods,"

Kupriyanov said in an interview with Russian television on Saturday.

"All of the problems faced by Western Europe [today] were created by themselves, and there's no need to blame Gazprom for them. It's better to look in the mirror," Kupriyanov suggested.

Spot prices for gas hit an all-time high of more than \$2,187 per thousand cubic meters in European trading this week amid fears of shortages before cooling. Some officials and media have blamed Russia for the situation, suggesting that Moscow is holding back reserve capacity, presumably for some economic or geopolitical reasons.

Russian officials have dismissed the claims, accusing European leaders of creating the crisis themselves through their preference for short-term contracts, failure to stock up reserves following a cold winter and spring of 2021, lavish spending on wind and solar energy capacities which proved lacklustre, and fierce competition between Europe and Asia for limited energy supplies.

Kupriyanov says Gazprom supplied more gas in to Germany, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Denmark, Finland, and Poland in 2021 than in 2020, with deliveries to Germany reaching 50.2 billion cubic meters - 5.3 billion more than last year's deliveries.

"At the same time, a number of our clients, in particular France and Germany, have already selected their annual contract volumes, and are no longer bidding for supplies, with Gazprom booking transport capacities based on existing bids, not vice versa," the spokesman said.

According to Kupriyanov, Germany is presently engaged in the reverse flow of supplies out of its underground storage facilities to Poland and further on to Ukraine in the amount of 3-5 million cubic meters per day, even as the amount of gas in its reserves has been depleted by 47 percent, and winter is only starting. "This isn't the most rational decision," the official suggested.

Britain's Economy To Dwarf France's In 15 Years' Time

LONDON (Dispatches) - Britain's economy will vastly outstrip that of France in the next 15 years, according to a landmark report published on Sunday.

Booming tech investment and the economic reforms of the Thatcher era are giving the UK a clear lead over its neighbor and historic rival, according to independent think-tank the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR).

Its latest World Economic League Table, which looks at the prospects for all 193 countries, forecasts the UK economy will be 16 per cent larger than France's by 2036. The UK's is currently estimated to be worth £2.1 trillion, 3.6 per cent larger than France's.

The research will further strengthen Britain's case in the battle with France for bankers and other highly qualified staff.

Douglas McWilliams, deputy chairman of CEBR, told The Mail on Sunday: "Tech is the dynamic factor in economic growth and Britain is investing more in this area than France and Germany put together.

'Between half and three-quarters of UK economic growth has come from the tech sector. By contrast, Germany has a hefty legacy economy, based on car manufacturing and similar.'

The UK is the world's fifth-largest economy and is estimated to have a gross domestic product of £36,357 per head.

The report predicts Britain will drop to sixth position behind India in 2026, where it is expected to remain until 2036.

France, currently the sixth-largest economy, is predicted to fall to seventh position next year and remain there. There had been hopes in Paris that Brexit would lead to an exodus of

financial jobs from the UK. But consulting firm EY has reported that fewer than 8,000 posts have been relocated from London to the Continent.

The Mail on Sunday revealed last weekend that the European Central Bank is trying to raise this figure, threatening to take licences from banks that fail to shift substantial financial assets and staff from London to the eurozone.

Mr McWilliams said Brexit allows Britain to retain Thatcher's economic legacy but warned tech firms may find it harder to recruit talented workers from overseas.

The CEBR report notes that Brexit had cost the City no more than ten per cent of its business, despite dire forecasts from politicians and commentators in the run-up to Britain's exit from the EU.

The UK suffered one of the biggest economic shocks from the pandemic globally, but is tipped to bounce back this year. Economists surveyed by the MoS expect UK growth of 4.7 per cent next year, following a 7 per cent rise this year. The economy shrank 9.4 per cent in 2020, its worst performance for a century.

Pakistanis Own \$20b in Cryptocurrencies, More Than Federal Reserves



KARACHI (Dispatches) - Cryptocurrencies and property remained top-performing assets in Pakistan this year, with the country recording about \$20 billion in cryptocurrency value in 2021, an amount in excess of current federal reserves, according to new research studies.

The central bank declared in 2018 that virtual currencies such as Bitcoin were not legal tender issued or guaranteed by the government. But despite not being recognized by the State Bank of Pakistan, interest in cryptocurrencies has been on the rise.

The country ranked third in the Global Crypto Adoption Index in 2020-21, after India and Vietnam. "Pakistan recorded around \$20 billion of cryptocurrency value in 2020-21, showing an abnormal increase of 711 percent," the Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the country's top trade body, said in a new research report. The central bank has not commented on the FPPCI's findings so far.

Cryptocurrencies have thrived during the coronavirus pandemic, the federation said, adding: "The biggest crypto exchange used by Pakistani investors is Binance, which is headquartered in Cayman Island, whereas other renowned platforms include Localbitcoins.com, Binomo and others."

About 67 percent of crypto investors in Pakistan use centralized services, whereas only 33 percent use decentralized financing platforms for crypto-related transactions.

The peer-to-peer model for investing in cryptocurrencies works in a way that buyers transfer money directly to sellers, whereas service providers act as intermediaries and provide escrow services to hedge counterparty credit risks.

Iran Gas Condensate Exports Rise

TEHRAN (IP) – Oil Minister said that the country’s gas condensate exports were rising, adding a new record has been set in gas production from the joint South Pars gas field. Speaking to the reporters on the sidelines of an exhibition of the capabilities of Academic Center for Education, Culture, and Research (ACECR), and following the

signing of several deals between ACECR and subsidiaries of the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum on Monday, Javad Owji said the administration had no plans to increase the price of petrol, adding the record of 705 million cubic meters of gas production from South Pars joint field was set in late December.



Climate Crisis Puts Oil in the Crosshairs, But Dependence Persists

PARIS (Dispatches) - The climate crisis has put the end of oil onto the agenda, but achieving that is a colossal task given the world economy’s deep dependence on petroleum. “In 2021, several developments showed clearly that (the petroleum) industry doesn’t have a future,” said Romain Ioualalen at the activist group Oil Change International. The International Energy Agency warned in May that an immediate halt to new investment in fossil projects is needed if the world is to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and to stand any chance of limiting warming to 1.5C. The call was a revolution for an agency created in the wake of the first 1970 oil shock to protect the energy security of rich, oil-consuming nations. Another major moment in 2021 was the emergence at the COP 26 climate summit in Glasgow of a coalition of nations that pledged to phase out oil and gas production, although no major oil and gas producing nation joined that group. “It is no longer taboo to talk about the end of the extraction of hydrocarbons during international climate summits,” said Oil Change International’s Ioualalen. And fossil fuels -- which still represent 80 percent of energy consumed -- were explicitly blamed for driving climate change, which was not the case when the Paris climate pact was reached in 2015. More recently, environmental defenders scored a symbolic victory when oil giant Shell decided to exit the development of the controversial Cambo oil field off Scotland saying the investment case was “not strong enough”. “We’ve known for several years that the end of crude oil ... is near,” said Moez Ajmi, an energy specialist at professional services firm EY. “But is the world ready to live without oil? It is still very dependent in my view.” The IEA also believes that oil demand is still set to rise. It expects it to reach its pre-pandemic level of just under 100 million barrels per day next year. With crude prices having rebounded in the past months, oil producers are rolling in cash and can afford to pursue new projects. “Any talk of the oil and gas industries being consigned to the past and halting new investments in oil and gas is misguided,” OPEC leader Mohammed Barkindo said recently. The head of French oil firm TotalEnergies, Patrick Pouyanne, said he’s “convinced the transition will take place because there is a real awareness, but it will take time.” He believes the issue is being approached from the wrong end. Instead of focussing on reducing oil, attention should be shifted towards consumption. Demand for fossil fuels “will decline because consumers have access to new products like electric vehicles,” said Pouyanne.



In the first half of the year, electric vehicles accounted for 7 percent of global auto sales, according to BloombergNEF. While that is still a small percentage, it is growing fast. Oil Change International’s Ioualalen said that arguments put forward by oil companies and producing nations are cynical and focus on the short term. “They’re trying to justify an unsustainable trajectory at any cost,” he said. “We’re still far from a decarbonised economy, of course, but it is the energy system investments that are made today that will lead us there,” said Ioualalen. Whatever the horizon for the end of petroleum, industry players are still only willy-nilly preparing for it as pressure upon them mounts. US oil majors ExxonMobil and Chevron were long holdouts but finally announced this year investments into the energy transition. “2022 has the potential to be a truly transformational year,” said Tom Ellacott, senior vice president for corporate analysis at energy research and consultancy firm Wood Mackenzie. “It’s clear that sitting on the decarbonisation sidelines isn’t an option” given the increasing pressure on the oil industry. Experts believe that 2022 will see more investment in wind and solar power as well as technology to capture carbon emissions from fossil fuel power plants and factories.

Uzbekistan Set for Second Stage of Reforms



TASHKENT (Dispatches) - As Uzbekistan prepares for the next stage of its reform program, its leadership is says it will carry out a major restructuring of government, with some functions devolved to local authorities and others dispensed with altogether. Stage One focused largely on Uzbekistan’s external relationships -- how the “New Uzbekistan” is perceived by the outside world; foreign capital was welcomed and a major privatization effort began. Some of the nation’s most criticized human rights problems -- forced labor in the cotton fields and torture in the prison system, for instance -- have been or are being redressed. The formerly isolationist nation has revamped its foreign policy to embrace multilateralism and establish friendly ties near and far, and it is taking leadership positions on selected issues -- such as post-war Afghanistan and regional electrical transmission -- on behalf of its Central Asian neighbors. “Positions have improved markedly in a number of international rankings, including the Index of Economic Freedom, the World Bank’s Doing Business Index, the OECD Country Risk Rankings, and the World Open Data Rankings,” Said Rustamov, Uzbekistan’s London ambassador, says. “The EU has granted Uzbekistan ‘GSP+’ trade beneficiary status, and recently the UK did so too. The country is in the process of joining the WTO.” Inbound investment and GDP are up and international tourism is showing promising signs for the future. Construction in Tashkent, Samarkand and other major cities is booming. Stage Two will be more challenging, but potentially even more significant. Discussing planned decentralisation and enhancements to the authority and fiscal powers of local government, newly re-elected President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said recently: “In the future, most of the functions of the state will be transferred from the centre to the regions.” Mirziyoyev has already revealed some details. Job creation and poverty reduction in particular have been mentioned, with roles to be handed to the newly created position of assistant “khokim” (comparable to deputy mayor) in each community. To some extent, decentralization has been a running theme throughout Uzbekistan’s reforms. Early in the first stage a nation-wide network of “People’s Receptions” -- offices where citizens can ask questions and raise problems -- was established.

Turkey Made Strides Toward Becoming Global Tech Giant in 2021

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey continued its technological march with several significant projects in technology, defense and aviation in 2021 -- from domestically designed cars to new communication satellites and cutting-edge defense products. After a tough year due to the coronavirus pandemic measures, such as lockdowns and travel bans in 2020, when events were postponed or organized virtually, 2021 saw Turkey staging important events that attracted a huge amount of participation. After successful military operations where Turkish defense products proved their quality, such as in the northern Syrian and Nagorno-Karabakh regions, Turkish products became increasingly popular. Turkey’s first medium-range missile engine broke a world record in April by reaching 1,342 newtons of thrust power with its 240-millimeter (9.5-inch) diameter. The TEI-TJ300 engine, developed by Turkish Aerospace Industries’ engine producing subsidiary TUSAŞ Engine Industries (TEI), with the support of the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK), will be able to be used in air, naval and land defense systems. The country successfully tested in May its first 1,500-hp locally made tank engine, Batu, developed by Turkish firm BMC Power. The engine can be used in various tanks. Defense giant Aselsan in May successfully tested a micro unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), Saka, which has a 3-axis gimbal, is developed for exploration and surveillance purposes and weighs around 600 grams (1.3 pounds). Turkey’s Bayraktar Akıncı combat drone, developed by UAV magnet Baykar, broke a record in the country in July by flying at an altitude of 38,039 feet and staying in the air for 25 hours and 46 minutes. In July, Turkey’s HİSAR A+ air defense missile system was delivered with all elements and the HİSAR O+ system reached the stage of mass production. As the first domestically designed air defense system, the HİSAR missiles were developed to protect military bases, ports, facilities and troops against air-based threats.

Pakistan Gov’t...

FROM PAGE 1

PVMA Chairman Tariq Ullah Sufi and Senior Vice Chairman Sheikh Amjad Rasheed said that the dumping of Iranian oil is causing revenue loss to the national kitty but also hitting the sales of “Made in Pakistan” products in the domestic market. They said the smuggled goods are non-certified and substandard edible oil products, hence a threat to human health, therefore these products must be checked and stopped for keeping in stock and selling under the stipulations of PSQCA Act 1996 and rules framed there-under. They called upon the provincial food authorities of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to take notice of this issue of public interest. The attractive profit margins, available to the implied undocumented and grey supply chain of smuggled goods, suggest that the illegal practice is liable to further flourish if left unattended, the PVMA said. It is a universally accepted and experienced phenomenon that raw materials and finished goods on which incidence of duty/taxes and other levies are higher in comparison with the regional and neighboring countries are prone to smuggling and thus the local industry is witnessing the same scenario, the association added. Unfortunately, the law enforcement agencies, tax offices, district administration and management authorities, besides other registering and licensing regulators are not paying any heed to the issue, hence the legitimate, documented and tax obedient industry

is seriously suffering and sustaining irreparable financial losses by losing market share. Mr Rasheed said the association has sought time from Finance Adviser Shaukat Tarin and the chairman FBR for taking any action against the influx of Iranian oil in order to save the local industry. A ghee/cooking oil producer said since the Iranian product is not according to PSQA standard then it could be injurious to human health. He said the government should save the local industry which is already struggling due to rupee depreciation against the dollar, the current gas crisis, and high tariff on edible oil imports. PVMA Secretary-General Umer Islam Khan said the low price of Iranian oil means that there is no tax or duty on the product while the Iranian government also provides subsidies. On the government’s plan to reduce the general sales tax to 8.5pc from 17pc at import stage of palm oil and oil seeds and 50pc cut in customs duty on import of palm oil, he said “so far nothing has been done.” He said Pakistan consumes 4.5 million tonnes of ghee and cooking oil annually. Import of palm oil (main raw material of making edible oil products) stands at three to 3.1m tonnes per annum. Besides, 3.2m tonnes of seeds are imported to extract 900,000 tonnes of canola and soyabean oil. The industry gets 400,000 tonnes of oil from cottonseed, rapeseed, canola seed, and corn.

Maduro Hails...

FROM PAGE 1

Referring to the visit of Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani to Venezuela in 2019, Maduro said, “He was a smiley, optimistic man, and I thank God for ever meeting him.” “Soleimani combated terrorism and the brutal terrorist criminals who attacked the peoples of the Axis of resistance. He was a brave man,” he added. He stressed the importance of learning from these horrific crimes, such as the crime of assassinating martyr Soleimani. “Is this a world we want, where we witness the White House issuing an order to kill a hero of the struggle against terrorism in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Lebanon?” The world must raise its voice again, he underscored, in condemnation of the assassination of the people’s hero, General Soleimani. On the Palestinian cause, President Maduro stressed that no one in the world dares to ask Caracas to abandon Palestine. “We cannot accept such demands. It is a sin to simply think about abandoning Palestine or leaving it by itself.” “Palestine is humanity’s holy land, and we have the Palestinian land in such high regard. We hear the name ‘Palestine’ loud and high,” Maduro affirmed, condemning the Israeli occupation’s crimes against Palestinians, saying “Israel” would pay for them one day. Speaking about Syria, the Venezuelan president said that the Syrian people have suffered a lot throughout the last 11 years, and they knew how to preserve and win. The Syrian Arab Army, alongside the unified Syrian people and President Bashar Al-Assad, will make Syria rise again and fully liberate it, he declared.

Iran, Iraq...

FROM PAGE 1

“We agreed to start the primary study and implementation of this project within the next month, which is practically a big step for Iran and Iraq to expand trade, and increase freight and passenger exchanges, which is important for both countries,” he added. Qasemi noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (known as RAI) and the Iraqi Republic Railways will implement the project together and a joint venture will be established within two months. By linking railways with Iran, Iraq is going to also access Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the northern regions, including the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East. Mentioning his meetings with Barham Salih and Al-Kadhimi, the Iranian minister said the two sides have also discussed the facilitation of the presence of Iranian companies in the Iraqi market. Iranian companies will have a more active role in the reconstruction of Iraq, he said. “During the meeting with the Iraqi president, talks were held on the general issues of relations between the two countries and the increase of trade and support for the Shalamchah-Basra project, as well as air transportation between the two countries and it was decided to double the number of flights between the two countries,” Qasemi explained. “We also discussed road transportation between the two countries and various other issues, which we hope will be supported by the Prime Minister and the President of Iraq,” he added.

Troika Summit...

FROM PAGE 1

“When it comes to such meetings, they should be held in person. The reason is that the issues on the agenda are quite sensitive and it’s not reasonable to discuss them via video conference,” he stressed. “The meeting will probably take place in Tehran or in Turkey. However, the summit itself will be held in Tehran because it is now Iran’s turn to host the event,” Lavrentyev emphasized. When asked when the next international Astana meeting on Syria would take place, the Russian presidential envoy said that it depended on when the Russia-Iran-Turkey summit was held. “If we manage to arrange it this spring, for instance, then our Astana format meeting will follow right away. This is how we view the situation. The presidents need to meet, talk, and outline avenues for future cooperation and order the relevant agencies to deal with the matter via the Astana platform. We will gather later to discuss specific mechanisms to implement the instructions that we will receive from our presidents,” the diplomat concluded. Senior Assistant to Iranian Foreign Minister for Special Political Affairs Ali Asghar Khaji told TASS on the sidelines of an international meeting on Syria earlier that Iran, Russia, and Turkey had agreed to hold a summit in Tehran in February or March 2022 depending on the coronavirus situation. The Iranian diplomatic official also said that the summit would be preceded by a meeting between the three countries’ top diplomats, slated for January or early February 2022.

Thailand Book Place in AFF Suzuki Cup Final

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Thailand booked their place in the AFF Suzuki Cup final for a ninth time in 13 attempts after they held defending champions Vietnam to a goalless draw in the second leg of the semi-finals to complete a 2-0 aggregate victory.

The Vietnamese dominated possession at Singapore's National Stadium but could not break down the resolute defense of the Thais, who have conceded only one goal in six matches on their run to the final.

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Hanyu Books Olympic Spot

SAITAMA (Dispatches) - Two-time Olympic figure skating Champion Yuzuru Hanyu has booked his place at the Beijing Games, laying down a marker with a commanding win at Japan's national championships.

But he failed in his bid to become the first person to land a quadruple axel in competition, slightly under-rotating his maiden crack at the legendary jump. Hanyu, who was making his first appearance in eight months after injuring ankle ligaments, will have the chance to try again in China in six weeks' time.

8 IRAN NEWS

SPORTS

TUESDAY DECEMBER 28, 2021

Curry Powers Warriors Past Suns

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry scored 33 points to power Golden State to a 116-107 victory over Phoenix that moved the Warriors ahead of the Suns for best record in the NBA.

Otto Porter Jr. scored 13 of his 19 points in the fourth quarter as the Warriors pulled away to win a back-and-forth battle that featured 12 lead changes.

The Warriors arrived in Phoenix for the Christmas Day clash with three of their top four scorers -- Andrew Wiggins, Damion Lee and Jordan Poole -- sidelined by Covid concerns.

Curry mostly filled the void, and for the first time in nine Christmas games scored more than 20 points -- despite connecting on just 10 of 27 shots from the field, including five of 16 from three-point range.

"Next man up mentality, that's the only way we're going to win a game like this," Curry said, praising Porter's poise down the stretch.

"I'm proud of everybody, man, because not a lot of people picked us to win tonight," added Curry after the Warriors ended the Suns' 15-game home winning streak.

Chris Paul scored 21 points and handed out eight assists for Phoenix.

The surge of Covid cases around the league robbed the five-game Christmas Day slate of some star power, but there was still plenty of drama. In Milwaukee, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points in his return from Covid protocols, powering the NBA champion Bucks to a 117-113 comeback win over the coronavirus-depleted Boston Celtics.

Antetokounmpo, who had missed five games, scored 29 points in the second half as the Bucks rallied to deny a gutsy Celtics squad that had nine players unavailable because of Covid-19 concerns, and 10 unavailable counting Al Horford, who cleared protocols but was deemed not yet game fit.

With the minimum required eight players in uniform -- after German guard Dennis Schroder was ruled out by Covid concerns earlier Saturday -- the Celtics took it to the NBA champions early.

Openers Get India Off to Good Start in First Test

CENTURION (Dispatches) - India's opening batsmen KL Rahul and Mayank Agarwal gave their side a solid start on the first day of the first Test against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion.

India were 83 for no wicket at lunch, justifying captain Virat Kohli's decision to bat first on a green-tinged pitch after winning the toss. Rahul (29 not out) and Agarwal (46 not out) both showed good judgment in deciding which balls to play against steady but largely unthreatening bowling.

New cap Marco Jansen created the only chance of the morning, having Agarwal dropped by wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock with his score on 36 and the total 52.

Jansen, 21, a tall left-arm fast bowler, was selected ahead of Duanne Olivier, the form bowler of the South African first-class season. Olivier took 28 wickets in four first-class matches. Agarwal hit Jansen for three boundaries in his first over when the debutant came into the attack in the tenth over of the day.

However, Jansen bowled some good deliveries and beat Rahul outside the off stump in the over after Agarwal was dropped.

The new ball was shared by Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi, neither of whom had played any first-class cricket since South Africa's Test series in the West Indies in June. The South Africa team wore black armbands in honor of anti-apartheid icon Desmond Tutu, described as the country's moral compass, who died on Sunday aged 90.

Both teams also held a minute's silence.

Zhu Wins First WTA 125 Title

SEOUL (Dispatches) - Second seed Zhu Lin did not drop a set en route to the biggest title of her career at the Hana Bank Korea Open, conceding just four games to top seed Kristina Mladenovic in the final.

No.2 seed Zhu Lin captured the biggest title of her career at the Hana Bank Korea Open after dismissing No.1 seed Kristina Mladenovic 6-0, 6-4 in a one-hour, 18-minute final. The tournament, a WTA 250 fixture since 2004, returned at WTA 125 level this year to become the first WTA event in East Asia since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.



STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - Norway's double Olympic cross country skiing champion Ingvald Flugstad Oestberg will miss the 2022 Games in Beijing due to health issues, the country's winter sports governing body said.

The Norwegian Ski Federation (NSF) said the 31-year-old, who won gold in the team sprint in Sochi in 2014 and the 4x5km relay in Pyeongchang in 2018, would miss the Tour de Ski and the Olympics.

Oestberg returned to the national team in November after almost two years of health problems, in which the results she returned in physical tests were not deemed to be high enough for the ski federation to clear her to compete.

"The planned follow-up after the first races shows that her health situation cannot manage the ski program. For that reason Ingvald must take a longer break from competition, which means that the Olympics are unfortunately too soon," NSF medical director Oeystein Andersen said in a statement.

Oestberg won the overall World Cup title in 2019.

"I have put in a huge amount of work, done my best, felt good and enjoyed participating in cross-country skiing again. (My) dreams are shattered, but I can do nothing but look forward," she said.

Vekic out of WTA Event in Melbourne



LONDON (Dispatches) - Former world No. 19 Donna Vekic has withdrawn from a WTA event scheduled to take place at Melbourne Park ahead of the Australian Open. Following the withdrawal of Vekic, a place in the tournament's main draw opened for Amanda Anisimova.

Vekic, now ranked at No. 68 in the world, kicked off her 2021 season in Melbourne, where she played the Yarra Valley Classic.

After a first round bye, Vekic lost to Tsvetana Pironkova. Despite the early loss at the Yarra Valley Classic, Vekic managed to put up a solid run at Melbourne Park at the Australian Open and make the round-of-16. Unfortunately for

Vekic, the pain in her knee was too big so she decided to undergo a surgery.

Vekic admitted 2021 was a 'difficult year' "I rested quite well, but I already started preparations this week. There is not much time this year, Christmas and the trip to Australia will be coming soon, so we should make the most of this time," Vekic told Sportske Novosti in late November.

"This was a really extremely difficult year, my first big injury and surgery happened. I didn't even know what to expect after that, the recovery was really long and painful, but the year ended successfully and I am looking forward to the next season in which I will, I hope, be ready and healthy and play tennis again without pain."

It was a difficult season for Vekic but it finished on a positive way. In her last tournament of the season, Vekic beat Clara Tauson in the Courmayeur final to lift her first WTA title since 2017. "That title was a proof to myself that all the work and effort I put in was not for nothing and that it still pays off to train, work, invest effort in recovery and all other things that are not pleasant as playing on the court. It's definitely an extra motivation for me for everything that will come," Vekic noted.

Barcelona Not Giving Up in Quest To Sign De Ligt

ROME (Dispatches) - Barcelona are reconsidering signing Juventus defender Matthijs De Ligt in next summer's transfer window.

The 22-year-old Dutch centre back seems destined to leave the Bianconeri in the near-future, with his agent Mino Raiola recently stating that he was ready for the next step of his career.

As reported by Sport, Barcelona are seriously interested in the idea of signing De Ligt but would need to wait until next summer, as the deal would be practically impossible to pull off in next month's transfer window due to his large salary.

The player would cost less than his €120m release clause, being told this by Raiola in recent days following a meeting in Turin. Juventus would be open to a sale as it would allow them to invest more heavily in a new striker.

Barcelona are now coming up with a plan to try and pull off the deal, with the departure of Philippe Coutinho seeming like the most probable way of facilitating the transfer.

Meanwhile Juventus have registered their interest in Inter midfielder Matias Vecino but a deal looks unlikely. The 30-year-old Uruguayan midfielder, whose contract expires with the Nerazzurri in June next year, has only made one Serie A start under coach Simone Inzaghi this season, and he could be sold by the club in next month's transfer window.



Shapovalov Tests Positive for Covid in Sydney

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - World number 14 Denis Shapovalov has tested positive for Covid-19 after arriving in Sydney, he said Sunday, highlighting the virus threat to the Australian Open.

The 22-year-old was among the first players to enter Australia ahead of the ATP Cup teams event from January 1, where he was supposed to be playing for Canada, and with the first Grand Slam of the year three weeks away.

He said on Twitter he was experiencing mild symptoms and isolating -- the latest player who competed at an Abu Dhabi exhibition this month to get coronavirus.

"Hi everyone, just wanted to update you that upon my arrival in Sydney, I tested positive for Covid," Shapovalov said.

"I am following all protocols, including isolation and letting the people who I've been in contact with know.

"Right now I am experiencing minor symptoms and look forward to getting back on the court, when it is safe to do so."

Shapovalov played Rafael Nadal in Abu Dhabi, with the Spanish superstar later also testing positive for Covid, throwing his plans for the Australian Open into chaos.

