

Health Ministry Announced on Sunday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic In Iran Increased to 131,083 With 50 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Board of Directors of the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID) during Their 72nd Annual Meeting on December 16 Elected Iran's Alireza Salamat as Vice President for a Three-Year Period

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Iran Rejects Europe's Unrealistic Claims

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry has rejected "unrealistic" claims by the three European signatories to the 2015 nuclear agreement that the Vienna talks were suspended at Tehran's request, saying it was a decision made by all the participating delegations.

"Despite the Western side's claim about Iran's request for a pause in the [Vienna] talks, these countries and other members of the P4+1 [group of countries] know very well that this time schedule is [the result of] a collective consensus which has been made by taking into account the European parties' Christmas and New Year holidays," Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

He added that it was not the first time that the Western parties have resorted to distorting realities and spreading disinformation, rejecting their latest claim as "unrealistic."

He emphasized that the three European parties to the multilateral nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), may have sought to make up for their previous demand for an early return to their capitals by making such an "unrealistic" claim.

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Tehran Calls on Paris to Revise Anti-Muslim Laws

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian rights official has called on France to revise laws targeting the Muslim minority across the European country after the French government ordered the closure of nearly two dozen more mosques in a fresh assault on freedom of religion.

Kazem Gharibabadi, the secretary-general of Iran's Human Rights Office, made the call in a Saturday tweet, days after France's Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin appeared on the French television LCI and said 21 mosques that showed signs of "extremism" had been closed in the country.

The minister said the French security forces had carried out raids at 99 mosques on suspicion of extremism, and closed 21 of the mosques in question while the process of closing 6 others was underway.

"In western approach, terrorists in Iran are human rights defenders and religious freedom in their own countries is tantamount to terrorism! The French Interior Minister: 21 mosques were currently shut and 6 will be closed soon based on laws against extremism and separatism," Gharibabadi wrote.

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Iran Calls for Urgent Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN – Iran's Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Hossein Amirabdollahian presenting four proposals to help the people of Afghanistan says the people of the neighboring state need urgent humanitarian assistance and the establishment of a financial fund among Islamic countries is necessary to achieve this goal.

The foreign minister made the remarks while speaking at the 17th Extraordinary Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member-states in Islamabad on Sunday aimed at reviewing developments in Afghanistan.

"I deem it necessary to begin by commending His Excellency Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the Honorable Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for calling and hosting this extraordinary session. What has gathered us here today is the prolonged crisis of Afghanistan, the dimensions of which are expanding on a daily basis," he said.

He went on to say the Islamic Republic of Iran considers sustainable security and political and social stability in Afghanistan to be in line with the collective interests of the entire region.

"We believe that sustainable security and political and social stability in Afghanistan is possible only through real collective participation and an inclusive and effective government in which all ethnicities and religions play a role," said the FM.

Hossein Amirabdollahian noted any postponement, will give the enemies of Afghan people the chance to activate an extensive network of social criminals through spreading the terrorism of Daesh, creating economic hardships, and critical conditions in livelihood, healthcare, and the basic needs of life.

He said furthermore, the enemies of the people of Afghanistan may seize the opportunity to disperse chaos, poverty, and famine after 20 years of occupation and destruction of any infrastructure and impose inefficiency on the authorities in Kabul and the people of this country.

The FM expressing his views said national reconciliation, national cohesion, and inclusive participation in government and governance, alongside the good faith and benevolent contribution of the neighboring countries, as well as regional and Muslim states in the fight against terrorism, insecurity, and instability in addition to providing humanitarian assistance, are the most urgent requirements for supporting Afghan people and guaranteeing a bright future for them.

He said during the past 40 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been hosting millions of Afghan refugees and immigrants. These refugees and immigrants are the product of US aggression and occupation.

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Israelis Warned Over Any Military Adventurism Against Iran

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Several current and former Israeli military officials and experts say the regime lacks the ability to act on its threats of launching an attack against nuclear sites in Iran, as the Islamic Republic has significantly promoted its defense capabilities.

Citing the Israeli officials and experts, The New York Times reported on Saturday that a wider attempt to destroy the dozens of nuclear sites in distant parts of the Islamic Republic would be beyond the current resources of the Israeli military.

Recently, as Iran and its partners in the 2015 nuclear deal are engaged in a diplomatic process to secure a removal of the U.S. sanctions and bring Washington back to the negotiating table, Israel has stepped up its military threats against Tehran in an attempt to derail the talks and prevent a potential revival of the deal that it has long tried to kill.

The regime has warned its allies that it would "take matters into its own hands" if the nuclear deal gets back on track in its original form and without getting new concessions from Iran.

On Saturday, an Iranian security official warned about "acts of mischief" by Israel against Iran amid "relatively successful" negotiations going on between the Islamic Republic and the remaining parties to the 2015 nuclear deal in Vienna.

Until now, Israel has tried to undermine Iran's nuclear energy program through a combination of aggressive diplomacy and clandestine terrorist attacks.

It has waged a shadow war through espionage, targeted assassinations, sabotage and cyberattacks — smaller-scale operations that it has never formally claimed.

Back in September, the head of the Israeli armed forces, Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi, said large parts of a military budget increase had been allocated to preparing a strike on Iran.

Early this month, David Barnea, the head of Israel's Mossad spy agency, boasted that the regime would do "whatever it takes" to stop Iran from what the regime calls making a nuclear bomb.

Minister of military affairs Benny Gantz also publicly announced during a visit to the US that he had ordered the Israeli army to prepare for a possible military strike on Iran.

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Rain of Baseless Accusations

Iranians and the world have not fully forgotten that when there is some international issue especially in the Middle East and the West Asia, the Westerners and their media begin consecutive accusations against the Islamic Republic of Iran to overshadow the main issue or to corner Iran for getting concessions.

In 2015 and on the eve of the nuclear talks in Vienna, the West attributed many incidents and terrorists acts to Tehran while they knew that they were false but the accusations were aimed at bullying Tehran for giving concessions during the talks.

Now that Vienna talks are approaching their final days and the signatories of the JCPOA seems to reach agreement, new accusation has been directed towards Tehran and this time the West and its allies are trying to create rift between Iran and Houthis in Yemen who are fighting for their independence.

Some media outlets claimed that Houthis have expelled Iran's ambassador from Yemen and they have tried to show that Houthis have turned against Tehran. While the truth is something else.

Reacting to this baseless news, Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh refuted the report and said the Iranian ambassador to Yemen is being taken back home to receive treatment for COVID-19.

In a tweet on Saturday, Khatibzadeh said Hassan Irloo needed urgent medical attention days after contracting the infectious disease.

The spokesman also expressed gratitude to the countries that helped the envoy's transfer to his homeland for treatment, praising their assistance as "humanitarian act."

"By the grace of God and with the help of some countries in the region, Mr. Irloo is being transferred to the country," he said.

Irloo officially began his diplomatic mission to Yemen in November 2020, in defiance of the United States' anger at the two countries' developing relations. The United States added him to the list of its sanctions a month later.

The pro-West media outlets cover such baseless claim on Iran's ambassador while they have forgotten their main task of freedom of expression and covering the crimes of the Saudi-led coalition forces against the Yemeni people.

The U.S. has played a key role in Saudi Arabia's war against Yemen, which has caused the world's worst humanitarian disaster in the impoverished Middle Eastern country.

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Int'l Transportation Expo Opens in Tehran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The 5th International Exhibition of Transportation, Logistics and Related Industries kicked off in Tehran on Sunday in a ceremony attended by Transport and Urban Development Minister Rostam Qasemi.

Over 285 domestic and foreign companies including 40 startups, 22 knowledge-based companies, and companies from Japan, China, Russia, Sweden, and France are participating in this year's exhibition, the portal of Transport Ministry reported.

During this exhibition, the latest achievements, services, and products of the country's knowledge-based companies, startups and companies, and organizations active in the transportation industry are also going to be unveiled.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 5th International Exhibition of Transportation, Logistics and Related Industries, Transport Minister Rostam Qasemi announced that the portal of the country's real estate and housing system is going to be launched in the near future.

According to Qasemi, the data provided by this system can be used as a basis for future planning.

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Alvand Destroyer, 4 Submarines Join Iran Army

BANDAR ABBAS (IRNA) - Alvand Destroyer and four submarines joined the Iranian Army Navy at a ceremony in southern Iran on Sunday.

Iran's Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani and Deputy Commander of Army for Coordination Affairs Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari were present in the ceremony. Head of factories affiliated to Army, Captain Siamak Pourgazazi, said at the ceremony that Alvand Destroyer has been overhauled by indigenous experts. Also, four submarines joined the Navy after renovated, Captain Pourgazazi added.

UN Official Thanks Iran for Generous Hosting of Afghans

ZAHEDAN (IRNA) - An official with the United Nations has depicted generous hosting of Afghan asylum seekers by the Iranian government and people as admirable, noting that international organizations are determined to assist Iran in this respect.

According to the Sistan and Baluchestan provincial government, Commissioner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi inspected construction operation of a temporary camp for Afghan asylum seekers in Niatak near Zabul, eastern Iran.

Grandi said that 11 million dollars has been allocated for construction of the site in Niatak and that more than half of the amount will be provided by the UN Refugee Agency.

According to the international official, the camp will provide Afghan asylum seekers with health, education and livelihood requirements.

Pointing to Iran's generous cooperation in giving refuge to the oppressed people from Afghanistan, he expressed gratitude for the humanitarian move by Iranians, adding that the United Nations is reviewing issues of different countries in dealing



with the refugees problems.

Moreover, the United Nations is striving to pave the ground for returning stability to Afghanistan.

Grandi wrote on his Twitter account on Sunday, "Iran, which has hosted Afghan refugees for decades, is now facing new arrivals from Afghanistan. I visited a site in Sistan and Baluchistan being built with UNHCR's help to receive some of them. Iran needs more support for all the Afghans it hosts, including long-term refugees."

a delegation, Filippo Grandi arrived in Sistan and Baluchestan Province on Saturday. He was welcomed by provincial officials and held talks with deputy governor general and then paid a visit to the construction site of a camp for Afghan refugees in Niatak.

Iran FM, Pakistan PM Call for Closer Bilateral Relations

ISLAMABAD (IRNA) - Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Hossein Amirabdollahian and the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan have reaffirmed their mutual determination to further develop bilateral relations.

Amirabdollahian met with Imran Khan on Sunday on the sidelines of the emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Islamabad.

Members of the Iranian delegation, Pakistan's National Security Adviser (NSA) Moeed Yusuf, and Ambassador of Iran to Pakistan Mohammad Ali Hosseini were also present on the occasion.

Recalling his bilateral meeting with President Ebrahim Raisi on the sidelines of the SCO Summit, the Prime Minister said Pakistan attaches great importance to its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The two sides reviewed the latest developments related to bilateral cooperation, cross-border trade, and the development of border markets between the two countries.

Referring to the situation in Afghanistan, Imran Khan called for consensus between regional and international actors to help overcome the humanitarian and economic crisis in the neighboring country.

He stressed the important role of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Turkish FM Hails Friendly Relations with Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The foreign minister of Turkey hailed what he called "friendly and prime" relations with neighboring Iran.

Foreign Minister of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu and his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian held a meeting on the sidelines of an emergency session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Islamabad on Sunday.

In the gathering, the top Turkish diplomat lauded his country's friendly and prime relations with Iran.

He also conveyed Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's warm greetings to Iranian officials.

The two senior diplomats further held consultations about the regional developments and made arrangements for the Turkish president's visit to Tehran in future.

The foreign ministers of the OIC members have gathered in Pakistan for an emergency meeting focusing on the crisis in Afghanistan.

Islamabad Favors Broader Economic Ties With Tehran

SHIRAZ (IRNA) - Pakistan's ambassador to Iran said here on Saturday that his country is after broadening economic interactions with Iran up to an annual five billion dollars a year.

Ambassador Rahim Hayat Quraishi made the comment in a meeting with the governor-general of Fars province after referring to the two nations' joint cultural, historical and literary backgrounds.

The people of Pakistan profoundly and affectionately love the Iranian people and grow up with the literary works of Hafez, Sa'adi, and Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (Letter of the Kings).

He welcomed Fars province governor's proposal for establishment of a committee to pursue bilateral ties, and proposed that introducing a connection between the Fars Governorate and Pakistan Embassy will facilitate that process.

The ambassador said that each year a large number of Pakistani citizens travel to India for liver surgery and keeping in mind the two countries' status for acquiring



visas for Pakistani citizens is problematic for them, which is why the patients in need of liver transplant can be hospitalized in Shiraz.

He said that Fars province can in this respect play an effective role in strengthening Iran-Pakistan relations.

The governor-general of Fars province, for his part, referred to the share of cultural, historical, religious, and literary backgrounds of the people of Iran and Pakistan, as well as the love that has taken shape accordingly between the two nations.

He argued that the conditions are such that a bright future for relations between Fars province and Pakistan is quite predictable.

Mohammad-Hadi Imaniyeh said that the world's largest transplant center has been established in Fars province, adding that the Shiraz Liver Transplant Center, too, can both be the host of Pakistani patients and accepting your country's medical students and medical interns.

He also proposed exchanging agricultural products and fruits between the province and Pakistan.

Iran-IAEA Current Issues Being Followed Up as Usual

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran said that the current issues between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency are being followed up as usual.

Behrouz Kamalvandi, the spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said that the country made the replacement of damaged cameras at the Tsai Complex in Karaj conditional on three preconditions: "judicial-security investigations into the dimensions of sabotage, condemnation of these sabotages by the IAEA and technical-security investigation of new cameras by Iran before installation."

Kamalvandi added: "Iran's voluntary action to issue a license to replace these cameras is not in the form of a new agreement that was made after obtaining these three preconditions, and today (Sunday) the process of technical-security inspections of cameras by Iran is scheduled to begin."

The spokesman of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran said: "The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), as a specialized and technical institution, has continuous interactions with the International Atomic Energy Agency within the framework of safeguards, and these interactions should not take a political form.

Kamalvandi said: "In the media space and with the aim of psychological operations, the Western and Israeli media are trying very hard to politicize Iran's interactions with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and unfortunately there are tendencies in the IAEA in this regard."

Iran Confirms Omicron Cases in Country

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian Coronavirus Task Force has confirmed cases of the Omicron strain of the deadly virus in the country.

In an emergency meeting of the Coronavirus Task Force held at the health ministry, it was confirmed that cases of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 have been observed in Iran, said the ministry's Public Relations Office.

In the meeting, participants also exchanged views on drawing up new health protocols.

They stressed the necessity of the injection of the third dose of the coronavirus vaccine as well as wearing face masks and observing other health protocols in order to contain the spread of the new strain of the virus.

Meanwhile, a member of the task force reiterated that Omicron turns into the predominant variant of COVID-19 in 17 days while the Delta strain took 100 days to become the dominant breed of the virus.

He said the Omicron variant is likely to have entered Iran as borders are open and flights are running.

"Observations show the number of Omicron infections is increasing in different countries day by day, and there is a possibility that it is present Iran," said he task force member.

"If observed in the country, Omicron can change the situation from blue to red; so, health directives should be taken more seriously," he said.

Iran Pioneer in Discovering Narcotics in World

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Secretary of Iran Drug Control Headquarters Brigadier General Eskandar Momeni said that Iran is pioneering in the world for fighting narcotics.

Momeni said that the UN has reported that 90% of opium, 70% of morphine, and 20% of heroine in the world are discovered by Iran.

He added that about 1,200 tons of illegal drug were discovered in Iran last year.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Momeni said that presence of the US in Afghanistan is the cause of increase in narcotics production.

He noted that production of narcotics in Afghanistan experienced a 50-fold rise in 2018 compared with 2000.

Iran, Sweden Discuss Yemeni Crisis



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Ali-Asghar Khaji, a senior advisor to Iranian foreign minister, and Sweden's Special Envoy to Yemen Peter Semneby, in a meeting in Tehran on Saturday, reviewed the latest ongoing developments in Yemen.

The two diplomats explored ways for further cooperation between Iran and Sweden on the crisis in the tiny Arab country.

Khaji underlined the need for finding a political solution to the Yemeni crisis while stressing the need for intra-Yemeni talks and the formation of an all-inclusive government in the country.

The Swedish envoy, for his part, reiterated Iran's role in restoring peace to Yemen and the entire region.

He also elaborated on the efforts made by the United Nations to establish a ceasefire in the country, and lift the economic siege on the Yemeni people and restoration of political dialogue.

Navy to Show Iran's Authority in World Arena

BANDAR ABBAS (IRNA) - Deputy Commander of the Iranian Army for Coordination Affairs Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari said on Sunday that Iran's Navy is trying to show the authority of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the world arena.

Admiral Sayyari made the remarks in the ceremony of joining Alvand Destroyer, four submarines, two choppers, and planes to the Iranian Navy in Bandar Abbas.

"Iranian ships, nowadays do their voyage to the Gulf of Finland and St. Petersburg waters, that is 50,000 nautical miles, and in the long voyage, Iranian ships entered the world's strategic areas," he added.

Deputy Commander of the Iranian Army for Coordination Affairs addressing a ceremony added that nowadays the Iranian Navy's 79th fleet is conducting the expedition at high seas.

Iran's Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani and Deputy Commander of Army for Coordination Affairs Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari were present in the ceremony.

Iran-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Europe Corridor to Be Activated

TEHRAN (MNA) - The new corridor of Iran, Azerbaijan Republic, Georgia, the Black Sea and Europe will be activated this week, said Iranian Ambassador to Baku Seyed Abbas Mousavi.

After the revival of the ECO Corridor (Pakistan, Iran, Turkey) and the trial launch of the International North-South Transport Corridor (Finland, Russia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran, the Persian Gulf and India), a new corridor (Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Black Sea and Europe) will be activated this week," said Mousavi in a Sunday tweet.

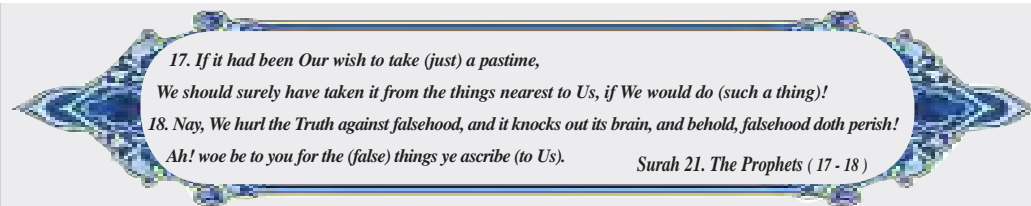
The Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad (ITI) corridor has been formed based on agreements in the 10-nation ECO, a key economic bloc that seeks to facilitate trade and investment in the region. The corridor, known as ECO's east-west route, is expected to deepen economic relations between Iran, Turkey and Pakistan as founding members of the bloc.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a 7,200-km-long [1] multi-mode network of ship, rail, and road routes for moving freight between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe. The route primarily involves moving freight from India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia via ship, rail and road. The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali, etc.



PRAYER TIME

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| ■ Noon (Zohr) | 12:02 |
| ■ Evening (Maghreb) | 17:14 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr) | 05:40 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Sunrise | 07:10 |



Devaluation of Turkish Currency a Threat to Iran's Exports

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Head of Iran's Export Confederation Mohammad Lahooti says current devaluation of Turkey's national currency lira has boosted the country's exports and it can affect Iran's important export markets like Iraq and Russia and it is a serious threat.

Lahooti said that devaluation of lira can help Turkey's exports to increase, and since Turkish exporters are supported by the Turkish government, the impact of devaluation of lira for exports will be doubled and this can definitely help Turkey to overshadow Iran's export markets in countries like Iraq, Russia and the CIS states.

He said that one of Iran's toughest and serious rivals in exports especially in Iraq, Afghanistan and CIS countries except Armenia is Turkey and due to massive investment in industrial and logistical sectors in Turkey as well as the final product exports of this country has always been the main rival of Iranian exporters and in some cases they have overshadowed Iran's export markets.

He went on to say that since Turkey's policy is an export-centered one and its required infrastructures in the banking, transportation, international relations and



packing are different from Iran, the devaluation of lira can definitely boost Turkey's exports because Turkish exporters are supported by the government.

Lahooti reiterated that Iran's Trade Promotion Organization can thwart this impact by giving export incentives to exporters in the markets where Turkey is Iran's main rival. He said Iran's agro and food stuff can be affected more by this development in Turkey as Turkey is the main rival of Iran in exports of agro and food products in the region.

The Turkish lira plunged as much as 5.6% to a record low against the dollar on Thursday after the central bank slashed its policy rate in line with an unorthodox economic program set out by President Tayyip Erdogan.

The lira touched a low of 15.689 after the move, before trimming losses to 15.58

Political Issues Halted Iran Electricity Exports to Oman



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Wire and Cable Manufacturers Technical Committee of Iran Electrical Industry Syndicate blames political issues for the halt in electricity export to Iraq and said in the project in Iraq they were forced to get their money in Iraq national currency dinar instead of international currencies due to sanctions.

Speaking to ILNA, Alireza Kolahi talked about the condition of electricity and equipment exports and said that export of electrical energy is of the state contracts that it has its own issues and currently the private sector is not present in it due to some concerns of the energy ministry but exports of technical and engineering services and goods also have its own challenges.

He went on to say that export of equipment is carried out on three bases of business to consumer, business to business or business to government. He added that in the field of electricity, the sales are 90 percent carried out in the business to government basis and the remaining is done in business to business.

Kolahi also noted that currently good political relations and lobbies of the governments of some neighboring states that they themselves own companies are very stronger than Iran's government. He said for example Turkey's government itself is involved in big projects and of course this method has recently begun in Iran, especially in some target markets Iranian exporters have had good support of embassies.

He also termed banking problem a challenge ahead of exports and said projects need guarantee letters and transfer of money and currently due to sanctions and lack of connection to the FATF, it has become a difficult and expensive job for Iranians. He noted for example in the project in Iraq, Iranian companies were forced to deal in Iraq's national currency due to sanctions and therefore the companies suffered 10 percent loss due to the difference between the official and free rates.

Kolahi also said although some problems in Iraq and Afghanistan were to some extent resolved but in some countries like Kazakhstan due to lack of banking connection, Iranians were eliminated from big projects.

He went on to say that Iran could export millions of dollars of wire but it is currently barely around \$100m, adding that big international companies are not ready to cooperate with Iran.

He admitted that Iranian wire and cable manufacturers export their products under the name of other countries like Turkey and they even have to pay the custom tariff of Turkey in order to export the products under the name of Turkey and this hurts the trade.

He also said political issues have put a brake on Iran's exports to Oman, adding that talks are underway for exports to Qatar and Kuwait.

Iran to Pay Chinese, Turkish Builders in Crude, Minerals

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran will pay builders from China and Turkey in crude or minerals rather than cash if they become involved in housing projects in the country, says a member of the country's Supreme Housing Council.

Ahmad Donyamali said that Iran is in talks with Chinese and Turkish construction companies to get them involved in a tiny segment of its massive project to build four million affordable houses in the country in the next four years.

However, Donyamali said that a main condition for working with those companies will be to avoid paying them in cash because of restrictions facing Iran in banking and crude export issues.

"In talks with foreign companies we are seriously discussing the oil barter mechanism and we have declared that the condition for partnership ... is that we will not pay any cash," the official was quoted as saying by semi-official ILNA news agency.

The comments are the latest to come from Iranian government officials about the need to use crude shipments to fund key projects or to pay for imports of basic goods into the country.

The oil barter mechanism has been highlighted as a major instrument to offset the impacts of American sanctions on Iran's economy, especially since an administration came into office in August on promises that it will seek to neutralize the sanctions.

Donyamali said that Chinese or Turkish builders will have a small share of Iran's affordable housing project, saying government's policy will be to award around 90% of the contracts to Iranian companies despite their more expensive bids.

He said paying foreign builders in crude or minerals shipments was not yet final, saying main government departments have to reach a decision on the issue.

Opportunities Must Be Offered for Foreign Investment

TEHRAN (IP) - Minister of Mine, Trade and Industry says that in order to attract foreign investment, opportunities must be transparently designed and offered to foreign investors.

Speaking on the sidelines of a meeting with the country's investors, Raza Fatemi-Amin said: "Domestic investment is more accessible because the investors are familiar with the country's statutes, but someone who intends to invest abroad first needs to know what opportunities are in that country to invest in."

Fatemi-Amin referred to other points in investment fields and said that all investment licenses must be prepared beforehand for individuals to facilitate investment opportunities.

Iran's Minister of Mine, Trade, Industry added: "To facilitate investment, we should also amend the regulations pursued in the Ministry of Mines, Trade and Industry to remove obstacles in the field of investment, both at national and international levels."

The Ministry of Mine, Trade, Industry is to establish a convergence between its Trade Organization and the Investment Organization in the Ministry of Finance to facilitate investment, continued the minister.

He recalled that the trade of the international economy

is not just the exchange of goods but also a combination of investment and marketing:

"In the international economy, investment is not defined as just buying and selling of goods, but a chain that includes the exchange of goods and technology and joint ventures."

In his remarks, Reza Fatemi-Amin told IP that special investment measures should be taken, such as creating employment opportunities for developing suitable investment opportunities.

"So far, a proper pathology of investment has been done, so we act based on 6 axes for the realization of investment," pointed the minister, adding: "Clear financing of each project from the beginning, preparation of investment packages for projects and opportunities, expansion of public participation and coordination between project stakeholders from government and its institutions to the private sector and the people, are other important axes in activating investment."

The minister called on the relevant agencies to identify the investment obstacles to regulate investment facilitation.

Fatemi-Amin pointed out: "The particular investment program of each city and province will be prepared according to the existing capacities and potentials."

First Transit Cargo From Ukraine Arrives in Iran

ABADAN (IRNA) - The first transit cargo worth at 17 billion rials arrived from Ukraine in Arvand Kenar Port in southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan, the head of the port customs office announced on Sunday.

The cargo will be dispatched to Kuwait after regular formalities, Ali Farhoudi said, according to provincial headquarters supervising customs offices.

The customs office of Arvand Kenar opened about four months ago after three years of shutdown.

Arvand Kenar is located 45 km south of Abadan, an important city in Khuzestan.

The port is the nearest one to Kuwait and Iraqi port of Faw.

Serious Step of MSC for Reducing Water Consumption

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN - Head of steelmaking and continuous casting unit of Mobarakeh Steel Company (MSC) explained the new projects of this unit for reducing water consumption in the process of production and said that the water consumption of this unit last year was exactly one cubic meter per ton of steel and this figure has reduced to 0.95 cubic meter per ton of steel in the first half of the current year.

Gholamreza Salimi said that the figure means the water consumption trend in this unit is going downward and will continue. He said the projects in the steelmaking and continuous casting of Mobarakeh Steel Company for reducing water consumption are divided into two sections. He added that some projects are carried out in long-time basis and some other are related to the production process.

He then delved into details of the projects and how they can help reduction in the water consumption by resolving the problems.

He reiterated that to re-use water which is poured out of the ponds and to recycle it is one of the methods for reducing water consumption. Salimi noted that by increasing hydro sites for casting unit, the water consumption can reduce by 50 percent in this unit.

Iran Ranks 1st in Neuroscience Field in Region

TEHRAN (MNA) - Advisor to the Iranian Cognitive Sciences & Technologies Council said Saturday that Iran ranked first in the region in the field of neuroscience and cognitive neurology.

Mohammad Taghi Joghataei said that based on the study and assessment carried out by international organizations, Iran ranks first in neuroscience and cognitive neurology in the region.

He also added that Iran currently ranks 19th in the world in the field of neuroscience, 13th in behavioral neuroscience, 17th in the cellular and molecular field and 12th in artificial intelligence and neuroscience.

Joghataei, who is also the President of the Iranian Neuroscience Society (INSS), stated that the 10th Neuroscience Congress 2021 is slated to be held on Dec 22-24, 2021 virtually in Tehran.

He underlined that the 10th Neuroscience Congress 2021 will focus on brain mapping, computational neuroscience, epilepsy, brain stimulation, neurotechnology, brain damage disorders, neurogenetics, cognitive rehabilitation in the elderly and coronary heart disease and its impact on the nervous system.

During the conference, which will be participated by Iran, Turkey and Georgia, two specialized panels of regional associations on neuroscience will be held as well, he added.

Joghataei underlined that all the speeches and articles submitted to the congress will be presented virtually.

Basic Goods Unloading at Ports Up 25%

TEHRAN (MNA) - Unloading of basic goods at the port of Iran has risen 25 percent in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 21), as compared to the previous year, the head of Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) announced.

The highest amount of import of basic goods was related to Imam Khomeini port (in southwestern Khuzestan province), Ali-Akbar Safaei noted.

"Currently, 17 ships are unloading and loading goods at the same time," he said, adding, "We need 75,000 trucks to distribute basic goods."

"We unload the basic goods in the shortest time and we do not have to worry about the supply of the basic goods", the official added.

"We will use the power of all knowledge-based companies to supply spare parts as well as low-sulfur fuel," the PMO head said, adding, "One of our main plans is to increase and prosper trade."

According to the data released by Transport and Urban Development Ministry, 16.85 million tons (mt) of basic goods were cleared from the country's ports in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-November 21).

Paris Cancels New Year's Eve Firework Display

PARIS (Dispatches) - Paris on Saturday said it was cancelling its traditional New Year fireworks as Europe braced for tighter curbs to rein in the spread of the new strain of the coronavirus fuelling a resurgence in Covid-19 cases worldwide.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen has warned the Omicron coronavirus variant could be dominant in Europe by mid-January. Many countries have decided to reintroduce travel restrictions and other containment measures since it was first detected in South Africa last month. "With regard to the acceleration of the pandemic, and the risks related to the end-of-year festivities, authorities should impose significant restrictions," France's scientific panel said.



Death Toll From Philippines Typhoon Rises to 18

MANILA (Dispatches) - The death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year has risen to 18 as the disaster agency warned Saturday of "severe damage" in the hardest-hit areas.

More than 300,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Typhoon Rai ravaged the southern and central regions of the country, knocking out communications in many areas and toppling concrete power poles.

Rai was a super typhoon when it smashed into the popular tourist island of Siargao on Thursday, packing maximum sustained winds of 195 kilometres per hour (120 miles per hour). Its wind speeds eased to 150 kph as it barrelled across the archipelago, ripping roofs off houses, uprooting trees and littering streets with debris.



Taiwan Referendums Fail in Major Setback for Opposition



TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwan's opposition suffered a major setback after voters rejected four referendums it had championed as a show of no confidence in the government.

The defeat of the referendums comes as Taipei faces growing military and political pressure from Beijing, and is a boost for President Tsai Ing-wen - re-elected by a landslide last year on vows to stand up to China.

China claims the democratically ruled island as its own territory.

Taiwan's main opposition party the Kuomintang, or KMT, which traditionally favours close ties with Beijing, is hoping to make a comeback in key mayoral elections late next year.

Saturday's two most contentious referendums asked whether to ban imports of pork containing the leanness-enhancing additive ractopamine on safety grounds, and whether to relocate a planned liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal to protect a reef. The government approved the pork imports last year, hoping to remove a stumbling block for a free trade deal with the United States, where ractopamine is widely used, and show it is a reliable trade partner.

It says the LNG terminal will secure energy supplies for the semiconductor-producing island, hit by power cuts in May.

Government officials have said the LNG terminal will be moved further offshore to minimise the impact on the reef, but Saturday's referendum sought a complete relocation.

Turnout on Saturday was low, but the government welcomed the referendums' defeat.

"Taiwan's people want to go out into the world, and are willing to actively participate in the international community," Tsai told reporters, referring to the pork vote. Her government hopes the result will also bolster its case to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP.

Asked about the vote, an official at the American Institute in Taiwan, the de facto U.S. embassy in the absence of formal diplomatic relations, said: "We will continue to seek constructive engagement with Taiwan on issues that affect exports of U.S. food and agricultural products."

KMT Chairman Eric Chu, who assumed the role in September on a promise to revitalize party fortunes, apologized for the failure.

"Let's not be discouraged. Let's continue to work hard. We will always stand with the people. We must always represent the people's opinions and oppose the democratic dictatorship of the government," he said.

Cold weather could have been to blame for the low turnout, he added.

The KMT had also asked voters to approve a third issue, to restart a mothballed nuclear plant, saying that was the best way to ensure energy supplies. The government wants to phase out nuclear power.

Afghan Taliban Leaders Appeal for Help as Migrant Crisis Looms

KABUL (Dispatches) - Senior Taliban officials appealed on Saturday for international help to combat a deepening economic crisis that has fuelled fears of another refugee exodus from Afghanistan.

The comments, at a special meeting to mark the U.N.'s international migrants day, underlined the new Islamist Taliban government's push to engage with the world community, four months after they seized power in Kabul.

The movement's deputy Foreign Minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, said it was the responsibility of countries like the United States, which have blocked billions of dollars of central bank reserves, to help Afghanistan recover after decades of war.

"The impact of the frozen funds is on the common people and not Taliban authorities," he told the conference, attended by representatives of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR, the United Nations refugee organization.

U.N. bodies estimate that millions of Afghans could face hunger over the winter without urgent help, but aid has been hampered by international unwillingness to engage directly with the Taliban, in part because of concern over rights for women and political inclusion.

The abrupt withdrawal of foreign aid following the Taliban victory has pushed Afghanistan's fragile economy close to collapse.

Millions are without work and the banking system is only partially functional.

"If the political and economic situation doesn't change, there will be more migration," Stanikzai said.

The United States has issued guidance that would permit personal cash remittances to Afghanistan but it has not relented on its refusal to release the \$9 billion in central bank reserves or lift sanctions on a number of Taliban leaders.

Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met representatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross on Saturday in Islamabad, ahead of a meeting of foreign ministers from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discuss the situation in Afghanistan.

He said the Taliban welcomed international humanitarian organizations and gave assurances that they would be allowed to work unimpeded.



Explosion at Pakistan Bank Branch Kills at Least 15

KARACHI (Dispatches) - At least 15 people were killed and 16 others injured in an explosion on Saturday at a bank branch in Karachi's industrial area, police said.

A senior police officer said the blast at a branch of Habib Bank Limited, Pakistan's largest lender, could have been caused by a gas leak, Sarfaraz Nawaz also told reporters that the building appeared to have been constructed over a sewage drain.

"Our explosives teams are at work trying to ascertain the nature of the blast, but apparently the structure was constructed on a drain and gas could be a probable cause," he said.

In statement on Twitter, Habib Bank said an explosion had damaged its branch and caused casualties and injuries.

"Our sympathies are with the bereaved families," it added.

A petrol station located next to the bank within the Sindh Industrial Trading Estate and cars parked nearby were badly damaged. Television footage showed the bank's floor ripped apart, exposing twisted iron bars.

"So far 15 people have died and 16 were brought injured to hospital," Karachi's administrator Murtaza Wahab said in a tweet.

Another senior police officer, Sharjeel Kharal, told reporters it was not immediately clear how many were dead or injured in the explosion as the bank had a skeleton staff on Saturday.



Chad to Deploy Additional 1,000 UN Peacekeepers to Mali

PARIS (Dispatches) - Mali's foreign affairs ministry has said that Chad planned to deploy 1,000 additional UN peacekeepers to Mali to reinforce its troops battling armed groups in the former French colony.

"The deployment is part of a bilateral framework at the request of the Government of Chad for reinforcing its contingent in Northern Mali following the reconfiguration of the Barkhane force," the ministry said in a statement on Saturday.

Chadian soldiers make up nearly 1,400 of the UN's 13,000-troop peacekeeping force in north and central Mali, where an armed rebellion has escalated despite a nine-year effort by an international coalition to subdue it.

The upcoming deployment will reinforce those and other Chadian troops as France scales back its 5,000-strong regional counterterrorism mission known as Barkhane.

Earlier this week, French troops left the city of Timbuktu where, in 2013, former French President Francois Hollande declared the start of France's military offensive in Mali.

In June this year, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a major troop drawdown after a military takeover in Mali in August 2020 that overthrew the

elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

France has already closed three bases in northern Mali this year. By next year, it is set to have about 3,000 soldiers in the Sahel, down from 5,100 at the height of its deployment.

Chad government spokesperson Azem Bermendoea told the Reuters news agency on Saturday that additional troops would soon be sent to Mali, but he declined to specify the size of the contingent or a deployment timeline.

"After the withdrawal of French troops, we found it urgent to strengthen the operational and tactical capacity of our contingent while waiting for the Malian army and the (UN) Blue Helmets to reorganise their deployments," Bermendoea said.

Chad deployed some 1,000 soldiers to the tri-border region of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali in February to reinforce national armies after France first publicly mulled reducing its regional presence.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali, or known simply as MINUSMA, began its deployment to the troubled Sahel state in 2013. It has 16,500 personnel, including 10,700 troops, according to its website.



Biden Urged to End Trump-Era Border Policies



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - More than 240 pro-migrant organizations urged President Joe Biden to terminate two border policies that block or reduce access to asylum in the United States, saying the policies violate U.S. law and international treaty obligations.

Biden, a Democrat, came into office in January promising to roll back the hardline immigration legacy of his Republican predecessor former President Donald Trump, but advocates - many who supported his candidacy - have grown frustrated with the slow pace of reform. In a letter addressed to Biden and other top officials, the groups called the policies "illegal."

While Biden tried to end one of the policies, known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), a federal judge ordered its reinstatement in response to a lawsuit. But advocates criticized the administration for then expanding the MPP program to apply to all migrants from the Western Hemisphere when it restarted in early December.

Under the MPP program, non-Mexican asylum seekers caught at the U.S.-Mexico border can be sent to Mexico to await U.S. court dates, potentially facing kidnappings and other harms in dangerous border towns.

In restarting MPP, the administration said it would add new humanitarian protections, like health screenings, access to COVID-19 vaccines and lawyers. But a report released on Thursday by the advocacy group Human Rights First said those promises had not materialized. The organization interviewed 16 returned migrants and found most said they were never informed of their right to speak with a lawyer while in U.S. custody. The report also said U.S. officials had not adequately screened migrants for health vulnerabilities that might allow them to remain in the United States, among other criticisms.

A White House spokesperson said the administration was required to comply with the court-ordered restart "in good faith" and still disagreed with the policy.

As of Thursday, 161 migrants had been returned to Mexico since the MPP restart, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). All returns took place in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Elahieh Apt (\$2200)
220sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, Sauna
J, balcony
marble fl
fireplace
Brand new
pkg, & F.F

Shanon (adviser)

Jordan Villa (\$5000)
2000sq.m
6bdrs, S/p
Sauna, J
balcony, pkg
green yard
Nicely Furn

Niavaran (\$2300)
200sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, F.F

Velenjak bldg (\$8000)
5storey, 20bdrs, & pkgs

Farmanieh (\$2800) 300sq.m, 4bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, F.F
Zaferanieh (\$3000) 320sq.m, 4bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, F.F

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Russian Gas Exports to Europe Via Yamal Pipeline Drop Sharply

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian natural gas deliveries to Germany through the Yamal-Europe pipeline dropped sharply, data from German network operator Gascade showed. Flows at the Mallnow metering point on the German-Polish border fell to an hourly volume of 1,217,444 kilowatt hours from an average of 10,000,000 kWh/h on Friday and around 12,000,000 kWh/h on Thursday. It was not immediately clear why the flows were down. Russian gas exporter Gazprom did not immediately reply to a request for comment.



Erdogan Pledges 15m Covid Vaccine Doses for Africa

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkey will send 15 million Covid-19 vaccine doses to Africa, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced at a major summit of the continent's leaders, adding that the low vaccination rates there were a blot on humanity.

Ankara has invested heavily in developing trade and diplomatic ties with the world's poorest continent during Erdogan's rule as prime minister and then president since 2003.

In opening remarks to dozens of African leaders and ministers, Erdogan said Turkey would ship 15 million Covid-19 vaccine doses to Africa, where cases are rapidly rising and vaccination rates are low.

"We are aware of the global injustice in accessing the Covid-19 vaccine and Africa's unjust treatment," Erdogan said.

"It is disgraceful for humanity that only six percent of Africa's population has been vaccinated."

Turkey is developing its own vaccine, known as Turkovac, which is in the process of receiving emergency use approval.

Following any authorisation, it will be shared with Africa, Erdogan said.

It was not immediately clear from his remarks whether Turkey would first send some doses of the internationally approved vaccines it was currently using, including those developed by Pfizer-BioNTech.

"In order to contribute to the resolution of this issue, within our means, we plan to share 15 million vaccine doses in the period ahead," he said.

The number of new infections in Africa has shot up by 57 percent in the past week, according to AFP calculations based on official figures.

South Africa is the hardest-hit country on the continent, where infections are soaring because of the new Omicron variant.

The highly mutated strain was first detected in South Africa and Botswana last month, and is believed to be more contagious than other variants.

Erdogan said Turkey wished to strengthen relations with Africa in a wide range of areas including health, defence, energy, agriculture and technology.

"The real potential between us goes far beyond the targets we have," he said.

Trade between Turkey and Africa has grown in the past 20 years from from \$5.4 billion to \$25.3 billion (4.8 billion euros to 22.5 billion euros) last year.

And in the first 11 months of 2021, it had reached \$30 billion, Erdogan said.

Turkey has set an even higher target of trade volume for the future: \$75 billion.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Friday 16 African heads of state were attending the summit as well as 102 ministers including 26 top diplomats.

The Turkish leader has also held one-on-one meetings with African heads of state including Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari.

Fitch Downgrades Sri Lanka as Default Fears Mount

COLOMBO (Dispatches) - International ratings agency Fitch downgraded cash-strapped Sri Lanka due to mounting fears of a sovereign default on its US\$26 billion foreign debt, but Colombo insisted it will meet its obligations.

The downgrade by one notch from "CCC" to "CC" came a day after Sri Lanka reported a 1.5 per cent contraction in the third quarter of this year as a foreign exchange crisis wrecked its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Fitch said the downgrade reflected its view of an "increased probability of a default event in coming months" as Sri Lanka's foreign reserves slumped to US\$1.58 billion at the end of November.

"We believe it will be difficult for the government to meet its external debt obligations in 2022 and 2023 in the absence of new external financing sources," the agency said in a statement.

However, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka accused Fitch of making a "reckless" downgrade ignoring "positive developments" in the economy.

"It must also be noted that the government has given a clear assurance that Sri Lanka will honor all debt obligations in the period ahead," the bank said in a statement.

Fitch noted Sri Lanka has to repay two international sovereign bonds of US\$500 million in January 2022 and US\$1.0 billion in July 2022 with little improvement in capital inflows into the nation of 21 million people.

It added foreign-currency debt service payments, including principal and interest, total US\$6.9 billion for next year, the equivalent of nearly 430 per cent of the island's official gross international reserves as of November 2021.



The island's tourism-dependent economy was hammered by the pandemic and authorities responded to falling foreign exchange reserves with a broad import ban, triggering shortages including food, fuel and medicines.

The crisis has spread to manufacturing and services, and agriculture has also suffered badly due to a ban on agrochemical imports.

Sri Lanka's economy had grown 12.3 per cent in the second quarter but a third wave of Covid-19 infections that forced a 41-day curfew saw services and industries heavily affected, the statistics office said on Friday.

Its foreign reserves of \$1.58 billion at the end of November have decreased from US\$7.5 billion when the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa took over two years ago.

Europe's Car Industry Faces Worse Year Than 2020

PARIS (Dispatches) - Europe's automobile industry is facing a worse year than the Covid-battered 2020 with sales falling a fifth straight month amid a global shortage of electronic chips used in new models.

European sales fell back 20.5 per cent year-on-year to 713,346 units, the worst slump since 1993, the European automobile manufacturers association (ACEA) said.

Although economic activity bounced back relatively strongly in the first 11 months of the year compared with last year, car sales on the continent stagnated, falling 0.04 per cent.

"The impact of the microchip shortage on vehicle output dragged the EU's year-to-date sales performance into negative territory despite 2020's record low base for comparison," the ACEA said in a statement.

Several major markets also saw double-digit falls in November sales — German registrations dived 31.7 per cent, Italian and Polish sales were off by a quarter and Spain and Belgium were down 12.3 and 17.1 per cent while France limited the fall to 3.2 per cent.

Bulgaria, Ireland and Slovenia saw small gains, by contrast.

Taken January-November, three of the four largest EU markets posted gains, even so on 2020, Italy rising 8.6 per cent, Spain 3.8 per cent and France 2.5 per cent.

But Germany saw a fall of 8.1 per cent compared with 2020.

European market leader Volkswagen saw January-November sales drop back 1.6 per cent to 2.2 million with Skoda suffering in particular although strong showings from Seat and Porsche compensated.

Germany to Grant €13.5m to Help Pakistan Fight Climate Change

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Germany will provide a grant of €13.5 million to Pakistan for growing a billion trees in a bid to ramp up the South Asian country's fight against the adverse impacts of climate change, threatening food security and ecosystems.

Ministry of Economic Affairs and KfW Development Bank of Germany has signed a financing agreement for Billion Tree Afforestation Support Programme (Phase-1), according to an official statement.

Mian Asad Hayaud Din, Secretary Economic Affairs Division and Sebastian Jacobi, Country Director, KfW signed the agreement in Islamabad.

With the funds provided by German, KfW Development Bank will support Pakistan's efforts to reduce the impacts of climate change by planting 10 billion trees, introducing best practices on native and invasive plant species, training on firefighting techniques and provision of equipment, and women/youth engagement and empowerment.

The project will result in a clean and green environment through reduction in carbon emissions and also bring about socioeconomic benefits to local communities.

While addressing on the occasion, Sebastian Jacobi, Country Director KfW, said his institution was actively supporting the Government of Pakistan in the energy and climate sector with an active portfolio of more than €300 million.

"KfW has provided funding for construction and rehabilitation of three hydropower projects, construction of power substations, installation of micro-hydel power plants, and also providing micro-financing for solarisation of homes in off-grid areas," Jacobi said.

He further said these efforts would result in bringing sustainable and lasting positive change in the lives of deserving communities in the country and help mitigate the risks of climate change.

Mian Asad Hayaud Din, Secretary, Economic Affairs Division highlighted the government had set ambitious targets to mitigate the impact of climate change.

"In this regard, continued support of Germany is highly commendable and these investments will lead to a better and healthy future for the generations to come," said Hayaud Din.

Germany is also considering providing another €20 million for the next phase of the project. Together, these fundings will, result in sustainable forest management by the government institutions and create jobs especially for women and youth.

Argentina Budget Defeat to Affect Debt Negotiation

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Argentina's government suffered an embarrassing defeat as its 2022 budget was rejected by parliament, with Economy Minister Martin Guzman insisting this would "affect" its debt renegotiations with the International Monetary Fund.

Guzman said the defeat "weakens us as a nation-state within Argentina and before the world. And that hurts us." The defeat came just hours before President Alberto Fernandez held a virtual meeting with IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva.

"I spoke with the head of the IMF @KGeorgieva," said Fernandez on Twitter.

"We both recognized the unexpected problem of the budget rejection but promised to continue working fully focused on bringing about an agreement that does not compromise the continuity of the inclusive economic recovery."

The proposed budget envisaged 2022 growth of four percent, compared to around 10 percent in 2021, and a relative controlling of inflation at 33 percent, well below this year's 50 percent.

But it was defeated by 132 to votes to 121 in the lower house Chamber of Deputies, where the governing center-left alliance is in the minority. It is the first example of the problems that face Fernandez during the final two years of his mandate following last month's midterm legislative elections defeat.

Having already been in the minority in the Chamber of Deputies, Fernandez's Frente de Todos (Everyone's Front) coalition also lost control of the upper house Senate.

Guzman said the rebuttal "signifies rejecting the macro-economic program that is the basis for the negotiations with the IMF to refinance the absurd and damaging \$44 billion debt."

Fernandez's government has been attempting to renegotiate the terms of the IMF debt -- acquired under his liberal predecessor Mauricio Macri -- almost since the moment he took office.

At the beginning of the week, Guzman said Argentina can "in no way amortize the repayments of around \$18 billion in 2022 and \$19 billion in 2023."

Even so, Georgieva wrote on Twitter that she had a "very good meeting with President @alferdez (Fernandez) on advancing our work to sustain #Argentina's recovery and address its economic challenges."

Already in recession since 2018, the coronavirus pandemic plunged Argentina into an even worse economic crisis.

The country has one of the world's highest inflation rates and a poverty rate of 42 percent for a population of 45 million.

The opposition dismissed the proposed budget as a pipe dream. "Guzman proposes an idyllic scenario with growth and low inflation, ignoring the critical situation the country is going through with a fiscal deficit it cannot finance, inflation over 50 percent, an exchange rate gap of 100 percent and a fiscal deficit of three points of GDP," said opposition lawmaker Luciano Laspina, explaining the rejection.

The blow means Argentina will have to extend the 2021 budget, but paradoxically that could afford it greater leeway in the allocation of resources since the executive will not be constrained by voted budgetary allocations.

Italy Agrees Tax Cuts, Energy Price Curbs in 2022 Budget



ROME (Dispatches) - The Italian government on Friday reached a deal with the ruling parties to cut income and business taxes by about 7.5 billion euros (\$8.50 billion) next year, according to an amendment to the 2022 budget before parliament.

Rome will also allocate around 4 billion euros to curb energy bills for households and companies, the amendment said.

The budget, which parliament must approve by Dec. 31, targets the 2022 deficit to fall to 5.6 percent of national output from 9.4 percent this year, reflecting strong economic growth and the end of stimulus measures introduced at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With international energy prices rising, Mario Draghi's government has earmarked an additional 1.8 billion euros to try to rein in utility bills, the budget amendment shows. That comes on top of the 2 billion euros previously set aside. A separate measure allows households to pay electricity and gas bills related to the first four months of next year in 10 instalments, to dilute the impact on family finances.

The tax cuts will be implemented mainly through a reorganisation of income tax (IRPEF), reducing the number of tax rates to four from five and increasing some tax-related benefits for low-earners.

The first tax band on annual income of up to 15,000 euros will be left at 23 percent. The second band, between 15,000 and 28,000 euros, will be lowered to 25 percent from 27 percent.

The third band, on income from 28,000 to 50,000 euros, will get the most substantial cut, to 35 percent from 38 percent.

The fourth band, on income from 50,000 to 75,000 euros, will rise from 41 percent to 43 percent. This is the rate that is currently applied on income above 75,000 euros, effectively cancelling the fifth income tax band. The tax reform also exempts more than 800,000 self-employed workers from paying a regional business tax (IRAP).

Official Recommends 3-Week School Lock Down in Iran

TEHRAN (IP) - A member of the Scientific Committee for the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus advises health officials to close schools for three weeks.

At the end of a meeting of the Scientific Committee for the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus, which was held on Sunday morning at the Heart Hotel in Tehran, Majid Mokhtari

responded to Iran Press question and said: “Although the Scientific Committee for the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus is not deciding on COVID issues in Iran, the task force is advised to close schools for three weeks to curb Omicron variant.”

He noted that the COVID outbreak is still serious and advised Iranians to inject a second dose and then a third dose of the vaccine.



Omicron Cases Doubling at Least Every 3 Days

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Global health agency says there are ‘still limited data’ on the clinical severity of new variant, which has so far been reported in 89 countries.

The Omicron variant of the coronavirus is spreading significantly faster than the Delta strain in countries with documented community transmission, with the number of cases doubling in 1.5 to 3 days, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said.

In an update on Saturday, the United Nations’ health agency said Omicron has been reported in 89 countries.

The highly mutated variant is spreading rapidly in countries with high levels of population immunity, the WHO said, but it is unclear if this is due to the virus’ ability to evade immunity, its inherent increased transmissibility or a combination of both.

The agency designated Omicron a variant of concern on November 26, soon after it was first detected by scientists in South Africa, and much is still not known about it. Scientists remain uncertain how dangerous it is, but early data suggests it can be more resistant to vaccines and more transmissible than the Delta variant.

“There are still limited data on the clinical severity of Omicron,” the WHO said in its update. “More data are needed to understand the severity profile and how severity is impacted by vaccination and pre-existing immunity.”

It added, “There are still limited available data, and no peer-reviewed evidence, on vaccine efficacy or effectiveness to date for Omicron.”

On Friday, a non-peer reviewed study by Imperial College London said the risk of reinfection with Omicron is more than five times higher and it has shown no sign of being milder than Delta.

The research cast doubt on the cautious optimism of some experts, based primarily on anecdotal accounts from South Africa, that the new strain may not be as virulent and not overwhelm healthcare systems.

The study was released as British officials reported record COVID-19 cases for the third consecutive day, with a rise to 93,045 new infections, while French Prime Minister Jean Castex likened Omicron’s spread in Europe to “lightning”.

On Thursday, United States President Joe Biden warned of a “winter of severe

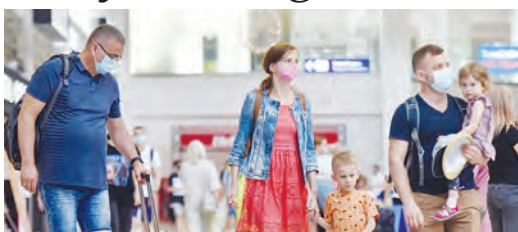


illness and death” for those unvaccinated against COVID-19, while health ministers at the G7 bloc of advanced economies called Omicron the biggest threat to global public health.

It came after WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Omicron “is spreading at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant” and lamented that some people were dismissing it as a mild variant.

“Surely, we have learned by now that we underestimate this virus at our peril,” he told a media briefing on Tuesday. “Even if Omicron does cause less severe disease, the sheer number of cases could once again overwhelm unprepared health systems.”

Turkish Tourism Industry Expects 10m Early Bookings for 2022



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkish tourism industry expects around 10 million early reservations for 2022, Turkish Travel Agencies Association (TÜRSAB) Chairperson Firuz Bağlıkaya said.

Bağlıkaya told Anadolu Agency (AA) that Turkey is one of the countries that recovered early in tourism after following the pandemic period full of lockdowns and travel restrictions.

“We have made a significant increase (in tourism figures) compared to 2020. Our expectation in 2022 is to get very close to 2019 figures,” he said, and that it seems this will be achieved easily.

“I think we will have a good season for a few years in a row that is full of records starting from next year,” he added.

Bağlıkaya also pointed out that the average per capita expenditure of tourists has increased compared to 2019.

“In 2019, the average expenditure per capita was around \$660, it now reached over \$800,” Bağlıkaya said.

Stating that the market diversification in tourism is important for them and that currently, the markets that send the most tourists are Russia, Ukraine, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Russia, Ukraine and Middle Eastern countries were a lifeline during the pandemic period, he said, and they continue to offer relief to the sector.

Referring to early booking campaigns, Bağlıkaya said that the reservations continue from almost everywhere, especially from the U.K., Germany, Ukraine and Russia.

“The next season looks good. It looks much better than this year. Our expectations on bookings from abroad are high,” he said.

For domestic tourism, there are campaigns that allow local tourists to take advantage of early booking opportunities, the tourism official said, noting that there are also discount campaigns of up to 50%.

Bağlıkaya noted that if travelers who want to visit in July or August make a reservation today, they can avail discounts of up to 70%.

Mete Vardar, chairperson of the Turkey-based tour operator, Jolly Tur, also said that the industry gained significant experience during the pandemic process.

Emphasizing that there was mobility in tourism thanks to the domestic market during the COVID-19 period, Vardar stated that they are hopeful for the next season.

Vardar said they have already been receiving high demand from abroad,” adding: “Therefore, early booking is extremely important. It will provide an advantage not only in price but also in location.”

South Korea Can Offer More to Global Chip Supply Chains

SEOUL (Dispatches) - A senior U.S. diplomat said that South Korea has “much more to offer” to the global economy in terms of semiconductor supply chains, as he called for stronger bilateral ties during economic talks held in Seoul.

Jose Fernandez, undersecretary of state for economic growth, energy and the environment, made the remarks during a meeting with Second Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-moon for the sixth Senior Economic Dialogue (SED) meant to discuss cooperation on global supply chains, energy, infrastructure and technology.

“Semiconductor shortages that were caused by Covid-19 put a spotlight on Korea as a leader and an essential partner in global semiconductor supply chains,” Fernandez said in his opening statement at the session.

“We firmly believe Korea has much more to offer to the global economy. You’ve got world class technical expertise, high-quality transparent investment and foreign legislation and more.

“This kind of cooperation brings enormous value from Korea to its partners and to the multilateral organizations, with which it interacts,” he added.

Washington seeks to bolster its relationship with Seoul and other economies in the region amid an intensifying US-China rivalry, reports Yonhap News Agency.

Choi took note of the Joe Biden administration’s initiatives, including the “Indo-Pacific economic framework”, which he said seems to be the U.S.’ “umbrella” initiative.

Iran Calls for Urgent...

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“The current chaos in Afghanistan is also imposing a daily wave of immigrants on Iran due to a sense of insecurity, terrorism, and financial and economic crises among the people of Afghanistan. More than five thousand Afghans are now entering Iran on a daily basis,” said Amirabdollahian.

He added while Iran has not received any international assistance for this particular purpose so far. The Islamic Republic of Iran will continue supporting and delivering humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan out of Islamic and humanitarian motivations.

He said in addition to countries that are the real root causes of the current circumstances, all of us, especially Muslim states, should provide all the people in Afghanistan with necessary and continuous assistance and support.

The FM said since the beginning of the recent developments, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made efforts to keep its borders open and even facilitate human and commercial movements. Moreover, during the past one hundred days, Iran has delivered more than 13 humanitarian aid consignments to various cities of Afghanistan and has provided enormous support to the government and people of Afghanistan to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, including vaccination of the Afghan nationals in Iran.

Amirabdollahian said the Islamic Republic of Iran submits the following proposals to this important meeting in support of the people of Afghanistan:

First, Muslim states should encourage the ruling

establishment in Afghanistan and all parties to form an inclusive government.

Second, the people of Afghanistan are in dire need of urgent humanitarian assistance. The formation of a financial fund among the Muslim states seems necessary to realize this objective.

Third, it is also necessary to release Afghanistan’s assets.

Fourth, undoubtedly, the UN member states and its Secretary-General can play a leading role in contributing to the formation of an inclusive government and assisting the people of Afghanistan, and preventing a new humanitarian catastrophe.

“In conclusion, I would like to address the current critical situation in Palestine. I believe that the return of all Palestinians to their homeland and the formation of a Palestinian government ruling across its historical motherland with the holy Quds as its capital, should remain a top priority of the OIC,” said the Iranian foreign minister.

He said the experience of the process of reconciliation with the fake regime of Israel and the normalization of relations indicates that the issue of Palestine can be resolved only if the illegal occupation of this Islamic land is truly and completely terminated.

“Once again, Iran emphasizes on its proposal as a democratic solution to hold an inclusive referendum with the participation of all the main and true residents of Palestine including Muslims, Christians, and Jews,” said Amirabdollahian.

Int’l Transportation...

FROM PAGE 1

“We are waiting for the permit to launch the real estate and housing system. People should register in this portal because this system can provide a good infrastructure for future planning,” the minister said.

Emphasizing on strengthening the transportation sector, Qasemi said: “If the transportation sector grows, it can account for up to 20 percent of the country’s gross domestic product.”

According to the minister, developing the infrastructure in this sector could increase the transit of goods through Iran and consequently raise the country’s revenues. He further stressed the need for encouraging the private sector to participate in transportation projects like freeways, and said: “We are looking to make transportation projects attractive for the private sector.”

“We have many semi-finished projects both in the railway and in the roads sectors, the completion of which is important for us. Our country has a special geopolitical position, which has made the completion of railway projects and semi-finished roads important to us,” the official said.

Regarding the modernization of the road transportation fleet, Qasemi said: “there are currently 400,000 trucks active across the country of which we plan to renovate 160,000.”

Rain of...

FROM PAGE 1

Saudi Arabia launched the war in March 2015 with the goal of bringing former Yemeni president Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi’s government back to power and crushing the popular Ansarullah resistance movement.

According to a UN report released last month, the death toll from the war will reach 377,000, including those killed as a result of indirect and direct causes, by the end of 2021.

While the Saudi-led coalition forces have failed any success against the Houthi forces and the spiritual bond between Tehran and Houthis is strong, enemies of this tie have begun this dirty game of creating rift to tarnish the tie between Iran and Yemen.

Of course this plot will also be foiled and the truth will prevail but it is crystal clear that all of these baseless claims like Iran’s meddling in Yemen or in other countries are aimed at overshadowing the Vienna talks in order that the Western parties can increase the pressure on Tehran for getting concessions and stopping the expansion of Iran’s influence in the region which is on the rise and all nations in the region and even the world follow its anti-hegemony and dependence-seeking spirit.

After making noise over Iran’s nuclear installations which was in vein, now the issue of Iran’s ambassador to Yemen has been raised and we should wait for more such baseless charges against Tehran in upcoming days until the Vienna talks end because all of them are aimed at weakening Iran’s position but the West has forgotten this issue that Tehran will never retreat from its freedom-seeking principles and the country is ready for attribution of any charge and claim and for foiling them.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has always supported the oppressed people in the world either spiritually or financially and it will continue it because the school of the Islamic Revolution has found its way in the world and many freedom-seeking people in the world are joining this school no matter what religion they have because they are united in content but may differ in the form of fight against oppressors and world hegemony.

Iran Rejects...

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The Iranian spokesperson urged the European trio to show seriousness and determination to contribute to the progress of the talks, instead of insisting on their “threadbare and useless blame game.”

Khatibzadeh’s remarks came after senior European diplomats on Friday claimed that they were disappointed by Iran’s decision to request a pause in the Vienna talks amid what they described as “technical progress.”

During the seventh round of the Vienna talks, Iran presented two draft texts which address, separately, the removal of U.S. sanctions and Iran’s return to its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA. Tehran also said it was preparing a third draft text on the verification of the sanctions removal.

The Chinese envoy to the United Nations and other international organizations in Vienna, Wang Qun, said on Friday that Beijing expects that the important consensus reached in this round will be translated into a final agreement as soon as possible.

He added that Beijing looks forward to the early resumption of the eighth round of the Vienna talks on removal of anti-Iran sanctions.

Tehran Calls on Paris...

FROM PAGE 1

“We call on France to revise its anti-Muslims laws that target France’s 5.5 million minority Muslims, their worship places, educational and other centers,” he added.

The hostile move by the French government is seen as yet another Islamophobic attack targeting the country’s persecuted minority Muslim community, which has in recent years faced deep marginalization and a witch-hunt campaign.

Earlier in the year, the lower house of the French parliament approved a controversial bill targeting religious freedom and stigmatizing Muslims, while tightening rules on the funding of mosques, associations, and non-governmental organizations belonging to Muslims.

The bill also targeted Muslim girls under the age of 18 by banning the wearing of hijab - a headdress worn by Muslim women - in public places.

More than 5 million Muslims live in France, the largest Muslim population in Europe.



Woods Has Long Way to Go

MIAMI (Dispatches) - Tiger Woods is looking forward to his first competitive rounds since suffering career-threatening leg injuries in a February car crash, but he said the PNC Championship family tournament is no gauge of his readiness for the PGA Tour.

"I still have a long way to go in this rehab process," said the 15-time major champion, who suffered compound fractures in his right leg after the car he was driving in a Los Angeles suburb veered off the road and flipped several times.

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Lyon Bar Fans From Away Matches

PARIS (Dispatches) - Ligue 1 club Lyon have barred their supporters from attending away matches until further notice following the latest incident involving their fans led to the abandonment of Friday's French Cup match with Paris FC.

The club said in a statement on Saturday that "more than ever we must eradicate hooliganism and ban all those who are enemies, by their acts, of football."

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SPORTS

MONDAY DECEMBER 20, 2021

Curry Scores 30 Points In Win Against Celtics

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry followed up his record-setting night on Tuesday with an encore performance of 30 points in Boston as the Golden State Warriors held on to beat the Celtics 111-107.

Curry's Warriors survived to win a tight game down the stretch after Golden State blew a 20-point lead against the undermanned Celtics.

One game after breaking Ray Allen's all-time record for threes, Curry was facing Allen's former team at the Boston Garden arena.

With his second-made basket on Wednesday, Curry eclipsed Allen's record with his 2,974th career three-pointer with 7:33 left in the opening quarter.

The historic moment came at Madison Square Garden where the game was halted as Curry shared an embrace with teammates, his father, Dell Curry, and Allen.

On Friday, Curry nailed consecutive threes on his first two shots of the game, giving the Warriors an 11-point lead just four minutes in.

Andrewiggins added 27 points, Andre Iguodala chipped in 12 points, Draymond Green tallied a team-high eight assists for the Warriors, who have won five of their last six games.

Jayson Tatum had 27 points, eight rebounds and six assists to lead Boston, which has dropped five of its last seven.

Boston was missing starting centre Al Horford and forwards Grant Williams, Jabari Parker, Juancho Hernangomez and Sam Hauser, all because of the league's Covid-19 measures.

Celtics guard Dennis Schroder also missed the game with a non-Covid illness. Boston guard Romeo Langford left the game with neck pain in the second quarter and did not return.

Warriors star Klay Thompson (right Achilles tendon) remained sidelined with the injury despite being recalled from farm team affiliate Santa Cruz.



In Florida, Max Strus and Gabe Vincent delivered career high performances as the Miami Heat rolled over the short-handed Orlando Magic 115-105.

Strus scored 23 of his 32 points in the opening half and Vincent finished with 27 as Miami sent the Magic to their seventh straight loss.

The Magic had just 12 players on their roster because of injuries and Covid-19 protocols. Mo Bamba, Terrence Ross, Moe Wagner, R.J. Hampton and Ignas Brazdeikis were placed into the league's health and safety protocols.

Another six players were sidelined by injury, including leading scorer Cole Anthony (ankle) and rookie guard Jalen Suggs (fractured thumb).

Strus made a career-high eight threes and Vincent sank four, while Miami converted 19 of 35 triples.

P.J. Tucker scored 15 points, Dewayne Dedmon finished with 13 points and Kyle Lowry totaled 11 points and a season-high 15 assists.

Franz Wagner paced Orlando with 27 points.

Miami led 93-83 entering the fourth quarter, as Vincent netted 18 third-quarter points.

The Heat came into Friday's game with six players out, including leading scorers Jimmy Butler (tailbone), Tyler Herro (quadriceps) and Bam Adebayo (thumb).

Eriksen Leaves Inter Milan By Mutual Consent

ROME (Dispatches) - Christian Eriksen has terminated his contract with Inter Milan by mutual consent six months after suffering a heart incident whilst playing for Denmark at the European Championships.

The 29-year-old has been fitted with a pacemaker, ruling him out of playing in Italian football, but leaving the door open in other championships.

"Inter and Christian Eriksen have decided to terminate the current contract by mutual consent, as he's officially not allowed to play in Serie A with defibrillator," the Italian club said.

Eriksen will now be free to consider his options with other potential clubs, and has recently been in training with his boyhood club Odense.

The former Tottenham man suffered a cardiac arrest in Denmark's opening game at Euro 2020 against Finland in Copenhagen on June 12 and had to be resuscitated on the pitch.



Mbappe to Collaborate With Dior

PARIS (Dispatches) - French football star Kylian Mbappe said today he would be collaborating with French luxury fashion house Dior.

"I am delighted to announce that I am now officially part of Maison Dior. Can't wait to share our collaborations in men's fashion and Sauvage fragrance," Mbappe wrote on Twitter.

Mbappe's tweet confirms recent media reports that Dior had named Mbappe as its new global ambassador.

In September, Dior signed a two-year deal to design clothing for Mbappe's football club, star-studded Paris St Germain, marking its first tie-up with a sports team.

The tie-up fit a shift by luxury labels at Dior-owner LVMH to embrace streetwear, linking it to high-fashion with an eye to younger consumers.

Conte Urges Caution as Players Return From COVID

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham Hotspur boss Antonio Conte said he must carefully manage the workload of his players as they return to training following a COVID-19 outbreak at the club that led to the postponement of their last two Premier League games.

Spurs have not played since beating Norwich City on Dec. 5, with games at Brighton and Hove Albion and Leicester City called off due to positive cases at the London club and the Foxes.

"When the players are back from COVID, for sure you have to pay great attention. You can't give them the same charge of work as other players. If you want everything very soon, you risk injuries," Conte said before Sunday's home game with Liverpool.

"Before picking the starting XI you have to take into consideration all this. For instance, to start with one player and after 60 or 70 minutes change him with one player who had COVID. In this situation, it's important to have patience and take the right risk."

Barty, Raducanu Headline Sydney's Australian Open Warm-Up



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Ash Barty and Emma Raducanu will be the headline acts when elite women's tennis returns to Sydney for the first time in three years, ahead of next month's Australian Open, organizers said.

World number one and Wimbledon champion Barty was runner up in the last two editions of the Sydney International in 2018 and 2019 before the 134-year-old tournament fell victim to the reorganisation of the Australian season.

Barty will return to the harbor city for the Sydney Tennis Classic from January 9 to 15 at

the head of a strong field which includes 19 of the world's 24 best women players.

The Australian will be joined by top-10 players Garbine Muguruza, Barbora Krejickova, Maria Sakkari, Anett Kontaveit, Paula Badosa, Iga Swiatek and Ons Jabeur in vying for the WTA 500 title.

British teenager Raducanu and Leylah Fernandez, the Canadian she beat in the final to complete her fairytale run to the US Open title earlier this year, will also be in action at the Sydney Olympic Park Tennis Centre.

Former US Open champion Dominic Thiem will be the main drawcard in the ATP tournament along with Australian Alex de Minaur, who was the last men's Sydney International champion in 2019.

Barty will also play at the Adelaide International as she prepares for her home Grand Slam at Melbourne Park, which starts on January 17.

Bennett Takes Stunning First World Cup Win At Val Gardena

VAL GARDENA (Dispatches) - Bryce Bennett claimed his first ever alpine skiing World Cup victory on Saturday after stunning the field to win the downhill event at Val Gardena.

American Bennett topped the times early on in the Italian Dolomites with a run of two minutes, 2.42 seconds to pip Austria's Otmar Striedinger by 0.14sec, with Niels Hintermann 0.32sec back in third.

It was a first ever World Cup podium for Bennett, 29, whose previous best finishes had all come in Italy, fourth at Val Gardena in 2018 and 2020 and at Bormio in 2018.

Bennett benefitted from pre-race favourite Aleksander Aamodt Kilde dropping out following an error when he was 0.86sec faster than his rivals through the top section.

Norway's Kilde, the overall champion in 2020, was looking for a fourth straight World Cup win after claiming the super-G on Friday and a super-G and downhill at Beaver Creek, Colorado at the start of the month.

The 29-year-old lost control at a jump as he fizzed down the slope, allowing Bennett to hold on to top spot as the rest of the field all fell short.

Matthias Mayer had the chance to move top of the overall standings but also struggled to keep his footing after a jump and finished over a second off the pace in 16th.

Mayer retained his lead in the downhill standings, with the Austrian on 195 points, 30 ahead of Feuz Beat who moved into second in front of Kilde after finishing fifth.

But Marco Odermatt, who did not compete on Saturday, retains first place in the race for the overall title with 453 points, 48 ahead of Mayer.



Nadal Loses To Murray But Both Are Pleased

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal deemed his unofficial return to competition in Abu Dhabi as a "positive start" after he fell to Andy Murray in a high-quality exhibition match.

In a battle of two former world number ones, the Scot won 6-3, 7-5 in the semi-final of the Mubadala World Tennis Championship.

Nadal, who had played just two matches in six months after a foot injury that ruled him out of Wimbledon and the US Open, was back in action for the first time since August.

"I think I did a lot of things well and other things, of course after a long period of time, I need to recover again, some things that when you're under competition come automatically," Nadal said after facing Murray for the first time since 2016.

"Now I have to think more, or you don't have this extra time to make the right decisions." "In general terms it has been a positive match, I even had my chances to win that second set."

"It's just a positive start. I played even better than what I thought a few weeks ago."

The 20-time Grand Slam champion says he only started playing practice sets two days ago.

"In Mallorca for the last five months, I played zero of these matches. I just did exercises and something more under control to try and make the normal evolution for the foot," explained Nadal.

On Wednesday in Abu Dhabi, Nadal trained with world No.14 Denis Shapovalov, who was impressed.

