

**President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi  
On Friday Continued His Provincial  
Visits by Visiting Yazd Province  
Leading a High-Ranking Delegation  
To Study the Problems of the  
Province Especially Water Shortage**

# IRAN NEWS

**Spokesman for Atomic Energy  
Organization of Iran Said About the  
Agreement With the IAEA That the  
International Body's Will Not Have  
Access to the Information recorded  
By the CCTV Cameras at Karaj Site**

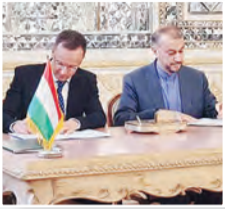
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SATURDAY DECEMBER 18, 2021 - AZAR 27, 1400

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Azerbaijan republic, Russia**  
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**Vienna Talks to Continue  
After a Break of Few Days**

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's lead negotiator at the negotiations in the Austrian capital to remove the U.S. sanctions says good progress has been made in Vienna this week, noting that the high-ranking talks will continue after a short break.

In a tweet on Friday morning, Ali Bagheri Kani said he met with EU deputy foreign policy chief Enrique Mora, who coordinates the Vienna talks, on Thursday, after consultations with other delegations.

"Following our consultations with other delegations, yesterday, @enrique mora & I met to take stock of the situation & discuss the way forward," Bagheri Kani wrote.

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**Tehran Criticizes UN for  
Anti-Iran Human Rights Resolution**



**IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK**

TEHRAN - Iran's Deputy Head of Judiciary for International Affairs says the UN adopts an anti-Iranian resolution submitted by Canada. At the same time, more than 400,000 Iranians have been barred from consular services by Ottawa due to political issues.

Attending a press conference on Thursday, Kazem

Gharibabadi referred to recent resolution the UN issued against Iran and said that the U.S. has acknowledged that it has imposed the most unprecedented sanctions against the Iranians, but the UN resolution shows no trace of the condemnation of the very unilateral and illegal sanctions:

"Are human rights just concerned with the rights of a few prisoners, who are protected by Western countries, for crimes against their own people or their own country? Aren't the rights of millions of Iranians the very human rights, being violated as a result of unilateral sanctions, lack of medicine, medical equipment and other things?"

Gharibabadi continued: "In the region, there are some countries that know nothing about democracy and elections, but they are fully cooperating with these ostensibly Western human rights advocates and are given impunity against any criticism, resolution or reporting mechanism."

He said that because of the political approaches to human rights and exclusivism in the Human Rights Council and other international human rights mechanisms, it is not allowed to file a case or report or issue a human rights resolution against the very regional countries.

Gharibabadi continued: "We believe that even if we do not have international obligations, we are obliged to protect the rights of the people because of the country's regulations and religious and Islamic requirements."

Stating that the principles of the recent resolution were far from the existing facts, he said that the resolution criticizes the volume of executions in Iran, it should be noted that the issue of banning the death penalty was a Western phenomenon:

"If the death penalty is abolished in Western law, should it be extended to all countries and become a universal standard? At least 55 countries still retain the death penalty in their laws. The fact that Western countries are pursuing the universality of their standards is not human rights."

Statistics published by Westerners through their press and human rights NGOs also indicated that the death penalty in Iran had been significantly reduced, but the fact was not highlighted.

The top Iranian Human Rights official referred to the medicines embargo on children with EB and asked:

"EB children in Iran, who have difficulty accessing the medicines needed and lose their lives due to lack of access to medicine, do have any rights? Why are there no statements issued in support of these children? For one thing, they launch wide-ranging international propaganda against Iran, but they remain silent to kill thousands of children, both in Iran and in other countries."

Gharibabadi referred to the false claim of the recent resolution on the torture of detainees in Iran and stated the prohibition of torture is constitutional in Iran.

"There is a convention called the Convention against Torture to which we are not a party, but our laws are much more sublime in this regard than the convention, and there are few countries that have provided the prohibition of torture in their constitution."

He stressed Iran always demanded everyone who claims to be tortured should refer to the relevant judicial authorities and the human rights headquarters so that they would follow up the issue seriously, but the so-called UN special rapporteur has not yet provided Iran with any evidence to substantiate his claims about torturing prisoners in the country.

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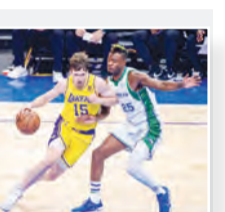
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**EU Leaders Weigh  
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**8 SPORT**

**Graham Nails  
61-Foot Buzzer-Beater**  
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**President Blames U.S., NATO  
For Crimes in Afghanistan**

**IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK**

TEHRAN - President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi says two decades of the military presence of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Afghanistan had no other result for the Afghan people but bloodshed and backwardness.

Raisi was speaking in a meeting with visiting Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó in Tehran on Thursday, during which the two sides discussed further development of bilateral relations, especially in economic and political fields.

Referring to the dire situation of Afghanistan after two decades of Western military presence in the war-torn country, Iran's president said, "The outcome of two decades of the [military] presence of the NATO and the U.S. in Afghanistan is murder, crime, bloodshed, and backwardness of Afghan people."

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**Iran, Oman Hold Joint  
Military Exercises in Strait  
Of Hormuz, Sea of Oman**

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Navy and the Royal Navy of Oman have held a joint military drill in Iran's territorial waters in the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman.

The military exercise, which was the ninth of its kind between the Iranian and Omani naval forces, was conducted early on Thursday in line with an agreement reached during sessions held by the two countries' joint military friendship commissions.

The exercise, backed by helicopters from both countries and Iranian drones, was held in the presence of the heads of the joint military friendship commissions of the two countries and their members in the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman.

The main goals of the naval drills, held with the participation of several floating units from both countries, have been declared as developing bilateral ties, implementation of various training programs at sea, exchanging experiences, and improving the efficiency of the two countries' naval staff.

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**U.S. Blacklists  
3 Companies for  
Deal With Iran**

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. Commerce Department on Thursday blacklisted three companies for attempting to provide support to Iran's advanced conventional weapons and missile programs via exports through China.

The department's Bureau of Industry and Security added the three companies to its entity list for China ties and "actions contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States".

The updated list, published in the Federal Register, noted that "these companies have supplied or attempted to supply U.S.-origin items that could provide material support to Iran's advanced conventional weapons and missile programs to entities" sanctioned by the US.

The three blacklisted companies are Wavelet Electronics, Comtel Technology Limited and HSJ Electronics.

Their inclusion on the list prevents them from exporting, re-exporting or conducting in-country equipment transfers.

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**On the occasion of National Export Day;**

**Aras Tarla Amir in the list of The  
Top Exports of the Country**

**Aras Tarla Amir Company, under the  
management of Mr. Ebrahimi, was  
selected as the top export company**

The conference was organized by the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Trade. The conference was attended by Mohammad Mokhber, First Vice President, Mohsen Rezaei, Vice President for Economic Affairs, Sorena Sattari, Vice President for Science and Technology, and Alireza Peyman Pak, Director General of the Trade Development Organization, state officials and officials of the Trade Development Organization of Iran. This conference was held in honor of the managers of the top industrial units.

**About company**

Aras Tarla Amir Greenhouse Complex is the largest glass greenhouse complex in the Middle East in the Aras Free Zone. The amount of Rial investment is one thousand seven hundred billion Rials. The company has a foreign exchange investment of more than 70 million euros and an area of 80 hectares. The company has an annual production capacity of more than 24,200 tons of greenhouse summer plants by hydroponic method and has directly created jobs for 650 people.

**Annual production capacity;**

24,200 tons of vegetable and summer products

**Certificates obtained;**

ISO 9001 Quality Management System Certificate, 2015 / Environmental Management System Certificate 2015;



14001 ISO / Occupational Safety and Health System Certification 2018 45001 ISO / Food Safety Management System Certificate 2018 22000 ISO / Obtaining the mark of the permissible level of pollutants in the pepper product from the National Standard Organization of Iran.

**The main objectives and indicators of the  
greenhouse;**

Produce a healthy product / Increase efficiency per unit area / Reduce waste to less than one percent / Increase water use efficiency / Optimal use of production resources and institutions / Create productive and new employment / Production of commercial seedlings based on the latest plant production methods Developed and produced transplanted seedlings / reduced energy consumption / foreign exchange through export.

To achieve the desired goals, Aras Tarla Amir greenhouse has been designed and constructed with the latest technical knowledge and superior technology of European countries, especially the Netherlands. Under these conditions, the occurrence of harmful factors, especially pathogens, is significantly controlled. Use of integrated pest and disease control (IPM) and (ICM) methods, implementation of good agricultural operations (GAP) Controls pathogenesis.

**Central Office;** Tabriz Tehran Gate, not far from Shahriar Square, Afa Building

**Phone:** 041-33335050

**Factory:** Julfa, Aras Industrial Free Trade Zone, at the beginning of Nivoghli Road



## IRGC Dismantles Terrorist Team in Southeast Iran

ZAHEDAN (IP) - Qods Headquarters of Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) reported the dismantling of a terrorist team in Saravan city of Sistan and Baluchestan province, southeast of Iran. The terrorist team that was going to carry out acts of sabotage in the country was dismantled by IRGC forces on Thursday. Four terrorists were killed in their clash with IRGC forces. A great amount of ammo and weapons also were seized from the terrorists. IRGC intelligence unit also dismantled an arms trafficking network in Khuzestan province, southern Iran 11 days ago.

## Hungary to Issue Entry Visas Based on Iranian Covid Jabs

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

**TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister says he has signed a memorandum of understanding with his visiting Hungarian counterpart for the Iranian coronavirus vaccines to be the basis for issuance of entry visas to Hungary.**



"An important development today was Hungary recognizing Iranian coronavirus vaccines as valid. To thank the Iranian scientists who successfully produced vaccines in several domestic companies, we signed a document in this regard based on which all Iranian jabs, if certificates are issued in Iran, can be acceptable in Hungary and be the basis for issuance of visas by Hungary," Hossein Amir Abdollahian said in a joint presser with Hungary's Peter Szijjarto.

The Iranian foreign minister added that the MOU will be effective starting from Friday and that consultations are underway with other countries so that they recognize the Iranian vaccines for issuance of visas for Iranian nationals.

"Exports of vaccines produced by the Islamic Republic of Iran to other countries will also materialize," he said.

Amir Abdollahian also said Iran and Hungary held positive talks and reached "important agreements" during Szijjarto's visit.

On the sidelines of the meeting, the two sides signed three memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in the areas of education and culture. Hungary undertook,

under one of the agreements, to grant scholarships to Iranian university students.

Officials of the two countries also held a session of the Iran-Hungary joint economic committee later on Thursday.

This is the first visit by Hungarian foreign minister to Tehran since the inauguration of the new Iranian administration in August.

In a meeting held on the sidelines of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in New York in September, Amir-Abdollahian and Szijjarto held talks about bilateral cooperation, particularly in economic fields, and the removal of obstacles in the way of training university students as well as the developments in Afghanistan.

Amir Abdollahian said he and Szijjarto also discussed the situation in Afghanistan. The top Iranian diplomat said Hungary has sent several aid shipments to Afghanistan.

He said Szijjarto has also brought along a shipment of 4 million doses of covid vaccines, which are donated by Hungary and other countries to the four million Afghan refugees living in Iran. He thanked Hungary for its humanitarian gesture toward the Afghan refugees.

## FM Criticizes Western Sides for Lack of Initiative During Negotiations

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's foreign minister has criticized the Western participants in the Vienna talks on the removal of anti-Iran sanctions for their inability to come up with new initiatives during negotiations in the Austrian capital.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in a Thursday phone call with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, during which the two sides explored ways of boosting mutual relations as well as the ongoing talks in Vienna and other international developments.

While thanking the Chinese government for its support for Iran's position during the Vienna talks, Iran's top diplomat noted that the overall progress of negotiations was good, while taking the Western parties to task for lack of initiative in negotiations.

In similar remarks over the weekend, Iran's lead negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani said the Iranian side has not received any constructive initiative or proposal from the opposite side to resolve persisting disagreements.

Throughout the course of the Vienna talks, Russia and China have supported Iran's position on the primacy of the removal of US sanctions, three years after the US pulled out of the 2015 nuclear agreement and imposed the "toughest ever" sanctions on Iran with the aim of killing the deal.

During the phone call, Amir-Abdollahian expressed hope that the Western sides to the Vienna talks would behave logically and, similar to Iran, take part in negotiations with goodwill and initiative.

He also criticized the United States and some other Western states for boycotting Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, noting that senior officials from Iran will take part in the event.

The remarks came more than a week after Washington announced that it would initiate a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics and the 2022 Winter Paralympics in China over what it claimed to be widespread rights abuses by China against the Muslim Uyghur minority in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.

The United States' closest allies - Australia, Britain, and Canada - followed suit and announced similar decisions two days later even though their athletes will attend the games.

Elsewhere during the Thursday phone conversation, Amir-Abdollahian also accepted Wang's invitation to pay a visit to Beijing in the near future.

Wang, for his part, declared his country's support for Iran's stance in the Vienna talks and noted that the positive efforts made by the Iranian side will facilitate negotiations.

He also appreciated Iran's initiative to engage in talks with certain regional countries, describing it as a factor in establishing stability in the region.

Wang also lauded Iran's stance on the Western countries' boycott of the Winter Olympics, expressing hope that the event would be held in the best possible manner, attended by Iran's sports teams.

He added that a future visit to his country by Iran's foreign minister would provide a good opportunity for the promotion of the two countries' common goals.

## Iran Doesn't Tolerate Language of Threat

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says the West has to understand that Iran does not tolerate "any language of threat" against it.

"We are [acting] on the basis of good faith and initiative, and are seeking the conclusion of a good agreement, but do not brook the language of threat under any circumstances," he told United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres during a telephone call on Wednesday. The Western side has to understand that application of such discourse against Iran always "produces the opposite result," the top diplomat added.

The remarks came as Iran and the P4+1 group of countries that comprises the UK, France, Russia, and China plus Germany, have been holding several rounds of talks in the Austrian capital.

The talks are aimed at examining the prospect of removal of the sanctions that the United States returned against Tehran in 2018 after leaving a historic nuclear agreement between Iran and the above countries.

Amir-Abdollahian repeated the Islamic Republic's assertion that the country does not accept any commitments beyond the 2015 nuclear deal.

He expressed regret that "the lack of initiative" on the part of the Western side had slowed down the negotiation process, while the Iranian side has come up with "some good proposals" that could form the basis of a lasting agreement.

The UN chief, for his part, considered the Vienna talks to be important, and repeated the world body's support for the nuclear deal.

He also expressed gratitude towards Tehran for its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran's recent measure to allow the UN nuclear watchdog to set up new cameras at the TESA Karaj Complex, a centrifuge component manufacturing workshop in north-central Iran, "indicated that Tehran enjoys a good level of cooperation with the agency," something that would, in turn, contribute to the "trust-building process" during the negotiations, Guterres said.

The United Nations, he asserted, would deploy all of its available mechanisms to help the negotiations succeed.

## Tehran-IAEA Agreement to Strip Away Lies, Pretexts for Continuation of Sanctions

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) says the organization is making efforts to deprive all ill-wishers of pretexts for the continuation of sanctions, after Iran took a voluntary measure to further collaborate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In remarks on Thursday, Mohammad Eslami said the AEOI is cooperating with the IAEA to resolve remaining issues so as to "prevent the ill-wishers and the Zionists" from waging a psychological war and spreading fake news to derail the ongoing talks in Vienna, which are aimed at removing the United States' anti-Iran sanctions.

"We will continue our effective efforts to ensure that no one concocts excuses or justifications for the continuation of sanctions," Eslami told reporters.

The remarks came after AEOI spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi said Iran would take a voluntary measure to allow the IAEA to replace cameras at the TESA Karaj Complex, which were damaged in a June act of sabotage widely attributed to Israel.

"Following exchanges of views between the AEOI and the IAEA, particularly based on recent talks between the heads of the agencies Mohammad Eslami and Rafael

Grossi, it was decided that the IAEA shall have the necessary cooperation [with Iran] in precise technical, security and judicial inspections of the Agency's cameras at the TESA Karaj Complex. This measure is meant to soothe concerns that saboteurs may take advantage of the cameras," Kamalvandi said on Thursday.

He stated that the IAEA technicians would also answer Iran's technical questions regarding the cameras, adding that the Agency's cameras would be re-installed after careful and necessary checks.

Eslami similarly said the IAEA's cameras can be re-installed at the Karaj nuclear facility only after thorough security and judicial inspections and the discerning of the factors that played a role in that "terrorist incident."

In a statement on Thursday, the IAEA chief said the agreement "will enable us to resume necessary continuity of knowledge at this facility," noting that the new cameras would be installed "in coming days."

Grossi described the agreement as an important development for the IAEA's verification and monitoring activities in Iran, adding, "I sincerely hope that we can continue our constructive discussions to also address and resolve all outstanding safeguards issues in Iran."

## Iran, Hungary Sign Customs Cooperation Agreement

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran and Hungary have signed an agreement on customs processes to help trade flowing smoothly between the two countries.

Spokesman of the Iranian customs administration (IRICA) said on Thursday that the agreement had been signed earlier in the day between Iran's Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Ehsan Khandouzi and visiting Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó.

Rouhollah Latifi said the document was signed during a second summit of Iran-Hungary joint economic cooperation committee where Iranian authorities held talks with Hungarian delegates on how the two countries can boost trade and economic relations. Khandouzi, who took over as finance minister in late August, said that the customs agreement will be a positive step on the path to expand economic ties between Iran and Hungary.

He said that the two countries had also discussed increased cooperation on banking and exchange issues as well as on how to expand trade ties that are stuck at a low value of \$40 million per year.

Hungary's Szijjártó also described talks held in the joint economic committee as successful, saying his country and Iran had agreed to expand cooperation in certain areas, including on construction material exports from Iran to Hungary as well as on joint investment projects in agriculture and health.

## President Congratulates His Kazakh Counterpart on Independence Day

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Ebrahim Raisi extended a message on Thursday to his Kazakh counterpart Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and congratulated him on Independence Day in that country on December 16.

In his message, President Raisi said Kazakhstan has taken important steps towards development and progress 30 years after independence.

Kazakhstan's three-decade initiatives within the framework of the international and regional structure show the country's attention to the global developments, the president noted.

He went on to say that Iran and Kazakhstan have always made efforts to upgrade the level of cooperation in cultural, economic, and political fields and in line with serving mutual interests.

Meanwhile, the current level of relations between the two friendly countries is not favorable as the two enjoy great capacities for cooperation, President Raisi added.

The Iranian president, meantime, expressed hope that Iran and Kazakhstan would actively make use of the existing capabilities in order to deepen multilateral and bilateral relations.

In the end, the president wished prosperity and success for his Kazakh counterpart and the people of Kazakhstan.

## Tehran to Be a Role Model For Islamic World Cities

TEHRAN (IP) - Tehran's Mayor says the city management is determined to make Tehran a role model for the Islamic world cities.

Speaking in the 13th Festival of Research and Innovation in Urban Management and the 8th Festival of Research on the Development of Education in Urban and Rural Management, Alireza Zakani said Freedom, independence, spirituality, progress, and justice are five slogans that quickly became the world's focus.

The mayor of Tehran noted: "We should think about the future and have solutions to remove problems."

"We must pay special attention to the intelligence and capacities in the cities that have been pursued in the last two years," he stressed. Tehran's mayor also emphasized creating a significant change in the cities, saying the past measures were fruitful, but it is not enough.

## EU Troika Called on To Act as Fair Partner

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman has called on the EU-troika in the Vienna talks to act as a fair partner regarding the Iran nuclear deal.

Saeed Khatibzadeh reacted to the EU troika's latest statement on Iran's nuclear program and the atomic deal, known as JCPOA.

Khatibzadeh said any statement on the JCPOA that fails to mention the U.S. culpability and its role in the disarray in the agreement only shows utter ignorance.

He added that if the EU troika wants to be taken seriously as a fair partner, it must act like a fair partner. The Foreign Ministry spokesman noted that for Iran the JCPOA hollowed out when promised benefits under the JCPOA did not materialize.

Khatibzadeh reiterated that those benefits must finally be delivered. His comments came after the three European parties to the deal said that chances of reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement were quickly diminishing due to what they described as "Iran's continued nuclear escalation".

## Iran Seeks Constructive Interaction in Int'l Arena

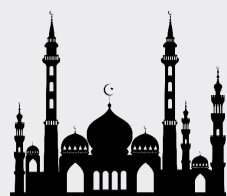
TEHRAN (IP) - The First Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran announced the primary foreign policy strategy of the government is to increase relations with neighbors.

Mohammad Mokhber emphasized on Wednesday at the meeting of the heads of the missions of the Islamic Republic of Iran in neighboring countries: "Advancing political strategies in interaction with other countries will not continue without a sustainable economic activity."

And for this reason, we must seek constructive relations with neighboring countries, the region, and the world and seriously pursue joint productions and investments, he added.

Pointing out that the structure of Iranian embassies in foreign countries should be defined based on evaluating each country's potentials, Mokhber clarified: "The capacity of Iranians abroad is an excellent opportunity for growth and development inside Iran."

The First Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran added: "The Iranian government is ready to provide and define appropriate economic activities for all Iranian investments abroad."



## PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:01
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:13
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:39
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:09

13. Flee not, but return to the good things of this life which were given you, and to your homes in order that ye may be called to account.

14. They said: "Ah! woe to us! We were indeed wrong-doers!"

Surah 21, The Prophets (13 - 14)

## Iran Set to Boost Energy Cooperation With Azerbaijan republic, Russia

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - Energy Minister Aliakbar Mehrabian further stressed the importance of enhancing cooperation with Baku and working together to complete two jointly-owned dams while also highlighting closer cooperation with Russia.**

"In order to run this project and the electrical connection which had been established for a short time in the past, an electricity peak management plan has been implemented in all three countries, and the electricity shortage will be met as well," said Iranian Energy Minister in an online meeting with his opposite number from the Azerbaijan Republic Parviz Shahbazov.

Mehrabian said he would be prepared to hold a trilateral meeting of energy ministers from Iran, the Azerbaijan Republic and Russia.

He added Tehran would like to see an increase in the duration of the period of time



of purchasing electricity, and welcomes a transfer of the purchase period from the hot season to other times of the year.

The minister also emphasized the importance of installing turbines next to the two dams jointly owned by Iran and the Azerbaijan Republic.

"When operational, the project will generate a considerable amount of electricity as well as revenues for both countries," he noted.

"Iran is one of the countries with the technology to build power plants and exports to other countries, namely Russia, power plant turbines with an efficiency of more than 60%," the Iranian energy minister explained.

One of the programs of the Iranian Energy Ministry is to expand the country's National Power Grid to connect it to that of neighboring countries in accordance with international standards and with the aim of promoting energy exchanges with, and energy exports to other countries.

## Industrial Policy and Emergent Technology Think-Tank Launched



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - The industrial policy and emergent technology think-tank was inaugurated in presence of Deputy Industry Minister and Head of Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran (IDRO), the Managing Director of Industrial Management Institute and Vice-President on education affairs of Iman Sadeq (AS) University.**

This think-tank is aimed at conducting studies and presenting efficient strategies for exploitation in the national industry and technology sectors and was established in collaboration between the Industrial Management Institute and Imam Sadeq (AS) University.

Addressing the inauguration ceremony, Head of IDRO Mr. Mohsen Salehinia hailed the launch of this think-tank and termed the existence of such scientific centers a facilitator for industrial development in the country. He went on to say that this think-tank can help the developmental organizations of the country in preparing the proper roadmaps in accordance with needs and super challenges of industry and technology.

Salehinia noted that seeking efficiency of the industrial policies in the countries close to Iran's structure and resources is one of the items expected from this think-tank. He went on to say that these analyses can assist industry ministry and other industrial bodies of the country in upgrading the existing industrial policies. He then pointed to other services that this think-tank can offer through its analyses.

Then managing director of Industrial Management Institute Mr. Abolfazl Kiani Bakhtiari, for his part, said that favorable dominance and ruling in the scene of industry needs some prerequisites, adding that first the strategy and in the next levels industrial policy can be devised in this think-tank.

Meanwhile addressing the ceremony, Vice-President on education affairs of Imam Sadeq (AS) University Mr. Gholamreza Goodarzi pointed to the meetings of the board of trustees of the think-tank and expressed hope that by design of scientific groups and involvement of under universities the think-tank would materialize its set-targets.

## Tehran Seeks Doubling Trade With Neighboring Countries



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - Deputy foreign minister for economic diplomacy says the government is planning to double trade with neighboring countries.**

"The president has been stressing the need for the current trade between our country and the neighboring countries to double in four years," said Mahdi Safari.

"On the same basis, the foreign ministry held the five-day meeting of the ambassadors and envoys in the missions of the Islamic Republic of Iran with a focus on neighboring countries and economic diplomacy."

Safari further explained that the policy centers on exports of engineering services and exchanges on electricity, natural gas, oil and even water with other countries.

He said neutralizing sanctions is the main objective of Iran's cooperation with neighboring countries, especially in the area of trade.

"Independent from the negotiations [in Vienna on removal of the US bans], we want to offset the sanctions," he said.

Safari added that the idea, floated in Ashgabat, of the agreement among Iran, the Azerbaijan Republic and Turkmenistan for natural gas swap can also be a basis for cooperation on water swap.

The deputy foreign minister also touched on Russia's objection to the quality of agricultural products exported from Iran.

"A delegation will visit Moscow and we asked [the Russian side] to hold bilateral talks on different levels, even at the level of the foreign ministry, on the issue. The problem has been temporarily resolved and a delegation from Russia will also visit our farms," he said.

Safari also said the number of Iranian trade attaches in different countries will increase from 8 to 35 in an attempt to promote economic diplomacy.

Safari also talked about the opportunities full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization bring to Iran.

"The Shanghai [Cooperation Organization] has great economic capacity, which we will work to combine with the potential offered by the Economic Cooperation Organization, otherwise known as ECO," he said.

The official also said there have been openings on the issue of Iranian funds blocked in other countries due to the U.S. sanctions, including in Iraq.

## Country Needs Technology Ecosystem

**TEHRAN (IP) - Iran's Vice President for Science, Research, and Technology says to develop science, technology, and research, the establishment of an ecosystem is a prerequisite.**

Speaking at the 22nd ceremony of honoring the country's selected researchers and technologists on Thursday, Sorena Sattari stressed on the interaction between the market and the education system.

Sattari stressed the need for an interaction between the market and the system saying: "We want an ecosystem that is now ready in the country's science and technology parks."

He reiterated: "The product is the result of private sector investment, not the government, and we must create an ecosystem for the private sector to invest; this ecosystem has already been created. We have more than 45 companies on the stock exchange which the government must invest in."

The 22nd ceremony of honoring the country's selected researchers and technologists was held at Tehran's International Permanent Fairgrounds Exhibition on Dec.16, 2021, coincided with the last days of the 'Research Week'.

The ceremony was attended by Sourena Sattari,

Vice President for Science and Technology, Mohammad Ali Zolfigol, Minister of Science, Research and Technology, Ahmad Vahidi, Iran's Interior Minister, and Hamid Sajjadi, Minister of Sport and Youths.

Meanwhile Minister of Science, Research, and Technology said that based on the scientific regulations of the country, grounds must be prepared to encourage researchers and technologists to interact with the whole world. Speaking on the sidelines of the ceremony, Mohammad Ali Zolfigol noted: "There are different ways to promote scientific diplomacy at the international level, one of which is to encourage scientists and researchers to cooperate with the research and technology groups in other countries."

"We should also invite foreign students in the country's universities to follow both their education and research," Zolfigol added. Zolfigol said that holding national and international conferences and inviting prominent scientists from other countries, especially the neighbors, to present their latest experiences and study opportunities was the other promising way to improve the country's scientific diplomacy.

## Second Power Transmission Line Launched From Turkmenistan to Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - CEO of the Iranian company for the production, transmission and distribution of electricity, Arash Kudri, announced the launch of a second power transmission line from Turkmenistan, which will increase electricity imports and reduce fuel consumption in Iran in winter, ORIENT reported.**

During the 16th meeting of the Joint Economic Commission in Tehran, agreement was reached to increase the supply of Turkmen electricity to Iran.

The commissioning of the second transmission line from Turkmenistan on the Mary-Serakhs-Mashhad route (Iran) will reduce fuel consumption in the country by one million liters per day, Kudri said at a meeting of the heads of the Iranian electric power industry of Islamic Republic of Iran, IRNA reports. In January-November 2021, electricity production in Turkmenistan increased by 12% and its exports increased by 36% during this period.

## 6% Rise in Iran Refinery Output

**TEHRAN (Shana) -- The director of coordination and supervision of operations of the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) announced a 6% increase in the output of Iran's refineries.**

Saeed Madah Moravej on the process of increasing refining of condensate and crude oil in the country's refineries, said: "The refining performance of crude oil and gas condensate in 2020 was equal to 2.045 million barrels per day. This year, despite overhauls in refineries and other downstream units, this figure has reached

2,170,000 barrels per day with some modifications to the distillation and refining units of the refineries."

He added: "This figure indicates a 6% rise in crude oil and gas condensate refined in the country's refineries and has increased output of petroleum products by the same amount."

The official said despite this rise, gasoline consumption has risen by 15% in the country.

Mr. Moravej stated: "The average daily gasoline consumption of the country has increased from 75.5 million liters last year to 86 million liters per day.

## Rise in SJSCO Production Despite Electricity Restriction

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - Sirjan Jahan Steel Complex (SJSCO) has witnessed rise in production this year despite restriction in electricity distribution.**

The CEO of SJSCO Mr. Ali Abbasloo in an interview said that fortunately the production in the company has increased in the eight months despite electricity shortage and restriction, adding that his colleagues in the company have tried to make ineffective this shortage in the production in the sponge iron and steel units, admitting that this shortage has slightly affected the production of ingot in the company.

He said considering the record of monthly production of 95,000 tons, there was a possibility to raise the production of ingot by 15% comparing to last year but electricity restriction robbed us of this chance.

Touching upon the exports, Abbasloo said that exports of the company this year

have increased as the company exported 185,000 tons in 8 months. He noted that the company is concerned about gas supply and in the gas supply to the company is cut, it will face problem in production, reiterating that gas outage can affect the sponge iron and ingot production. He added that in fact when no sponge iron is produced, the production of ingot will also face challenges.

He also highlighted the significance of the company's presence in the stock market, admitting recent decline in the stock market the shares of this company have also faced decline.

Sirjan Jahan Steel Complex has tried to increase its sponge iron and steel ingot in the upcoming years through implementing developmental projects but shortage of electricity and gas can overshadow the production.



## KSC Ranks First in Growth in Steel Exports

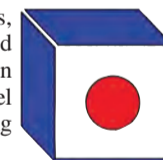
IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - According to reports, Iranian steelmakers have exported over 4.9m tons of steel production in 8 months this year and Khorasan Steel Company (KSC) has been the leading company in exports in this period.**

As per official reports, KSC's rebar exports have witnessed 1083% growth and it has been the highest amount of growth among the exported steel items in the eight months. This amount of exports of steel production in eight months shows 22% growth year on year.

The report shows that Khuzestan Steel Company (KSC) with 1.1m tons of exports, Mobarakeh Steel Company with over 814,700m tons and Esfahan Steel Company with over 766,600m tons have had the best performance in exports in 8 months.

Last month, KSC has exported 58,400 tons of rebars and 79,000 tons of steel billets and according to the report, the total amount of steel production steels in last month has been 684,200 tons which shows 7% growth comparing to the same period last year.



KSC.CO

## A Record 488 Journalists Imprisoned in 2021

PARIS (Dispatches) - There are currently 488 media professionals imprisoned around the world, the highest number since Reporters Without Borders began counting more than 25 years ago, the organization announced Thursday.

By contrast, the number killed this year – 46 – was the lowest since it began issuing annual tallies, due to the relative stabilisation of conflicts in the Middle East.

"The number of journalists detained in connection with their work has never been this high since Reporters Without Borders began publishing its annual round-up in 1995," the group, which battles for freedom of the press, said in a statement.



## S. Korea Eyes on Tougher Curbs Against Spike in COVID-19 Infections

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea said it will reinstate stricter social distancing rules a month-and-a-half after easing them under a 'living with COVID-19' policy, as the number of new infections and serious cases spirals.

Curbs will return from Saturday to Jan. 2, limiting gatherings to no more than four people - as long as they are fully vaccinated - and forcing restaurants, cafes and bars to close by 9 p.m. and movie theatres and internet cafes by 10 p.m., officials said.

Unvaccinated people can only dine out alone, or use takeout or delivery services.



## EU Leaders Weigh New Sanctions on Russia



BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - The European Union is under assault from Russia on multiple fronts and must unite behind new economic sanctions, Baltic and central European leaders said on Thursday, with Lithuania citing a risk of possible Russian military strikes from Belarus.

The warnings at an EU summit were some of the most direct in recent weeks as the United States and its NATO allies seek to deter any possible Russian attack on Ukraine and reduce Moscow's margin for surprise. Many NATO allies are also EU member states.

"We really are facing a series of attacks. I see them all as associated," Latvian Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins told reporters, listing what he said was the weaponisation of Middle East migrants on Belarus' borders with the EU, artificially high prices for Russian natural gas, and Russian disinformation.

Ukraine remains the main flashpoint between Russia and the West. Washington says Russia has amassed more than 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders, possibly for an invasion. Moscow says it has a right to move its troops around its own territory as it sees fit but says the manoeuvres are purely defensive.

EU leaders will warn of "massive consequences" if Russia were to invade Ukraine, according to a draft final summit statement seen by Reuters. The United States and Britain have taken a similar stance.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday Russia was increasing, not reducing, its troops on the border.

"We see no sign that this build-up is stopping or slowing down. On the contrary, it continues," he told reporters at NATO headquarters, standing alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Stoltenberg said there were Russian "combat-ready troops, tanks, artillery, armored units, drones (and) electronic warfare systems" on Ukraine's border.

The Kremlin denies the West's accusations against it, including any plan to invade Ukraine. It says it has legitimate security interests in the region and on Wednesday handed proposals to the United States that NATO should not expand eastwards or place new weapons systems near Russia's borders.

But Russia's Baltic neighbors attacked what they see as Moscow's attempts to blur the line between peace and war.

"We are probably facing the most dangerous situation in the last 30 years. I am talking about not only Ukraine but the eastern flank of NATO," said Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, a day after EU leaders held a summit with Ukraine and four other ex-Soviet republics in Brussels.

He cited fears that Russia might integrate Belarus, which borders Poland and two Baltic states, into its military systems and use its territory "as a possible platform to attack neighboring countries".

## Tunisia's Ghannouchi Rejects Extension of Parliament Freeze

TUNIS (Dispatches) - Tunisia's Speaker Rached Ghannouchi has refused to suspend the parliament for another year, just three days after President Kais Saied announced the extension of a suspension until Tunisians vote for a replacement assembly in December 2022.

Ghannouchi, also head of the Ennahdha party, expressed his "absolute rejection of suspending parliament for another year", saying he "considers this procedure unconstitutional and illegal".

The move "prolongs [Saied's] one-man rule and deepens the political crisis in the country and its financial, economic and social consequences as well as isolating Tunisia internationally", he said in a statement on his Facebook page.

He added that the only way out of the current crisis was "by the immediate cancellation of exceptional measures" announced by the president. On December 13, President Saied said he would call a constitutional referendum next July and that parliamentary elections would follow in December.



## Russia Rejects Calls for Domestic Violence Overhaul

MOSCOW (AFP) - Russia rejected calls to tighten domestic violence legislation Thursday, despite a European court ruling ordering Moscow to act on the "staggering scale" of abuse of women in the country.

According to activists, nearly 16.5 million women in Russia suffered domestic violence every year before the pandemic, with virus curbs only exacerbating the problem.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) this week called out Russia's "failure" to protect women against violence within the home, saying "women in Russia are in a situation of de-facto discrimination."

It said Russia's lack of legislation on domestic violence had created a "climate that was conducive" to abuse.

President Vladimir Putin's government in 2017 decriminalised some forms of domestic violence, classifying them as an administrative offence and not a crime. Campaigners -- who for years lobbied for stricter laws -- hailed the ECHR ruling as historic and said it should pave the way for new legislation.

But Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov shot down those hopes Thursday, saying the present laws were sufficient.

"We believe current legislation provides all necessary tools to combat this evil and law enforcement agencies are making efforts," Peskov told reporters. "Of course, unfortunate and tragic incidents do occur," he said, adding: "I don't want to comment on the decision of the court."

Leading women's rights activist Alena Popova said Peskov's comments showed that the authorities had not taken any "final decision" on changes to the law and vowed to push for legislation she has co-authored.

Oksana Pushkina, a former lawmaker from Putin's United Russia party who campaigns for women's rights, said Peskov's comments were "very irresponsible."

The ECHR ordered Russia to pay compensation Tuesday to four women who were battered or narrowly escaped being killed by their partners and who had had complaints to police ignored.

In September this year, Saied brushed aside most of the 2014 democratic constitution to say he could rule by decree during a period of exceptional measures and promised dialogue on further changes.

Critics denounced his takeover as a coup but Saied has consistently defended the move as the only way to end governmental paralysis after years of political squabbling and economic stagnation, compounded by the coronavirus pandemic.

He named Najla Bouden Romdhane, a little-known university engineer who worked with the World Bank, as the country's first female prime minister, nearly two months after dismissing Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi.

Saied, who has been a fierce critic of the North African country's 2014 constitution, said a nationwide public consultation would take place from January 1 until March 20 to gather suggestions for constitutional and other reforms.

He said he would appoint a committee of experts to draft a new constitution, to be ready by June ahead of the referendum.

## Hong Kong Gears up for Patriots-Only Poll

HONG KONG (Dispatches) - With days remaining for Hong Kong's legislative elections, candidates are hitting the Chinese-controlled city's streets canvassing for last-minute votes. But residents say there is little enthusiasm to vote this time.

One woman told Al Jazeera that many voters in Hong Kong see the December 19 poll as a "selection" and not an "election". That is because electoral reforms -- introduced by Beijing earlier this year -- mean that only candidates who passed the authorities' "patriots only" vetting process were allowed to run.

Only three of the 153 candidates contesting this year's election openly identify as pro-democracy, according to the South China Morning Post, marking a dramatic change in the semi-autonomous territory that was roiled by protests calling for greater democracy in 2014 and again, in 2019. "What you see is people giving a very wide berth to candidates," said the resident, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions.

"No one is taking a pamphlet. People see the candidates on the sidewalk and they cross the road, the same way they cross the road when they see a police station or the national security office."

Originally set for September of last year, the election for Hong Kong's legislative council was delayed for more than a year, with authorities citing concern over the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision to postpone the vote followed a sweeping crackdown on dissent in China's freest city, with

mass arrests and Beijing introducing a national security law that criminalized subversion, secession, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces with up to life in prison. That law has been used to pursue politicians, activists and even the media. Most of the city's pro-democracy politicians now are either in prison or in exile.

As Hong Kong's political freedoms all but disappeared, Beijing took aim at the city's parliament, known as the LegCo. The electoral changes have redrawn districts and cut down the number of candidates chosen directly by the public from 35 to 20.

Another 30 seats will be chosen by voting blocs linked to professions, and 40 seats will be appointed by a committee headed by Hong Kong's pro-Beijing leader, Carrie Lam.

Amid the clampdown, the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute found that only 52 percent of respondents plan to vote, marking a 30-year low for the legislative elections. Many voters are expected to boycott the vote or spoil their ballot, although urging others to do so could lead to arrest.

Six people have been arrested so far for urging others to boycott, according to local media, or simply reposting Facebook posts about a potential boycott. The government has also issued arrest warrants for former legislators Ted Hui and Yau Man-chun, who have called for a boycott of the vote from exile in the United Kingdom and Australia, respectively.

Even so, many feel it is the only option they have left.



## Bangladesh Marks 50 Years of Liberation War Victory

DHAKA (Dispatches) - Bangladesh has marked 50 years of victory over Pakistan in a bloody war for independence by hosting a military parade with the Indian president as a guest of honor.

Huge crowds paid tribute to Bangladesh's war heroes in the capital Dhaka and other cities on Thursday.

Veterans who lost their limbs in the war laid wreaths -- watched by thousands of solemn observers -- at the National Martyrs' Memorial, a concrete monument near Dhaka symbolising the campaign against Pakistani rule.

Women across the country wore saris of green and red, matching the national flag, as they watched concerts where musicians performed patriotic songs.

On December 16, 1971, Pakistani soldiers surrendered to a joint India-Bangladesh force, formally making Bangladesh a new nation under the leadership of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The war began on March 26 and continued for nine months -- killing as many as three million people -- before victory was declared in December, aided by India under then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Thursday's celebrations were attended by Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, who was on a two-day visit to the Muslim-majority country.

After arriving on Wednesday, Kovind held discussions with Bangladeshi President Abdul Hamid in Dhaka.

Arindam Bagchi, a spokesman for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, said the two leaders discussed issues of interest, including connectivity and trade, cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 and development partnerships.

Hasina and Bangladeshi Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen also received Kovind. "In 10 years, we will see very changed and different countries. We are looking at green technologies, renewables in this era of climate change to create employment, IT and digital platforms, startups," said India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

Bangladesh has held celebrations throughout the year to mark the golden anniversary of its independence, though some events were called off because of the coronavirus pandemic.



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S/p, Sauna  
J, balcony  
marble fl  
Fully Furn

**Shanon (adviser)**

**Jordan Villa (\$5000)**  
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5bdrs, S/p  
S, J, balcony  
parquet floor  
Fully Furn

**Parsian**

**Fereshteh (\$1800)**  
180sq.m, 3bdrs  
S/pool, S, J  
balcony, F.F

**Niavaran (\$2000)**  
220sq.m, 3bdrs, S/pool  
S, J, pkg, & F.F

**Velenjak Bldg (\$10000)**  
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## Saudi Inflation up 1.1% in November

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia's consumer price index increased by 1.1% in November from a year earlier and was 0.2% higher on the month, government data showed. The rise was mainly the result of higher prices for transport, which increased by 5.7% on the back of higher gasoline prices, up by 47.9% year on year, the General Authority for Statistics said.

"Transport prices were the main driver of the inflation rate in November 2021 due to their high relative importance in the Saudi consumer basket", it said. Saudi Arabia has said in its 2022 budget that the inflation rate this year is expected to rise to 3.3% on average, due to the fading of the base effect of a tripling of value added tax in July last the year.



## China Spending Data Adds to Worries Over Economic Rebound

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese consumer spending grew at a slower-than-expected pace in November, data released China's economy bounced back quickly from the pandemic after authorities contained Covid-19 with strict border controls and targeted lockdowns, but the recovery has been losing steam this year.

Economists said a current nationwide increase in Chinese coronavirus cases, and resulting containment measures, appear to have led to cautious consumer behavior just as a property market slump worsens.

Retail sales rose 3.9 per cent on-year, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), coming in below expectations and markedly slower than October's 4.9 per cent. "The international environment has become more complex and severe, and there are still many constraints on domestic economic recovery," NBS spokesman Fu Linghui told reporters. Fu added that China's economy faced the "triple pressures" of shrinking demand, supply shocks and weakening expectations, but that it was still expected to steadily improve. Economists Sheana Yue and Mark Williams of Capital Economics said in a research note that the pandemic "remained the key reason holding back a full recovery," blaming it for "weakness in the labor market."

The urban unemployment rate ticked up to five per cent last month, from 4.9 per cent.

Williams had said earlier that recent data indicated that consumers were choosing to travel less as virus cases rise, while warning of other "downbeat signals" such as slowing growth in sales during the annual November 1-11 shopping festival — China's answer to the US "Black Friday" consumer spree.

NBS spokesman Fu had told reporters previously that "current international environment uncertainties are mounting and the domestic economic recovery is still unstable and uneven." The economy grew only 0.2 per cent from the previous three months in the third quarter, the weakest since a historic contraction in the first quarter last year.

On the positive side, industrial production grew 3.8 per cent on-year in November, in line with expectations of a pick-up as disruptions from power shortages eased. Outages in recent months, which were linked to emission reduction targets, surging coal prices and supply shortages, had hit some factory production.

"Even though power supply shortages have eased recently, elevated input prices will linger... and sluggish domestic demand could be a longer-term drag," Moody's Analytics warned.

Fixed-asset investment growth slowed to 5.2 per cent in the first 11 months, with property investment rising six per cent — down from the January-October period — amid falling home sales and tight financing rules.

"Wage arrears in property-related sectors, especially the construction sector, could also weigh on consumption," said Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura. The Chinese property sector has been thrown into uncertainty as major developers such as the giant Evergrande Group struggle to dig out of crushing debt burdens.

China's economic growth rate came in below expectations at 4.9 per cent in the July-September third quarter on the property sector woes and energy crisis.

Policy makers have been grappling with a long-term slowdown in recent years, which follows decades of hyper-fast growth.

## Japan Admits Overstating GDP Component Data for Years

TOKYO (Dispatches) - The Japanese government overstated construction orders data received from the industry for years, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said, in a practice that may have had the effect of inflating the country's economic growth figures.

Kishida made the comment in a parliamentary session after an Asahi newspaper report that the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism had been "rewriting" data received from about 12,000 select companies since 2013 at a pace of about 10,000 entries per year.

It was not clear why the government started the practice of rewriting the data. It is also unclear how gross domestic product (GDP) figures may have been affected, though analysts expected any impact to be minimal particularly as the companies concerned were likely small in scale. "It is regrettable that such a thing has happened," Kishida said. "The government will examine as soon as possible what steps it can take to avoid such an incident from happening again."

He added that "improvements" had been made to the figures since January 2020 and that there was no direct impact on GDP data for fiscal year 2020 and 2021.

More broadly, the concern for some is the credibility of data upon which market participants rely for forecasting.

"The biggest problem is not the effect on the GDP per se but the damage to reliability of (official) statistics," said Saisuke Sakai, senior economist at Mizuho Research and Technologies.



"We can't help doubting this kind of issue could happen across government ministries," Sakai added, referring to another flaw in health ministry data found in 2018.

The survey compiles public and private construction orders which in the 2020 fiscal year totalled roughly ¥80 trillion (RM2.9 trillion), and is among data used to calculate GDP. For the survey, the ministry collects monthly orders data from construction companies through local prefecture authorities.

Companies that were late in submitting orders data would often send in several months' worth of figures at once at a later date, the Asahi said. In these instances, the ministry would instruct local authorities to rewrite the orders for the combined months as the figure for the latest, single month.

## Turkey's Currency Crash Hammers the Nation's Builders

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkish builders have postponed some projects and slowed the pace of others after a currency meltdown sent construction costs soaring, rattling an industry that has propelled the economy in recent decades, executives and officials say.

The industry, which accounts for about 5% of economic output, may cut jobs and is likely to shrink this quarter as builders await more stable prices, after the sector contracted 6.7% year on year in the third quarter, they told Reuters.

Costs for rebars, concrete and other construction materials have jumped more than 40% in the past three months, firms and a builders association say, mirroring the lira's 41% plunge to record lows against the dollar in the same period.

The currency slide has been driven by the central bank's aggressive monetary easing, a move sought by President Tayyip Erdogan but criticised by economists and opposition lawmakers.

The depreciation has stoked inflation, upended household budgets and caused disruption for construction and other businesses that rely on imported raw materials.

"We are seriously struggling with the cost increases," said Ibrahim Babacan, chairman of construction firm Babacan Holding.

His company has postponed one Istanbul condominium project until the second quarter of 2022, awaiting "more predictability to invest more", he said.

The firm was also considering slowing another project launched six months ago for 1,000 homes in a condominium "if the unpredictability prevails," he said, adding that investment for that project had ballooned from about 1 billion lira (\$72 million) to 1.6 billion lira in the space of six months.

The lira hit 14.99 to the dollar on Monday, losing half its value this year. Annual inflation hit 21.3% in November and the producer price index rose to 54.62%.

"The construction sector is facing three main challenges: cost increases, deteriorating balance sheets and delays in construction projects," said Nazmi Durbakayim, head of the Istanbul Constructors' Association.



## Afghan Central Bank Moves to Stabilize Collapsing Currency

KABUL (Dispatches) - Afghanistan's central bank said that it was working to ensure the stability of the afghani, after the currency lost almost 12 percent of its value against the United States dollar in a matter of hours amid a deepening economic crisis and soaring inflation.

The abrupt withdrawal of foreign aid following the Taliban victory in August has left Afghanistan's fragile economy on the brink of collapse, with prices for food, fuel and other basic staples rising rapidly out of reach for many.

The central bank issued a statement saying that it had held a number of meetings with foreign exchange dealers, representatives of commercial banks and the business sector to halt the fall in the afghani.

"Based on its strategic planning policies, Da Afghanistan Bank has always tried to avoid volatility that could be harmful to the purchasing power of the people," it said.

A meeting of the council of ministers also instructed the government's economic commission to "take urgent steps to ensure the stability of the afghani", Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement.

The crisis has accelerated sharply in recent days. On Monday the afghani, which traded at around 77 to the dollar before the fall of Kabul and at 97 a week ago, dropped from 112 to the dollar in the morning at Kabul's Sarai Shahzada money market to 125 by the afternoon.

On Tuesday it had recovered slightly and was being quoted at around 114-115 following the central bank move. "The Islamic Emirate said it would bring the dollar down and issue dollars on the market and it's changing now," a dealer at Sarai Shahzada said, using the name for the new Taliban government.

Rising prices

However, the pressure on the afghani has already had a stark impact on the prices of daily necessities in an economy where unemployment is widespread and where many who do have work have not been paid in months.

## Iraq Foreign Reserves Rise on Currency Devaluation, Oil Prices

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq's foreign currency reserves have risen to \$64 billion from \$48 billion since Iraq devalued its currency almost a year ago, Iraqi Central Bank Governor Mustafa Ghalib said.

Ghalib said the devaluation had helped bring the reserves up, and that Iraq's economy was much healthier than during the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, when oil prices plummeted and Baghdad was in preliminary talks with the International Monetary Fund for a possible loan.

"We were meeting sometimes twice a day with the IMF and the World Bank, but the Iraqi government's financial situation is much better now," Ghalib told Reuters in an interview at his office in Baghdad.

"Reserves might have decreased in the 30s of billions of dollars without the devaluation ... the rise in oil prices has also helped," he added.

Ghalib said he expected Iraq's 2022 budget to be based on an oil price of roughly \$45 per barrel. Iraq, OPEC's second-largest producer, draws around 95 percent of its state revenue from oil sales.

Iraq currently owes its neighbor Iran around \$5 billion for energy imports that are crucial for keeping the lights on, but Baghdad is abiding by U.S. sanctions that prohibit it from paying any cash to Iran, Ghalib said.

Iraq has paid some of those power debts in commodities and supplies, for example buying some \$250 million worth of Russian-made Sputnik COVID-19 vaccines for Iran, as well as making wheat purchases for Tehran, he said.

Ghalib confirmed reports that Iraq has opened an account with the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, saying it has deposited around \$100 million in the account for possible future payment for infrastructure projects.

## UK Inflation Spikes To Decade-High at 5.1%



LONDON (Dispatches) - British inflation rocketed to its highest level for more than 10 years on broad price gains, data showed today on the eve of a Bank of England interest rate decision.

The annual rate surged to 5.1 per cent in November after October's 4.2 per cent, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. November marked the highest level since September 2011, with inflationary pressures driven partly by jumping fuel costs.

The BoE, whose main task is to keep inflation close to a 2.0-per cent target, will tomorrow announce its latest monetary policy decision amid turmoil over the Omicron coronavirus variant.

"A wide range of price rises contributed to another steep rise in inflation, which now stands at its highest rate for over a decade," said ONS Chief Economist Grant Fitzner.

"The price of fuel increased notably, pushing average petrol prices higher than we have seen before.

"Clothing costs — which increased after falling this time last year — along with price rises for food, second-hand cars and increased tobacco duty all helped drive up inflation this month."

Inflationary pressures were also fuelled by the global supply crunch and jumping commodity prices.

"The cost of goods produced by factories and the price of raw materials have continued to increase significantly to their highest rate for at least 12 years," Fitzner said.

After countries emerged from pandemic lockdowns this year, companies struggled to meet demand for goods and services, sending inflation soaring.

Runaway energy costs, fuelled by reopening economies, have also propelled global inflation.

Central banks use interest rate hikes to try to damp high inflation, which is weighing on companies and consumers globally.

## Minister Stresses Scientific Plans To Improve Country's Technology

TEHRAN (IP) - Interior Minister said the administration has a comprehensive scientific plan which must be achieved through eligible management in science, research, and technology fields.

Speaking at the 22nd ceremony of honoring the country's selected researchers and technologists on Thursday, Ahmad Vahidi stated that the status of knowledge must be determined so that a value chain of command is formed. "Iran has huge maritime capabilities, so we must make good use of research and technology, which can meet many of the country's needs," Vahidi stressed.



## Scholz Vows to Launch Biggest Transformation of German Economy in a Century

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said his government would make Europe's largest economy fit for the future by fostering investment in climate protection and digitalization, vowing no one would be left behind in this major transformation.

The Social Democrat's first major address to parliament since replacing conservative leader Angela Merkel last week focused largely on domestic issues, emphasizing the immediate need to tackle the pandemic and the longer-term task of modernizing both the economy and society.

Yet the 63-year old, who has paid visits to Paris, Brussels and Warsaw since taking office, also underscored the importance of strengthening the European Union and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with transatlantic allies in the face of security threats like the Russian military build-up in Ukraine.

"We have about 23 years ahead of us in which we must and will get out of fossil fuels which means the biggest transformation of our industry and economy in at least 100 years," said Germany's new chancellor.

Scholz served as vice chancellor and finance minister in coalition with Merkel over the past four years. But he has vowed his unprecedented three-way coalition with the ecological Greens and liberal Free Democrats would be a "restart".

Germany needed to double renewable energy production by 2030 but also to expand infrastructure like charging stations for electric vehicles, he said.

His government would create the framework for most of the investment in Germany's future to be private, for example expanding the state bank's role in supporting start-ups.

Such a transformation could only work if there was social cohesion, Scholz said, highlighting plans to raise the minimum wage and make society more inclusive, for example through self-identification for transgender people and the liberalization of citizenship laws.

"We are an immigration country ... but we must work at becoming a better country for integration," he said, adding that his government aimed to make it easier for foreigners to come work in Germany.

Opposition lawmakers on both sides of the political spectrum focused their criticism of the new government on its proposals to fund public investments by taking on billions of euros in extra debt. Those on the far-left criticized it for not raising taxes on the wealthy and those on the right accused it of unsustainable financial policy.

Running at just under 70% of GDP, Germany's debt ratio is far smaller than that of France, on 115%, or the United States, on more than 160%, but Scholz has nonetheless faced criticism over his government's budget plans.

The opposition conservatives said on Tuesday they would file a complaint with the constitutional court about the new government's plans to tap unused debt from this year's budget for future spending on climate and economic transformation.



Scholz said his immediate priority would be tackling the pandemic, warning there would be "no red lines" for his government in fighting Germany's fourth wave and imploring citizens to get vaccinated.

He touched on foreign policy an hour into his speech, saying the success of the European Union was a top priority for Germany and his government would work to strengthen the bloc. One aim was to see qualified majority voting at the European Council expanded.

Scholz, who is due to attend his first EU summit as chancellor on Thursday, has big shoes to fill after Merkel helped navigate the bloc through multiple crises during her 16 years in office.

The two leaders share a down-to-earth, conciliatory manner and a calm rather than charismatic attitude - qualities on display in his sober speech on Wednesday in which he thanked Merkel for her handover that was, he said, a global lesson in citizenship.

On Europe's most immediate crisis, Scholz reiterated warnings that any violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity by Russia would have a high price although Berlin still wanted a dialogue with Moscow.

"We will speak with one voice here with our European partners and our transatlantic allies," he said.

## EU to Allow Joint Gas Buying, Plots Low-Carbon Gas Shift



BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - The European Commission proposed rules allowing EU countries to jointly buy strategic reserves of gas, under plans that would also bolster gas storage and aim to add more low-carbon gases to the network.

European Union countries including Spain, Greece and Romania have called for joint gas buying, a move they say would help shore up supplies. Gas prices surged to record highs in recent months, stoked by factors including high demand and lower-than-expected exports from Russia.

The European Commission has responded by proposing a system by which countries' transmission system operators (TSO) could jointly buy strategic stocks of gas, which could be used in an emergency situation of severe scarcity.

Participation would be voluntary and countries would first need to notify the Commission, sharing details including the volume to be bought, the operating procedures to activate the supply in an emergency, and expected costs and benefits.

EU countries would also need to include storage in their regional assessments of gas supply risks, including relating to foreign ownership of storage infrastructure, under the Commission proposal. If they identify risks, countries should consider measures such as obliging TSOs to buy strategic stocks.

Spanish deputy Prime Minister Teresa Ribera told reporters on Tuesday that joint rather than individual purchasing could help secure better terms in global gas markets.

Officials from some other EU states have said they do not expect their countries to take part in such a scheme.

The EU executive body's proposal will not take effect in time to combat the gas price spike this winter. It could face months of negotiations between the European Parliament and EU member countries, who must approve the rules and who disagree on the role of gas in the energy transition.

The proposal would require countries' long-term fossil gas contracts to end by 2050, the date by which the EU has pledged to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions. Fossil gas provides roughly a quarter of EU energy, with 90% of it imported.

## IMF Warns of Interest Rate Risks as Global Debt Hits \$226 Trillion

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Global debt surged to \$226 trillion last year, its biggest one-year jump since World War Two, and will be put at risk if global interest rates rise faster than expected and growth falters, the International Monetary Fund said.

In a blog posting, IMF officials said the COVID-19 pandemic caused debt to hit 256% of global GDP in

2020, an increase of 28 percentage points. Government borrowing accounted for slightly over half of the \$28 trillion increase, but private debt among non-financial corporations and households also hit new highs.

Advanced economies and China accounted for 90% of the debt rise, enabled by low interest rates. Debt rose less in other developing countries, which were hampered by often higher



borrowing costs and limited access to funding, the IMF said.

IMF Fiscal Affairs Director Vitor Gaspar and other officials said that higher interest rates will diminish the impact of increased fiscal spending, and cause debt sustainability concerns to intensify.

"The risks will be magnified if global interest rates rise faster than expected and growth falters," the officials wrote.

"A significant tightening of financial conditions would heighten the pressure on the most highly indebted governments, households, and firms. If the public and private sectors are forced to deleverage simultaneously, growth prospects will suffer."

## Iran, Oman...

FROM PAGE 1

According to media reports, various scenarios were designed and implemented by the two sides' vessels and naval aircraft, which indicated a major leap forward in Thursday's drills compared to the previous ones.

The drills came after the Iranian Navy chief expressed on Tuesday the country's readiness to host Oman's naval fleets for a visit to Iranian ports as a means to further promote bilateral relations.

Rear Admiral Shahram Irani praised the country's stable relations with Oman, saying all attempts by enemies to harm friendly ties between the two Persian Gulf neighbors have been to no avail and that security and peace were the main demands of regional nations.

Iran has also held joint naval exercises with other countries, including Pakistan and Russia. Iranian military experts and technicians have in recent years made great progress in developing and manufacturing a broad range of military equipment, making the armed forces self-sufficient in this regard. Iran has also held several military units with the aim of testing its combat preparedness in face of possible threats.

Iranian officials have repeatedly underscored that the Islamic Republic will not hesitate to build up its defense capabilities, emphasizing such abilities are entirely meant for the purpose of defense and will be never subject to negotiations.

## U.S. Blacklists...

FROM PAGE 1

In addition, the Commerce Department blacklisted a network of eight other companies providing material support to Iran's defense industry with exports through China, Malaysia, Turkey and Georgia.

The companies in that network include Hong Kong Cheung Wah Electronics Technology Company Limited, Hyper Systems Union Limited, Shenzhen Rion Technology, Thundsea Electric Limited, Genesis Engineering, Integrated Scientific Microwave Technology and SAEROS Safety ERO Company.

The blacklisting comes amid a broader tranche of Commerce Department sanctions

over the export of biotechnology to China reportedly "for military applications and human rights abuses".

"We cannot allow U.S. commodities, technologies and software that support medical science and biotechnical innovation be diverted towards uses contrary to U.S. national security," Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a statement.

"The U.S. will continue to stand strong against efforts by [China] and Iran to turn tools that can help humanity prosper into implements that threaten global security and stability."

## Tehran Criticizes UN...

FROM PAGE 1

He said that the new resolution is not based on facts but on purely politicizations, adding that Iran would continue its activities to promote human rights and would not be influenced by other countries' political actions and mechanisms.

"We will boast these political and dual-standards approaches to human rights advocates and recall to them that human rights are not a political issue in the service of their dual standards that they want to use as a tool against some countries, and in some cases, other countries are forced to remain silent to the violation of the rights of their people," the Deputy for International Affairs of Iran's Judiciary, Kazem Gharibabadi concluded.

## Vienna Talks to...

FROM PAGE 1

"We have made good progress this week," he stated, adding, "We will convene a Joint Commission today & will continue talks after a break of a few days."

The U.S., which is not allowed to directly participate in the talks as a result of its 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA, claims that it is willing to undo the withdrawal and repeal its "maximum pressure" policy against Iran.

Several rounds of consultations were held on Thursday on the sidelines of the Vienna talks as diplomats from the participating countries prepared to leave Vienna.

Russia's top negotiator, Mikhail Ulyanov, offered brief comments about the consultations via Twitter on Thursday night.

He said the original JCPOA signatories with the exception of Iran held a meeting earlier, adding, "The participants - both optimists and skeptics - were more or less relaxed. It seems to be a good sign."

He also said the JCPOA participants, without Iran, separately met for an informal meeting to discuss a number of issues on which "our views and assessments do not necessarily coincide."

"It was a useful exchange of views," the Russian diplomat noted.

According to Ulyanov, the delegations of Russia, China, and Iran also met once again on Thursday.

Bagheri Kani and Ulyanov's positive assessment of the progress made in the Austrian capital came days after they criticized the trio of European participants - France, Britain, and Germany - for playing a blame game and adopting illogical positions instead of playing a serious, constructive role.

In recent weeks, the so-called E3 has intensified pressure on Iran to return to full compliance with its nuclear obligations under the deal.

## President Blames...

FROM PAGE 1

"More than 30,000 Afghan children are now grappling with various kinds of disabilities as a result of the Americans' presence" in their country, Raisi said.

Iran's chief executive then underscored the need for the Afghan people to rule their own country, stressing that Afghanistan must be run by an independent government.

"There are nearly four million Afghan migrants in Iran and they have been received warmly. Western countries have made many promises to help Afghan migrants but have not helped them in any way," Iran's president said.

Elsewhere in his remarks, President Raisi said cooperation between Iran and Hungary in the fight against terrorism, narcotics, and organized crimes is to the benefit of both the region and the world.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran fights terrorism in practice but some [countries] only give lip service to anti-terror fight," Raisi said.

For his part, Szijjártó said he believes the West and NATO acted hypocritically on the issue of Afghanistan, expressing concern about the massive influx of Afghan refugees. Voicing satisfaction with the Iranian government's attention to boosting trade and economic relations with Hungary, the Hungarian minister said his country is working to improve the level of relations between Tehran and Budapest.

"In line with a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between Iran and Hungary, vaccines produced in both countries will be accepted [as effective] and starting tomorrow, Hungarians and Iranians can travel to each of the two countries after receiving their own country's domestic vaccines," the Hungarian minister added.

## London to Host Italy-Argentina Champions Clash

LONDON (Dispatches) - London will host the first edition of a new intercontinental final between the champions of Europe and South America when Italy face Argentina on June 1, UEFA said. Wembley is understood to be the preferred venue for the match known as the Finalissima.

The clash is part of a renewed memorandum of understanding between UEFA and CONMEBOL till 2028 which will cover two further editions of the showpiece match in addition to the game next year.

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## Modric, Marcelo Test Positive for Covid-19

MADRID (Dispatches) - Real Madrid players Luka Modric and Marcelo have tested positive for Covid-19, the La Liga club said in a statement.

Real did not say if the two were suffering any symptoms, but that they have been moved into quarantine in line with Spain's health protocol and will miss Sunday's league game against Cadiz.

The number of Covid-19 cases growing around Europe is also impacting the world of soccer. Valencia confirmed four cases on Monday, including their head coach and two players.

# Graham Nails 61-Footer Buzzer-Beater

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Devonte Graham made one of the greatest game-winning buzzer-beaters in NBA history, banking in a 61-footer to give the New Orleans Pelicans a thrilling 113-110 win over the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Just moments before Graham's heave from three-quarters court, the Thunder's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander nailed a deep 3-pointer of his own with 1.4 seconds left to tie the game. Gilgeous-Alexander's 30-footer came as he was avoiding a foul that would have sent him to the free-throw line for two shots.

According to ESPN, Graham's shot was the longest game-winning buzzer-beater in the NBA in the last 25 years. Additionally, ESPN noted that Wednesday's thriller marked the first game in the last 25 seasons to feature two tying or go-ahead baskets of at least 30 feet in the final five seconds of a game.

Before Graham's shot, Brandon Ingram (34 points) scored the Pelicans' previous 10 points. He tied the game with a layup and then put the visitors ahead with a steal and a dunk on the next possession. Jonas Valanciunas had 19 points and 16 rebounds for New Orleans, while Graham added 15 points and eight assists.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 33 points to lead the Thunder, making all nine of his free throws. In fact, Oklahoma City made all 19 of its free-throw tries -- 14 in the fourth quarter.

### Lakers 107, Mavericks 104 (OT)

Austin Reaves hit a 3-pointer with one second left in overtime and LeBron James scored 24 points as visiting Los Angeles beat Dallas for its third straight win.

Russell Westbrook had 23 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists for the Lakers, who rallied from a seven-point deficit midway through the fourth quarter and tied the game at 93 on Wayne Ellington's trey with two seconds left in regulation.

### Heat 101, 76ers 96

Gabe Vincent scored a career-high 26 points, draining a career-best seven 3-pointers, to lift Miami past host Philadelphia.

Vincent's trey with 39.2 seconds left snapped a 96-all tie and proved to be the winning shot after the 76ers had wiped out a 23-point deficit. The short-handed Heat played without Bam Adebayo, Jimmy Butler, Tyler Herro, Markieff Morris, Victor Oladipo and Caleb Martin. The only player in health and safety protocols was Martin.

## Hamilton Knighted Days After F1 Title Snatched Away

LONDON (Dispatches) - Lewis Hamilton may have missed out on a record-breaking eighth Formula One title in controversial fashion, but his glittering career was recognized as he was knighted by the Prince of Wales at Windsor Castle.

The 36-year-old was recognised in the New Year Honours list for services to motor sport following a year in which he eclipsed Michael Schumacher's all-time tally for Grand Prix wins and emulated the German by winning a seventh world title.

But on Sunday, championship rival Max Verstappen claimed his first Formula One world title after a season-long battle with Hamilton came down to a one-lap shoot-out in Abu Dhabi.

The deployment of the safety car after a late crash at the Yas Marina Circuit wiped out Hamilton's seemingly unassailable lead and Verstappen had the advantage as he was using fresher tyres.

On Wednesday, Hamilton was joined by his mother Carmen Lockhart and was all smiles as they posed for pictures in the castle's quadrangle.

However, he declined to speak to reporters afterwards.

Hamilton reportedly told his engineers "this has been manipulated" moments after the title was snatched away from him, but he was later magnanimous towards Verstappen in post-race interviews.

He is the fourth F1 driver to be knighted, following in the footsteps of Australian Jack Brabham and Britons Stirling Moss and Jackie Stewart, and the first to be awarded the honour while still competing.

## Uruguay Name Alonso to Replace Iconic Coach Tabarez

MONTEVIDEO (Dispatches) - Uruguay have named Diego Alonso as their new national team coach almost a month after sacking iconic veteran Oscar Tabarez, the Uruguayan Football Association (AUF) announced.

Tabarez, 74, was fired last month after a record-breaking 15 years in charge following a run of four straight defeats in which Uruguay conceded 11 goals and scored just one.



Bucks 114, Pacers 99

Milwaukee put together a 21-0 run in the fourth quarter to defeat visiting Indiana for the third time this season.

After Indiana took a 92-91 lead with just about 10 minutes remaining, the Bucks held the Pacers scoreless for nearly eight minutes to compile a rally that would hand them their ninth straight home win. With Giannis Antetokounmpo and Donte DiVincenzo in health and safety protocols and Khris Middleton

### Jazz 124, Clippers 103

Donovan Mitchell scored 19 of his 27 points in the second half and three other Utah players scored at least 20 points in a victory over Los Angeles in Salt Lake City.

Jordan Clarkson scored 21 points, Rudy Gobert tallied 20 points with 17 rebounds and Bojan Bogdanovic added 20 points to help lift the Jazz to their eighth straight win.

Marcus Morris Sr. led the Clippers with 24 points and eight rebounds. Eric Bledsoe contributed 21 points with eight assists as Los Angeles saw its four-game winning streak come to an end. Paul George (elbow) missed his fourth straight game.

### Hawks 111, Magic 99

Trae Young had 28 points, John Collins totaled 21 points and 10 rebounds and Atlanta ended a two-game losing streak with a win over host Orlando.

The Hawks led by as many 23 points in the second half as they returned to the 500 mark. Clint Capela contributed 11 rebounds, seven points, four assists and two blocks, and Cam Reddish went 3-for-6 from beyond the arc and had 13 points.

## Djokovic Crowned ITF World Champion For Record Seventh Time

LONDON (Dispatches) - Men's world number one Novak Djokovic has been named the 2021 ITF world champion for a record seventh time while women's number one Ash Barty has picked up her second crown, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) said on Thursday.

Djokovic, who finished the year as number one for a record seventh time, won the Australian Open, French Open and Wimbledon while he fell short at the Tokyo Olympics and the U.S. Open final in his quest for a rare golden slam.

The Serb was tied with American great Pete Sampras on six wins for the title first awarded in 1978. Barty, who won her first Wimbledon title this year and a bronze medal at the Olympics in mixed doubles, previously won the award in 2019.

"After such a rewarding year for me, my team, family and fans it is a great honour to be named the ITF World Champion for the seventh time," Djokovic said.

"I am very grateful and proud for the results I've achieved and fortunate I had a chance to compete for the Serbian national team, too."

Djokovic is tied with Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer on 20 Grand Slams and could make the record his own if he wins next month's Australian Open - a tournament he has won a record nine times.



## Nadal Playing Without Expectations in First Event

LONDON (Dispatches) - Rafa Nadal is set to make his comeback from injury at the Mubadala World Tennis Championship exhibition event in Abu Dhabi this week and the Spaniard said on Thursday he hopes he can get back to his best in time for next month's Australian Open.

Nadal has spent the last four months on the sidelines with a foot injury while he also struggled with back issues at the start of this year.

The 35-year-old Spaniard was knocked out at Roland Garros in the semi-finals before he was forced to pull out of Wimbledon, the Tokyo Olympics and the U.S. Open. He last competed in August at the Citi Open in Washington.

"I am feeling better, if not I will not be here. That's the goal, I know the comeback will not be easy," Nadal told reporters.

"I don't have big expectations now, but my only expectation is to be here, to play in front of a great crowd again, to feel myself competing again against great players and then enjoy.

"It has been a very tough period of time for me honestly, so just being here is a great news for me, just enjoying the situation and I really hope the foot is going to get better and better, to be again at the way and at the level I want to be."

Nadal is tied with world number one Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer on a record 20 Grand Slam wins.

An Australian Open champion in 2009 and also a four-times runner-up in Melbourne, Nadal said he hopes to play one tournament before the season's first Grand Slam from Jan. 17-30.

"I am fighting to be ready if the situation changes, and I feel myself healthy and I am able to play the tournament before Australia and be there for 20 days before the tournament, the Australian Open start, and practicing," he added.

"I have been doing a great job at home, practicing well with the right tactic and intensity, working a lot on my fitness."

## Vaccination a Sign of Solidarity

LIVERPOOL (Dispatches) - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said he believes taking the coronavirus vaccine is about "solidarity, loyalty and togetherness" as he revealed his whole squad has been at least double vaccinated.

From Wednesday, fans in the Premier League had to show proof of vaccination or a negative test result in the past 48 hours to enter stadiums as Britain battles a new wave of coronavirus cases caused by the new Omicron variant.

Two Premier League games have also been postponed in the past week due to multiple cases at Tottenham and Manchester United, while there have been smaller outbreaks at Leicester, Norwich and Aston Villa. "We are like the whole world concerned about it, but we do what we can. The vaccination status of the team is quite good," said Klopp at his pre-match press conference.

"Everyone here is at least double vaccinated and will get a booster as soon as possible.

"The whole vaccination thing is for me a question of solidarity, loyalty and togetherness and we have all the chance to help not only ourselves but other people as well by getting vaccinated.

"There are no two possible answers, there is only one answer. That is how I understand it."

A raft of measures were agreed among Premier League clubs on Tuesday to try and minimize disruption caused by Covid.



## Thiem Cancels Abu Dhabi Return

VIENNA (Dispatches) - Dominic Thiem said that he plans to return to competitive tennis in Australia in January after cancelling his participation at an exhibition tournament in Abu Dhabi this week.

"The ATP Cup is definitely the goal now. I hope I will be able to play there... I'm optimistic," the 2020 US Open champion told reporters.

The 28-year-old said his wrist had fully healed from an injury -- that had kept him off the court since August -- but he had yet to overcome a mental block when he is hitting the ball.

"The whole process is going according to plan. I am pain free. But I lag behind in training. I only go on the court when I can do 100 percent of the forehand, and I am currently at 80," he said.

The Austrian said he was currently back to training several hours a day but has not yet played against any of his teammates, leading him to call off competing at Mubadala World Tennis Championship this week.

Thiem said he would fly from Abu Dhabi to Sydney later this month.

After the ATP Cup, Thiem plans to compete in the first Grand Slam of 2022 at the Australian Open, which he has won nine times in the past. At the ATP Cup in Sydney, he is scheduled to play the opening match against defending champion and world number two Daniil Medvedev on January 2.

