

Health Ministry Announced On Wednesday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to 131,527 With 53 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

Head of the Education, Research And Technology Commission of the Parliament Said That One of the Most Outstanding Achievements of General Soleimani School Was the Country's Scientific Development

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Israeli Regime Links Its Security to Instability in Region



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Trump Tops Blacklist of Perpetrators of Gen. Soleimani Assassination

TEHRAN (PresSTV) - Iranians cross a street, next to a poster of Iran's top anti-terror commander Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in the capital Tehran on December 28, 2021. The two commanders were martyred in a US drone strike on in 2020.

The secretary-general of Iran's Human Rights Office says three countries inside the region and three outside were involved in the 2020 assassination of Iran's top anti-terror commander Qassem Soleimani, with former U.S. president Donald Trump topping the list of criminals behind the terrorist attack.

In remarks on Wednesday, Kazem Gharibabadi pointed out that because the assassination was conducted by the US government, most of the perpetrators are American.

"The instigator of this terrorist act is the American regime, which has caused a large number of defendants in the case to be American," he said, days before the second anniversary of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani's assassination in neighboring Iraq.

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Ministry Eyes \$12b In Petrochem Sales

TEHRAN (Shana) - Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji said petrochemical companies are estimated to deposit \$12 billion in the NIMA system by the end of the current calendar year, which began on March 21.

Addressing a ceremony to mark the petrochemical day, he said that there are 67 active petrochemical units in the country that produce valuable products, adding: "Petrochemical plants have provided \$9 billion to the Nima system since the beginning of the year and it is estimated that this figure will reach \$12 billion by the end of the year."

The Minister of Petroleum stated that the demand for petrochemical products in the world markets is a ostensible and that no matter how much we invest in this industry, it is still small.

Owji noted that 15,000 industrial units in the country are fed by petrochemicals, adding: "Today, about 80 million cubic meters are spent on fuel and feedstock in the petrochemical industry, which produces valuable products, and on the other hand, 600 million cubic meters per day is used in the domestic sector."

Iraqis Owe Over \$800m To Iranian Companies



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Secretary of Iranian Association of Exporters of Technical and Engineering Services Bahman Salehi Javid says Iraq's debts to Iran are a huge figure as Iraqis owe some \$800m to Iranian companies.

Speaking to ILNA and touching upon on the talks for payment of Iraqis' debts to Iranians, he said the amount of debts is a big figure and it is estimated at being around \$800m, adding that Iraqis pay their debts but this is Iranian companies which are the losers of this type of payment and Iraqis enjoy this condition and even they bully Iranian companies.

He went on to say that he expects Iranian statesmen to step in for payment of debts to Iranian companies, admitting that there is currently enough cooperation between the government officials with Iraqi government over the payment of debts.

On the achievements of Foreign Minister's visit to Azerbaijan for the export of technical and engineering services, he said soon they will have a meeting with deputy foreign minister on this issue and currently nothing serious has happened in this field. He added that no new development has happened about the condition of Iranian companies in Azerbaijani unless some agreements have been signed during foreign minister visit. He admitted that condition of Iranian companies in Azerbaijan is not clear and favorable yet and expressed the condition would improve.

On trade and exports to Afghanistan, Salehi Javid said Afghanistan is currently a risk and due to the lack of stability and security all trades and visits to Afghanistan are done with high risk and companies are waiting for stability in this country.

He admitted that the previous projects have to be continued and companies try to continue their projects with the least work forces and it is not expected any project to begin soon.

Abbas Meeting With Gantz Stab In Back of West Bank Intifada

GAZA (Dispatches) - The Hamas resistance movement has condemned a meeting between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli minister of military affairs, Benny Gantz, as "a dagger in the back of the intifada (uprising)" in the West Bank, saying it weakens opposition to the normalization of ties with the occupying regime.

Gantz hosted Abbas at his home in Rosh Ha' Ayin on Tuesday night. It was the second meeting between the two, who first met in Ramallah back in August.

It also marked the first time the Palestinian leader held talks with a senior Israeli official in the occupied territories since 2010.

In a post on his Twitter account, Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said the meeting is "condemned and rejected by all [Palestinian] patriots as it has deviated from the national spirit of our people."

"This meeting coincides with the attacks of [Zionist] settlers on our people in the West Bank. It adds to the crimes committed by the Palestinian Authority leaders and is considered a dagger in the back of the intifada (uprising) in the West Bank," he added, referring to increasing tensions between the Palestinians and Israeli settlers in recent weeks.

Warning that the development would deepen the Palestinian political divide, Qassem said, "[It] complicates the situation in Palestine, encourages those sides in the region who want to normalize with the occupiers, and weakens the Palestinian position against normalization."

Tuesday's meeting lasted two and a half hours and was attended by the coordinator of operations in the occupied territories, Major General Rasan Aliyan, Palestinian Minister of Civil Affairs Hussein al-Sheikh and Palestinian Security Chief Majed Faraj.

Sheikh said in a tweet that the meeting "dealt with the importance of creating a political horizon that leads to a political solution in accordance with international legitimacy solutions."

The two sides, he continued, also discussed "the tense conditions in the field due to the practices of settlers" against Palestinians.

The Israeli opposition Likud party criticized Gantz's meeting with Abbas, saying that Prime Minister Naftali Bennett "is returning Abu Mazen (Abbas) and the Palestinians to the agenda. Dangerous concessions to Israel's security are only a matter of time."

Russia Reportedly to Sell Dozens of Su-35 to Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Russia's best non-stealth Su-35 fighter could be headed to Iran, a report says.

The website "19fortyfive" has cited an earlier report by another website the "aviacionline" as saying that Iran and Russia will sign a 20-year, \$10 billion security and defense cooperation agreement in January 2022, which would include the purchase of Su-35 fighters, S-400 missiles and a satellite.

According to information gathered a defense analyst, the agreement will include the purchase of at least 24 Sukhoi Su-35SE heavy fighters. Many of these aircraft are already manufactured, as they were part of an unfinished order by Egypt.

Egypt was to become the first customer for the Su-35 in the Middle East area, following the signing of a contract during 2018 (not confirmed until May 2020), comprising the delivery of 24/26 units for approximately USD 3 billion. In fact, 15 or 16 aircraft were already manufactured and ready for delivery, but Egypt never received them.

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Gov't Reinstates Ban On Crypto Mining to Avoid Blackouts

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has decided to halt operations of authorized cryptocurrency mining centers to avoid blackouts in the winter during which energy consumption steeply rises in the country.

The shutdown is the second this year as Iran is cracking down on illegal mining carried out by both individuals at home and larger-scale industrial units.

It will be in place until March 6 with the aim of freeing up 209 megawatts of power for consumption in the household sector, Managing Director of Iran Grid Management Company (Tavanir) Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi was quoted as saying.

"The Energy Ministry has been implementing measures since last month to reduce the use of liquid fuels in power plants, including cutting licensed crypto farms' power supply, turning off lampposts in less risky areas and stringent supervision of consumption," he said.

The residential and commercial sectors use natural gas for space heating which, according to local reports, uses 70% of the fuel consumed in Iran.

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Gold Mine in Central Iran Ramps Up Production

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A gold mine in central Isfahan produced 223 kg of the precious metal in the eight months since the start of the Persian year in mid-March, its managing director says.

The production at Moteh gold mine was up 5 percent year on year, Alireza Talari said on Wednesday, adding output in the month of Aban which ended on Nov. 21 also rose 29% to 31 kg.

Iran's proven gold reserves are estimated at 340 tonnes, but officials believe this figure would rise much higher with extensive prospecting.

In 2014, Iran launched the Zarshuran plant in northwest Takab, which is billed as the biggest gold processing operation in the Middle East with proven reserves of 110 tons.

According to officials, two gold processing plants with a combined capacity of 2.7 million tons per year will come on stream in South Khorasan province by the end of the current Iranian year in March 2022.

The country has about 37 billion tons of proven mineral reserves and 57 billion tons of potential reserves, worth \$800 billion according to 2014 data on state-owned mines and metal holding company IMIDRO's website.

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Iran Agrees With China to Open Consulate in Bandar Abbas

TEHRAN (MNA)- The Iranian Council of Ministers in a meeting chaired by President Raisi agreed on Wednesday that China will be allowed to open a Consulate General in the southern city of Bandar Abbas.

The Iranian Council of Ministers or the cabinet approved a plan proposed by the Iranian Foreign Ministry in accordance with the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, according to which China will open a Consulate General in Bandar Abbas in the south of Iran.

Also, in accordance with Principle 138 of the Constitution and in compliance with the relevant laws and regulations, the Iranian Council of Ministers agreed with the country's Foreign Ministry's proposal to issue a permit to open a Consulate General in the Armenian city of Kapan.

Israeli Regime Links Its Security to Instability in Region

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Zionists cannot stand the stability, security, and tranquility in the region, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson said, adding that the Israeli regime has based its security on creating instability in the region.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson condemned on Wednesday the repeated attacks by the Zionist regime on Syrian territory, especially food and medicine warehouses in the port of Latakia.

Khatibzadeh added that the Israeli regime's attacks not only are an act of aggression against a UN member state but also they are in blatant violation of Syria's sovereignty.

He also described the Israeli regime's aggression as inhuman and immoral which is aimed at creating insecurity and crises in the region.

The leaders of the regime cannot tolerate stability, security, and tranquility in the



region, he also said, adding that the Zionist rulers have linked their security to the instability in the region.

According to him, the Zionists, who repeatedly target Syrian territory under false and baseless pretexts, violate and ridicule all international laws, regulations, and norms.

The spokesman further called on the international community to prevent the recurrence of such attacks, which endanger regional peace and security.

The Syrian nation has the legitimate right to retaliate against the actions of the aggressors, Khatibzadeh went on to conclude.

ICRO Head Stresses More Cultural Cooperation Between Iran, China

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The chairman of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) has said that Iran and China need to coordinate their activities to present a right picture of themselves to the world.

The chairman of the Iranian Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) Hojjatolislam Mohammad Mahdi Imanipour made the remarks in a meeting with the Chinese envoy to Iran Ambassador Chang Hua and the Chinese cultural attache at the Chinese Embassy in Tehran on Tuesday.

Imanipour pointed to the existence of cultural commonalities between the two countries and said that the history of cultural relations between Iran and China has existed since ancient times and the two countries are trying to maintain a long-standing level of communication.

The ICRO head emphasized the expansion of cultural cooperation between the two countries and declared the organization's readiness to cooperate in various fields of cultural studies, exhibitions, research and meeting of cultural delegations, as well as hosting the Chinese cultural delegation in Tehran.

He continued his remarks by insisting on showing a real image of Iran and China in the world, adding "In the fields of combating Islamophobia, Iranophobia and Chinaophobia, we can hold joint meetings and programs and are interested in using the capacities of Chinese elites in these cases."

Chang Hua, for his part, called for the establishment of a cultural center between Iran and China in the capitals of the two countries and said "With the establishment of this cultural center, we will benefit from each other's cultural capabilities and the relations between the two countries strengthen more than before."

Iran Pursues Cyberattacks On Country's Infrastructure In Int'l Forums



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said on Tuesday that Iran will pursue cyberattacks against the country's infrastructure in international forums legally.

Amirabdollahian met and held talks with Head of Iran Civil Defense Organization Brigadier General Gholamreza Jalali on Tuesday.

They discussed various issues of cooperation in the field of civil defense, including the development of the country's relations with the rest of the world, legal and political pursuits by the Foreign Ministry in international forums, and creating the necessary platforms for scientific-defense dialogues.

Referring to the scientific capabilities and capacities of the country, as well as the needs of other states, including some neighbors in the field of civil defense issues, Amirabdollahian expressed readiness to use all legal and political tools available in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to further develop and update the indigenous knowledge.

He reiterated that they will pursue cyberattacks against the country's infrastructure in international forums legally.

Gov't Seeks Helping Manufacturing Enterprises

TEHRAN (IP) - Referring to the government's plans and approaches to support manufacturing enterprises, Iran's First Vice President stated: "The government seeks to design and implement a program called the Revitalization Movement."

Emphasizing the government's special efforts and determination to support the production sector, Mohammad Mokhber said: "Production is the only way to save the country's economy and can achieve issues such as economic growth, fighting against unemployment, investment, appreciation of the national currency and controlling inflation."

Referring to the government's plans and approaches to support manufacturing enterprises, Mohammad Mokhber stated: "The government seeks to design and implement a program called the Revitalization Movement, according to which production enterprises that are closed or operating at low capacity would be supported and continue their economic activity with new strength."

Emphasizing the need to prevent the import of goods whose similar samples are produced in the country, Mokhber said: "Except in cases where the issue of competition and organization of price and quality is raised, in other cases, goods whose similar samples are produced domestically should not enter the country."

Referring to the situation in the country at the time of the inauguration of the 13th government, the First Vice President stated: "Fortunately, today there is no concern for the supply of basic commodities and the currency needed for it in the country."

Referring to Iran's numerous capacities such as sea and mining, First Vice President said: "One of the important advantages of Iran is having mines, which unfortunately, despite the vast capacities in this field, we have not seen appropriate measures and planning."

The First Vice President also mentioned the access to the sea and 2700 km of coastline in the country and added: "Relying on God-given blessings and existing capacities in the country, extensive measures can be taken for economic development, but unfortunately these blessings have not been taken to account as it should be."

Mokhber stressed the need to avoid selling raw minerals and clarified: "If we focus on digital and maritime economy, effective steps will be taken towards the development of the country."

In another part of his speech, the First Vice President emphasized the importance of economic diplomacy and said: "Ambassadors should pay serious attention to the issue of economic diplomacy, especially with neighboring countries, because this can lead to economic openings for the country."

Religious Minorities Made Great Sacrifices During War

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian vice president for parliamentary affairs has praised the country's Armenian minority for their role in defending Iran during Iraq's imposed war.

Seyed Mohammad Hosseini said many people from the Armenian community were martyred and maimed during the war.

Hosseini made the comment while visiting the house of martyr Iranian soldier Vazgen Adamian.

While congratulating the family of Vazgen Adamian

and all followers of the Christian faith on the Gregorian New Year, Hosseini said many Armenians and people from other religious minorities of Iran defended the country against the enemy's aggression with all their power.

He added that Armenian combatants were at the frontlines of war during the sacred- defense years.

The Iranian vice president for parliamentary affairs also said martyrs are highly precious for the Iranian people and officials and their sacrifices will never be forgotten. During the visit, the family of Vazgen Adamian raised their problems and Hosseini promised to pursue the matter in order to solve those problems.

Vazgen Admian's sister also said she is proud of being an Iranian.

Vazgen Adamian was born in 1962 in the city of Khorramshahr and was martyred at the hands of counterrevolutionary groups in Haj Omran in 1985. Under the Iranian Constitution, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism are recognized as official religions in the country and followers of these faiths are free to exercise their religious rituals and have representatives at the Iranian Parliament.

Dargaz Exports 122,000 Tons Potato to Turkmenistan



MASHHAD (IRNA) - The managing director of Lotfabad customs in Dargaz said some 122,000 tons of potato has been exported to Turkmenistan during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (to end on March 20, 2022).

Mohammad Ali Bagheri said that there was no rejected cargo from Turkmenistan.

He added that apples, tangerines, oranges, and bell peppers were among other products exported to Turkmenistan.

Last month after a two-year halt due to coronavirus outbreak, Iran's first shipment was exported to Turkmenistan through Dargaz railway.

Over 60% of Idle Industrial Units Revivable

TEHRAN (MNA) - The head of Iran Small Industries and Industrial Parks Organization (ISIPO) has said over 60 percent of the idle industrial units across the country have the potential to be revived and resume operation, IRNA reported.

"Currently, some production units are struggling with banking, legal, or tax problems, and we want to identify such units to solve their problems so that they remain active and provide employment," Ali Rasouljan told the national TV.

"If idle units return to the production cycle, the employment and business process of the production units will flourish," he added.

Back in September, Rasouljan had announced that 499 idle industrial units were revived in the country during the first five months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-August 22).

According to the official, the mentioned units created job opportunities for over 12,478 people.

Rasouljan said that reviving 1,600 idle and semi-active industrial units in the industrial parks and zones, as well as 400 units outside of such parks, is targeted for the current fiscal year (ends on March 20, 2022).

The official mentioned Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry's programs for developing the country's productive sectors in the current year and said: "Industry Ministry has defined 36 new programs for improving the productivity of the country's major strategic industries in the current year among which ISIPO is in charge of two programs."

Iran to Launch Smart Management Plan on COVID-19

TEHRAN (IP) - The deputy head of the environmental and occupational health center of the ministry of health and medical Education (MoHME) said: "Smart Management Plan is based on the two basic principles: vaccination and systemic control of all different units."

In a press conference on Wednesday, Mohsen Farhadi referred to the Smart Management Plan as an inter-agency system that requires the cooperation of the Ministry of Health, Communications, and the Ministry of Interior.

Farhadi emphasized that the primary supervision of the project is with the Ministry of Health, and it will control the observance of health protocols. Pointing out that the Smart Management Plan is not going to limit people, he added: «Services will be provided to people whom, firstly, have been vaccinated and, secondly, are not sick.»

Farhadi emphasized: «This plan tries to minimize the transmission of the disease, which is the main way of transmitting the disease, and to continue the activities of the administrative apparatus, clubs and cinemas with the new instructions.»

The deputy director of the health center of the Ministry of Health added: «From the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, we had 170 health protocols, which need to be updated with the new approach.»

Number of Persian Language Learners Hits New Record in Spain

TEHRAN (IFP) - In Spain, more people are developing an interest in the Persian language, with the number of learners in the European country setting a new record this year.

Nazia Barani, a Persian language professor and head of the Iran Studies Department at the University of Salamanca in northwestern Spain, told ISNA that Persian language courses had faced "an unprecedented reception" in the past academic year.

"In the 2021-2022 academic year, a record number of 60 people registered [in the courses] at the department, which is a source of happiness," she said. Despite concerns over the spread of COVID-19, the university managed to have classes in person, she said.

According to results from questionnaires, Barani added, most Persian language students chose to enroll in the course upon the recommendation of fellow students in previous years.

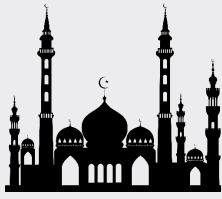
Kish Construction Industry Exhibition ,nderway

KISH (IP) - The 17th specialized exhibition of construction industry has started at the International Exhibition Center of Kish Island, southern Iran.

More than 120 Iranian companies show-cased their latest capabilities in the fields of intelligent building, tools, equipment and construction machinery, elevators, roof and wall coverings, heating and cooling systems, glass, iron and steel, safety equipment and supplies in the 17th Kish Construction Industry Exhibition.

The 17th Kish Construction Industry Specialized Exhibition opened on Tuesday evening and people, activists and professionals in the field of construction can visit this specialized exhibition until December 31, 2021.

Beautification and quality of construction and security of buildings is an important issue for people's lives in the shadow of beauty and safety, and in the meantime, the use of modern and up-to-date equipment and paying attention to safety in the construction of buildings, is emphasized and demanded by people.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:07
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:20
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:44
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14

34. We granted not to any man before thee permanent life (here): if then thou shouldst die, would they live permanently?
35. Every soul shall have a taste of death: and We test you by evil and by good by way of trial. to Us must ye return.

Surah 21, The Prophets (34 - 35)

Tehran, Bangkok Urged to Sign Preferential Trade Agreement

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – In an in-presence and online meeting at Iran Chamber of Commerce, ways of boosting trade between Iran and Thailand were discussed and participants reiterated that Iran and Thailand should sign the preferential trade agreement to enhance bilateral trade.

The participants in the meeting called the preferential trade and joint investment a short-cut for reaching a sustainable trade between the two countries.

In the meeting Head of International of Iran Chamber of Commerce Mohammad Reza Karbasi expressed his dissatisfaction over the level of trade ties between Iran and Thailand and said that the rise in the awareness and familiarity of economic activists about the capacities of the two states for developing trade cooperation is necessary.

He then pointed to the considerable progress of Thailand in the field of agriculture and said Thailand has turned into the sixth rice producing and the second exporting country of this product in the world and the country is well known in production and export of textile and apparel, agro products, types of drinking, tobacco, concrete, electric equipment, cars, auto parts and agro machineries.

Karbasi said that capability of Thailand in the field of food production, export of dried fruit and other products is the ground for boosting the trade ties between Tehran and Bangkok, adding that both countries can help their trade ties to increase through joint investment, exchange of technical knowledge and special devices for producing dried fruit. He also said both countries can also barter trade in the field of agricultural products, fishery and halal food industries.

He noted that Thailand's foreign trade in the first three quarters of 2021 has been over \$413.3b and its exports stood at \$216b and in return the imports were around \$197.3b.

Karbasi also said that the trade volume of Iran and Thailand in the first three quarters of 2021 was around \$198m as Iran's exports to this country stood at \$101m and Thailand exported \$97m of goods to Iran. He noted on the whole Iran's share of



Thailand's foreign trade is less than one percent.

He also called Iran and Thailand a bridge for the link of economic activists of the two states in East Asia, West Asia, Caucasus and Europe and emphasized that Thai companies by finding proper Iranian counterparts can enter other countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and other states in the Persian Gulf, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Karbasi also said that the good cooperation between chambers of commerce of the two countries is also necessary for improving the cooperation between the two countries and invited officials of Thailand's chamber of commerce to pay a visit to Tehran after the end of the current pandemic restrictions in order to get familiar with Iran's capacities.

He also emphasized reinforcing and resumption of the banking cooperation between the two countries for expansion of economic cooperation and noted that without banking relation those trade affairs will not materialize.

Karbasi also called for finalizing the agreement between Iran and Thailand in the fields of agriculture, standardization, preferential trade, incentives and reciprocal support from investment, and announced readiness of Iran Chamber of Commerce for improving the current level of trade with using the capacities of the private sectors of the two states.

Meanwhile deputy head of Thailand Chamber of Commerce, for his part, pointed to the historic relation between the two countries and called Iran as Thailand's important trade partner in the field of agriculture and emphasized that Iran can turn into a center for export of Thai agro products to other countries in the region and turn into a hub in this field.

Top Experiences in Steelmaking, Continuous Casting

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – On the occasion of the 2nd International Conference on Steelmaking and Continuous Casting (ISCC) which is to be held on February 22-23, 2022, Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) has decided to honor the efforts of experts, industrialists and active researchers in the fields related to steelmaking and continuous casting during the conference for their top innovations and inventions.

The company announced that esteemed experts, industrialists and researchers can send their innovations, inventions and ideas in the steelmaking and continuous casting and related fields to the secretariat of the conference to be judged by the jury.

The volunteers and applicants should prepare the details of their innovation in a certain format and send it in the format of world office and PDF to this email address: ISCC@hosco.ir.

The applicants should mention the subject of their innovation as "Innovation" and mention their full name and the name of the company or university.



Iran Ready to Dispatch Skilled Labor to Serbia



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare has declared Tehran's readiness to dispatch Iranian skilled workforce to Serbia.

Director General of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security for international affairs Hamed Forouzan made the remark in a meeting with Serbian Ambassador to Tehran Dragan Todorović on Wednesday.

Referring to long-term political and international relations between Serbia and Iran, Forouzan noted that a draft memorandum of understanding on job creation and vocational cooperation is being finalized and that another MoU on social security is being prepared, which would be inked hopefully concurrent with a visit by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to Iran.

The Iranian official also invited the Serbian ambassador to pay a visit to the Social Security Investment Company of Iran (SHASTA), adding that the meeting with the ambassador can help facilitate cooperation between Serbian and Iranian economic and trade groups.

Forouzan underlined that the Islamic Republic of Iran expects Serbia to support Tehran in international organizations.

Todorović, for his part, said that the joint meeting has been held to evaluate the current situation in order to pave the way for expansion of trade ties in different fields such as agriculture and tourism.

Emphasizing on the need for facilitating issuance of visa for businessmen of both countries, the ambassador said that the main obstacle in the way of expansion of trade relationship is problems concerning banking transactions. He expressed hope that resolving political issues would pave the way for feasible trade and banking cooperation.

Statistics indicate that trade ties between Serbia and Iran boosted in recent years, for instance the economic exchanges stood at 52.3 million dollars in 2018. Iran exported goods worth 42.4 million dollars to Serbia in that year and imported 9.8 million dollars from the European country in the same period.

Development of Railways Best Options to Neutralize Sanctions

TEHRAN (IP) - "The development of railways is one of the best options to neutralize sanctions and increase international bargaining chips," said Ara Shavardian, a representative of Armenian Christians in Tehran and northern Iran in the parliament.

"After the launch of the ECO train, the government's pursuit of the Shalamcheh-Basra railway now shows a serious determination to use transit capacities," Ara Shavardian wrote on his Twitter page.

The Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul railway project or ECO freight train was inaugurated in Pakistan on Tuesday, December 21, to promote trade and regional connectivity with the presence of Pakistani ministers and Ambassadors of some countries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The train has resumed its operations after a gap of 10 years, and a special ceremony was held at Islamabad's Margalla Railway Station on occasion.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Minister for Railways Azam Khan Swati, Adviser to Prime Minister of Pakistan for Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood, Ambassador of Iran Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini, Ambassadors of Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan attended the ceremony.

\$35b Petchem Projects Underway

TEHRAN (Shana) - The CEO of the National Petrochemical Company stated: "We have about 70 projects underway in this industry, which are worth about 35 to 36 billion dollars, and with the help of the Petrochemical Research and Technology Company and knowledge-based companies, we can carry out these plans."

Morteza Shahmirzaei said: "We have to show enthusiasm from within because there is no help that is

expected from outside, and wherever work has been done on the basis of your self-esteem and initiative of scientists and experts."

Shahmirzaei, noting that 50 million tons of petrochemical production capacity is to be added in the next few years, said: "We can calculate that through the upstream and downstream sector and the value chain ... we can make a great difference in the country."

Money Supply Increase Rate Dropping in Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - A report by the Central Bank of Iran indicates that the rate of monthly increase in the money supply has begun to fall.

In a meeting of the Administration's Economic Coordination Headquarters on Tuesday evening, chaired by President Ebrahim Raisi, the CBI gave a report showing that the monthly increase in the money supply has started a downward trend.

According to the report, the money supply increase rate in the Iranian month of Aban (October 23 - November 21) has decreased by 2.1 percent compared to a month earlier.

In the meeting, Raisi ordered all organizations in charge, specifically the Ministry of Economy, the Budget and Planning Organization, and the Central Bank of Iran to keep efforts to cap the rate of increase of money supply.

Economists maintain that if the money supply increases faster than real output, inflation will occur. In other words, money becomes worthless if too much is printed.

Last month, the CBI chief Ali Salehabadi said the process of repatriation of foreign currency earned from the export of Iranian commodities has improved, resulting in relative stability in the currency market.

The top banker said the currency generated from the exports of oil, natural gas and gas condensates was also being supplied to the domestic market.

Days after taking office in August, Raisi emphasized the necessity for the removal of obstacles to the activities of Iranian exporters, saying plans must be formulated to eliminate the barriers and provide motivation for the enhancement of exports.



Superiority of MSC in World With Optimizing Water Consumption



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN – The CEO of Mobarakeh Steel Company (MSC) Mr. Mohammad Yaser Tayebnia on the sidelines of the visit of Majlis lawmaker Hojjatolislam Mohammad Taghi Naghdali from the production lines and waste water treatment unit of the company said this industrial enterprise is the biggest national industry and steelmaking plant in the Middle East and said the company has always been pioneer in the construction in the country and has been able to observe its task by playing its role in social responsibilities in the best way possible.

Tayebnia said Mobarakeh Steel Company in the specialized field has been able to make the country needless of importing different types of steel shits which are required by the auto making, home appliances and downstream industries.

He also pointed to the issues and problems in the infrastructural field in the country, adding that despite several concerns of the government, MSC as the leader of national economy and industry has put on the agenda its executive goals of implementing several projects.

Referring to some infrastructural projects like developing the power plant by MSC, Tayebnia said that construction of the 1500-megawatt power plant has been put on the agenda of the company's developmental programs and expressed hope that it would be completed in the shortest time.

Pointing to the existing vacuum in the field of energy carriers, he said developing infrastructural measures in the road and rail transportation is of the other goals of the company because concurrent with the rise in the production, it needs investment in the rail transportation sector.

Tayebnia then pointed to the measures taken by MSC in efficient water consumption and said that optimizing and reducing water consumption in the process of production, collecting the wastewater of 9 cities and its treatment and return of it to the industrial use in the company has been one of the actions of the company in the past decade and today half of the water needs of the company is provided through treatment of wastewater.

He also criticized those who express unwise and raw opinions on the way of water consumption in the company.

Debate on Reforms Sparks Scuffles in Jordan Parliament

AMMAN (Dispatches) - A live-streamed televised debate in Jordan's parliament on constitutional reforms including gender equality degenerated into scuffles between MPs on Tuesday, forcing the session to be adjourned.

A heated row -- amid much pushing and finger-wagging -- broke out between deputies and parliament speaker Abdelkarim al-Daghmi.

The argument erupted during a debate on an amendment adding the female noun for a Jordanian citizen, to a chapter in the constitution guaranteeing equal rights of all citizens.



France Closes Mosque North of Paris

PARIS (Dispatches) - France has ordered the closure of a mosque in the north of the country because of the radical nature of its imam's preaching, regional authorities told AFP on Tuesday.

The mosque in Beauvais, a town of 50,000 people some 100 kilometres (62 miles) north of Paris, will remain shut for six months, according to the prefecture of the Oise region where Beauvais is located.

It said the sermons there incite hatred, violence and "defend jihad". The move comes two weeks after Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said he had triggered the procedure to close the site because the imam there "is targeting Christians, homosexuals and Jews" in his sermons. This, the minister said, was "unacceptable".



Kuwait Names Cabinet With Opposition MPs



KUWAIT CITY (Dispatches) - Kuwait has formed a new cabinet with a new finance minister and including three opposition legislators following a standoff between previous governments and the parliament.

Oil Minister Mohammad al-Fares was reappointed in the new cabinet announced on Tuesday.

Abdul Wahab al-Rasheed, head of the non-governmental Kuwait Economic Society, replaced Khalifa Hamada as finance minister.

The new health minister is Khaled al-Saeed, whose predecessor had steered Kuwait through the COVID-19 pandemic. The announcement of a new cabinet broke a monthlong deadlock with the nomination of 15 new government ministers who will have to address a series of political and financial difficulties.

This is the Persian Gulf state's third cabinet this year after the previous governments resigned in the standoff that had hindered state efforts for fiscal reform.

The government has tried to temporarily boost finances while more structural and fiscal reforms remain deadlocked, including a debt law to tap international markets.

The dispute has delayed an overhaul of Kuwait's welfare system and prevented the sheikhdom from taking on debt -- leaving it with little in its coffers to pay bloated public sector salaries.

State media said Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Sabah, who had taken steps to defuse the standoff, approved the cabinet despite having handed over most constitutional duties in November to the crown prince, who issued the decree on the cabinet formation.

OPEC member Kuwait bans political parties but has given its legislature more influence than similar bodies in other Gulf monarchies, including the power to pass and block laws, question ministers and submit no-confidence votes against senior government officials.

The cabinet has only one female minister. It includes three opposition MPs and one pro-government lawmaker, in a departure from past governments that normally included only one member of the parliament.

The opposition parliamentarians were given the information, social affairs and National Assembly affairs portfolios.

"The government is trying to dismantle the opposition front ... by including some parliamentarians in the government formation," Kuwaiti political analyst Mohammed al-Dosari told Reuters news agency.

He said several opposition members are still seeking the departure of the prime minister and the parliament speaker.

Several legislators had insisted on questioning Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al Khalid, premier since late 2019, on various issues, including handling the pandemic and perceived corruption.

Swiss-EU Relationship Could Fall Apart If Talks Fail

BERLIN (Dispatches) - The European Union's relationship with Switzerland could fall apart if negotiations over Switzerland's place in the EU internal market fail, European Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic, told Der Spiegel magazine.

Brussels has pushed for years for a treaty to cap an array of bilateral accords and require the Swiss to routinely adopt changes to single market rules.

Talks between Bern and its biggest trading partner broke off in May over concerns about yielding too much sovereignty to the bloc.

"Should new negotiations not lead to success, the bilateral agreements that were still in force would gradually expire and make our relationship obsolete at some point," said Sefcovic, who oversees EU-Swiss affairs, in an interview published on Tuesday.

Switzerland would have to give assurances it would abide by EU internal market rules if Bern is committed to new negotiations, Sefcovic said.

South Africa Recalls New Isolation and Quarantine Rules

JOHANNESBURG (Dispatches) - South Africa has recalled rules that no longer required people without symptoms of COVID-19 to isolate or test if they have been in contact with a positive case, the government announced on Tuesday, saying an amended circular will be re-issued.

Last week the health ministry said that asymptomatic individuals who had been in contact with a case of COVID-19 no longer had to isolate but should monitor for symptoms for 5-7 days and avoid attending large gatherings.

It had added that only those people who developed symptoms needed to get tested and that those with mild symptoms should isolate for eight days and severe cases for 10 days. It had also revised protocols on quarantine, saying all quarantine facilities outside the home would be stopped, while contact tracing efforts would also be scrapped aside from in specific scenarios such as cluster outbreaks.

The reason for the revision was based on a number of scientific factors including the fact that, most people have vaccinated with at least one vaccine dose and developed some level of immunity. This has contributed to the current low hospitalisation and high recovery rates, the department said.

Now all those protocols will be recalled after the Department of Health was inundated with media, stakeholders and public enquiries and comments following the release of the revised regulations.

"In line with the principles of transparency and openness, the department has decided to put the implementation of the revised policy changes on hold, while taking all additional comments and inputs received into consideration," it said in a statement.

"This means the status quo remains, and all prior existing regulations with regards to contact tracing, quarantine and isolation remain applicable."

The country has led the continent in terms of COVID-19 cases and deaths as well as vaccinations, with 3.42 million cases reported and 90,854 fatalities.

Its experience has been closely watched around the world after it was among the first countries to identify the more transmissible Omicron variant.

Somalia's Allies Fear Instability as Political Crisis Deepens

MOGADISHU (Dispatches) - Somalia's allies and international observers have expressed alarm over the escalating power struggle between the country's president and prime minister, as heavily armed factions patrolled parts of the capital, Mogadishu.

Soldiers loyal to Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble took up positions near the presidential palace, reports citing witnesses said, while others paraded the streets.

"They are not far away from the main security checkpoints of the presidential palace, they are armed with heavy machine guns and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]," Saido Mumin, a Mogadishu resident, told the AFP news agency.

Another local, Abdulkadir Ahmed, said that although the situation appeared to be calm, he was "really worried" about the potential for violence.

It came a day after President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmaajo, announced the suspension of Roble's powers for suspected corruption, a move the prime minister described as a coup attempt.

Relations between the pair have long been frosty, but the latest developments have sparked concerns for Somalia's stability as the country struggles to hold long-delayed elections.

Observers have urged both sides to resolve the festering dispute, which is widely seen by allies as distracting the internationally-backed government from fighting an armed campaign by al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda-linked armed group.

On Monday, the Africa Bureau of the United States State Department warned that Washington was "prepared to act against those who obstruct Somalia's path to peace".

"The attempted suspension of @MohamedHRoble is alarming & we support his efforts for rapid & credible elections. All parties must desist from escalatory actions & statements," it said on Twitter.

Farmaajo has accused Roble of interfering with a probe into a land-grab case and withdrawn his mandate to organize elections.

Roble in turn has accused Farmaajo of attempting to carry out "a coup against the government, the constitution, and the rules of the country" and sabotage the vote.

Also late on Monday, international observers and allies, including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the US, the European Union, and the United Nations, released a statement expressing "deep concern" over the crisis.



Afghan Women Call for Rights, Protest Alleged Taliban Killings

KABUL (Dispatches) - A crowd of women has marched through the Afghan capital calling for women's rights to be respected and accusing Taliban authorities of covertly killing soldiers who served the former United States-backed government.

About 30 women gathered near a mosque in the center of Kabul on Tuesday and marched a few hundred meters chanting "justice, justice" before they were stopped by Taliban forces, an AFP correspondent reported.

The Taliban also tried to prevent journalists from covering the march, organized against the "mysterious murders of young people, particularly the country's former soldiers", according to social media invitations for the march.

Taliban fighters briefly detained a group of reporters and confiscated equipment from some photographers, deleting images from their cameras before returning them. Since the Taliban returned to power in August, it has effectively banned unsanctioned protests and frequently intervene to block demonstrations against its rule.

The protest comes weeks after separate reports by the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said there were credible allegations of more than 100 extrajudicial killings by the Taliban since the takeover.

"I want to tell the world, tell the Taliban to stop killing. We want freedom, we want justice, we want human rights," protester Nayera Koahistani told the AFP news agency.

In a statement read aloud by protester Laila Basam, the demonstrators called on the Taliban "to stop its criminal machine".

The statement said former soldiers and ex-employees of the overthrown government are "under direct threat", violating a general amnesty announced by the Taliban in August. The protesters also aired objections to the ratcheting restrictions women are facing under the Taliban rule.

The government issued new guidelines at the weekend, banning women from travelling long distances unless escorted by a close male relative.

"Women's rights are human rights. We must defend our rights," said Koahistani. Speaking from Kabul, Mahbooba Saraj, chair of the Afghan Women's Network, said the move made it difficult for women to get around as many "do not have a mahram [male guardian]" to accompany them.



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L.balcony
yard, & pkg
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Shanon (adviser)

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5bdrs, S/p
S, J, balcony
green yard
Fully Furn

Parsian

Farmanieh (\$2200) 3bdrs
Farmanieh (\$4000) 4bdrs
Both with S/p, S, J, & F.F

Shahrak-e-Gharb Villa
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balcony, & F.F (\$4000)

Zaferanieh Apt (\$1500)
2bdrs, 130sq.m, S/p, S, J, yard, F.F

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Indonesia Allows Boeing's 737 MAX to Fly Again

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia has lifted a ban on the Boeing 737 MAX, its transport ministry said on Tuesday, three years after the crash of one of the aircraft operated by domestic carrier Lion Air with the loss of all 189 people on board.

Aviation authorities around the world grounded the aircraft months later after a similarly deadly accident

in March 2019 involving one of the aircraft operated by Ethiopian Airlines.

The approval for the aircraft's return in Indonesia comes months after it returned to service in the United States and Europe, and follows more recent lifting of grounding orders in countries including Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Ethiopia.



Japan's November Jobless Rate Rises to 2.8%

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan's unemployment rate in November edged up to 2.8% from the previous month as an economic recovery from the coronavirus fallout prompted more people to leave their jobs in search of better ones, the government said.

The seasonally adjusted jobless rate rose 0.1 percentage point from the previous month for the first increase in six months, after the COVID-19 state of emergency measure asking people to refrain from nonessential outings was lifted in October following a significant drop in the number of infections.

Separate government data from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare showed the job availability ratio in November was unchanged from the previous month at 1.15, meaning that there were 115 job openings for every 100 job seekers.

The total number of unemployed people in November increased by 100,000 from the previous month to 1.92 million, rising for the first time in three months, said the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

Among them, 760,000 people voluntarily left their jobs, up 60,000, while 480,000 were laid off, unchanged from the previous month, and 500,000 were new job seekers, up 10,000.

"The increase in the number of unemployed indicates that more people are seeking jobs with better conditions and is considered to be a reflection of the recent lower number of coronavirus cases and (an economic) pickup," a government official told reporters.

Private-sector analysts also said daily COVID-19 cases dropping to around 250 or lower in the reporting month — compared to a peak of over 25,000 in the summer — helped give workers a more optimistic view of the outlook for the domestic economy.

Megumi Wada, a researcher at the Daiwa Institute of Research, said the increase in the jobless rates for those between 15 and 24 as well as those between 35 and 44 show that people who had refrained from switching careers have now started looking for new jobs. The seasonal adjusted jobless rate for the former age group saw a 1.1% increase from the previous month, while the latter was up 0.3%.

Looking ahead, Wada said the labor market is expected to recover, led by improvements in the face-to-face service sector such as the hotel industry and eateries that are experiencing labor shortages as more people go out.

"For this year, the number of reservations for shinkansen bullet trains and airplanes is increasing, indicating that more people are planning to return to their hometowns (in the year-end and New Year holidays)," Wada said.

The number of workers, unadjusted for seasonal factors, in the pandemic-hit accommodation and food service sector as well as the wholesale and retail sector, continued to fall from a year earlier, but the pace of decline slowed, indicating improvements in their labor markets, the government official said.

The number of workers in hotel and restaurant services fell 190,000 from a year earlier in the reporting month following a 440,000 drop marked in October, while the number in wholesale and retail was down 120,000 year on year after shrinking 320,000 in October. Meanwhile, the number of workers in the telecommunications industry, and in transport and postal activities, continued to increase, rising 9.3% and 5.5% from a year earlier, respectively.

The latest data showed the total number of people in work remained unchanged from the previous month at a seasonally adjusted 66.24 million.

Bangladesh Projected to Be a \$500b Economy by Next Fiscal Year

DHAKA (Dispatches) - Bangladesh is gunning to become a half-a-trillion-dollar economy next fiscal year buoyed by a successful vaccination campaign and a steady growth in agriculture and industry.



As per the finance division's projection, the size of the Bangladesh economy would be \$510 billion in fiscal 2022-23 after growing at 10.7 percent.

The GDP is estimated to be \$455 billion at the current price this fiscal year, up from \$411 billion. The overall growth will reach 12.08 percent, according to the forecast, which was presented at the Fiscal Coordination Council meeting presided over by Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal on Wednesday.

The projections did not factor in the Omicron variant of the coronavirus that is tearing through the globe and is rolling back the economic recovery made this year.

"People are spending money. Exports were good. The remittance flow was good except for the last few months. These are all symptoms of normalcy," said Selim Raihan, executive director of

the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling.

The government had revised down the GDP growth last fiscal year.

"Since they brought down the growth, it is obvious that the GDP growth will take a leap in the current fiscal year," he said, adding that the neighbouring countries are also projecting high growth.

But there are some concerns.

The spread of Omicron in some countries of North America and Europe may affect the country's export sector.

"We hope that it does not become dreadful like the earlier [Delta] variant. However, we need to be watchful. Above all, I am hopeful that we will be able to attain the projected growth," Raihan added.

The production of crops, especially Aman and Boro, continued to grow like in the previous year, according to the finance division's presentation. Crop production will increase 9.7 percent year-on-year to 472 lakh tonne in fiscal 2021-22, according to the Department of Agricultural Extension. In fiscal 2019-20, crop production was 430.35 lakh tonnes.

During economic transformation, agricultural growth slows down. But that was not the case in Bangladesh, even during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the overall production of medium and large industries saw 19 percent growth in August 2021. The growth rate was 4.38 percent in the last year.

Among others, the leather industry witnessed a giant 125.24 percent growth while the textile 29 percent and other non-metallic minerals 30.72 percent.

Turkey's Natural Gas Imports Up 15.2% Year-on-Year in October

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's imported 15.2% more natural gas in October this year compared to the same month of 2020, according to data by the energy watchdog on Tuesday.

Natural gas imports increased to around 4.65 billion cubic meters (bcm) from approximately 4.04 bcm for the same month of 2020, Turkey's Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK) said in its monthly natural gas market report.

In October, the country imported 3.02 bcm of natural gas via pipelines, while 1.63 million cubic meters (mcm) was purchased as LNG, EPDK's data showed. This marked a decrease of 6.9% in pipeline imports but an increase of 105.5% in LNG imports.

Russia was Turkey's top gas import destination, supplying 1.86 bcm of natural gas while the U.S. and Azerbaijan followed with 838 mcm and 762 mcm, respectively.

Turkey's gas imports from Russia and Azerbaijan decrease by 8.8% and 30.9%, respectively in October, while imports from the U.S. increased by 748% compared to the same period of 2020.

Turkey's total gas consumption also increased by 23.5% to approximately 4.42 bcm compared to the same month of 2020. Household consumption grew by 31.5% to 505 mcm, while the use of gas in power plants increased by 24.2% to 1.80 bcm during the same period.

Consumption growth in natural gas power plants, which generated more electricity due to drought and lower hydro capacity over the last few months, continues to boost imports. The natural gas volume in storage in October 2021 decreased by 15.9% to around 2.74 bcm compared to about 3.25 bcm in September last year.

Pakistan Gov't Warns of Economic Risks Posed by Omicron

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistan government cautioned about the impending risks of Omicron on the economy including the concerns of the policymakers about the inflationary effects and the resulting policy response.

Omicron has forced economists across the globe to cast a shadow of doubt on the ongoing global economic growth recovery. Pakistan's economy cannot ignore the impending risks of this spread, said Economic Adviser's Wing (EAW) of the Ministry of Finance in its

Monthly Economic Update & Outlook.

In its December Update, the EAW explained that Pakistan's inflation rate is driven by the international commodity prices, exchange rate, seasonal factors and economic agents' expectations concerning the future developments of these indicators.

The year-on-year increase in inflation in recent months is mainly driven by soaring electricity charges, fuel, house rent, transport and non-perishable food items among the largest contributors.

It is expected that the inflation will soften month-on-month in December. International oil prices have retreated somewhat from previous highs. The exchange rate continued to slightly depreciate but the government efforts to dampen the pass-through of high international food prices into domestic retail markets is continued.

However, the low base effect may contribute to keeping the December inflation rate in double-digit. Although the forecast probability margins are wide, most likely, year-on-year inflation is expected to remain double-digit in December but slightly less than the previous month's number.

Global energy prices for November declined month-on-month by 6.4pc, while non-energy prices fell by 0.2pc.

The report noted that the fiscal deficit fell to 1.1pc of GDP in 4MFY22 from 1.7pc of a year ago. Similarly, the primary balance posted a surplus of Rs206bn in July-October compared to Rs156bn in the same period last year.

On the external side, the current account posted a deficit of 5.3pc of GDP (\$7.1bn) in 5MFY22 against a 1.6pc (\$1.9bn) surplus during the same months last year. The CAD widened due to the growing imports of energy and non-energy commodities, along with a rising trend in the global prices of oil, Covid-19 vaccines, food and metals.

According to the report, for rabi season 2021-22, the wheat crop has been cultivated on an area of 22.1 million acres (94.5pc of the target area of 23.3m acres). The input situation is expected to remain smooth to achieve the wheat production target of 28.9 million tonnes. The better input situation is expected to increase crops production in the rabi season.

Spain's Gov't Clears Crucial Labor Reform And Budget for 2022

MADRID (AP) — Spain's left-wing ruling coalition on Tuesday secured its hold on power with the approval of a landmark labor reform backed by both unions and employers and a new national spending plan for next year that includes a hefty disbursement of pandemic recovery funds.

An array of left-leaning and nationalist lawmakers gave the final go-ahead to Spain's 450-billion-euro (\$509 billion) budget for 2022, which allocates more than half of the funds to education, health, pensions, subsidies and other forms of social spending.

The budget includes the first 20 billion euros of 70 billion euros (\$79.2 billion) total granted to the country from the European Union's COVID-19 recovery funds. The European Commission, the executive branch of the 27-nation bloc, transferred to Spain an initial tranche of 10 billion euros (\$11.3 billion) earlier this week.

The budget approval is seen as a crucial test of the parliamentary support of the minority coalition of Socialists and the anti-austerity United We Can party. By clearing the hurdle in a 281-62 vote with one abstention, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez dispelled pressure to call an early election and increased his chances to see out his term, which ends in 2023.

His Cabinet also passed Tuesday a decree Tuesday that overhauls the country's labor rules, a commitment by Sánchez's government with the European Commission before the end of 2021 in order to secure the next instalment of EU pandemic funds.

The labor reform reverts business-friendly regulations adopted in 2012 by a previous conservative administration at the height of last decade's sovereign debt crisis.

It limits most temporary contracts that are prevalent in the eurozone's fourth-largest economy to a maximum of three months and brings back collective bargaining with unions as the main channel to negotiate contracts. It also adopts the furlough program used to avoid layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic as a fixed tool for companies to turn to in future crises.

The reform has been sanctioned by workers' unions and trade associations, a rare achievement for the government and a personal win for Labor Minister Yolanda Díaz, a former labor attorney who has become the rising star in United We Can, the coalition's junior partner.

"This reform turns a page on the precariousness in Spain," Díaz told reporters during a weekly news conference following the Cabinet meeting, referring to official data that shows that one out of four contracts in Spain is short-term, the highest rate in the EU.

India to Become 3rd Largest Economy in 2031



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - The Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) has predicted that India will regain sixth position from France next year and become the third-largest economy in 2031, a year later the previously predicted.

CEBR, one of the UK's leading economics consultancies, in its annual World Economic League Table also predicted that China will overtake the US in 2030, two years later than forecast a year ago.

The London-based think tank said, over the next 15 years, India will see an improvement in its ranking in the World Economic League Table (WELT), rising from 7th place in 2021 to be the world's third-largest economy in 2036.

India will again take over France to regain its 6th place in WELT ranking for 2022, which it briefly lost to France in 2021, the CEBR added.

The think tank said, the COVID-19 pandemic has been nothing short of devastating for the country. Indeed, India has the third highest death toll worldwide, ranking behind the US and Brazil.

Nonetheless, with the help of emergency aid and prompt responses from the Indian government, the country has been able to transition out of the second Covid-19 wave.

A large drop in daily active cases has also contributed to a sharp rebound in economic activity in 2021, following a GDP contraction of 7.3% in 2020.

The GDP in the second quarter of 2020 grew by 20.1% year-on-year amid a low base and despite the deadly second wave. This was followed by a slightly muted figure of 8.4% in Q3 2021, marking the fourth consecutive quarter of expansion.

Overall, the economy is estimated to have grown by 8.5% in 2021, with output in 2021 expected to be 0.6% above 2019 levels. The economic figures show an improvement after signs of slowing momentum in the economy before the pandemic, with the rate of GDP growth sinking to a more than ten-year low of 4.0% in 2019, down from 6.5% in 2018 and around half the 8.3% growth rate recorded in 2016.

Zionists Terrified by Power of Resistance Axis

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The spokesperson for the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said the Zionist regime and the global arrogance have been terrified by the power of the axis of resistance.

The process of downfall of the Zionist regime has reached its most intense part over the past 70 years, General Ramezan Sharif said at a cultural meeting on Tuesday.

He said the global arrogance and the Zionists have become so frightened of the power of resistance axis that they assassinated senior Iranian commander Lt. General Qasem Soleimani.

The spokesman also noted that the blood of martyrs and the resistance of people have frustrated the Zionists and the enemies of Islam.



China Expands Lockdowns as Virus Surges in U.S., Europe

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China put hundreds of thousands more people under lockdown Tuesday to try and stamp out a worsening coronavirus outbreak, as infections hit new highs in multiple US states and Europe.

Covid surges have wreaked havoc around the world, with many nations in Europe and North America trying to strike a balance between economically punishing restrictions and controlling the spread of the virus.

The United States halved the isolation period for asymptomatic cases to try and blunt the disruptions, while France ordered firms to have employees work from home for at least three days a week.

Despite facing a much smaller outbreak compared with global virus hotspots, China has not relaxed its "zero Covid" strategy, imposing stay-at-home orders in many parts of the city of Yan'an.

The hundreds of thousands of affected residents there joined the 13 million people in the city of Xi'an, who entered a sixth day of home confinement as China battled its highest daily case numbers in 21 months.

"I'm about to be starved to death," wrote one Xi'an resident on the Twitter-like Weibo platform.

"There's no food, my housing compound won't let me out, and I'm about to run out of instant noodles... please help!"

Many Xi'an residents have similarly complained on social media about the restrictions, which include a ban on driving and only one member of a household permitted to go outside for groceries every three days.

This lockdown is the most sweeping in China since the similarly-sized city Wuhan was cut off from the world in the early days of the pandemic.

The surges in many countries have been propelled by the highly transmissible Omicron virus variant, hammering vulnerable sectors such as travel.

Some 11,500 flights have been scrapped worldwide since Friday, and tens of thousands more delayed, during one of the year's busiest travel periods.

Multiple airlines have blamed staffing shortages caused by spikes of Omicron cases.

The surge in the United States has been fuelled by the Omicron variant, as well as large pockets of unvaccinated residents and a lack of access to quick and easy testing.

President Joe Biden said Monday some US hospitals could be "overrun" but that the country was generally well prepared.

He stressed that Omicron would not have the same impact as the initial Covid-19 outbreak or the Delta variant surge this year.

"Omicron is a source of concern, but it should not be a source of panic," Biden said.

In an effort to prevent mass labour shortages during the surge, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday cut the isolation period for



asymptomatic cases from 10 to five days.

The United States is the nation hit hardest by the pandemic, and is closing in on its daily high of 250,000 cases recorded last January.

Governments worldwide are scrambling to boost vaccinations, stressing that the overwhelming majority of Covid-19 hospitalizations and deaths are occurring among the unvaccinated.

Many nations have also been forced to bring back unpopular and economically painful restrictions.

Private gatherings will be limited to ten vaccinated people -- two for non-vaccinated people -- and nightclubs will be closed. All sports competitions will now be held behind closed doors.

"Something has to be done to bring the infection figures down," a Berlin resident told AFP TV.

Facing record-high infections, France stopped short of issuing a stay-at-home order but called on employers to make staff work from home three days a week where possible.

The new measure, in place for at least three weeks, is one of several announced after a crisis cabinet meeting on Omicron, which is threatening to overwhelm hospitals. Denmark and Iceland also reported record daily cases.

The new Covid wave has, once again, also caused chaos in the sporting calendar.

England's Premier League announced that a record 103 players and staff had tested positive in the past week. So far in December, 15 games have been postponed.

Trump Tops Blacklist of...

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Gharibabadi explained that more than 120 perpetrators have been identified, arrest warrants have been issued for more than 40, and judicial representatives have been sent to 9 countries for pursuing the case.

"Three countries in the region and three countries outside the region are involved in the case of the assassination of martyrs Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis."

Noting that Trump was the main perpetrator of the heinous act, the Iranian official said an international will and the cooperation of Interpol are needed to arrest the criminals.

Along with his companions, including the deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, General Soleimani was targeted in a US drone strike near the Baghdad International Airport on January 5, 2020.

The U.S. assassination, directly ordered by Trump, drew a wave of condemnations from officials and movements throughout the world and triggered huge public protests across the region.

According to Gharibabadi, the trial of the perpetrators will be held in two months.

"The indictment of the perpetrators behind the martyr's assassination will be sent to the Tehran Court of Justice in two months," he said.

He also said Iran and Iraq have set up a joint investigation committee to follow up on the case, adding that the two sides have exchanged information on the US-orchestrated crime.

"We have asked Iraq to speed up the investigation so that the necessary verdicts can be issued [sooner]," Gharibabadi remarked.

The Judiciary official also criticized international forums for their silence in the face of the atrocious act.

"As long as these double standards prevail in the world, administering justice will not be easy, but we have a responsibility to take action and try to persuade global public opinion, regardless of those contradictions and double standards," he added.

Russia Reportedly to...

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According to "aviacionline", the impediment to the completion of the operation was that the United States threatened to sanction Egypt if it went ahead with the Su-35s. The operability of its fleet of more than 200 F-16s, dozens of AH-64 Apache helicopters, and hundreds of M-1 Abrams tanks was at risk.

Russia then tried to place 11 of these Su-35s in Indonesia, which had long ago almost finalized the purchase of a batch of these heavy fighters. But the head of the Indonesian Air Force declared that the Su-35 was excluded from the jet tender, in favor of the French Rafale and the American F-15EX.

Gov't Reinstates Ban...

FROM PAGE 1

The official called on citizens to reduce their electricity and gas consumption as much as possible as well. Last week, the National Iranian Gas Company said Iran's daily gas demand in the household sector had soared to an unprecedented 570 million cubic meters per day for the first time on record.

Energy consumption is unusually high in Iran, driven by massive subsidies provided by the government. An unusually dry spring has also left Iran struggling with hydropower shortages.

The country first put a blanket ban on crypto mining in the summer, when power demand hit a historic high amid hot temperatures. The decision came after dozens of cities across Iran faced power outages, with social media and news outlets blaming it on bitcoin mining.

Since then, the government has been enforcing restrictions on authorized crypto mining operators and working to combat illegal crypto miners. In late November, local energy authorities announced that they had seized 222,000 mining devices used for illicit mining crypto.

Rajabi Mashhadi said unlicensed operators account for the largest share of crypto mining in the country, consuming more than 600 megawatts of electricity. The ban imposed in summer was subsequently lifted in September after authorities said the power grid had become more stable.

Crypto mining consumes large quantities of energy because it uses costly software to solve complex math puzzles to validate transactions in the cryptocurrency. The first miner to solve the problem is rewarded in cryptocurrencies and the transaction is added to the blockchain or digital ledger.

Countries with cheap electricity have emerged as major hosts of cryptocurrency mining.

Malaysia's Policy Transition Raises Risk Of Volatility in 2022

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Malaysia's policy transition from monetary accommodation and fiscal expansion to austerity and consolidation raises the risk of volatility in the stock market in 2022, but this is only likely to happen in the second half of the year and after the 15th general election (GE15).

According to Kenanga Research, until then, conditions are supportive for positive stock market returns as liquidity remains ample, while value has emerged following 2021's steep market decline and regional underperformance.

"And for all the anxieties that the recent floods have caused, the implied fourth quarter of 2021's (Q4 2021) earnings results already suggested that Q4 2021's earnings would be the lowest.

"(This is) despite commodity prices holding up and a surge in economic reopening activities (briefly disrupted by the floods notwithstanding), plus encouraging data of leading economic indicators released recently," the research firm said in its investment strategy note today.

However, it noted that catalysts are lacking and there will be the usual pre-election inertia that will drag the market advance, and so returns will not be broad-based.

While the severe floods in mid-December would likely impact Q4 2021 earnings, Kenanga Research said the market has already projected very conservative earnings estimates around lockdown-related impacts which may have been overly aggressive, given anecdotal evidence of a surge in economic reopening activities.

The research firm said several signs suggest the likelihood of GE15 being called well before the July 2023 deadline, including the resounding win by the Barisan Nasional in the November Melaka state election, followed by the convincing win by its close ally, Gabungan Parti Sarawak, recently.

Additionally, economic data released in Q4 2021 suggests the current recovery is intact for now and would likely hit the government's targeted 3.0-4.0 per cent growth, it added.

"The opposition side is more fragmented after the Sheraton Move and it looks highly unlikely for Pakatan Harapan, Bersatu and Parti Pejuang to regroup. And finally, the pandemic looks to be subsiding," it noted.

Kenanga Research said these events should likely embolden the ruling coalition to call an election possibly as early as Q2 2022.

It added that liquidity remains ample and no tightening is expected in Q1 2022.

UK Firm Closer to Offering Global Internet Via Satellites

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - A Russian Soyuz rocket today took 36 more satellites from British operator OneWeb into orbit, bringing the company more than halfway towards its goal of providing global broadband internet.

The London-headquartered company is working to complete the construction of a constellation of low earth orbit satellites providing enhanced broadband and other services to countries around the planet.

The UK company plans for its global commercial internet service to be operational by next year, supported by some 650 satellites. With the latest mission, it now has a total of 394 satellites in orbit for the constellation.

The Russian rocket, operated by Europe's Arianespace, took off at 1310 GMT from the Moscow-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in ex-Soviet Kazakhstan.

"LIFTOFF!" Russia's Roscosmos space agency tweeted after the launch.

OneWeb is competing in the race to provide fast internet for the world's remote areas via satellites along with tech billionaire Elon Musk and fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos of Amazon.

Arianespace, which has worked with Russia for close to two decades, is under contract to make 16 Soyuz launches between December 2020 and the end of 2022.

Denmark's Hans Christian Andersen Museum Gets Fairytale Makeover

ODENSE (Dispatches) - Denmark is honoring its most famous writer, Hans Christian Andersen, with a revamped museum that aims to immerse visitors in the fantasy worlds he created.

Visitors have expressed delight with the new museum, which reopened in the summer and saw renovation work completed this month before it was shut as part of Denmark's efforts to fight a Covid resurgence.

From "The Little Mermaid" to "The Snow Queen", Andersen's works -- which the author called his "children" -- have inspired countless Disney films, ballets, songs and books.

The old Hans Christian Andersen museum in the writer's hometown of Odense in central Denmark was a "traditional biographical museum" filled with "a lot of artefacts and text", said Lone Weidemann, marketing coordinator for Odense museums.

But visitors "were looking for his fairytales, because that's what they know".

In a magical transformation that any fairy godmother would be proud of, city authorities have overseen a seven-year

renovation of the museum into a sprawling complex above and below the cobbled streets of Odense's old town.

After entering the redesigned museum, visitors move through the modest cottage where Andersen spent his childhood in the early 1800s, before being swept into a vast underground space devoted to his stories -- filled with animations, interactive exhibits and music.

The museum "takes you to a complete other world", said Ara Halici, a tourist from the Netherlands who made the trip to Odense especially for the museum.

"How fantastic it is to be taken away from your daily struggles in life," he said.

Having arrived just days before Denmark shut down cultural venues to fight a resurgent coronavirus pandemic, his story at least had a happy ending.

Andersen's life story is woven through the exhibits, which chart his humble beginnings as the child of an illiterate washerwoman and an impoverished shoemaker.

Born in 1805 and losing his father aged 11, Andersen left Odense three years later and headed for the capital, Copenhagen, where he dreamt of becoming an actor.

Gold Mine in...

FROM PAGE 1

The extractives industry, however, is underdeveloped and mineral products account for only 0.6 percent of Iran's GDP.

Oil has been the primary source of foreign currency for decades, but with the industry having come under a strict sanctions regime, mining is emerging as a new revenue source because the immense diversity of the sector makes it much harder to sanction. Iran is a rising steel power. It was ranked 10th among global producers after output rose 10.7% to 7.5 million tons in the first quarter of this year, according to the World Steel Association.

On Wednesday, figures released by the Ministry of Industry, Mining and Trade showed Iranian companies produced 35.28 million tons of crude steel and steel products in the eight months since March. Crude steel output fell 3.1% to 18.6 million tons during the period. Steel products stood at 16.6 million tons, down 6.6%.

Copper and aluminum production, however, rose in the period which saw Iranian mills churn out 202,000 tons of copper cathodes, up 6.2%, and 360,000 tons of aluminum ingots, up 24.8%.

As of 2020, Iran produced about 309,000 tons of copper, according to data from the World Bureau of Metal Statistics. It aims to boost that to 800,000 tons by 2025.

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Ganguly Hospitalized With Covid

KOLKATA (AFP) - Former Indian cricket captain Sourav Ganguly has been admitted to hospital after testing positive for Covid-19, a senior doctor said Tuesday. Ganguly, who underwent minor heart surgery in January, was admitted on Monday suffering from a mild fever, a senior doctor of the Woodlands Hospital in Kolkata said. "His condition is stable. There is no cause for alarm at the moment," the medic told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Black Jack Wins Sydney To Hobart Yacht Race

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Supermaxi Black Jack won the prestigious Sydney to Hobart yacht race on Tuesday. Owned by Australian Peter Harburg and skippered by Mark Bradford, Black Jack took line honours after a tight tussle with LawConnect on the River Derwent after two days 12 hours 37min and 17 sec of racing. It was one of the slowest Sydney to Hobart races ever with harsh conditions forcing withdrawals due to damage or minor crew injuries.

Morant's Last-Second Layup Lifts Grizzlies Over NBA Suns

WASHINGTON (AFP) - Memphis guard Ja Morant scored the last of his 33 points on a driving layup with a half-second remaining to lift the Grizzlies over host Phoenix 114-113 on Monday. Desmond Bane added a career-high 32 points with six 3-pointers for the Grizzlies (21-14), who also got 13 points and 16 rebounds from New Zealand center Steven Adams in preventing the Suns from matching Golden State for the overall NBA lead. "I'm glad everybody is able to see what we're capable of and what we can do against some really good teams in this league," Morant said. The Suns, trailing 60-48 at half-time and 89-75 entering the fourth quarter, fought back and seized a one-point lead on Devin Booker's 3-pointer with five seconds remaining, setting the stage for Morant's last-second heroics. "I was supposed to fake the handoff and go get a bucket and that's what I did," Morant said. It marked the first time in team history both Grizzlies starting guards scored 30 or more points in the same game. "That last play Ja had, got that layup, that's something we've run a couple times but the execution was great," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said. "Credit our guys for playing the full 48 minutes. We just found a way to win a really good game against a really good team."



Phoenix, led by Booker's 30 points, fell to 26-7, sliding one game behind the Warriors (27-6) for the Western Conference lead. Brooklyn's James Harden scored 39 points, added 15 assists and pulled down eight rebounds to spark the Eastern Conference-leading Nets to a 124-108 victory at the Los Angeles Clippers. With star teammates Kevin Durant, the NBA scoring leader, and Kyrie Irving in the NBA Covid-19 safety protocols, Harden seized command to lift Brooklyn to 22-9 overall. Australian guard Patty Mills and Nic Claxton each added 18 for the Nets. Marcus Morris scored 24 to lead the Clippers. Chicago's DeMar DeRozan scored 35 points, going 14-of-20 from the floor, and passed off 10 assists while Zach LaVine added 30 points and nine assists to power the Bulls to a 130-118 victory in Atlanta. The Hawks rallied within 116-112 before Chicago delivered a 14-4 run to seal a victory over an Atlanta squad that had 10 players in NBA Covid-19 health and safety protocols. The Bulls won their fourth game in a row and eighth in 10 starts, improving to 21-10 and second in the Eastern Conference. The Montenegrin big man contributed 24 points, 17 rebounds, six assists, four blocked shots and a steal. Cam Reddish scored 33 points and Trae Young added 29 to lead the Hawks. Minnesota reserve Jaylen Nowell scored 29 points and Nathan Knight added 20 points and 11 rebounds to lead the Timberwolves over the visiting Boston Celtics 108-103. Jaylen Brown led Boston with 26 points while Payton Pritchard added 23. Charlotte's Terry Rozier scored 27 points and Kelly Oubre Jr. added 18 off the bench to lead six double-figure scorers for the Hornets in a 123-99 victory over Houston. Jordan Clarkson came off Utah's bench to score 23 points, grab eight rebounds and pass out five assists, leading the Jazz to a 110-104 victory at San Antonio. Croatian Bojan Bogdanovic added 19 points for the Jazz while Frenchman Rudy Gobert had 16 points and 13 rebounds for Utah, which improved to 24-9. Derrick White led the Spurs with 21 points. Latvian center Kristaps Porzingis scored 34 points and grabbed nine rebounds to lead the Dallas Mavericks over the host Portland Trail Blazers 132-117.



Torres Signs For Barcelona From Man City

PARIS (Dispatches) - Spanish international Ferran Torres signed for cash-strapped Barcelona on Tuesday from Manchester City, the Catalan side announced. Despite their financial struggles, Barcelona have reportedly agreed a deal worth an initial 55 million euros (\$62 million, £47 million) for the 22-year-old. "FC Barcelona has reached an agreement with Manchester City for the transfer of Ferran Torres," Barcelona said in a statement on their website. "The player has signed a contract for the next five seasons, until 30 June 2027. "His buyout clause has been set at 1,000 million euros." Torres scored 16 goals in 43 appearances for City since joining from Valencia last year but this season has been disrupted by a fractured foot that has kept him out since October. He won the Premier League, League Cup and reached the final of the Champions League during his only full season in Manchester. City manager Pep Guardiola said last week that Torres had asked to leave and he would not stand in his way. Torres will fill the vacuum left at Barcelona by another former City striker Sergio Aguero.

Shami Reaches 200 Wicket Landmark

CENTURION (Dispatches) - Pace bowler Mohammed Shami bowled India into a strong position on the third day of the first Test against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Tuesday. Shami took five for 44 as South Africa were bowled out for 197 in reply to India's first innings total of 327. His haul saw Shami become the 11th Indian to take 200 wickets in Tests. India reached 16 for one at the close, an overall lead of 146 runs on a pitch which is likely to offer increasingly uneven bounce over the remaining two days. In contrast to the first day, when India made 272 for three, it was a day for the bowlers as the match resumed after the second day was rained off. With an extra half hour added to make up for the lost overs, 18 wickets fell for 268 runs. South African fast bowlers Lungi Ngidi and Kagiso Rabada bowled the hosts back into the match as India lost seven wickets for 55 runs at the start of the day. But India's fast bowlers, led by Shami, made outstanding use of the new ball on a pitch which had quickened up and which had numerous indentations, making the bounce unpredictable. Shami bowled a relentless length at lively pace and was rewarded with his sixth five-wicket haul in 55 Tests. Jasprit Bumrah made the first breakthrough for India, having South African captain Dean Elgar caught behind in the first over.

Paris Sweeps to Sixth Bormio Downhill Win



BORMIO (Dispatches) - Italy's Dominik Paris won the men's downhill race in Bormio for the sixth time on Tuesday ahead of Swiss Marco Odermatt who takes the overall World Cup. The 32-year-old Paris dominated the race down the icy Stelvio piste in northern Italy to finish 0.24 sec ahead of Odermatt with Swiss Niels Hintermann third at 0.80. Odermatt's first podium finish in the downhill

extends his lead in the overall World Cup standings to 286 points on Austrian Matthias Mayer, who finished 12th on the day, with two Super-G races on Wednesday and Thursday. Meanwhile Paris added to his impressive run of victories in the Lombardy ski resort after wins in 2012, 2017, 2018 and twice in 2019. No skier has won a downhill race on the same piste as many times. Paris has missed out just once on the Stelvio, finishing fourth last year as he made his comeback following ruptured ligaments in his right knee. For Paris it was the 16th World Cup downhill victory of his career. Odermatt continued his blistering form ahead of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, notching up a seventh podium in ten races so far this season.

Djokovic Mystery Deepens

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic has not withdrawn from the ATP Cup despite claims he was almost sure to do so, Tennis Australia said Tuesday, as other top players led by Naomi Osaka began arriving ahead of the Australian Open. There has been serious doubt as to whether men's world number one Djokovic would travel to Australia, having refused to confirm if he has been vaccinated against the coronavirus. An unnamed member of his team told Serbian newspaper Blic that they were "99 percent" sure that he would not play in the ATP Cup, which comes ahead of the Australian Open, adding to the intrigue over whether Djokovic would be at the first Grand Slam of the year. But Tennis Australia told AFP the Serbian had yet to pull out of the teams event, which is due to start on Saturday in Sydney with Djokovic drawn to play Norway's Casper Ruud on the opening day. "We haven't heard of any withdrawals from Team Serbia for the ATP Cup," a spokesperson said. Tennis Australia has organized charter flights to bring international stars into Melbourne and Sydney, with the first arriving Tuesday. Defending women's Australian Open champion Osaka was among those to touch down, but Djokovic was not on board, TA said. Players can also opt to fly commercial. Nine-time Australian Open champion Djokovic could win a record 21st Grand Slam title if he plays at Melbourne Park, but to enter Australia he and members of his entourage have to be vaccinated.



Worley Wins Giant Slalom In Lienz

LIENZ (Dispatches) - France's Tessa Worley won the World Cup giant slalom in Lienz on Tuesday, a race which U.S. star Mikaela Shiffrin missed due to testing positive for Covid-19. Two-time giant slalom world champion Worley, claimed a 15th World Cup victory in the discipline, finishing 0.30 sec ahead of World Cup overall defending champion Petra Vlhova of Slovakia. Sweden's Sara Hector, who won the event at Courchevel last week, was third fastest at 0.38 sec. Worley, 32, set the fastest time in the first leg and was fourth fastest in the second. For Worley it was a first win of the season before the Winter Olympics in Beijing in just over a month's time where she will hope to secure her first ever medal at the quadrennial showpiece event. The race is taking place without spectators after the Austrian ski federation decided it was wisest in the wake of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 taking hold. Shiffrin, who leads Italy's Olympic downhill champion Sofia Goggia by 93 points in the overall World Cup standings, revealed on Monday she had tested positive. Two-time Olympic gold medallist Shiffrin, 26, is one of several female ski stars to have tested positive. Switzerland's 2016 overall World Cup champion Lara Gut-Behrami missed the Val d'Isere and Courchevel meetings. Austria's double ski world champion Katharina Liensberger also missed the Courchevel round of the World Cup season.



Lengthy Covid Break Did Man Utd No Favors

LONDON (Dispatches) - Harry Maguire said a 16-day coronavirus break had done Manchester United no favors after they salvaged a 1-1 draw at Premier League strugglers Newcastle, leaving them seven points off the top four. Ralf Rangnick's men needed a 71st-minute equaliser from half-time substitute Edinson Cavani after Allan Saint-Maximin scored a superb early opener, and were indebted to David de Gea for a series of fine saves.