

Health Ministry Announced on Saturday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to 130,661 With 58 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh Said on Saturday That There Will Be Good News About the Neutralization and Ineffectiveness Of Sanctions in the Coming Days

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UK Discussing How to Repay £400m Iran Debt

LONDON (Dispatches) - UK government officials were in Tehran last week discussing legal ways to pay Britain's historical £400m debt to Iran, the Iranian ambassador to London has said. Mohsen Baharvand added that he was in live discussions with the Foreign Office, and said the issues were not insurmountable.

The UK Foreign Office has refused to discuss any details of the payment to Iran, or what has been holding up the settling of the £400m debt dating back to an arms sale to Iran in the mid-1970s.

Families of the UK dual nationals detained in Iran have repeatedly said they believe their family members are being held hostage until the debt is paid. The former foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt has also said he does not think the UK dual nationals will be released until the debt is paid.

Baharvand, speaking to reporters in London on Friday, said Iran and the UK had been close to an agreement on the debt in the summer: "We wanted to use that deal to ask our people that we are seeing a good sign from the UK and then that gives us a possibility to expedite our efforts to help the dual nationals and things like that. Then we had a deal. We signed it but two days after the signature of that deal the UK government said they could not implement it because of U.S. sanctions," he said. **See Page 7**

Official says Dishonest Reports Not to Affect Iran's Will

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's chief negotiator in Vienna talks has once again reaffirmed the Islamic Republic's determination to reach a deal with the P4+1 group of countries on the removal of sanctions during the ongoing negotiations in the Austrian capital, saying "dishonest reports" from outside the negotiating room will fail to have any impact on Tehran's will.

"Dishonest reports from outside negotiating room won't weaken our will to reach a deal securing our nation's rights & interests," Ali Bagheri Kani said in a post on his Twitter account on Friday as talks are underway between Iran and the five remaining signatories to the 2015 nuclear agreement aimed at securing the removal of the sanctions imposed by the US on Iran after Washington's withdrawal from the accord, and reviving the embattled deal.

Bagheri Kani, who serves as Iran's deputy foreign minister for political affairs, emphasized that the nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is alive "because of Iran's responsible conduct." **See Page 7**

Iran Serious, Seeking Good Deal in Vienna



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi says the ongoing negotiations in Vienna will result in a good deal if the other parties are determined to remove U.S. sanctions against Tehran.

Addressing Iranian ambassadors and heads of Iranian diplomatic missions abroad on Saturday, President Raisi said Tehran definitely pursues such an agreement.

"The fact that we presented the text of Iran's proposal to the negotiating parties shows that we are serious in the talks, and if the other side is also serious about the removal of sanctions, we will achieve a good agreement. We are definitely after a good agreement," he said. Last week, Iran submitted two draft proposals to the other parties concerning the removal of sanctions and Tehran's nuclear commitments, but the Europeans requested a break to take them to their capitals for discussion.

The talks resumed on Thursday, with Iran's top negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, stressing that Tehran is sticking to the stance it laid out last week.

Raisi said the brutal U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic are mainly economic-based and the enemy's strategy is to keep and expand the shadow of these sanctions on the Iranian nation, adding Iran should primarily focus on defusing and breaking the impact of the bans.

He underlined that his administration is doing its best to thwart the effect of the sanctions and our decision in the fields of oil sales and financial resources are geared toward managing the country in case the sanctions continue.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian president pointed to a serious effort to establish better ties with neighboring countries, insisting that Tehran needs to develop a correct view about its borders and look at its neighbors as opportunities, not threats.

Emphasizing the significance of developing strong economic ties with neighboring nations, Raisi further underlined that establishing ties with Israel can neither bring security to the occupying regime, nor to the states of the region.

He added that maintaining good relations with regional countries is what will culminate into security in our region. Raisi described foreign authority as an extension of domestic authority and said, "We believe that relations with neighboring countries should be stable. Everyone knows that the connection with the Zionist Regime by some countries in the region does not provide security for them. Wherever the Zionist Regime has infiltrated, the host country has suffered. Countries in the region can contribute to security and peace by interacting with the Islamic Republic of Iran".

The President emphasized, "All hardships we have is because of the presence of outsiders in the region. NATO and the United States have been in Afghanistan for 20 years, but the people of this country have not felt peace for a day".

Stating that there is an infrastructure of economic relations with neighbors, Raisi said, "Deep knowledge of domestic capabilities is very important for the missions of the Islamic Republic of Iran abroad and they should introduce Iran's scientific and technical capabilities to the world".

Emphasizing that we are determined to pursue a policy of interaction with our neighbors, the President said, "Today, the sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran are economically based. The strategy that the enemy is pursuing is to put Iran under sanctions, but we are pursuing two steps of lifting them and neutralizing them".

Mali Keen to Cooperate With Iran in Extraterritorial Cultivation

TEHRAN (MNA) - Director-general of the Malian Foreign Affairs Ministry's Asia and Oceania Office has said his country is ready to cooperate with Iranian companies for extraterritorial cultivation, the portal of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) reported.

Addressing the meeting with the TCCIMA Deputy Head for International Affairs Hesamedin Hallaj on Saturday, the Malian official called on Iranian companies to expand agricultural activities in Mali, saying that his country is fully prepared to provide suitable land and water for agriculture to Iranian companies. Emphasizing the high capacity of cooperation between the two countries, he stressed that his country does not have a complicated bureaucracy for the economic activity of Iranian companies and it is fully prepared for cooperation with Iranian companies.

"Mali is the third-largest economy in Northwest Africa, but unfortunately financial and economic relations between Iran and Mali are not at the level of political relations between two countries; While in the fields of agriculture, mining, and handicrafts, there is a lot of potential for cooperation between the two countries," he said. Having two large rivers, Mali has abundant water resources and suitable land for agriculture, the official said, adding that the country's Agriculture Ministry and the finance institutions are ready to transfer land and water to Iranian companies for cultivation.

He also informed about his country's need for chemical fertilizers for agriculture, including phosphate and urea fertilizers, and said: "I have an order for 260,000 tons of urea fertilizer for a company in Mali right now. If Iranian producers are ready, they can sign contracts with financial companies to export chemical fertilizers to my country."

Further in this meeting, Hallaj referred to the low volume of economic relations between the two countries and noted that this issue is due to the lack of knowledge about the two sides' potentials and capacities and stressed the need to activate the relations between the two countries' chambers of commerce.

Tehran Condemns Inhumane U.S. Measures Against Iranian People

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An Iranian envoy to the United Nations has denounced as inhumane and illegal what have been branded as the unilateral coercive measures by the United States against the Iranian people.

Zahra Ershadi, deputy permanent representative of Iran to the UN, made the remarks in a statement on Friday, stressing that Washington uses Unilateral Coercive Measures - or UCMs - as political leverage against other countries.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the inhumane and illegal UCMs not only as one of the main obstacles which hinder international efforts to provide humanitarian assistance but also as one of the main sources in creating humanitarian crises and devastating humanitarian principles around the world," she said in a statement before the UN General Assembly Plenary.

In the statement on "Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance", Ershadi added that the sanctions froze the funds Tehran held in foreign banks for purchases of coronavirus vaccines. **See Page 7**

IRGC Navy Takes Delivery of More Combat Speedboats

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy has taken delivery of 110 domestically-manufactured combat speedboats for maritime operations in Iran's southern territorial waters.

The speedboats joined the IRGC Navy's fleet during a Saturday ceremony attended by the IRGC Chief Commander Major General Hossein Salami and high-profile military figures in the southern Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas.

The speedboats are highly maneuverable, and are equipped with missile and rocket launchers as well as surveillance and reconnaissance devices.

In comments at the event, General Salami said Iran's advanced naval vessels have high destructive power to defend the country in terms of range, speed, accuracy.

Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy, said the new speedboats have been developed by local experts and can reach speeds of 75-90 knots (138-166 km/h). **See Page 7**

Iraq Deplores Reduction In Gas Supplies From Iran

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq's ministry of electricity said that a reduction in gas supplies from Iran had meant a power loss of around 3,400 megawatts, the state news agency reported.

Iraq's reliance on Iranian energy imports has geopolitical consequences and has been a source of ongoing tensions with the U.S. Washington has conditioned successive sanctions waivers, enabling these imports to continue, on Iraq becoming more energy independent.

The stakes are high for Iraq as electricity outages have routinely led to violent protests, particularly in the south.

Gas and electricity imports from Iran often meet up to a third of Iraq's power demands.

"Iraq relies on Iranian energy imports heavily, especially in peak summer months," said Yesar al-Maleki, Persian Gulf analyst at the Middle East Economic Survey.

"Gas imports from Iran range from 1.5-1.8 billion cubic feet per day. Now, we see generation in the south collapsing below one (gigawatt), meaning not just these lines are offline but even gas flow is down." **See Page 7**

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Iran, Austria Discuss Vienna Talks

VIENNA (IRNA) - Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani and Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Linhart reviewed bilateral and international issues as well as the Vienna Talks.

Bagheri is in Vienna to attend negotiations on lifting sanctions against Iran. Earlier, Bagheri slammed the unseriousness shown by some participants, saying that the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran was serious in the talks.

Tehran Set to Get U.S. Sanctions Lifted

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister says his ministry is duty-bound to work towards the lifting of Washington's sanctions against Tehran.

"The diplomacy apparatus' innate responsibility is to make every effort and use all its diplomatic know-how and experience to get the United States' cruel and unilateral sanctions lifted," said Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a meeting with Iranian ambassadors and heads of Iranian diplomatic missions overseas.

He said the administration of Iranian President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi took office on a platform of getting U.S. sanctions lifted, adding the foreign ministry is commissioned to work towards that end.

Also present at the meeting was President Raisi, who said if the other parties to the Vienna talks are determined to lift the U.S. sanctions against Iran, the negotiators will reach a good deal.

He said Tehran definitely pursues such an agreement.

Reports coming out of the Vienna talks on Friday suggest the negotiating teams had a better assessment of the discussions than their previous meetings.

In a report, IRNA said Tehran's proposals have been explained to the other sides and ambiguities are being cleared.

Meanwhile, Russian representative to the meeting Mikhail Olyanov said at the first meeting of the second round of talks that important ambiguities in the talks have been resolved and the negotiations are moving forward.

Reports also indicate the European troika have returned to Vienna with a more realistic approach after examining Tehran's proposals.

Meanwhile Amir-Abdollahian added that neighboring countries are the main focus of the Islamic Republic of Iran in foreign policy.

He went on to say: "The government's slogan is a balanced foreign policy and



active, dynamic, and intelligent diplomacy, and the government's four-year plan has been prepared and planned in this regard."

He also went on to say that looking at Asia is one of the priorities of the government's foreign policy, stressed: "We will pursue sustainable economic development without looking at the Vienna talks."

Amir-Abdollahian added: "Paying special attention to Iranians abroad and eliminating their separation with the country is one of the serious plans of the government."

The Iranian Foreign Minister also said: "In the coming days, we will hold the first meeting of the Council of Iranians Abroad, chaired by the President, and we hope that the approval of the law on the protection of Iranians abroad will be one of the outcomes of this meeting."

Referring to the Foreign Ministry's mission in the field of neutralizing and lifting sanctions, Amir-Abdollahian added: "In this regard, we have a duty to move with a revolutionary and jihadist approach."

The Iranian Foreign Minister also said: "We will pursue sustainable economic development without looking at the Vienna talks. However, the inherent duty of the diplomatic apparatus is to use all its diplomatic efforts and experience to lift the oppressive and unilateral sanctions of the United States."

Iran Adds to Military Might On a Daily Basis as Per Strategy

TEHRAN (MNA) - The Commander-in-Chief of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Major General Hossein Salami has said that Iran is determined to add to its military might in accordance with a smart, targeted, and considered strategy.

The Chief Commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Major General Hossein Salami made remarks at the ceremony of delivering 110 speedboats to the IRGC Navy fleet.

"Generating power is not a habit for us, but it is inspired by a strong strategy and follows a strategic logic, and the increase in power happens quite purposefully and intelligently," General Salami said.

"Today, Iran is determined to expand its power on a daily basis," he added.

General Salami went on to say that Iran is increasing its might on a daily basis despite all the illegal sanctions because the Iranians have come to the understanding that the country must have the power if it wants to be independent. The IRGC chief commander further emphasized that the Iranian nation wants to live freely, independently, and with dignity.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he pointed out that Iran has always firmly defended the rights of the other deprived and impoverished nations in the region, not letting foreign powers take control over them.

UNGA Approves Iran's Membership

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has approved Iran's full membership in the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR).

Before obtaining membership on Friday, the Islamic Republic had observer status at the UNSCEAR.

Iran's accession was first approved last month in the General Assembly's Fourth Committee, despite opposition from the Israeli regime and the United States.

In addition to Iran, Norway, Algeria and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also joined the UNSCEAR, increasing the number of the body's permanent members from 27 to 31.

The UNSCEAR was set up by resolution of the General Assembly in 1955. Its mandate is to assess and report on the levels of and the effects of exposure to ionizing radiation.

A secretariat, located in Vienna and functionally linked to the UN Environment Program, organizes the annual sessions and manages the preparation of documents for the Committee's scrutiny.

Iran has shown the peaceful nature of its nuclear program to the world by allowing the most transparent cooperation ever with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with six world states — namely the US, Germany, France, Britain, Russia and China — in 2015.

Following a year of strategic patience, Iran resorted to its legal rights stipulated in Article 26 of the JCPOA, which grants a party the right to suspend its contractual commitments in case of non-compliance by other signatories, and let go of some of the restrictions imposed on its nuclear energy program.

Root of Crises in the Middle East Is Foreign Intervention

TEHRAN (IP) - The Iranian Head of Strategic Council on Foreign Relations stressed that the root of various crises in West Asia was foreign intervention.

"The most important crisis in West Asia is Palestine, and the resolution of the crisis will be possible only with the participation of all the main inhabitants of Palestine and its acceptance by the int'l community," Kamal Kharrazi said in a virtual speech at the 30th International Conference on the Anniversary of Kazakhstan's Independence.

Kharrazi also described the Yemeni crisis as a "fruitless and costly war," adding: "The time has come for the siege of Yemen to be lifted and for a people's government to rule the country based on the fundamental principle of democracy."

Referring to the U.S. defeat in Afghanistan after 20 years of occupation, the eventual withdrawal, and its escape from the country, the former Iranian Foreign Minister said: "The only solution to the crisis is the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan."

Iran-Turkey Comprehensive Cooperation Document to Boost Economy



TEHRAN (MNA) - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said that a comprehensive cooperation document between Iran and Turkey will boom the economy of the country.

Speaking upon his arrival in Tehran late on Friday after his two-day visit to the Turkish city of Istanbul, Iranian Parliament Speaker Qalibaf expressed his hope on finalization of comprehensive cooperation document between the two countries which will boost the economy of the country optimally.

Iranian Parliament Speaker, who had participated in the conference of 16th edition of Parliamentary Union of OIC members (PUIC) at the official invitation of his Turkish counterpart, pointed out that the sessions of this Summit focused on 'Afghanistan, migration and Palestine'.

Turning to the previous visit of the Turkish foreign minister to Iran, Qalibaf said, "During the visit, officials of the two countries of Iran and Turkey discussed drawing up a comprehensive cooperation document."

He evaluated his visit to Turkey as 'positive' and stated that the two countries showed their vehement interests to boost their ties in all fields, especially in the economic areas.

In his meeting with Turkish entrepreneurs and businesspersons, he said that the 13th government of Iran under President Raisi is seriously determined to remove barriers ahead of trade and economic ties between the two countries.

Qalibaf also held a high-profile meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss issues of mutual interests.

Expansion of Ties With Syria, Region Top Priority for Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's vice president for parliamentary affairs said that Iran is seeking to implement all the agreements between Iran and Syria, adding the expansion of ties with Syria and other regional countries is top priority for Tehran.

Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, the Iranian vice president for parliamentary affairs on Saturday held talks with Shafiq Dayoub, Syrian Ambassador to Tehran.

During the meeting, Hosseini said that Iran's 13th administration under president Ebrahim Raisi is seeking to expand cooperation with the region and neighboring countries as a top priority while pointing to Syria as one of Iran's top priorities.

He noted that Iran considers itself as the companion to the Syrian people. He further described Syria as a strategic partner and ally.

Hosseini also said that Syria cooperated with Iran during Iran's 8-year holy defense against the Iraqi Saddam regime in the 1980s when Hafez al-Assad was the Syrian president and in return, Iran helped the Syrian people and legitimate Syrian government against ISIL invasion.

Iran's vice president for parliamentary affairs noted, "We are on the eve of the second anniversary of the martyrdom day of General Qassem Soleimani. He was the one who tied Iranian and Syrian people."

Hosseini described the defeat of ISIL in Syria, Iraq and the region as a result of the Resistance movement adding that ISIL danger was not only limited to these countries since it was threatening the entire world.



The Iranian vice-president further said Arabs, Europeans and the US used to support ISIL, and still, ISIL is trying to take haven in Afghanistan after the defeat in Syria and Iraq with the help of the Western powers.

He further noted that U.S. and Westerners are trying to put the Syrian people and Government under economic and political pressure after their defeat in the country.

Hosseini announced Iran's readiness to cooperate on the reconstruction of Syria and continued that Iran and Syria had previously had some agreements on political and economic affairs that have been stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic, adding that the new Iranian administration is trying to implement the agreements.

He continued that just as the same way Iran helped Syria at the time of war is now ready to have serious cooperation on its reconstruction.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Hosseini said, "We are hoping U.S. military forces leave Syria and Iraq as soon as possible as they were forced to leave Afghanistan after 20 years. They are still stealing Syria's oil and surprisingly the world does not condemn this U.S.'s behavior."

Hosseini pointed to the Zionist regime's aggression against Syrian territories, calling on the world community to react to the Zionist regime's actions.

He warned the sponsors of the terrorists, saying that their actions will not go unanswered. If Zionists are seeking to start a war and insecurity in Syria, it will backfire.

Envoy Emphasizes Developing Scientific Ties With Japan

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador to Tokyo Morteza Movahhed in a meeting with President of Sasakawa Peace Foundation Atsushi Sunami stressed continuation of scientific and research cooperation.

Both sides reviewed scientific cooperation between Sasakawa Peace Foundation and Iranian research and social bodies, exchanging students and professors, and launching joint research

projects with regard to developments in Iran and the Islamic World.

Sunami described joint cooperation between Sasakawa Peace Foundation and Iranian Foreign Ministry and institutions as an important factor for developing cooperation.

He also underlined developing bilateral ties.

According to its official website, "The Sasakawa Peace Foundation is dedicated to responding to changes in the world's natural and social environments caused by human activity."

The body is aim to contribute to the welfare of humankind by leveraging the unique freedoms afforded to us as a private organization to pursue innovative ideas and methods for conducting research, presenting policy recommendations, advocating for international cooperation and exchange, and formulating a new governance system for humanity that encompasses all the world's oceans and lands.

Iran Exports Remote-Controlled Surgical Robots

TEHRAN (IP) - Specialists in an Iranian knowledge-based company have made remote-controlled surgical robots and exported them to Indonesia.

Ali Reza Mirbagheri, the designer of the Sina robot, said: "Sina surgical robot has 16 joints equipped with electronic motors."

He added: "Indonesia's health system has accepted using the surgical robots, and we have the capacity to take advantage of the opportunity to enter the market of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states by producing surgical robots."



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	11:58
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:11
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:35
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:05

3. Their hearts toying as with trifles.

The wrong-doers conceal their private counsels, (saying),

"Is this (one) more than a man like yourselves? Will ye go to witchcraft with your eyes open?"

4. Say: "My Lord knoweth (every) word (spoken) in the heavens and on earth:

He is the One that heareth and knoweth (all things)."

Surah 21. The Prophets (3 - 4)

Tehran-Baku Ties Go Perfect

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's ambassador to Republic of Azerbaijan said the relations between Tehran and Baku are in good condition.

Iran's ambassador to Republic of Azerbaijan, Abbas Mousavi In a meeting with Republic of Azerbaijan's ambassador to Tehran, Ali Alizadeh, said that bilateral negotiations resolved the recent tensions between the two sides.

Mousavi noted: The two nations benefit from the mutual ties, so many meetings are underway mainly in economic fields.

As neighbors, the two countries are eager to deepen their relationships, Abbas Mousavi, Iran's ambassador to Azerbaijan, stressed.

Mousavi added that the two countries have one of the safest borders, and the border cooperation between the two countries is at an extraordinary level.

He stated that the two countries' border guards communicate with each other, and they surely resolve any dispute or check issues related to any unauthorized entry.

Speaking on the sidelines of a meeting titled "To Review Ways for Strengthening Relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan," Mousavi noted: "After the liberation of the Republic of Azerbaijan's territories, about 132 km were annexed to our common borders, so the two countries plan to strengthen their borders as the borders of peace, friendship, and cooperation."

"We have agreements in borders areas and we are going to have new plans to strengthen the border relations in the meetings between the officials and ministers of the two countries," he said.

Then Azerbaijan Ambassador to Tehran expressed confidence that the construction of the AstaraChai Bridge would start in the near future.



Ali Alizadeh stated: "Recently, talks were held between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan to schedule meetings so that the two sides could discuss the pedestrian and car bridges over the AstaraChai."

Speaking on the sidelines of the meeting titled "To Review Ways for Strengthening Iran and Republic of Azerbaijan Relations," Alizadeh referred to the friendly meeting between the two countries' presidents in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat, and said: "The two sides emphasize the deepening of relations and development, and the ambassadors of the two countries have been advised to do so."

He noted that the meeting of the heads of the joint commissions of the two countries has indicated that both sides are interested in developing relations.

"The president of Azerbaijan described Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan as two friendly and brotherly countries, and we, as the ambassadors of the two sides, will try to increase the commonalities between Tehran and Baku," he concluded.

Alizadeh also said that economic ties between Tehran-Baku must be strengthened.

According to him, over 150 bilateral agreements had been inked between the two countries, mostly economic. Iran is our old friend and neighbor, so everything is provided for Iranian companies in the energy field to work in Azerbaijan Republic, Alizadeh noted.

He said Republic of Azerbaijan has sought to expand its economic and trade ties with Iran. The meeting on cementing relations between Iran and Azerbaijan was held on Dec.10, in which Mousavi, Iran's ambassador to Azerbaijan, and Alizadeh, Azerbaijan's ambassador to Tehran, and some Iranian Parliamentarians attended.

IME Posts Record High In Trade Value, Volume

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 1,977,000 tons of commodities with a total trading value of almost \$519m, posting growths of 6% in volume and 16% in value of trades compared to the figures of the previous week.



According to a report by the IME's international affairs and PR, the exchange traded on its metals and minerals trading floor 1,693,000 tons of commodities valued at almost \$334m.

Commodities sold on this floor included 1,000,275 tons of cement, 345,240 tons of steel, 81,000 tons of iron ore, 35,500 tons of sponge iron, 12,510 tons of copper, 10,275 tons of aluminum, 1,600 tons of zinc and 21 tons of precious metals concentrate.

Furthermore, the IME saw on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 275,000 tons of commodities worth more than \$181m.

The IME's customers purchased on this floor 86,042 tons of polymeric products, 51,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 51,000 tons of lube cut, 46,980 tons of bitumen, 36,607 tons of chemicals, 3,795 tons of base oil and 1,309 tons of sulfur.

Last but not least was the IME's side market with 8,464 tons of commodities traded on it.

Car Manufacturing Rises 4.7% in 8 Months yr/yr

TEHRAN (MNA) - Car manufacturing in Iran has risen 4.7 percent during the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-November 21), as compared to the same period of time in the past year.

According to the data released by the Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry, Iranian carmakers manufactured 651,408 vehicles in the eight-month period of this year, while the figure was 622,144 in the same time span of the previous year.

During the said eight months, IKCO manufactured 319,710 vehicles, which was 0.1 percent less than the output in the same time span of the previous year.

SAIPA manufactured 283,593 vehicles in the mentioned period. Production by this automaker rose 6.2 percent in comparison to the previous year's same time span.

Deputy Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Mehdi Sadeqi Niaraki has said the country's car output is expected to increase by 50 percent in the next Iranian calendar year (starts on March 21, 2022).

"Private carmakers are trying to increase their output," Sadeqi Niaraki said.

Noting that the annual demand for automobiles is about 1.5 million in the country, the official noted: "Production of one million vehicles is forecast for the current year, and we expect a growth of about 50 percent for the next year, and automakers are also proposing all kinds of facilities and sale options."

Meanwhile, Industry, Mining and Trade Minister Seyyed Reza Fatemi Amin has said that his ministry has a two-year plan for the auto industry based on which this industry will undergo serious changes and improve significantly.

"We must strengthen competition, improve management and economic mechanisms, and increase production in the auto industry in order to succeed in our plans," Fatemi Amin said.

"Our plan is to produce 1.6 million vehicles next year (begins in March 2022), which will increase to three million units in [the Iranian calendar year] 1404 (begins in March 2025), and 30 percent of the production, equivalent to about one million units, should be sent to export markets," he added.

World Cup Is Both Soccer and Economic Event

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Vice President and Secretary of High Council for Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones Mr. Saeed Mohammad in meeting with Minister of Sport and Youth Mr. Hamid Sajjadi said the Soccer World Cup is both an important sport and economic event and Iran is pursuing sport diplomacy.

Speaking during a ceremony for signing MoU on cooperation between the Council and ministry of sport and youth, Mohammad said that the government does not look at free zones as a mere economic issue but it wants free zones to be pioneer and front-runner in the cultural, social and tourism issues.

He went on to say that there are good capacities in the free zones of the country and the council is trying to activate them, adding that considering high capacities and potentials of the free zones in the border provinces and their connections with other neighboring states, the council intends to pursue the sport diplomacy under the economic diplomacy category in the free zones.

Mohammad then added that all existing capacities of the free zones should be used for all sectors in the country and it welcomes the involvement of the ministry of sport and youth in different sections of the free zones because it is a bridge for more connection between sport and the young community. He noted that all sport facilities in the free zones should be used at most to support the improvement of sport in the country.

He reiterated that this cooperation will not be



limited only to soccer and the council will expand it to other fields of sport and it is ready to support other sport teams and athletes.

Touching upon the 2020 Soccer World Cup in Qatar, he said that it was better this issue to be pursued four years ago by Iran's football federation but today with a four-year delay, the country is to pursue it in a short time

because the Soccer World Cup is a sport event which is taken place every four years and it is both an important sport and economic event and Iran should make the most out of this big event.

He went on to say that the council is trying to compensate the past through close cooperation with the ministry and federation to have more coordination. He added that based on the signed MoU with the ministry, it was decided all sport facilities on Kish and Qeshm islands to be at the services of the football federation, adding that all facilities of the zones will be provided to Iran's national soccer team.

He also said that fans of other participating teams in Qatar Soccer World Cup can also enjoy staying and visiting Iran's free zones during this event.

Then Minister of Youth and Sport Sajjadi, for his part, said that this meeting and MoU will be a turning point in the history of sport on the country. He added that based on the MoU, required facilities for Iran's national team and its supporters will be provided and supporters of other countries can also take advantage of the facilities of these zones.

Iran, Afghanistan to Expand Trade Relations

TEHRAN (MNA) - Deputy President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration for Resources and Management Development Affairs said that bilateral trade relations between Iran and Afghanistan will be promoted in current government.

Ahmad Zakeri said that infrastructures and facilities at borders and border marketplaces were examined in three provinces bordering Afghanistan in order to develop border marketplaces and increase trade relations with Kabul.

He pointed to the recent visit of Iranian President Special Envoy for Afghanistan Affairs Kazemi Qomi to border marketplaces and borders for strengthening trade ties with Afghanistan and Dogharoon Border Marketplace in Khorasan Razavi province, said that effective measures were taken in this regard to remove barriers ahead of bilateral trade via rail transit.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Zakeri pointed to his visit to Iran and Afghanistan borders in Sistan and Baluchestan province on Friday, saying that field visits were made from Milak and Gamshad border marketplaces and existing problems and barriers ahead of the development of trade activity were taken into serious consideration on two borders of Iran and Afghanistan.

Given the above issues, drastic measures were adopted to promote trade, transport and customs relations with neighboring Afghanistan, he said, adding that developing border areas and concentrating on frontiersmen is of the cases that have been followed up strictly in the 13th government under President Raisi.

HOSCO Ranks First in COVID-Related Publications

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) ranked first in the Covid-related publications during the 16th Festival of the Public Relations Publications which was held at the conference hall of the Industrial Management Institute.



According to the reports the public relations of Hormozgan Steel Company ranked first in the Covid-related publications, third in producing video clips, brochure and page designing.

The festival was held in presence of Deputy Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Dr. Mehdiipoor, Head of Public Relations Society of Iran Mr. Khosro Rafiee and some of the experts and university teachers in the field of public relations and many companies and organizations had participated in the festival by presenting their works in different fields and the jury selected the best works in each category.

EAEU-Iran Interim Free Trade Agreement Extended Until 2025

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The interim free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Iran has been extended until 2025, official representative of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) Iya Malkina told a briefing for the press after the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting on 10 December on Friday.

"During the summit, the parties signed a protocol to the interim agreement leading to the formation of a free trade zone between the Eurasian Economic Union and Iran," Iya Malkina said. "The interim agreement has been extended until 27 October 2025 or until the free trade agreement enters into force, whichever comes first."

She recalled that the negotiations on the full-fledged free trade agreement are based on the regime in force between the EAEU and Iran in accordance with the interim agreement since October 2019. In H1 2021, trade with Iran posted a great growth: the exports of the EAEU member states surged by almost 47% to total \$1.35 billion, imports - by 34% to \$825 million. Trade between the EAEU countries and Iran increased by 27% over the same period in 2019, exports rose by 27%, imports - by almost 70%.

The Supreme Eurasian Economic Council summit was held via video conference. It was attended by Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko.

Czech President Rejects New Nominee for FM

PRAGUE (Dispatches) - Czech President Milos Zeman said on Friday he had rejected the nomination of a foreign minister in the incoming cabinet over the candidate's reservations toward Israel and toward cooperation with other members in a central European alliance.

Zeman said in a statement he was ready to appoint the rest of the cabinet but the rejection sets the stage for a legal battle with the new prime minister, Petr Fiala, leader of the centre-right Civic Democrats.

Fiala has backed the foreign minister nominee, Jan Lipavsky, from the liberal Pirate Party, which is part of Fiala's coalition that won an election in October.



Myanmar Anti-Coup Activists Protest Against Junta

YANGON (Dispatches)- Protesters in Myanmar closed businesses and stayed off the streets on Friday in a "silent strike" against rule by the military and its ousting of the Southeast Asian country's democratically elected government in a February coup.

Photos published by Myanmar media showed deserted streets and markets in towns across the country, while protesters in the northern city of Shwebo wore black clothes and marched in silence.

"We need to send a message to the world about Myanmar's terrible human rights violations," protest leader Khin Sandar told media.



Macron Welcomes Scholz, Seeking Common Ground After Merkel



PARIS (Dispatches) - President Emmanuel Macron and Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz played down differences over reform of EU budget rules and the place of nuclear in green investment financing, pledging on Friday to keep the Franco-German axis strong.

The trip to meet Macron in Paris was Scholz's first foreign visit since he became Germany's chancellor on Wednesday, ending 16 years of conservative rule under Angela Merkel. His three-party coalition has pledged to further strengthen European integration.

"During the last four years I have worked with Angela Merkel on all these subjects ... I know that we will continue together, dear Olaf, this close collaboration," Macron told Scholz at a joint news conference.

The more reserved Scholz said they had talked about how to work together to make Europe stronger.

Arriving at the Elysee palace, the new chancellor was greeted with a fistbump by Macron, who then accompanied him up the steps, patting him on the back. The French president had developed a friendly relationship with Scholz's predecessor Merkel, who broke with German tradition by backing unprecedented joint EU efforts to raise debt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the two remained at odds over some key issues, including Germany's gas imports from Russia, how to defend Europe, and relationships with other big political and economic competitors including China.

Macron wants to build new nuclear reactors in France, while German plans to phase them out are well established. The new German coalition agreement makes no mention of the issue, however, which Paris believes leaves room for compromise.

Asked at Friday's news conference about differences between Germany and France over whether nuclear power should be labelled sustainable, which France wants, Scholz skirted the question. "It is very clear that each country pursues its own strategy to fight man-made climate change. What unites us is that we recognise that responsibility and are ambitious," he said.

"Germany has decided that it will bank on an expansion of renewable energy." As France prepares to take over the six-month presidency of the European Union on Jan. 1, Macron will also be seeking Germany's support for his plans to overhaul EU budget rules.

"I am confident that we can solve the problems ahead of us together and that we can continue to enable the growth that we fostered with the (EU's 750 billion euro pandemic) recovery fund - and that at the same time we can ensure solid finances," said Scholz, who was German finance minister under Merkel.

"It is possible to achieve both at the same time, they are not opposites. We have promised to use the flexibility that the (EU's) Stability and Growth Pact offers."

Assange One Step Closer To Extradition to U.S.



LONDON (Dispatches) - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange moved a step closer to facing criminal charges in the United States for one of the biggest ever leaks of classified information after Washington won an appeal over his extradition in an English court.

U.S. authorities accuse Australian-born Assange, 50, of 18 counts relating to WikiLeaks' release of vast troves of confidential U.S. military records and diplomatic cables which they said had put lives in danger.

Assange's supporters cast him as an anti-establishment hero who has been persecuted by the United States for exposing U.S. wrongdoing and double-dealing across the world from Afghanistan and Iraq to Washington.

At the Royal Courts of Justice in London, the United States won an appeal against a ruling by a London District Judge that Assange should not be extradited because he was likely to commit suicide in a U.S. prison.

Judge Timothy Holroyde said he was satisfied with a package of assurances given by the United States about the conditions of Assange's detention, including a pledge not to hold him in a so-called "ADX" maximum security prison in Colorado and that he could be transferred to Australia to serve his sentence if convicted.

Further hurdles remain before Assange could be sent to the United States after an odyssey which has taken him from teenage hacker in Melbourne to years holed up in the Ecuadorean embassy in London and then incarcerated in a maximum-security prison.

The legal wrangling is almost certain to go to the Supreme Court, the United Kingdom's final court of appeal. Assange's fiancée, Stella Moris, said his legal team would appeal the decision. "How can it be fair, how can it be right, how can it be possible, to extradite Julian to the very country which plotted to kill him?" she said. "We will appeal this decision at the earliest possible moment."

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On November 8, Chaudhry confirmed that the month-long ceasefire had been agreed upon between the government and the TTP.

"The state's sovereignty, national security, peace in relevant areas and social and economic stability will be considered during the talks," he was quoted by state-run television broadcaster Pakistan Television as saying.

The announcement came a month after Prime Minister Imran Khan first announced that talks between the two sides were ongoing, following the fall of the Afghan government to the Afghan Taliban in mid-August.

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Migrant Truck Crashes in Mexico Killing 54

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ (Dispatches) - Fifty-four mostly Central Americans were killed when the truck they were in flipped over in southern Mexico, in one of the worst accidents involving migrants who risk their lives to reach the United States.

The trailer broke open, spilling out people, when the truck crashed on a sharp curve outside the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez in the state of Chiapas, according to video footage of the aftermath and civil protection authorities.

Chiapas Governor Rutilio Escandon said 49 people died at the scene, and five more while receiving medical attention.

"It took a bend, and because of the weight of us people inside, we all went with it," said a shocked-looking Guatemalan man sitting at the scene in footage broadcast on social media.

"The trailer couldn't handle the weight of people." More than 100 people were inside the trailer, authorities said. Several dozen were injured and taken to hospitals in Chiapas, which borders Guatemala.

Dozens of Guatemalan migrants were named in lists of the injured published on social media.

A Reuters witness heard cries and sobs among survivors as emergency personnel rushed to the site of

where the overturned truck shuddered to a halt by a highway footbridge.

Reuters images showed a white trailer on its side, with injured people splayed out on tarps on the ground. There were also rows of what appeared to be bodies wrapped in white cloth.

A video of the scene streamed on social media showed a woman holding a child wailing in her lap, both covered in blood. Another video showed a man curled up in pain inside the destroyed trailer, hardly moving as helpers pulled out bodies.

Men, women and children were among the dead, the Chiapas state government said, and President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Twitter expressed his sorrow at the "very painful" incident.

A police officer raises his arm to block photographers to avoid taking pictures at the site of a trailer accident that left at least 49 people dead, most of them migrants from Central America, in Tuxtla Gutierrez, in Chiapas state, Mexico December 9, 2021. REUTERS/Jacob Garcia

Migrants fleeing poverty and violence in Central America typically trek through Mexico to reach the U.S. border, and sometimes cram into large trucks organized by smugglers in extremely dangerous conditions.



China, Nicaragua Re-Establish Ties in Blow to U.S., Taiwan

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China and Nicaragua re-established diplomatic ties after the Central American country broke relations with Chinese-claimed Taiwan, boosting Beijing in a part of the world long considered the United States' backyard and angering Washington.

China has increased military and political pressure on Taiwan to accept its sovereignty claims, drawing anger from the democratically ruled island, which has repeatedly said it would not be bullied and has the right to international participation.

China's Foreign Ministry, announcing the decision after meetings with Nicaragua's finance minister and two of President Daniel Ortega's sons in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin, said the country had made the "correct choice".

The break with Taiwan shrinks the island's dwindling pool of international allies and is a blow to the United States.

It follows months of worsening ties between Ortega and Washington, and came on the day the U.S. State Department said it had applied sanctions on Nestor Moncada Lau, a national security adviser to Ortega, alleging he operates an import and customs fraud scheme to enrich members of Ortega's government.

The U.S. State Department said Nicaragua's decision did not reflect the will of the Nicaraguan people because its government was not freely elected.

"We do know, however, that this deprives Nicaragua's people of a steadfast partner in its democratic and economic growth," spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement. "We encourage all countries that value democratic institutions, transparency, the rule of law, and promoting economic prosperity for their citizens to expand engagement with Taiwan."

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Taiwan's allies - now only 14 countries - have stayed with Taipei only because of pressure from the United States and Taiwan's "dollar diplomacy", accusations Taipei denies.

Nicaragua's congress in 2019 accepted a \$100 million loan from Taiwan, but Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said on Friday that money, designed for economic reconstruction, has never been paid because of "procedural issues with allocation requirements" by the bank, which it did not name. China's Foreign Ministry, asked if China would give financial aid to Nicaragua, and said the resumption in ties was a "political decision, definitely not a bargaining chip".



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Gazprom Neft Supports OPEC+ Deal After 2022

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Alexander Dyukov, the head of Russian oil producer Gazprom Neft, said on Friday it would be "logical" to keep the current OPEC+ agreement to manage oil output after 2022.

In an interview to Rossiya 24 TV station he also said that global oil demand will continue to increase despite the emergence of the variants of COVID-19. He said he expects the company's oil and gas condensate production to rise by around 10% next year.



OPEC+ Output Hike Gamble Pays off as Oil Prices Recover

LONDON (Dispatches) - The gamble taken by OPEC and its allies, under pressure from top oil consumer the United States, to raise oil output in January despite its own forecasts of oversupply, appears to be paying off as prices stabilize.

Oil has steadied around \$75 a barrel as market participants brush off concerns of a glut, in part because they don't believe the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies can reach their new output target and demand is still expected to rise.

Heading into its Dec. 2 meeting, OPEC+ had every reason to lower supply. A U.S.-led release of oil from strategic stocks was set to increase the surplus. Oil fell 10% on Nov. 26 when reports of the new coronavirus variant emerged and below \$66 on the day of the meeting.

But OPEC+ stuck to its guns and went ahead with the nominal monthly increase of 400,000 barrels per day, taking a view that demand would not be severely hit. Oil's rise since has added to OPEC confidence that there won't be a major demand shock. "The market has taken the decision well," said an OPEC delegate. "The variant news made for short-lived negative sentiment, with no clear evidence."

While a new round of movement restrictions as a result of the Omicron variant threatens to impact demand, there has not been a return to the strict limits on travel seen during earlier waves of the pandemic.

At the same time OPEC+, which has been unwinding last year's record output curbs through monthly increases, has been under-delivering on the pledges due to a lack of capacity to pump more in some of the alliance's producers.

"The bottom line: everything is good when Brent is quoted at around \$75," said a Russian OPEC+ source.

Prices could head even higher in 2022, according to Christyan Malek and other analysts at JP Morgan, who think OPEC+ will struggle to add 250,000 bpd a month and forecast \$125 oil next year in a Nov. 29 note.

The decision to hike output was good for big oil consumers, which have been urging OPEC+ to do more to lower prices. The White House, which has lobbied for more oil, welcomed the OPEC+ decision to increase output.

In the days leading up to and following the Dec. 2 meeting, OPEC had a number of meetings with representatives of consumer nations. A U.S. delegation met with a number of UAE and Saudi officials, as well as from non-OPEC Qatar.

OPEC Secretary General Mohammad Barkindo and others held a meeting on Dec. 3 with Chinese officials, an OPEC source said, adding it was a "positive" meeting and came a day after the OPEC+ decision to stick to planned output increases.

OPEC officials deny that their decisions had anything to do with consumer pressure. A White House spokesperson said: "The delegation meetings were not related to the OPEC+ meetings and that was not the purpose of the trip," which focused on a range of economic issues.

Neil Atkinson, a veteran oil analyst and former senior official at the International Energy Agency, said the OPEC+ decision was good for both producers and consumers.

He said the actual OPEC+ increase was likely to be less than 400,000 bpd, so was unlikely to amplify the surplus of oil expected in the first quarter, and it was hard to see a return to the intensity of earlier lockdowns.

"I doubt there will be a major demand shock," he said. "OPEC+ did the right thing. Thus far, they have added barrels carefully as demand has recovered and prices have recovered to levels that are a fair balance."

Japan's Q4 Business Mood Likely Improved

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan's business mood improved in the three months to December and exports continued to benefit from robust global demand in November, a Reuters poll showed, offering policymakers hope the economy is gradually emerging from its pandemic-induced slump.

The data would bode well for the Bank of Japan, which is set to maintain ultra-easy policy next week and debate whether to phase out pandemic-relief fund schemes that expire in March. The BOJ's closely-watched "tankan" survey is likely to show the headline index for big manufacturers' sentiment edged up to plus 19 in December from plus 18 three months ago, according to analysts polled by Reuters.

"Manufacturers' sentiment will likely improve as the worst has passed in terms of chip shortages, and supply constraints caused by Southeast Asian factory shutdowns are gradually easing," said analysts at Mizuho Research & Technologies.

Big non-manufacturers' sentiment index is also seen improving to plus 6 from plus 2, as the Sept. 30 lifting of state of emergency curbs to combat the pandemic helped boost consumption, the poll showed. Big manufacturers and non-manufacturers both expect conditions to improve three months ahead, according to the poll, highlighting growing optimism among companies over the outlook.

The tankan will also show big firms plan to increase capital expenditure by 9.8% in the fiscal year ending in March, slightly lower than an estimate for a 10.1% gain in the previous survey, the poll showed. But the December tankan is unlikely to factor in much of the impact of the recent spread of the Omicron new variant, which could hurt business confidence ahead, analysts say.



Markets are also focusing on the tankan's indices gauging corporate funding for clues on whether the BOJ will decide next week to scale down pandemic-relief funding support. The BOJ will release the survey on Dec. 13 at 8:50 a.m. local time (Dec. 12 at 2350GMT).

Separate data on Japan's trade balance will show exports rose 21.2% in November from a year earlier, a sign robust global demand continues to underpin the economy, the poll showed. Machinery orders, a leading indicator of corporate capital expenditure, likely rose 2.1% in October from the previous month, the poll showed.

UK Economy Almost Flat-Lined in October

LONDON (Dispatches) - Britain's economy barely grew in October, even before the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant, further denting expectations that the Bank of England will raise interest rates next week for the first time since the pandemic struck.

Gross domestic product edged up by a weaker than expected 0.1%, slowing sharply from monthly growth of 0.6% in September.

That meant the economy remained 0.5% smaller than in February 2020, just before Britain went into its first COVID-19 lockdown, the Office for National Statistics said on Friday.

"We've always acknowledged there could be bumps on our road to recovery," finance minister Rishi Sunak said.

"But the early actions we have taken, our ongoing 400 billion pound economic support package and our vaccine program mean we are well placed to keep our economy on track." Economists polled by Reuters had forecast monthly GDP growth of 0.4%.

Maïke Currie, investment director at Fidelity International, said Britain's fast-rising inflation rate and the spread of Omicron might mean the world's fifth-biggest economy starts to shrink again.

"The Bank of England will be acutely aware that it's harder to dig an economy out of recession than to cool rising inflation, which makes an interest rate rise next week increasingly unlikely."

Sterling dipped after the ONS figures were published as investors took them as another reason for the central bank not to follow through on its signals in recent months that it would start to raise borrowing costs in the face of growing inflation pressure.

The Bank of England is currently holding its December policy meetings and is due to announce its decision next Thursday. Britain's economy bounced back strongly earlier this year from its nearly 10% slump in 2020 when the pandemic hit.

But the rebound slowed in recent months as supply chain problems hit manufacturers and it is expected to lose more momentum because of new COVID-19 rules to slow the spread of the Omicron variant.

October's meagre growth was propped up by a continued rise in face-to-face appointments at doctors' surgeries in England, which had fallen sharply during the pandemic, contributing to a 0.4% rise in output in Britain's dominant services sector. By contrast, industrial output fell 0.6%, hit by big falls in electricity and gas and in mining and quarrying.

The manufacturing sector flat-lined as the sector struggled with supply chain problems and staff shortages.

Construction fell by the most since April 2020, down by 1.8% from September, also hit by a shortage of supplies.

Separately, the ONS released trade data showing that Britain's goods trade deficit narrowed to 13.9 billion pounds in October from 14.7 billion pounds in September.

German Exports Rebound in October Despite Supply Bottlenecks



BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany's exports bounced back in October despite global supply chain bottlenecks, according to figures released Thursday by the federal statistics agency, Destatis.

"Despite all the negative factors, German foreign trade is at last back at pre-crisis levels," Dirk Jandura, head of the German federal trade and services association BGA, said, in reference to the coronavirus pandemic, which throttled trade around much of the world.

"This is really good news, given the many supply chain problems," Jandura said. However, he added that logistical problems were likely to persist into the months ahead with a shortage of containers and skilled staff — and local coronavirus outbreaks.

According to Destatis, German exports were up 8.1% on the previous October, and also back above the pre-coronavirus crisis levels of February 2020 when seasonally adjusted.

Germany exported €121.3 billion (\$137.4 billion) worth of goods in October, 4.1% more than in the previous month when seasonally adjusted.

Exports to EU countries were up 11.6%, while exports to countries outside the bloc climbed by 4.1%. And exports to China, an important trading partner for Germany, were up by 8.5% year-on-year in October.

Meanwhile, imports surged 17.3% against the previous October, also 13.5% higher than in February 2020 before COVID restrictions started kicking in worldwide. Germany imported €108.5 billion worth of goods in October, 5% more than in the previous month.

The trade surplus fell to €12.5 billion from €12.9 billion in the previous month.

Sebastian Dullien, director of the IMK economic research institute, saw the data as a strong performance that could help Germany "avoid a mini-recession at the end of this year due to the fourth wave of the coronavirus."

IMF Chief Economist Sees Inflationary Pressures, Risks From Omicron

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Central banks do not have the space to keep monetary policy loose and interest rates low, the International Monetary Fund's chief economist said on Thursday, also warning that the pandemic could turn out far more costly than estimated.

Gita Gopinath, IMF chief economist, said that it had estimated that a more transmissible SARS-CoV-2 variant such as Omicron could cost the global economy a further \$5.3 trillion, in addition to the current projected loss of \$12.5 trillion.

She was speaking to an event organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) which seeks \$23.4 billion for vaccines and other tools against the COVID-19 pandemic through the ACT (Access to COVID Tools) Accelerator, co-run with the GAVI Vaccine Alliance.

"We are now in the phase where countries around the world just don't have the space to keep monetary policy very loose, to kind of keep interest rates extremely low. We are seeing inflationary pressures building up around the world," she said. "And so think of a situation where you could have this pandemic last longer, you have longer supply disruptions that are putting inflationary pressures, and then we have the real risk of something we have avoided so far, which is stagflationary concerns," Gopinath added.

Concerns over Omicron, which the WHO says has been reported by 57 countries since it was first detected last month in southern Africa and Hong Kong, was "an obvious hit to recoveries everywhere in the world", she said.

The IMF had simulated the case of what would happen if there were a more transmissible variant than Delta, she said, referring to the current dominant strain.

"Our projections are that that would add another loss of around \$5.3 trillion to the global economy. So that is in addition to the current projected \$12.5 trillion lost," she said.

Indian Economy Likely to Grow 9% Next Fiscal

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Swiss brokerage Credit Suisse expects the economy to continue to show positive surprises and record up to 9 percent growth in the next fiscal.

For the current financial year too, the brokerage anticipates growth to be higher than the consensus forecast of 8.4-9.5 percent, and printing in at around 10.5 percent.

As a policy, Credit Suisse does not provide absolute growth numbers in its forecast.

However, an extrapolation of data available and projections indicate that economic growth could clip 9 percent in 2022-23 period, which

according to the brokerage is up to 400 basis points (bps) over the consensus numbers.

Neelkanth Mishra, the co-head of equity strategy for Asia Pacific and India equity strategist at Credit Suisse, told PTI that he expects meaningful upgrades to the GDP forecast as the economic recovery has surprised positively.

"We expect GDP getting an upgrade of 4 percentage points over the consensus for FY23 as output should get closer to the pre-pandemic trend than what is currently forecast."

"The economy is expected to continue to show positive surprises even though the recovery has so far been lop-sided but in the next three-six months most of low-income jobs should recover too," Mishra said on Thursday.

While warning that high energy prices could be a headwind, Mishra said the economy has the capacity to sustain faster import growth. The pace of growth might moderate if imported energy prices (crude oil, gas, coal, fertiliser and palm oil) remain high.

Another drag could be low employment/re-employment in some key sectors like education, travel, construction materials and auto manufacturing, which are not yet back to the pre-pandemic levels. However, these should improve as the economy continues to open up, helped by high seroprevalence, he pointed out.

According to him, other positives for higher growth is the recovery in consumer spending, strong equity fund-raising that has helped repair the risk capital that was lost during the pandemic, growing IT demand globally and the resultant around 5 lakh hiring in the offing and the pickup in dwelling construction.

On the markets, he said since the country's price-to-earnings premium of 21 percent over global equities and 72 percent over the emerging markets is already too high, further upside in the metric is unlikely.

Farhadi to Receive Directing Award at Palm Springs Festival

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The American "Variety" magazine announced that this magazine "will honor two-time Academy Award-winning director Asghar Farhadi at the Palm Springs International Film Festival on Friday, Jan. 7 as part of the publication's annual '10 Directors to Watch' and Creative Impact Awards brunch at the Parker Palm Springs."

According to "Variety" magazine, Iranian film director and screenwriter

Asghar Farhadi will be celebrated for his recent film "A Hero", released by Amazon Studios, as well as his entire body of work which includes "A Separation," "Everybody Knows", and "The Salesman."

"With 'A Hero,' Oscar-winning filmmaker Asghar Farhadi reaffirms his place at the forefront of international writer-directors," said Variety's executive vice president of content Steven Gaydos.



China's Economic Growth in 2022 Seen at 5.3%

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's economy is expected to grow around 5.3 percent in 2022 following an expected 8 percent growth this year, a top government think tank said.

According to the blue book on Chinese economy forecasts by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, policymakers should set a 2022 economic growth target above 5 percent, giving them more room to deal with challenges and focus on pushing reforms and boosting high-quality development.

The blue book's release coincided with a market eagerly waiting for clues to next year's economic policy agenda from the annual Central Economic Work Conference, which will be held later this month.

Li Xuesong, director of the Institute of Quantitative and Technological Economics, which is part of the CASS, said the recommended target of above 5 percent growth next year will leave some room for leeway, which will allow all the parties concerned to focus on promoting reform, innovation and high-quality development.

Citing the new blue book, Li said policymakers need to take more steps to shore up growth in 2022 amid downward pressure, with focus on moderately increasing countercyclical adjustments and enhancing cross-cyclical adjustments.

Countercyclical tools seek to offset possible negative effects of economic cycles like a slowing economy by adding stimulus to stoke growth. Such tools could involve tax, credit, monetary, government expenditure and industry policy.

Cross-cyclical tools like interest rate cuts/hikes and higher/lower investment in infrastructure underline small but prompt measures to achieve long-term goals, depending on whether the economy is slowing or accelerating currently.

"China's fiscal policy needs to remain proactive in 2022, with a focus on promoting its efficiency and quality, especially in fields like industrial upgrade and urbanization," Li told a news conference in Beijing. "And a prudent monetary policy should focus on stabilizing credit growth and dealing with inflation."

Given the grim and complicated economic situations at home and abroad, the government should make a big push to ensure stable prices and supplies, strengthen the industrial and supply chains, effectively prevent and control the COVID-19 pandemic, continuously boost technological innovation, effectively expand domestic demand, prepare to fend off risks and expand reforms and opening-up in key fields, Li said.

The blue book said the expected 5.3 percent growth in 2022 will bring the average annual growth rate forecast for the 2020-22 period to 5.2 percent, higher than the figure of 5.1 percent from 2020 to 2021.

The blue book estimated China's overall prices will rise moderately in 2022, with the producer price index and the consumer price index increasing 5 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively. And imports and exports in 2022 are expected to grow 10.4 percent and 6 percent, respectively.



"We expect the macroeconomic policy stance to ease in response to the downward pressure on growth," said Louis Kuijs, head of Asia economics at Oxford Economics, a think tank.

"We think policymakers have a bottom line for GDP growth, which is currently probably around 5 percent year-on-year... With our forecast seeing GDP growth dipping to 3.6 percent year-on-year in Q4 (fourth quarter), we expect policymakers to take more steps to shore up growth in late 2021 and early 2022."

Kuijs said the overall real investment is expected to edge up in 2022 due to the rise in infrastructure investment and resilient manufacturing investment. "In this setting, we expect 5.4 percent GDP growth in 2022, following an expected 8 percent in 2021."

Kuijs estimated that export growth may slow in 2022, following an exceptional 2021 performance.

"While there have been efforts (in some developed economies) to 'decouple' from China, the relatively strong performance of China's export-oriented manufacturing sector during COVID is limiting the shift of production. China's global market share has risen in 2020-2021," he said.

"With foreign demand growth slowing and foreign spending shifting more to services, we expect China's export growth to fall to 5 percent in real terms, from 17.3 percent in 2021."

Asia Pacific's Monetary Policy to Diverge in 2022



SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Monetary policy in the Asia Pacific region will continue to diverge next year as rich countries raise rates to battle inflation and emerging economies keep rates low, according to a new report.

South Korea and New Zealand's central banks are likely to tighten policy due to inflation concerns in 2022 after twice hiking rates this year, according to a research briefing by Oxford Economics released on Wednesday.

The Reserve Bank of New Zealand will lift the benchmark rate by 125 basis points to 2.25 percent, with the Bank of Korea to announce two 25 basis-point hikes to bring the policy rate to 1.5 percent, Oxford Economics predicts.

The Reserve Bank of India is also expected to raise its policy rate by 25 basis points in the first quarter to 4 percent. "The new Omicron variant has increased the risks around the monetary policy outlook. If the variant dampens demand more than it exacerbates supply-chain disruptions, it could prove disinflationary," Sian Fenner, the lead Asia economist, said in the briefing.

"But the reverse is equally true. Thus, we see most central banks prioritising growth and not shifting policy material."

Southeast Asian economies including Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines are considered unlikely to raise rates before 2023 due to gross domestic product remaining 4-6 percent below pre-pandemic levels.

Indonesia is not expected to consider a rate hike until after the US Federal Reserve raises rates, which is not expected until September 2022.

"We forecast core and headline inflation to trend higher over 2022, but we still expect inflation, on average, to remain below central banks' medium-term inflation targets," Fenner said. "As such, central banks have the room to prioritise supporting their nascent recoveries."

China is considered unlikely to raise rates in 2022 after adopting accommodative policies this year to boost flagging economic growth, according to the briefing, as authorities "remain keen on containing financial risks and leverage".

But Trinh D Nguyen, a senior economist at Natixis, told Al Jazeera she expected more broad-based tightening across the region.

Germany Invests Additional €20m in the UNDP Accelerator Labs

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) signed this week an agreement of €20 million additional funding from Germany to UNDP Accelerator Labs.

Germany's financial support to the Accelerator Labs has now reached €50 million, following on the first agreement signed in 2019.

With this additional funding, Germany confirms its role as a visionary founding investor of the Accelerator Labs, a network that taps into bottom-up innovations, enables experimentation and tests innovative ways of addressing social and environmental challenges. This also provides essential support for this joint venture to reach new heights in 2022 and 2023 and will help cement the Accelerator Lab's contribution to shaping #NextGenUNDP in line with UNDP's newly released Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

Because of the speed, dynamics, and complexity of today's challenges, we need to accelerate progress toward the Global Goals. The UNDP Accelerator Labs are uniquely positioned to lead the great transformation needed to achieve this. After one year and a half of activity, the network of 91 Labs covering 115 countries has powered UNDP for faster learning about today's toughest development challenges, supported governments with actionable insights, and acted as a catalyst for COVID-19 recovery. The Accelerator Labs are creating bottom-up change by building collective knowledge with grassroots innovators, increasing and diversifying data sources and introducing innovation methods that are new to development cooperation – such as solutions mapping, citizen science or system thinking.

Germany's investment will help embed and mainstream innovation practices and fast-track learning across UNDP and in the broader sustainable development ecosystem. One example of such innovation practices deployed by the Labs is collective intelligence. From citizens' insights to grassroots solutions, data from mobile phone companies to satellite imagery and Artificial Intelligence (AI), collective intelligence can help us tap into new sources of data and insight to fill SDG data gaps and understand emerging problems more quickly.

UNDP Accelerator Labs, with Germany's support, will be able to continue channeling the innovations, knowledge and contributions of people across the globe with the goal of putting this planet on a more sustainable and equitable path.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Accelerator Labs is the world's largest and fastest learning network on wicked sustainable development challenges. Co-built as a joint-venture with the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany and the Qatar Fund for Development, the Network covers 115 countries, and taps into local innovations to create actionable insights and reimagine sustainable development for the 21st century.

Within the German government, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is responsible for Germany's official development policy. The BMZ's task is to determine the objectives of German development policy, to negotiate with about 60 partner countries worldwide regarding bilateral cooperation, and to play a part in shaping multilateral cooperation.

The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany is a founding investor of the UNDP Accelerator Labs Network, alongside the Qatar Fund For Development.

Tehran Condemns...

FROM PAGE 1

She stressed that such bans hinder humanitarian assistance and create humanitarian crises around the world.

"We strongly reject the imposition of UCMS by a number of certain states as a political leverage, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in times of the deadly coronavirus, the United States' illegal and inhumane unilateral coercive measures have targeted innocent Iranian citizens by freezing our assets in foreign banks – the assets which we desperately wanted to use for the provision of vaccines and other humanitarian needs," the Iranian envoy said.

Ershadi also noted that humanitarian aid must be distributed across the world fairly and without any interference by donors.

"We strongly condemn situations wherein the humanitarian needs of populations in dire needs are taken hostage as a political mean or military tool, including by imposing blockages to starve to death civilians. Furthermore, the United Nations must assure that all humanitarian aid should be distributed among all populations in need indiscriminately and without any interference by donors," she further said.

UK Discussing...

FROM PAGE 1

"We are trying. We should not be that pessimistic. We are working with our Foreign Office colleagues maybe to reach that deal. We are in the process of discussions. Last week there was a delegation from the UK in Iran and personally I was talking to the Foreign Office and I am hopeful we will reach an agreement."

Referring to reports that the money could be paid in the form of humanitarian aid, he said: "It's not aid. Our money is here and we want our money. That is very simple. We want to receive our money. We are not insisting on interest. Otherwise it would be billions. We are talking to our UK colleagues as to which channel are the most probable to transfer that money to our accounts."

Asked if the U.S. could give a letter of comfort to the UK to guarantee the payment would not be sanctioned, he said: "The U.S. is not doing that. They have to help the UK government to do that. It is not impossible. Obstacles are not insurmountable, but we have to discuss, negotiate and find a way. We are now discussing through what channel that money be transferred. There is a negotiating process now."

He also stressed that the issue of the detainees' release was a matter for the Iranian judiciary, and could not be mixed up with the wider issue of the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna.

In response to the Iranian ambassador's remarks a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office spokesman said: "We continue to explore options to resolve this 40-year-old case and will not comment further as discussions are ongoing."

Foreign office sources stressed that the UK recognizes that it legally owes a debt to Iran, but said it was unhelpful to connect wider bilateral issues with those unfairly detained in Iran.

Official says...

FROM PAGE 1

Meanwhile, the Russian lead negotiator has said Iran and the P4+1 group of countries -- Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany -- are working on the text of a "final document" during the talks.

"It will take time and a lot of efforts but participants are result-oriented," the Russian ambassador to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said in a post on his Twitter on Friday.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Friday that all participants in the talks once again expressed determination to put maximum effort for restoring the JCPOA in its original form. "All sides reaffirmed their intention to pay maximum effort with the goal of finally defining practical steps, needed to re-launch the extensive implementation of JCPOA in its initial form, without additions or deletions."

It added that Iran and the P4+1 group of countries decided to continue intense contacts, including at the level of experts, within the framework of working groups on the removal of US sanctions and nuclear issues.

IRGC Navy...

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He added that all military equipment for the boats, including missiles, rockets, and radar systems, have been manufactured by IRGC specialists.

Last month, Tangsiri said Iranian forces have "slapped" the Americans six times during confrontations in the Persian Gulf over the past 18 months.

Speaking to a gathering of Basij students at the former U.S. embassy compound in Tehran on November 20, the IRGC Navy chief commander was apparently referring to the period since the US assassination of Iran's legendary commander General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad.

Iraq...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran feeds gas into Iraq through two pipelines used to power plants in Basra, Samawa, Nasiriyah and Diyala. Generation from these plants also plummeted, suggesting supply from Iran in these plants is also low.

The impact has been immediate. In Basra, the province requires 4,000 megawatts but is currently receiving 830 MW.

Iraq owes Iran billions of dollars for energy imports. The country's economic crisis has in part caused payment delays. A complex scheme designed to evade U.S. sanctions has slowed down transfers to pay for imports.

Through the scheme, Iraq is unable to pay Iran directly for the imports, but can pay for goods, medicines and other expenses related to Tehran's diplomatic mission and Iranian companies working in Iraq. In early 2021, Iraq purchased vaccines for Tehran.

But Iran has complained the money is trickling in too slowly.

Kohli Lost ODI Captaincy

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Virat Kohli's decision to relinquish the 20-overs captaincy resulted in him being removed as India's one-day skipper as selectors did not want to have two different white-ball captains, India board (BCCI) chief Sourav Ganguly said.

Opener Rohit Sharma took over as one-day captain on Wednesday, a month after succeeding Kohli as T20 skipper following their disappointing World Cup campaign.

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Biles Earns Time's Athlete of the Year Honor

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Four-time Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles earned Time magazine's "Athlete of the Year" honor, the publication said.

The 24-year-old gymnast traveled to the Tokyo Games this year with the intent of rewriting the recordbooks but instead brought about a groundbreaking, global conversation around athletes' mental well-being.

Grizzlies Maul Lakers, Jazz Outpace 76ers

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Jaren Jackson scored 25 points and Desmond Bane added 23 as the Memphis Grizzlies withstood LeBron James's 100th career triple-double in a 108-95 NBA victory.

Lakers superstar James scored 20 points, pulled down 10 rebounds and handed out 11 assists and Anthony Davis added 22 points for Los Angeles, but it wasn't enough as the Lakers coughed up 22 turnovers to fall to a Grizzlies team still missing top scorer Ja Morant and also without defensive stalwart Dillon Brooks.

But they led by six at halftime and pulled away in the fourth quarter as the uneven Lakers found themselves unable to build on their comfortable victory over the Boston Celtics on Tuesday.

"Our biggest battle, our biggest problem this year is consistency," said Lakers coach Frank Vogel. "Once we take one step forward we fall back, we have a disappointing performance. We have to find a way to catch ourselves from that."

James said the turnovers, which led to 27 Grizzlies points, were key.

"Tonight turnovers killed us," he said. "We were doing a hell of a job over the last seven games averaging only 12.5 turnovers. Tonight we had 22 for 27 points."

"That's been our Achilles heel before the last seven games, and tonight it bit us in the butt."

At 13-13, the star-studded Lakers are in sixth place in a Western Conference in which the Golden State Warriors and Phoenix Suns are jockeying for supremacy and the best record in the league.

The Utah Jazz tightened their hold on third place on Thursday with a 118-96 victory over the 76ers in Philadelphia, where French center Rudy Gobert laughed off critics with a dominant display.

Gobert scored 17 points and pulled down 21 rebounds for the Jazz, who pushed their winning streak to six games.

Utah's Rudy Gobert pulls down a rebound over Philadelphia's Joel Embiid in the Jazz's NBA victory over the 76ers

Donovan Mitchell led the Jazz with



22 points -- one of eight Utah players to score in double figures in the second night of a back-to-back for both teams.

Utah were coming off a 136-104 victory over Minnesota on Wednesday, after which Timberwolves guard Anthony Edwards insisted that Gobert -- a three-time NBA Defensive Player of the Year, "put no fear in my heart."

Gobert acknowledged that he'd heard the comments, but said they didn't provide an extra spur. "I'm motivated every night," Gobert said.

"It's more funny than anything. People love to take shots at me for no reason. I never take shots at anyone, I just come in and do my job every night. When you're the best in the world at something, people become insecure."

The Jazz were fuelled by 15 three-pointers, five of them from Mitchell. They also held the edge in points in the paint, pushing their lead to as many as 23 in the fourth quarter.

Joel Embiid had 19 points and nine rebounds for Philadelphia. But 11 of those points came in the first quarter and Embiid was bothered later by pain in his right side, visiting the locker room in the second half but returning to the game.

"I honestly don't know, but it was pretty painful," Embiid said of the trouble. "I'm not sure what happened."

Despite the uncertainty, Embiid said he thought he'd be ready when the 76ers host the Warriors on Saturday.

"I'll be fine," he said.



MELBOURNE (AFP) - Ashleigh Barty will return to action for the first time in four months at Adelaide in January while Naomi Osaka and Rafael Nadal kickstart their Australian Open build-up in Melbourne, officials said Friday.

Barty hasn't played since a shock third-round loss at the US Open in September, but the Australian still finished 2021 as world number one after a season in which she won five titles.

The reigning Wimbledon champion headlines an Adelaide International field that boasts nine of the world's top 10 women, including Iga Swiatek, who will be defending her title.

Former world number ones Garbine Muguruza, Karolina Pliskova and Victoria Azarenka are also entered for the January 2-9 event, along with world number two Aryna Sabalenka. The only top 10 player missing in Adelaide will be seventh-ranked Estonian Anett Kontaveit.

Defending Australian Open champion Osaka, who has slipped to 13 in the world, will play at the Melbourne Summer Set event from January 3-9, which features simultaneous women's and men's tournaments.

China Not Worried About Any Domino Effect of Olympic Boycotts

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China is not worried about a "domino effect" of diplomatic boycotts of the Beijing Winter Olympics, it said, after Australia, Britain and Canada joined the United States in deciding not to send officials to the Games.

The United States was the first to announce a boycott, saying on Monday its government officials would not attend the Feb. 4-20 Games because of China's human rights "atrocities" in the western region of Xinjiang.

"I don't see any need to be worried about any domino effect," Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a daily news conference when asked about the chance of more boycotts.

"On the contrary, most countries in the world have expressed support for the Beijing Winter Olympics."

The diplomatic boycotts by the United States and its allies follow a sharp deterioration in relations between Beijing and Washington that began under former U.S. President Donald Trump.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has maintained pressure on China over various issues including human rights and China's maritime claims in the South China Sea.

Wang pointed out that the United Nations on Dec. 2 adopted a resolution, co-sponsored by more than 170 of 193 member states, for an "Olympic Truce" calling on states to rise above politics and unite in sports during the Beijing Games.

"Quite a few" foreign leaders and members of royal families had registered to attend, he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is the only leader of a major country who has publicly accepted an invitation. Wang said the United States and its allies would "pay the price for their mistaken acts" and they had "used the Olympics platform for political manipulation".



F1 Drivers Are All a Bit Crazy

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton said he would waste no time worrying about a collision with Red Bull rival Max Verstappen, a man he called crazy only days ago, ending his hopes of a record eighth title.

The Mercedes driver goes into Sunday's season-ending decider in Abu Dhabi level on points with Verstappen but 9-8 behind on race wins.

That means Verstappen can be champion without needing to score another point if Hamilton also draws a blank at Yas Marina.

The pair have collided on track three times already this season.

"I don't give it any energy," Hamilton told reporters after appearing with Verstappen in a Thursday news conference with the championship trophy placed between them.

"We never thought we would be neck and neck going into the last race, we've had an amazing recovery collectively as a team... we don't waste energy on things that are out of our control."

Reminded that he had labelled Verstappen 'crazy' and 'dangerous' during last Sunday's chaotic Saudi Arabian race, when he ran into the back of the suddenly slowing Red Bull, Hamilton played down those comments.

"When we are in the races we say all sorts of things," he explained.

"We are in the heat of the moment, the adrenalin is firing, your emotions are on edge... I think ultimately us racing drivers we're all a bit crazy to be able to do what we do and take the risks that we do."

Asked if he trusted Verstappen to race fairly, Hamilton swerved.

"At the end of the day, I do believe everyone here racing comes to win," he said.

"I would like to believe everyone wants to do it in the right way, so I don't even let that creep into my mind."

Verstappen Continues To Criticize Rules And Officials

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen continued his criticism of Formula One rules and officials ahead of the title showdown in Abu Dhabi, saying he has been singled out for sanctions.

The 24-year-old Dutchman, who was penalised twice in last Sunday's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, said he is punished for his driving style and that others, who drive in the same aggressive and unforgiving way, are not.

He also claimed that FIA Race Director Michael Masi's official pre-race warning about driving standards and possible sanctions was intended to apply for him alone in a race which Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton start level on points atop the driver standings.

"Well, clearly, these don't apply for everyone," he said. "That's because the things I did in terms of defending, two other guys, in terms of racing, also did, and they didn't even get a mention, or penalty."

"I don't understand because I thought I was just racing hard. What happened, for me, didn't deserve any penalty. Really, the other two people who did it, they didn't get one."

"It's only me who gets it and, of course, fighting up the front, people were more critical, I guess. For me, I don't understand..."

His abrasive stance and mood ahead of Sunday's title decider at the Yas Marina Circuit demonstrated that he had not reconciled himself to last weekend's events or the widespread paddock perception that he had gone 'over the top'.

Verstappen was handed a five-second penalty for running wide at Turn One and 10 seconds for an incident that was perceived as him 'brake-testing' Hamilton when trying to slow to allow him to pass, as demanded by the race officials.



Martial Wants to Leave Man Utd In January

LONDON (Dispatches) - Anthony Martial wants to leave Manchester United in the January transfer window after struggling to get game time at Old Trafford this season, according to his agent.

The 26-year-old France forward, who joined United from Monaco in 2015, has started only two Premier League games this season and has scored just once.

Martial's representative, Philippe Lamboley, executive director of USFA Management, told Sky Sports News: "Anthony wishes to leave the club in January."

"He just needs to play. He doesn't want to stay in January and I will speak to the club soon."

Martial still has at least three years left on his contract at Old Trafford, having signed a new deal in 2019 that includes an option to extend for a further year.

He has fallen down the pecking order at United, who have an array of attacking talent to choose from, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Edinson Cavani, Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Mason Greenwood.

While he did not mention Martial by name, United interim manager Ralf Rangnick hinted there could be departures in January when he was asked about the bloated size of his squad today.

"It's still a big squad. We need to make sure that players want to stay here," he said.

"If they see they are not getting enough game time here it might make sense to speak to players individually and see if a loan deal might make sense, but right now it's too early."

Rangnick also revealed that injured United midfielder Paul Pogba is still around four weeks away from returning to action.

Pogba has been undergoing recovery work in Dubai after suffering a thigh injury on international duty with France last month.

