

Health Ministry Announced on Monday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic In Iran Increased to 131,702 With 22 More Iranians Killed by the Deadly Disease Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

A Source Close to the Iranian Negotiating Team in Vienna Rejected Some Western Media's Claims That a Deadline Has Been Set for the Ongoing Talks Which Resumed Yesterday

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2

DOMESTIC

Gen. Soleimani's Daughter Renews Vow to Avenge Father's Assassination



> SEE PAGE 2

3

DOMESTIC

Tokyo Preparing Trade Cooperation Document With Tehran



> SEE PAGE 3

4

INTERNATIONAL

Sudan Security Deploys to Block Anti-Coup Rallies



> SEE PAGE 4

8

SPORTS

DeRozan Makes Historic NBA Consecutive Buzzer Beaters



> SEE PAGE 8

Joint Text Reached In Vienna Talks Result of West's Realism

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The joint text reached in Vienna talks is the result of West's realization that it must back down from its maximum demands and be realistic that it cannot go beyond the JCPOA on the nuclear issue, said FM spokesman.

Speaking in his weekly press conference, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh answered questions on a wide range of topics.

Referring to the Iranian president's visit to Moscow in the coming days, he said, "His visit will take place at the invitation of Mr. Putin and will focus on economic, political and cultural cooperation."

In response to a question about the possibility of signing a document on strategic cooperation between Iran and Russia during the President's visit to Moscow, Khatibzadeh expressed hope that the work will be done on this trip.

See Page 7

UNSC Urged to Hold U.S., Israel Accountable for General Soleimani Assassination

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations has urged the UN Security Council to hold the United States and the Israeli regime responsible for the assassination of Iran's top anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani.

"Given the dire implications of this terrorist act on international peace and security, the Security Council must live up to its Charter-based responsibilities and hold the United States and the Israeli regime to account for planning, supporting, and committing the terrorist act," Majid Takht-Ravanchi wrote in a letter addressed to the rotating president of the UN Security Council Mona Juul.

The Iranian diplomat noted that former head of the Israeli military intelligence major general Tamir Hayman admitted last December that the Tel Aviv regime was involved in the 2020 assassination and described it as "an achievement" and one of the two significant and important targeted killings during his term.

See Page 7

President Calls for Trial of Trump, Pompeo For Assassination of Martyr Soleimani



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi said Monday that if former U.S. president Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo are not brought to justice, Muslims will avenge the crime they committed against Gen. Soleimani.

President Raisi made the comments at a massive gathering at Tehran Grand Mussalah held to commemorate the martyrdom of former IRGC Quds Force commander Lt. General Soleimani on Monday afternoon.

The president said that the top Iranian commander General Soleimani was a school of thought that was in continuation of the school of late Imam Khomeini and current Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

"His school will not die out with assassination and missiles because a school will remain forever," Raisi underscored.

Soleimani was not a man of compromise but was a man of resistance, the president noted, adding that Martyr Soleimani should not be seen only as a top military commander.

Raisi went on to say that Gen. Soleimani had the expertise in winning hearts and left behind a culture of resistance.

He said that the former IRGC Quds Force commander could conquer hearts better than lands.

Iranian President said that the Ex-president of the United States and also former Secretary of State must stand trial for the crime of assassinating General Soleimani.

He addressed the Americans, saying that General Soleimani was officially invited by the Iraqi prime minister before he was assassinated.

He added that the Americans violated Iraq's sovereignty.

"You [the Americans] not only violated Iraq's sovereignty, but you also assassinated a nation, not just an individual," Raisi said.

"The aggressor, murderer, and the key criminal, namely the former U.S. president must be tried for the heinous crime of assassinating Gen. Soleimani," President Raisi said.

The president went on to address the American statesmen that if the perpetrators behind the heinous crime do not stand trial, the Islamic Ummah will avenge his martyrdom.

Yemeni Naval Forces Seize Intruding Emirati Cargo Ship

SANAA (Dispatches) - The spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces says the country's naval troops, backed by allied fighters from Popular Committees, have managed to seize a United Arab Emirates-flagged cargo vessel as it was engaged in "hostile acts".

Brigadier General Yahya Saree said in a post published on his Twitter page on Monday that the Yemeni forces and their allies captured the vessel after it trespassed into Yemen's territorial waters and was acting against the security and stability of the country.

The senior Yemeni military official added that the ship was loaded with various munitions, noting that the full details of the seizure will be made public during a press conference within the next few hours.

For his part, spokesman for Yemen's popular Ansarullah resistance movement, Mohammed Abdulsalam, underscored that the UAE-flagged vessel was captured while it was carrying out hostile acts in Yemeni waters.

"The successful and unprecedented operation comes within the framework of the legitimate right of the Yemeni nation to confront the Saudi-led aggression and siege," he said.

In September 2018, Yemeni naval forces, backed by fighters from Popular Committees, targeted a military vessel in a missile attack off the coast of the kingdom's southwestern border region of Jizan, in response to the Riyadh regime's atrocious military campaign against their war-ravaged homeland.

A military source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the Arabic-language al-Masirah television network at the time that the frigate was targeted with a guided missile.

Colonel Aziz Rashed, deputy military spokesman for the Yemeni army, said the attack was in retaliation for a Saudi airstrike against Yemeni fishermen off the coast of the strategic western province of Hudaydah, which killed five people.

On July 25 that year, Yemeni naval forces and their allies targeted and destroyed a Saudi military vessel in a missile attack off the coast of Hudaydah.

An unnamed military source said the French-built Dammam frigate was targeted with a guided missile.

Back on August 12, 2017, Yemeni forces targeted a Saudi frigate with a guided missile in waters near the port city of Mukha, situated 346 kilometers south of the capital Sana'a.

Iran to Retaliate Harshly To Any Israeli Aggression

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammed Baqer Qalibaf stressed to Al-Manar that the Islamic Republic will respond to any Israeli aggression at once.

In an interview with Al-Manar's "Baina Qawssain" (Between Brackets) talk show on Sunday, Qalibaf noted that the Zionist regime is "unsteady" with "void capabilities."

"The Zionist entity is unsteady. Let's agree that its capabilities are void. This regime knows very well that any kind of aggression will be harshly met by the Islamic Republic. Undoubtedly we will retaliate at once, and our retaliation will include all those who will engage in any attack," the Iranian speaker told Al-Manar.

"The Islamic Republic will certainly respond to any military step taken by the Zionist entity," he added.

On the Vienna talks, aimed at reviving the 2015 nuclear deal, Qalibaf said that the Islamic Republic is keen to reach a "good deal," ruling out an interim deal with world powers.

See Page 7

Tehran to Pursue Legal Case Against Airbus, ATR

TEHRAN (PressTV)- Iran's civil aviation chief says the country will pursue its legal case against international plane manufacturers Airbus and ATR over their failure to supply spare parts to the Iranian airlines based on contracts signed before the United States imposed sanctions on Iran in 2018.

Mohammad Mohammadi Bakhsh said that Airbus and ATR have consistently refused to honor their contractual obligations regarding the supply of spare parts to Iran under the pretext that they could face American penalties.

"We are protesting this (decision) and we will pursue the legal case as whenever the issue is raised they attribute it to the (U.S.) sanctions," Mohammadi Bakhsh was quoted as saying by the ILNA news agency.

See Page 7

Tehran Refuses Recognizing Taliban Gov't

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian ambassador to Kabul says the current economic crisis in Afghanistan is paving the way for extremism, particularly for Daesh terror group.

Iran will not recognize the current Afghan government unless its government is inclusive, Bahadur Aminian said in an interview with TOLO news.

He added Tehran might persuade other countries to recognize the Afghan government if the Islamic Emirate brings reforms to its government structure.

"If a group comes (to power) and the group is (comprised) of a single ethnic group and all other ethnic groups are not included in the government, we don't accept it, and, therefore, we benevolently call on the Taliban rulers to form an inclusive government," he continued.

The Iranian ambassador said that the current economic crisis will pave the way for extremism, particularly for Daesh.

"If the economic problems remain, it will cause more migration. If the economic problems remain, they will cause extremism, which will not only threaten Afghanistan but also the region," the envoy added.

Aminian, however, denied reports that Iranian forces were treating Afghan refugees violently, saying that approximately four million Afghans are settled in Iran. Iran's government provided educational opportunities for the Afghan refugees, he added.

Aminian is optimistic over the US withdrawal of Afghanistan and states Tehran considers it part of its revenge against Washington for the killing of Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani.



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Judiciary Chief Urges Legal Persecution of Martyr Soleimani's Assassins

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Judiciary Chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei said on Monday that the administration, the Judiciary, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs should use all legal capacities to prosecute the criminals who assassinated General Qasem Soleimani in international and domestic courts and organizations. Mohseni Ejei praised Attorney General and Tehran's Attorney for filing criminal and legal lawsuits on the assassination of General Soleimani and his comrades and holding meetings with Iraqi legal officials on the issue.

Gen. Soleimani's Daughter Renews Vow to Avenge Father's Assassination

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Zeinab Soleimani, the daughter of top Iranian anti-terror commander General Qasem Soleimani who was assassinated by the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq two years ago, has renewed her pledge to avenge her father's assassination.

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

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

"My father loved the Iraqi people from the bottom of his heart... He would ponder a lot about a strong Iraq," Zeinab said during a vigil at the Baghdad airport on Sunday night, on the eve of the second martyrdom anniversary of two anti-terror commanders.

She noted that al-Muhandis also devoted "his life to the liberation of the Iraqi people."

Tonight, she said, "We vow to move closer, hand in hand and step by step, to the horizon of exacting 'harsh revenge' on enemies whose hands are stained with their blood."



Zeinab also stressed that "the tears of sorrow ... would soon turn into joyous tears of victory when dear Iraq and all the countries in the region are purged of the filth of the presence of American invaders."

Addressing the Americans, Zeinab made clear that "we will not forget this blood."

Also, Manar, the daughter of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, also spoke at the event, reasserting that "we will take revenge for the blood" of the two commanders and their companions.

"We will take revenge for you, your brother, and companions," she said, speaking to her father.

Manar also said, "We will exact vengeance on the rulers of Saudi Arabia, who think that they can restore the Umayyad rule with their money," referring to the tyrannical dynasty, which Imam Hussein (PBUH), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), rose against.

"We will take revenge for every drop of blood that was shed unjustly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen," she added.

President Orders Swift Payment of Compensation to Ukraine Flight Victims

TEHRAN (IFP) - President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran has ordered relevant authorities to speed up the payment of compensation to the families of those who lost their lives in the accidental downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane in early 2020 near Tehran.

During a cabinet meeting on Sunday, Raisi said it was "imperative" to fulfill the legal rights of the bereaved families of the victims of the tragic plane crash and speed up work to pay them compensation.

Raisi ordered the formation of a working group with the participation of a number of ministries and government institutions to follow up on the problems facing the victims' families.

The order comes on the second anniversary of the tragedy, which saw the passenger plane en route to Kiev crash minutes after takeoff near the Iranian capital, killing all of the 176 passengers and crews on board.

Hours earlier, Iran had launched a missile strike against a US-run base in Iraq and put the country's air defenses on high alert due to increased American aerial activity in the aftermath of the strike.

Iran acknowledged days later that the mismanagement of an air defense unit's radar system by its operator was the key human error that led to the accident.

Tehran pledged to pay \$150,000 to each of the families of the victims of the Ukrainian Airlines flight.

Iran's Judiciary has also launched a hearing process since late last year to bring to justice the individuals suspected of involvement in the crash.

P4+1's Initiative Needed to Guarantee Continuation of 2015 Agreements

VIENNA (IRNA) - On the verge of convening the 8th round of Vienna negotiations aimed at terminating sanctions, Iran's ambassador to Britain reiterated that the participating countries in negotiations need to initiate ways to guarantee proper implementation of the important and strategic 2015 agreements.

Ambassador Mohsen Baharvand wrote on his Instagram account on Sunday night that all the current members of the JCPOA agreement, and even the current US administration have agreed that the US behavior after reaching the JCPOA agreement in unilateral refraining from fulfilling its commitments were both illegal and unconstructive.

"They all also agreed that there need to be guarantee that such weird behaviors will not be repeated and in the future everyone needs to act in accordance with the UNSC Resolution 2231," he added.

He said that all the same, none of them have thus far presented any noticeable initiative, either political, or legal, or even practical initiative for guaranteeing the

proper implementation of those important and strategic agreements in the future.

"That is while the legal international foundations, such as the UNSC, and the high capacity banking transaction mechanisms provide broad capacities for initiating such guarantees," wrote Baharvand.

The Iranian envoy added that it was enough that the case would have been the other way around and the other side needed to give guarantee; since in that case they would have presented dozens of political and legal initiatives and used the entire international legal and political capacities in that respect.

He said that the Iranian delegation has the required capacity for proposing such initiatives, adding that "we are obliged to support our country's delegation in those sensitive negotiations".

The 8th round of Iran's nuclear talks aimed at terminating the sanctions will start on Monday after a three-day hiatus due to the beginning of the Christian New Year.

Tasnim News Agency Launches Website in Hebrew Language

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Hebrew website of Tasnim News Agency was officially launched on the second anniversary of martyrdom of the highly-revered commander of Islam, Martyr Lt. General Qasem Soleimani.

Announcing the formal launch of the Hebrew website, CEO of Tasnim News Agency, Majid Qolizadeh said, "Although the number of people speaking Hebrew in the world is not so large, the Tasnim News Agency decided to set up a website in Hebrew language considering the strategic importance that the issue of Palestine has for the Islamic Republic of Iran and for Muslims across the world, and to release reports relating to the issue in that site."

Referring to the massive and systematic censorship of the news about the Zionist regime and the occupied Palestine in the world, he said, "The undeniable reality is that not only have the people of the world been deprived of receiving the news about the whole truth about the occupied Palestine and the Zionist crimes, but the reports that are fed even to the residents of the occupied territories are being extensively manipulated and managed."

On the decision to unveil the Hebrew website of Tasnim on the anniversary of the criminal assassination that led to the martyrdom of General Soleimani, the CEO said, "The glorious martyr, Haj Qassem Soleimani, devoted his life to the efforts for the stability and calm of the nations and to the fight against cruelty and crimes in the West Asia region. There is hardly any move comparable with the sanctity and impact of the measures by Haj Qassem. However, Tasnim is doing its best to follow the holy path of Haj Qassem in the region, which is seeking freedom and advocating justice for all people with various ethnicities, religions, interests, and nationalities."

As regards the target audience of the Hebrew website of Tasnim, Qolizadeh said, "Basically, everybody speaking Hebrew in the world can be among the audience for the Hebrew website of Tasnim News Agency. The new team of Tasnim News Agency is trying to provide the Hebrew-speaking people outside the occupied territories with the true and authentic news of what is happening inside the occupied territories and other parts of the world, particularly in the West Asia region. Tasnim tries to help the residents of the occupied territories know more about the true nature and behavior of their leaders, get informed about the shaky and dark future of usurpation and occupation of the land of a nation and about the crimes against them, and receive more accurate and genuine arguments and capabilities of the Zionist regime's enemies."

Tehran, Muscat Discuss Bilateral Relations, Regional Developments



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The foreign ministers of Iran and Oman have discussed various issues of interest to both countries in a phone call.

During the Sunday phone call, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Omani counterpart, Sayyid Badr Albusaidi, stressed the importance of enhancing bilateral cooperation on the international level.

The top Iranian and Omani diplomat also urged the continuation of consultations on different mutual and international issues.

The Iranian foreign minister conveyed warm greetings of President Ebrahim Raeisi to Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said and exchanged views with his counterpart on possible ways to resolve regional crises through dialogue among countries in the region.

Amir-Abdollahian expressed hope that necessary ground would be prepared for his visit to Muscat as soon as possible. The Omani foreign minister, for his part, hailed positive Tehran-Muscat relations, saying that his country has always emphasized that regional crises should be settled through dialogue while sparing no effort to promote peace.

In a meeting with Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali bin Issa al-Harthi, the Omani Foreign Ministry's under-secretary for diplomatic affairs, in Tehran late last month, the Iranian foreign minister said Tehran is committed to dialogue and adoption of political solutions to resolve regional problems.

Amir-Abdollahian said improving and expanding relations with neighboring countries is the Iranian administration's foreign policy priority, noting that Iran attaches great importance to its ties with Oman as a neighbor.

Martyr Soleimani Created Deterrent Power For Resistance Movement

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi has said that Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani played a leading role in promoting capacities and capabilities of Islamic resistance movement.

After General Soleimani's efforts, regional nations and Resistance movement could defend themselves and create deterrent power against threats, Masjedi said.

As the ambassador noted, General Soleimani endeavored to annihilate terrorism in the region during his life.

In November 2017, General Soleimani, in a letter to Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, announced the termination of the corrupt tree of Daesh (ISIS) and congratulated the glorious victory to the Islamic World.

Closer Iran-Armenia Ties To Ensure Security

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Promotion of cooperation and economic relations between Iran and Armenia would serve the interests of all parties and contribute to regional security, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said.

In a telephone conversation with Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan on Monday, Raisi stressed the need for the development of economic and trade ties between the two neighbors.

"Enhancement of cooperation and economic exchanges between Tehran and Yerevan would fulfill the interests of all parties and definitely contribute to security," the Iranian president said.

He also pointed to the delicate situation in the Caucasus region, saying, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's principled policy is to support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of countries."

Reaffirming Iran's support for Armenia's sovereignty over its territories and roads, the Iranian president welcomed the progress in the negotiations between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, adding, "We hope that the other problems between the two countries would be also settled peacefully within the framework of the international principles and laws, and that we'd witness peace, stability and security in the region."

For his part, Pashinyan briefed the Iranian president on the process of negotiations about the situation in the Caucasus.

He also highlighted Armenia's determination to promote economic interaction with Iran and step up the activities of the Economic Cooperation Joint Commission.

The premier expressed confidence that closer cooperation and coordination between Armenia and Iran would help them take major steps for stabilizing regional peace and security.

Rally Held in Tehran to Condemn U.S. Assassination of General Soleimani

TEHRAN (IFP) - A group of Iranian university students have gathered outside the Swiss embassy in Tehran, calling for revenge over the US assassination of anti-terror icon, General Qasem Soleimani.

Tehran-based Swiss embassy represents the United States' interests in Iran.

The night-time rally was held on January 2, 2022 on the eve of the 2nd anniversary of the assassination of top Iranian general Soleimani by the U.S.

During the rally, the students chanted slogans such as "Down with the US," "Down with Israel," "Revenge, revenge, period!"

Call for Protest Against Instagram Removal of Posts on Martyr Soleimani

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Vice-President of the Judiciary for International Affairs and Secretary General of the Islamic Republic of Iran's High Council for Human Rights Kazem Gharibabadi has called on freedom-lovers and justice-seekers around to globe to complain about Instagram's removal of posts promoting Martyr Qasem Soleimani.

According to Iran's High Council for Human Rights, Gharibabadi reacted to removal of social media posts supporting Iranian Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated outside Baghdad international airport on January 3, 2020.

Instagram and its parent company Meta have been violating freedom of speech following assassination of the former commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), when they decided to omit posts that voice support for Iranian commander in order to comply with US sanctions against Iran.

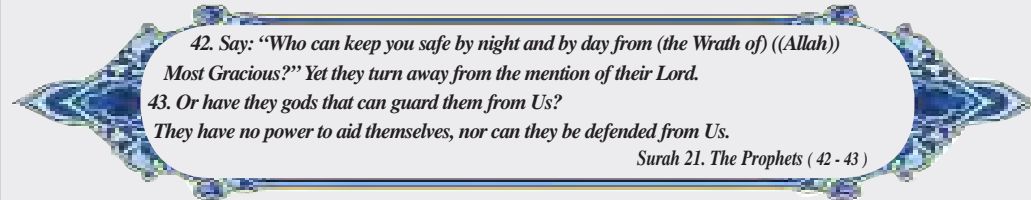
Gharibabadi wrote on his Twitter account on Sunday, "After physical assassination of Martyr Soleimani, a harbinger in fight against terrorism, he was also virtually assassinated. Tens of millions of posts regarding this great national hero have been deleted by Instagram under the pretext of its so-called policy on violence."

The Iranian official also tweeted, "I encourage the people throughout the world, including my fellow Iranians, to present their complaints or objections on this anti human rights act to: @IreneKhan , SR on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression; @mbachelet , UNHCHR; and HRC President."



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:09
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:24
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:45
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14



Tokyo Preparing Trade Cooperation Document With Tehran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

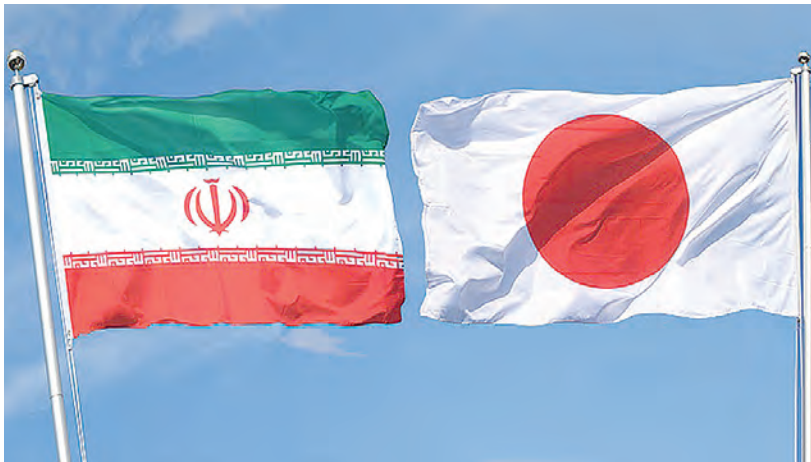
TEHRAN - The chairman of the Iran- Japan Joint Committee of Commerce Mr. Bahram Shakouri says that the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) has recently prepared a package of cooperation with Iran, and this indicates that the Japanese see a positive future for cooperation with Iran.

Speaking to ILNA, Shakouri said, "Iran-Japan trade is very low, and it can be said that the volume of our trade exchanges with the country is currently almost zero." He noted some part of Iran's exports to Japan was oil which has been halted and the non-oil exports to Japan have not been over \$38m and this figure means that Iran almost has no trade exchange with Tokyo.

The head of the Iran-Japan Joint Trade Committee added: "Recently, JETRO has prepared a package of cooperation with Iran and is interested in increasing relations, and this shows that the Japanese see the future positive because the Japanese want to hold B2B meetings to connect the industrial and mining units, and with the ongoing negotiations, these connections will be established."

"If we can revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and lift the sanctions, Japan can replace many other countries, even European ones, in our foreign trade because Japan is in high level in terms of innovation and technology and Japan can meet Iran's needs related to the mining and mining industry as well as other fields," he said. He went on to say that Japan is also a good destination for export of most of Iran's products like dried fruits, fruit concentrate, handicraft, saffron, carpet, sea products like shrimp and caviar and many other agro products.

Shakouri added that in the field of tourism, Japan can be a good destination for Iranian



tourists and Japanese are also interested in historic monuments and sites and therefore, in case of lifting sanctions, the trade exchange between the two states will increase.

He also pointed to the positive signs of this document for Iran and said that preparation of a package of cooperation with Iran in Japan is a very good sign and it indicates the Japanese believe that anti-Iran sanctions would be lifted. Shakouri went on to say that since Japanese companies have American partners and they have considerable trade with the U.S., they were cautious during sanctions and some part of Iran's money has been frozen in Japan and in such a condition when JETRO prepares a package for cooperation it indicates that Japanese expect bright future for cooperation with Iran and this is a good news for Iranians that the talks will bear fruit.

Shakouri went on to say that when Iran wanted to use its frozen money in Japanese banks for imports of COVID vaccines, Iran's Central Bank did not issue any required license, noting that in fact major part of the problem returns to sanctions and if the sanctions are removed, Iran should also return to the FATF to resolve the problem regarding money transfer.

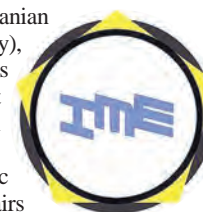
He reiterated that if Iran's Central Bank through cooperation with foreign ministry start talks with Japan for reaching an agreement, then Iran can purchase machineries and required equipment via the frozen assets in Japan.

Shakouri also reiterated that there is no sign of frozen asset in the document prepared by the JETRO because JETRO seeks trade of private sector and frozen money is not in the range of activities of this organization and the government should tackle it.

IME Posts Weekly Trade of Commodities Worth \$393m

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN- During the past Iranian calendar week (ended on Friday), 1.582 million tons of commodities worth 114 trillion rials (about \$393 million) were traded at Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME).



As reported by the IME's Public Relations and International Affairs Department, the exchange experienced trade of 1.264 million tons of commodities valued at more than 64.51 trillion rials (about \$222.4 million) on its metals and mineral trading floor.

Furthermore, the IME saw on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 310,566 tons of commodities worth nearly 48 trillion rials (about \$165.5 million).

Last but not least was the IME's side market with 7,013 tons of commodities traded on it.

As previously reported, during the past Iranian calendar month (ended on November 21), 8.961 million tons of commodities worth \$2.357 billion were traded at Iran Mercantile Exchange, indicating 18 percent rise in the value and 24 percent growth in the weight of trades as compared to its preceding month.

The exchange sold on its metals and minerals trading floor 7.387 million tons of commodities valued at more than \$1.42 billion.

Items traded on this floor included 5.176 million tons of cement, 1.452 million tons of steel, 521,000 tons of iron ore, 172,000 tons of sponge iron (DRI), 31,445 tons of aluminum, 30,535 of zinc, 29,100 tons of copper, 560 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 200 tons of metallurgical coke, 81 tons of precious metals concentrate and 63 kg of gold bars.

Furthermore, the exchange saw trade of more than 1.53 million tons of commodities worth almost \$907 million on its oil and petrochemical trading floor.

The IME's customers purchased on this floor 447,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 441,510 tons of bitumen, 324,851 tons of polymeric products, 150,081 tons of chemicals, 135,000 tons of lube cut, 15,682 tons of oil, 13,850 tons of sulfur, 546 tons of insulation and 50 tons of argon.

Tehran-Beijing Partnership Pact Facilitated Iran SCO Membership



TEHRAN (IFP) - The head of the Iran-China Chamber of Commerce says the signing of the Tehran-Beijing cooperation document shows Iran has global trade partners.

Majid Reza Hariri said after the conclusion of the 25-year agreement between Iran and China, the Islamic Republic's membership process in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was quickly accepted.

Hariri added that the document was the result of two years of negotiations between the two sides.

He noted that Iran and China have outlined cooperation in this document, and in fact, they have expressed their desire for long-term cooperation by signing the agreement.

Hariri also spoke about the achievements of signing the comprehensive document. He said after 40 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has achieved such stability and self-confidence to ink a long-term cooperation document with a foreign country.

Referring to the opposition and rumors surrounding the Iran-China cooperation document, Hariri said this issue is related to Iran's political situation in the world.

According to the head of the Iran-China Chamber of Commerce, Iran's allies, including China, emphasize on confidentiality so that their relations with other countries are not affected because Iran is under US sanctions.

Health Ministry Ready to Send Drugs, Vaccine to Turkey

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari announced the readiness of the health ministry to export medicine and vaccines to Turkey.

A meeting to review strategies to boost Iran-Turkey economic relations was held on Sunday with the participation of Mehdi Safari, Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy.

Talking to reporters about the meeting, Safari said in the meeting, developing economic relations with Turkey, challenges and solutions to problems were discussed.

He described the financial problems in Iran-Turkey relations as one of the topics discussed at the meeting

The deputy foreign minister also said that at the meeting, agricultural issues, standards and agreements between the two countries were discussed at the meeting.

"The problems and challenges related to the financial field and how to resolve them, as well as the promotion of trade relations between the two countries were discussed."

Safari also pointed out that "The readiness of the Ministry of Health to export drugs, especially vaccines, to Turkey was discussed at the meeting."

He added, "The Ministry of Health has recently authorized that up to 10 to 20% extra vaccines could be exported on condition that the country's needs are met."

He also referred to new technologies and said that "In today's meeting, it was suggested that we have a joint technology park in Turkey."

In this expert-level session, the Director-General of Foreign Ministry for the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe Affairs explained the significance of the development of relation with Turkey and officials of the responsible bodies were asked to submit their suggestions on enhancing economic relations with neighboring Turkey and resolving challenges facing ahead.

The two sides also explored avenues for the compilation of a comprehensive cooperation document between Iran and Turkey, a Preferential Trade Agreement and a balance of trade between the two countries.

Claim of Self-Sufficiency In Medicines Not True

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - An official of Iran's drug importers union says official claims of self-sufficiency in production of raw materials for medicine and pharmaceutical products is not true.

In an interview with ILNA, the deputy head of the Iranian Pharmaceutical Importers Association, Mojtaba Bourbour, said about 80 to 90 percent of the needed raw materials are imported from China and India. He added that some medicines are imported from China but sold as made in Iran.

Noting that there is no precise data on the amount of the imports of drugs packaged abroad, Bourbour said that unofficial figures indicate a \$400 million dollar decrease to about \$700 million since last year.

He added that most of Iran's imports of packaged medicines are from the United States and European countries, followed by India and Turkey.

He also criticized the government's policies that led to the decrease in imports, warning that medication prices may rise dramatically in the coming months as a result of restrictions by the health ministry and not foreign sanctions.

Also on Sunday, Iran's Health Minister Bahram Eynollahi talked of further restrictions on imports of medicine and pharmaceutical products, while the Food and Drug Administration announced a ban on the imports of COVID-19 vaccines.

Eynollahi urged people to trust drugs made in Iran and warned Iranian doctors against prescribing foreign brands of medicine.

Cellphone Imports Up 117% in 9 Months

TEHRAN (MNA) - The value of Iran's import of mobile phones increased 117 percent in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21) as compared to the last year's corresponding period, an official with the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced.

According to Arezu Ghaniyoun, the deputy head of the IRICA Bureau of Customs Statistics and Information Processing, 13.061 million cellphones worth \$2.942 billion were imported into the country in the mentioned period, which was also 42 percent higher than the previous year's same period in terms of number.

As reported, cellphone importers had shipped in 9.165 million devices worth

\$1.353 billion in the previous year's first nine months, which means the number of imported cellphones in the said period increased by 3.896 million.

Ghaniyoun noted that smartphone was Iran's top imported commodity in the current fiscal year's first nine months.

She mentioned, the coronavirus pandemic and consequently home officing and home education as the main reasons for the increase in the import of the mentioned product.

Iranian mobile phone traders imported 15.8 million smartphones over the previous Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20, 2021), according to the Iranian Association of Cellphones, Tablet, and Accessories Importers.

Oil Ministry Shows Willingness to Cooperate With Persian Gulf States

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Deputy Oil Minister Ahmad Asadzadeh has stated that his ministry is totally prepared for collaboration with the nations in the area, particularly the Persian Gulf Arab countries.

Speaking to IRIB, Asadzadeh declared, "at the Oil Ministry, we are fully prepared to cooperate with the countries in the region and the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf; some of these countries have recently shown a positive and constructive attitude which we welcome."

The official further mentioned, "many of these countries need gas, and we have good gas resources in the Persian Gulf, so we can do a lot of good work with a constructive, forward-looking cooperation and using a win-win formula."

The deputy oil minister for international affairs and trade expressed that his ministry is inspecting probable situations for collaboration with the stated nations and in this matter appreciates significant and truthful partnership.

Saba Steel Wins Excellent Manager Award

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Persian Gulf Saba Steel Company received the top manager award during the sixth national conference of Excellent Award for Manager of the Year which was held in presence of vice-president and some of the senior officials and Majlis deputies.



According to the reports, the CEO of Persian Gulf Saba Steel Company Mr. Saeed Bozorgi received the top manager award.

The conference and award ceremony was held at the IRIB Conference Hall and during the conference, the top and successful managers of economic enterprises in different fields of activities were honored with awards based on the assessments conducted by the jury.

Thousands Flee as Floods Worsen in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Thousands more people have fled swamped homes as heavy rains exacerbated flooding in seven Malaysian states, officials said Sunday, with over 125,000 people evacuated in total since mid-December.

The National Disaster Management Agency said the weeks-long bout of bad weather was expected to carry on until today. Dangerous water levels were detected in rivers in at least five states, a government monitoring website showed Sunday, with rising levels recorded in many other areas. Some 50 people have been killed so far, a police Facebook post on Saturday said, with two still missing.



Germans See Pandemic, Pensions As Biggest Topics for 2022

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germans want their new government to focus on fighting the coronavirus pandemic and safeguarding pensions in 2022, with fewer people wanting them to prioritize the climate crisis, an opinion poll showed on Sunday.

The survey by pollsters Insa for the Bild am Sonntag newspaper showed that 61% of the 2,004 people questioned think combating the pandemic is the most important task of the government, followed by securing pensions. Germans also want the government to deal with a shortage of staff in nursing homes, provide affordable housing and limit the rise in energy prices. Dealing with the impact of climate change only ranks sixth in their list of priorities.



Sudan Security Deploys to Block Anti-Coup Rallies



KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Sudanese security forces deployed in large numbers Sunday, setting up road blocks in the capital Khartoum amid calls for pro-democracy rallies in "memory of the martyrs" killed in recent protests. Communications including internet and phone lines have been severely restricted, while armed officers used shipping containers to block key bridges across the Nile River connecting Khartoum to its suburbs. Web monitoring group NetBlocks said mobile internet services were cut from mid-morning ahead of the planned protests, the first of the year.

Activists use the internet for organizing demonstrations and broadcasting live footage of the rallies. Sudan, with a long history of military coups, has undergone a fragile journey toward civilian rule since the 2019 ouster of autocrat Omar al-Bashir following mass popular protests. But the country has been plunged into turmoil since military leader General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan -- de facto leader since the ouster of Bashir -- launched a coup on October 25 and detained Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

Hamdok was reinstated on November 21, but mass protests have continued as demonstrators distrust veteran general Burhan and his promises of seeking to guide the country toward full democracy. Activists have kept up a more than two-month-long campaign of street demonstrations against the army's takeover, despite a crackdown that has seen at least 53 people killed and hundreds injured in protest-related violence, according to the pro-democracy Doctors' Committee group.

The protesters demand that soldiers "go back to the barracks" and are calling for a transition to civilian rule. The rallies have been repeatedly broken up by security forces firing rounds of tear gas, as well as charges by police wielding batons and shooting bullets into the air. On Thursday, five people were shot dead in Khartoum when security forces cracked down on mass rallies that saw tens of thousands take to the streets chanting "no to military rule". Burhan denies the takeover was a coup, and on Friday, a close advisor warned that "the demonstrations are only a waste of energy and time" which will not produce "any political solution". On Sunday, soldiers in armoured vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns were posted at strategic road crossings, an AFP reporter said. Activists say 2022 will be "the year of the continuation of the resistance" in posts on social media. They demand justice for the dozens killed since the coup as well as for the more than 250 who died during the mass protests that began in 2019 and paved the way for the toppling of Bashir. Activists have condemned sexual attacks during December 19 protests, in which the UN said at least 13 women and girls were victims of rape or gang-rape.

Huge Fire Destroys South African Parliament Building

CAPE TOWN (Dispatches) - A massive fire in South Africa's houses of parliament in Cape Town completely destroyed the National Assembly where parliamentarians sit, a spokesman said on Sunday as the blaze continued to rage.

"The entire chamber where the members sit... has burned down," Moloto Mothapo said, adding that the blaze had still not been extinguished.

No casualties have been reported so far but President Cyril Ramaphosa told reporters at the scene an arrest had been made. A man was arrested inside the parliament building and was being interrogated, said police spokeswoman Thandi Mbambo. "We have opened a criminal case. He has been arrested and will appear in court on Tuesday," she added. The blaze which started at around 0300 GMT on Sunday in the parliament complex's oldest wing, which was completed in 1884 and has wood-panelled rooms.

As day dawned, smoke could be seen billowing from the building against a blue sky.

"The roof of the Old Assembly building has collapsed and is gone," Jean-Pierre Smith, Cape Town's mayoral committee member for safety and security, told reporters earlier.

The historic building houses a collection of rare books and the original copy of the former Afrikaans national anthem "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika" ("The Voice of South Africa"), which was already damaged.

"The entire building has suffered extensively smoke and water damage," Smith said, adding "the fire has not been contained".

After ravaging the older wing of the building, the flames spread to newer parts of the complex which are currently in use.

"Firefighters are currently trying to control the fire in the New Wing, where the fire has affected the National Assembly Chamber," parliamentary spokesman Mothapo told an online news conference earlier in the day. The imposing red and white building was still shrouded in a thick cloud of black at midday.

A team of firefighters who were first to arrive at the scene battled the flames for several hours before being forced to retreat and call for reinforcements. Around 70 firefighters were later deployed, some using a crane to spray water on the blaze.

France Removes EU Flag From Arc de Triomphe After Rightwing Anger

PARIS (Dispatches) - French authorities removed a temporary installation of the European Union flag from the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris on Sunday, after right-wing opponents of President Emmanuel Macron accused him of "erasing" French identity.

The giant blue flag was raised in place of the French flag on New Year's Eve to mark France's turn at the rotating presidency of the EU Council, which it will hold for the next six months.

The arch, a monument to war dead, and other landmarks including the Eiffel Tower and the Pantheon are also being illuminated with blue lights for the remainder of this week.

But Macron's right-wing rivals for presidential elections in spring seized on the removal of the tricolor flag, calling it an affront to France's heritage and its veterans. "Preside over Europe yes, erase French identity no!" tweeted Valerie Pécresse, the conservative candidate who polls indicate could be the main challenger to Macron in the upcoming vote.

She urged him to restore the French flag, saying, "We owe it to our soldiers who spilled their blood for it."

Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, who had vowed to file a complaint with the State Council, France's highest court for administrative matters, called the removal of the EU flag "a great patriotic victory," claiming on Twitter that a "massive mobilization" had forced Macron to backpedal.

But an official in the French presidency said Sunday that the flag's removal before dawn was "in line with the planned schedule", insisting that unlike the blue lights for monuments, it was only supposed to be at the Arc for two days.

Europe Minister Clement Beaune had accused the right on Saturday of "desperately chasing after the sterile controversies of the far right."

South Korean Defects to North

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's military said Sunday that an unidentified person crossed the heavily fortified border into North Korea.

South Korea had earlier spotted the person with surveillance equipment at the eastern portion of the border and sent troops to capture him or her on Saturday night. But the troops failed to find the person and the surveillance equipment detected the person crossing over the border, Joint Chiefs of Staff officers said.

South Korea sent a message to North Korea on Sunday morning to ensure the safety of the person, but the North hasn't responded, the officers said requesting anonymity citing department rules.

In September 2020, North Korea fatally shot a South Korean fisheries official found floating in its waters in line with what Seoul called strict anti-virus rules that involve shooting anyone illegally crossing the border. Earlier in 2020, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un placed a border city under total lockdown after a North Korean defector with COVID-19-like symptoms sneaked back home. The fate of that

defector, who had lived in South Korea, is not known.

On Saturday, North Korea announced it had decided to place top priority on strict virus restrictions at a high-profile ruling party meeting last week.

The two Koreas are split along the world's most heavily armed border, called the Demilitarized Zone. An estimated 2 million mines are peppered inside and near the 248-kilometer (155-mile)-long, 4-kilometer (2.5-mile)-wide DMZ, which is also guarded by barbed wire fences, tank traps and combat troops on both sides.

Defecting via the DMZ is subsequently rare. At the height of their Cold War rivalry, both Koreas sent agents and spies to each other's territory through the DMZ, but no such incidents have been reported in recent years.

About 34,000 North Koreans have defected to South Korea since the late 1990s to avoid poverty or political oppression, but a vast majority of them have come via China and Southeast Asian countries. Some South Koreans have tried to defect to the impoverished, authoritarian North, but it is rare.



Three Missing, Hundreds of Homes Destroyed in Colorado Fire

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Three people are missing and feared dead after a wind-stoked wildfire roared through two towns in the U.S. state of Colorado, prompting thousands of evacuations and destroying nearly 1,000 homes.

Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle said that the three missing people, whom he declined to identify, all lived in homes that were consumed by the blaze. "The structures where these folks would be are completely destroyed," Pelle said at a news briefing.

Officials initially said there were no reports of fatalities or missing residents following the rare urban wildfire that erupted on Thursday morning on the northern outskirts of the Denver metropolitan area.

Wind gusts in excess of 100 miles per hour (160 km/h) pushed flames eastward into the towns of Superior and Louisville, prompting the evacuation of both communities.

In about two hours, the fire had scorched 6,000 acres (2,428 hectares), officials said.

Pelle said cadaver teams will be deployed on Sunday to search for the missing. But the task is complicated by debris from destroyed structures covered by eight inches (20 centimetres) of snow dumped by a storm overnight, he said.

At least seven people were also injured in the fire.

Pelle also said 991 homes in Superior, Louisville and in unincorporated parts of the county have been destroyed, making it the most destructive wildfire in state history in terms of residences lost.

Officials initially said sparks from downed power lines that were toppled by the gale-force winds may have sparked the blaze, but an inspection by utility company Xcel Energy found no damaged or downed lines near the fire's believed origin.

Pelle said detectives are investigating all avenues to determine what ignited the conflagration.

Acting on a tip, the sheriff said a search warrant was issued in connection to the probe, but declined to offer any details.



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S/p, Sauna
J, balcony
fireplace
Fully Furn

Niavaran Villa (\$5000)
1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
S, J, & pkg
marble floor
Fully Furn

Niavaran (\$2700) 280sq.m, 4bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, & F.F

Jordan (\$2200)
230sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, S, J, pkg
balcony, & F.F

Velenjak Apt (\$2200)
220sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, F.F

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Gazprom's Gas Exports Up in 2021

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia's Gazprom natural gas exports outside the former Soviet Union in 2021 increased by 5.8 billion cubic metres (bcm) to 185.1 bcm, itsaid on Sunday, while it likely missed its target for Europe.

Russian gas exports to Europe are under scrutiny after prices in the region reached all-time highs last month, with some politicians and experts accusing Gazprom of undersupplying the region as a way of pressuring authorities to certify the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Gazprom said it met all its contractual obligations for deliveries to Europe and had increased exports to Germany by 10.5%, to Turkey by 63% and to Italy by 20.3%.



Turkey Mulls New Financial Instruments To Shield Against Inflation

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey is considering a range of new financial products that would offer guarantees against inflation losses, according to a senior official.

It would follow a scheme unveiled last month to protect Turkish lira deposits against currency volatility, a measure designed to make citizens feel safer about holding their savings in the bank.

The scheme effectively ties the value of special new deposits to the United States dollar by promising to compensate for losses incurred from swings in the exchange rate.

The government is working on various new financial products to put the nation back on track and help it ultimately reach its current account surplus goal, Göksel Aşan, head of the Presidency Finance Office, told an interview with Nikkei Asia.

"The Treasury and Finance Ministry is working on inflation-indexed instruments," Aşan said. "I do not think that it will be another bank deposit instrument, which would mean competing with the new forex-indexed lira deposits," he said, hinting at bonds without specifying.

The scheme announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on Dec. 20 had reversed a slide in the lira and triggered a historic 50% surge in the currency's value in the week through Dec. 24.

Deposits increased by over TL 60 billion after the anti-dollarization plan announcement, Aşan said, expressing expectations that the new deposit instruments would collect TL 150 billion to forex-indexed lira accounts within a month.

"I also expect an additional \$5 billion to be exchanged back to the lira from standard forex deposit accounts in the same period," he said, suggesting a total sum of \$16 billion at the current exchange rate.

The lira had fallen to an all-time low of 18.40 per U.S. dollar on Dec. 20, before recording the historic rebound on the same day. The currency on Friday traded at around 13.4 per dollar and closed 2021 down over 40%.

The depreciation had made imports more expensive and followed a series of interest rate cuts, as the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) slashed its key policy rates by 500 basis points to 14% since September.

The annual inflation rose to more than 21% in November, the highest reading since November 2018, driven by rising food and import prices. It is expected to have exceeded 30% in December, breaching the level for the first time since 2003, according to surveys.

Among other initiatives, work is also underway to bring part of an estimated 5,000 tons of "under-the-mattress" gold into the financial system by introducing gold certificates to be exchanged with physical gold, Aşan told Nikkei.

These gold items are estimated by the government to be worth some \$280 billion.

Aşan's remarks followed an announcement by the country's central bank, which said it would also extend an incentive program to people who keep their savings in gold.

Erdoğan on Friday called on citizens to keep all their savings in lira and shift gold savings into banks, saying the recent exchange market volatility was largely under control.

India Appeals Against WTO Dispute Panel Ruling



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India has appealed against a ruling of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) trade dispute settlement panel which ruled that the country's domestic support measures for sugar and sugarcane are inconsistent with global trade norms, an official said.

The appeal was filed by India in the WTO's Appellate Body, which is the final authority on such trade disputes.

India has stated that the WTO's dispute panel ruling has made certain "erroneous" findings about domestic schemes to support sugarcane producers and exports and the findings of the panel are completely "unacceptable" to it.

The panel in its ruling on December 14, 2021 recommended India to withdraw its alleged prohibited subsidies under the Production Assistance, the Buffer Stock, and the Marketing and Transportation Schemes within 120 days from the adoption of this report.

Ruling in favor of Brazil, Australia and Guatemala in their trade dispute against India over New Delhi's sugar subsidies, the WTO panel has stated that the support measures are inconsistent with WTO trade rules.

The official said that the dispute panel's findings are unreasonable and not supported by the WTO rules and also evaded key issues which it was obliged to determine.

"The panel's findings on alleged export subsidies undermine logic and rationale. India has appealed in the appellate body of the WTO against the panel's ruling," the official added.

In 2019, Brazil, Australia and Guatemala dragged India into the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism alleging that New Delhi's domestic support measures to producers of sugarcane and sugar and export subsidies are inconsistent with global trade rules including various provisions

of the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture, Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT).

Brazil is the largest producer and exporter of sugar in the world. India is the world's second largest sugar producer after Brazil. In December 2020, the government had approved a subsidy of Rs 3,500 crore to sugar mills for the export of 60 lakh tons of sweetener during the ongoing marketing year 2020-21 as part of its efforts to help them clear outstanding dues to sugarcane farmers.

In the previous marketing year 2019-20 (October-September), the government had provided a lump sum export subsidy of Rs 10,448 per ton. Mills exported 5.7 million tons of sugar against the mandatory quota of 6 million tons set for the 2019-20 season (October-September), according to official data.

These three countries, which are members of the WTO, had complained that India's support measures to sugarcane producers exceeds the de minimis level of 10 per cent of the total value of sugarcane production, which according to them was inconsistent with the Agreement on Agriculture.

German Minister Pledges Tax Relief From 2023

BERLIN (Dispatches) - The new German government will offer tax relief to individuals and companies worth at least 30 billion euros (\$34.1 billion) in this legislative period, Finance Minister Christian Lindner was quoted as saying.

"We will relieve people and small and medium-sized businesses by significantly more than 30 billion euros," Lindner told the Bild am Sonntag newspaper.

Noting that the 2022 budget was put together by the previous government under Chancellor Angela Merkel, Lindner said his draft for 2023 will include relief such as on pension insurance contributions, and the end of an electricity price surcharge.

Meanwhile, Lindner, leader of the fiscally cautious Free Democrats (FDP), said he had asked his cabinet colleagues to review the spending projects of their ministries.

"We have to go back to sound public finances. We have a responsibility towards the younger generation," he said.

Lindner said one way to make savings would be to scrap the construction of a new government terminal at Berlin's BER airport, set to cost 50 million euros. He suggested a temporary building could be used permanently.

The minister is also planning a tax bill to help businesses cope with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, including allowing them to offset losses in 2022 and 2023 against profits from previous years.

Due to the pandemic, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's ruling coalition agreed to use an emergency clause in the constitution for a third year in a row in 2022 to suspend debt limits and enable new borrowing of 100 billion euros.

From 2023 onwards, the coalition aims to return to the debt brake rule in the constitution that limits new borrowing to a tiny fraction of economic output.



Airlines Grapple With Omicron-Related Disruptions to Start off 2022

LONDON (Dispatches) - More than 3,000 flights were cancelled around the world on Sunday, more than half of them U.S. flights, adding to the toll of holiday week travel disruptions due to adverse weather and the surge in coronavirus cases caused by the Omicron variant.

Over 3,300 flights had been cancelled by noon GMT on Sunday, including over 1,900 entering, departing from or within the United

States, according to a running tally on the tracking website FlightAware.com. Including those delayed but not cancelled, more than 4,800 flights were delayed in total.

The Christmas and New Year holidays are typically a peak time for air travel, but the rapid spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant has led to a sharp increase in COVID-19 infections, forcing airlines to cancel flights as pilots and crew quarantine.

Transportation agencies across the United States were also suspending or reducing services due to coronavirus-related staff shortages.

Omicron has brought record case counts and dampened New Year festivities around much of the world.

The rise in U.S. COVID-19 cases had caused some companies to change plans to increase the number of employees working from their offices from Monday.

Chevron Corp (CVX.N) was to start a full return to office from Jan. 3 but told employees in late December it was postponing the move indefinitely.

U.S. authorities registered at least 346,869 new coronavirus on Saturday, according to a Reuters tally. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 rose by at least 377 to 828,562.

U.S. airline cabin crew, pilots and support staff were reluctant to work overtime during the holiday travel season, despite offers of hefty financial incentives. Many workers feared contracting COVID-19 and did not welcome the prospect of dealing with unruly passengers, some airline unions said.

In the months preceding the holidays, airlines were wooing employees to ensure solid staffing, after furloughing or laying off thousands over the last 18 months as the pandemic hobbled the industry.

Russian Annual Oil Output Recovers in 2021 After Slump

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's annual oil production rose by more than 2% last year thanks to the easing of output cuts by the OPEC+ group of leading oil producers after a pandemic-induced decline in 2020, data showed on Sunday.

Russian oil and gas condensate output rose to 10.52 million barrels per day (bpd) last year, according to energy ministry data cited by the Interfax news agency and Reuters calculations, from 10.27 million bpd in 2020.

In tons, oil and gas condensate output increased to 524.05 million in 2021 from 512.68 million tons in 2020, but was still below a post-Soviet record-high of 560.2 million, or 11.25 million bpd, seen in 2019.

According to Interfax, Russian oil exports outside the former Soviet Union declined by 2.2% in 2021 to 214.4 million tons. It also said that Russian natural gas output jumped by 10% last year to 762.3 billion cubic meters.

In April 2020, Russia agreed to reduce its oil production by more than 2 million bpd, an unprecedented voluntary cut, along with other leading oil producers and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak has said that country's oil output is expected to rise further to 540-560 million tons (10.8-11.2 million bpd) in 2022, and to 542-562 million tons in 2023.

He has also said that Russia will restore its oil production to pre-pandemic levels by May 2022, though the timeline has been questioned by some analysts.

Many oil producers have reported they are almost out of spare production capacity having reduced output in tandem with other OPEC+ producers.

OPEC+ is now easing its output curbs, and in early December agreed to stick to its plan to increase output in January by 400,000 bpd.



Bangladesh Will Be a \$500b Economy in Next Financial Year



DHAKA (Dispatches) - Bangladesh will be a \$500 billion economy by the next financial year, said Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal.

"It took 19 years for our economy to become a \$100 billion economy. Now the size of our economy is \$411 billion and per capita income has increased to \$2,554. In the next financial year, the size of our economy will be \$500 billion," Mustafa Kamal made the remarks at a function organised by the Department of Economic Relations on Sunday (2 January) to mark Bangladesh's transition into developing countries.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina virtually joined the event held at Bangabandhu International Conference Center as the chief guest.

"Bangladesh is now a developing country from being one of the least developed countries. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has achieved this milestone. The country is moving forward in all sectors of the economy. Bangladesh has been praised all over the world for its growth," the finance minister added.

He further said that at present, the foreign exchange reserves are around \$45 to 46 billion, and hoped that it will reach \$50 billion by the end of this financial year.

"Education rate has increased in the country, poverty has decreased. The size of our annual development programs has increased. The state of the world economy is not good because of the coronavirus, yet Bangladesh is doing well. I will transform it into a hunger-free high-income country by 2030," the finance minister said.

Police Dismantle 2 Groups of Arms Traffickers

TEHRAN (MNA) – Khuzestan police Commander announced that two groups of firearms traffickers were dismantled in Ahvaz and Karun counties in southern Iran.

The security forces in Khuzestan province identified 2 separate arms trafficking teams that were trying to import weapons to Ahvaz and Karun.

The report added that during the operation two huge consignments of guns containing 87 firearms as well as huge amounts of ammunition were confiscated by the police forces.



Asia Looks to China-Focused Trade Bloc RCEP for Pandemic Recovery

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Members of a China-centered Asian trade bloc that took effect on January 1 are hoping the initiative, encompassing about a third of world trade and business activity, will help power their recoveries from the pandemic.

The 15-member Regional and Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP, includes China, Japan, South Korea and many other Asian countries. It does not include the US or India.

The deal slashes tariffs on thousands of products, streamlining trade procedures and providing mutual advantages for member nations. It also takes into account issues such as e-commerce, intellectual property and government procurement. But it has less stringent labour and environmental requirements than those expected of countries in the European Union or the smaller Trans-Pacific Partnership, which includes many of the same countries but not China.

RCEP is expected to boost trade within the region by two percent, or \$42 billion, both through increased trade and also through diversion of trade as tariff rules change, experts say. The accord is a coup for China, by far the biggest market in the region with more than 1.3 billion people.

“Beijing has had trouble in the area over the years for one reason or another,” said Oliver Farry, FRANCE 24’s correspondent in Hong Kong. “It hasn’t really managed to make its case very well in non-geopolitical terms and even previous economic initiatives like its much vaunted Belt and Road have been less successful than anticipated. So this has actually managed to lay out an unprecedentedly huge trade deal with a number of countries in the Asia Pacific region that it has had quite a few strange relationships with, including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Australia.”

Extra help will be needed: Two years of lockdowns, border closures, mandatory quarantines and other restrictions have cost millions of people their jobs while also contributing to disruptions in manufacturing and shipping that are snarling supply chains worldwide.

Countries confronted with outbreaks of the fast-spreading omicron coronavirus variant have reined in recent moves to reopen to international travel.

Regional economies contracted by 1.5 percent in 2020. They’ve bounced back, with the Asian Development Bank forecasting growth at seven percent this year — boosted by low year-before figures. But next year growth is expected to slow to 5.3 percent.

The pandemic slowed progress in ratifying the trade deal for some countries.

China was the first to ratify RCEP, in April, after it was signed in November 2020 at a virtual meeting of leaders from its 15 member countries. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have yet to do so, though they are expected to ratify it soon. Myanmar, whose government was ousted by the military on February 1, ratified it but that is pending acceptance by other members.

Beijing is fully prepared for the new trading bloc, having already fulfilled 701 “binding obligations” for RCEP, Chinese Vice Minister for Commerce Ren Hongbin said Thursday.

“RCEP is of great significance building new development patterns and a milestone in opening up our economy,” Ren said according to a transcript of a news conference on the ministry’s website. He said the block would draw member economies closer and “greatly boost confidence in economic recovery from the pandemic.”

The Chinese-initiated RCEP appeals to other developing countries because it reduces



barriers to trade in farm goods, manufactured goods and components, which make up most of their exports. It says little about trade in services and access for companies to operate in each other’s economies, which the United States and other developed countries want.

RCEP originally would have included about 3.6 billion people. Minus India, which pulled out, it still covers more than 2 billion people and close to a third of all trade and business activity.

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, the retooled version of the North American Free Trade Agreement under Trump, covers slightly less economic activity but less than a tenth of the world’s population. The EU and Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, the revised version of an agreement that former president Donald Trump rejected, also are smaller. RCEP includes six of the 11 remaining CPTPP members.

Like any trade deal, RCEP has its detractors.

In a recent legislative hearing shown on YouTube, government officials urged Indonesian lawmakers to pass RCEP, one of three backlogged trade arrangements.

But Elly Rachmat Yasin, a member of a commission responsible for agriculture, the environment, forestry and marine affairs, questioned Indonesia’s trade minister, Muhammad Lutfi, about the wisdom of Indonesia’s involvement, noting that India opted out largely due to fears that Chinese imports would swamp its markets.

Lutfi responded that RCEP would help boost exports and attract extra inflows of up to \$1.7 billion in foreign investment by 2040.

Philippine Trade Secretary Ramon Lopez says he expects lawmakers there to ratify the pact in January, after running out of time to get it done in December, when the government was busy dealing with the aftermath of a typhoon that struck on December 16, leaving 375 people dead and hundreds of thousands without adequate housing.

The trade bloc is expected to open many service sector jobs to workers in member countries — a big draw for countries like the Philippines that rely heavily on remittances from migrant workers.

“RCEP will uplift GDP and lower poverty incidence. It will open up more market access for our exports and widen sourcing of needed inputs that will improve competitiveness of our manufacturing sector and exporters,” Lopez said.

“There is no reason nor logic not to ratify RCEP,” he said, adding that failing to do so would be “catastrophic” since investors would likely favor countries within the trading bloc.

Joint Text Reached...

FROM PAGE 1

Answering a question on recognition of the Taliban as an independent government, Khatibzadeh said, “The Foreign Ministry has stated the positions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The formation of an inclusive government that reflects the ethnic and demographic diversity of Afghanistan is the main issue of Iran and neighboring countries.”

“Iran’s policy towards all the people of Afghanistan has been clear. Despite all the differences and problems, we tried to do our best for Afghans; Both those who took refuge in Iran and those who are in trouble inside Afghanistan,” he added. “One of the constant points of our talks with foreign delegations has been to assist and facilitate humanitarian access to Afghanistan.”

“If we have a joint text today [in Vienna talks], it is because the West has realized that it must back down from its maximum demands, and what we have today is the result of the same realism of the West in the Vienna talks. They found that they cannot go beyond the JCPOA on the nuclear issue,” he said.

Referring to the continuation of the eighth round of talks in Vienna on Monday, the spokesman said, “Bilateral and multilateral talks will begin this afternoon.”

UNSC Urged to...

FROM PAGE 1

“As I have on numerous occasions underlined,” Takht-Ravanchi said, “this internationally wrongful criminal act was a grave breach of the obligations of the United States under the international law, and thus entails its international responsibility.”

“This criminal act also entails the criminal responsibility of all those who had aided, abetted or otherwise assisted and supported, by any means, directly or indirectly, the planning or perpetration of this terrorist act, the clear example of which is the supportive role and the involvement of the Israeli regime in it,” Iran’s UN envoy added.

Takht-Ravanchi went on to emphasize that General Soleimani played a significant role in combating international terrorism, and was rightfully entitled “Hero of the Fight against Terrorism and the General of Peace.”

“Therefore, his cowardly assassination was a big gift and service to the Daesh and other Security Council-designated terrorist groups in the region,” the Iranian diplomat said.

General Soleimani and his Iraqi trenchmate Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) were targeted along with their companions on January 3, 2020, in a terrorist drone strike authorized by Trump near Baghdad International Airport.

Iran to Retaliate...

FROM PAGE 1

“We negotiate in the framework of the nuclear deal and the international procedure. I have repeatedly said that we seek a good deal. We have no intention to hold an interim agreement. The nuclear deal is an international decision, and in case it was approved, it should be permanent. Anyway, this deal was approved by the United National Security Council. All parties to this international organization must implement it.”

In this context, the Iranian speaker affirmed that the removal of sanctions is the key step which should be taken by the other parties of the deal.

“They have to take the first step and remove sanctions, and when this happens the Islamic Republic will be able to abide by its commitments with the world countries.”

Regarding ties with the Persian Gulf Arab countries, Qalibaf stressed Tehran’s openness to hold talks with any neighboring country including Saudi Arabia.

“We haven’t, and we will not make boundaries in the way of contact and negotiations, even with Saudi Arabia. We have repeatedly said, and frankly, that we don’t set preconditions on talks with Saudi, and there is no need to do so. We might have some admonition. However, we consider the unity of the Muslim world a priority and serves the Islamic interests.”

Tehran to Pursue...

FROM PAGE 1

The comments come amid ongoing efforts to salvage a 2015 nuclear deal which has unraveled since the U.S. pulled out of the agreement three years ago and imposed sanctions on Iran.

The sanctions caused Airbus and ATR to suspend aircraft supply contracts with Iran just after they delivered a handful of planes to the country in 2018.

However, the two plane manufacturers have refused to supply spare parts needed to maintain and repair those planes in Iran citing the threat of American punishment for engaging in any business activity with Tehran.

Mohammadi Bakhsh said Airbus and ATR should treat the spare parts issue in a manner different than plane deliveries as he insisted that failure to supply the parts could cause major incidents in the Iranian civil aviation sector.

“Airbus and ATR should never use the life of people as a pretext to comply with sanction issues,” he said, adding that Iran will pursue the legal case against the two companies regardless of what happens to the future of talks between Iran and world powers to revive the nuclear deal.

Record Cargo Shipped Through Egypt’s Suez Canal Last Year



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Egypt’s Suez Canal Authority said the key waterway netted record revenues last year, despite the coronavirus pandemic and a six-day blockage by giant cargo ship the Ever Given.

Connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, the canal accounts for roughly 10 percent of global maritime trade and is a source of much-needed foreign currency for Egypt.

In 2021, some 1.27 billion tons of cargo were shipped through the canal, earning \$6.3 billion dollars (5.5 billion euros) in transit fees, 13 percent more than the previous year and the highest figures ever recorded, Suez Canal Authority (SCA) chief Osama Rabie said.

The number of ships using the canal rose from 18,830 in 2020 to 20,694 in 2021, or more than 56 ships per day, the SCA said in a statement.

In March, the Ever Given super tanker -- a behemoth with deadweight tonnage of 199,000 -- got stuck diagonally across the canal during a sandstorm.

A round-the-clock salvage operation took six days to dislodge it, and one employee of the SCA died during the rescue operation. Egypt lost some \$12 million to \$15 million each day during the canal closure, according to the SCA.

The Ever Given safely returned back through the canal without a hitch in August.

In November, the SCA said it will hike transit tolls by six percent starting in 2022, but tourist vessels and liquefied natural gas carriers are be exempted.

U.S. Seeks New 5G Delay to Study Interference With Planes

NEW YORK (Dispatches) – U.S. authorities have asked telecom operators AT&T and Verizon to delay for up to two weeks their already postponed rollout of 5G networks amid uncertainty about interference with vital flight safety equipment.

The two companies said Saturday they are reviewing the request.



The U.S. rollout of the high-speed mobile broadband technology had been set for December 5, but was delayed to January 5 after aerospace giants Airbus and Boeing raised concerns about potential interference with the devices planes use to measure altitude.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and the head of the Federal Aviation Administration, Steve Dickson, asked for the latest delay in a letter sent Friday to AT&T and Verizon, two of the country’s biggest telecom operators.

The U.S. letter asked the companies to “continue to pause introducing commercial C-Band service” -- the frequency range used for 5G -- “for an additional short period of no more than two weeks beyond the currently scheduled deployment date of January 5.”

Asked by AFP for comment, Verizon spokesman Rich Young replied, “We’ve received the government’s letter after 6 pm on New Year’s Eve. We’re in the process of reviewing it.”

AT&T also said it was reviewing the government request.

In the letter, the U.S. officials assure the companies that 5G service will be able to begin “as planned in January with certain exceptions around priority airports.”

The officials say their priority has been “to protect flight safety, while ensuring that 5G deployment and aviation operations can co-exist.”

Last February, Verizon and AT&T were authorized to start using 3.7-3.8 GHz frequency bands as of December 5, after obtaining licenses worth tens of billions of dollars.

But when Airbus and Boeing raised their concerns about possible interference with airplanes’ radio altimeters -- which can operate at the same frequencies -- the launch date was pushed back to January.

The FAA requested further information about the instruments, and it issued directives limiting

the use of altimeters in certain situations, which sparked airline fears over the potential costs.

When Verizon and AT&T wrote to federal authorities in November to confirm their intention to start deploying 5G in January, they said they would take extra precautions beyond those required by US law until July 2022 while the FAA completes its investigation.

The conflict between 5G networks and aircraft equipment led French authorities to recommend switching off mobile phones with 5G on planes in February.

France’s civil aviation authority said interference from a signal on a nearby frequency to the radio altimeter could cause “critical” errors during landing.

Al-Attiah Wins First Dakar Special

HAIL (Dispatches) - Qatari Nasser Al-Attiah won the first special of the Dakar Rally on Sunday to extend his race lead after victory in the prologue.

The 51-year-old, looking to win the race for the fourth time, finished the stage 12 minutes and seven seconds quicker than nine-time world rally champion Sebastian Loeb in second place.

The 333-kilometre loop around northern Saudi Arabia saw several competitors suffer navigational difficulties, resulting in large time gaps.

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Gu Claims Second Straight Halfpipe Gold in Calgary

CALGARY (Dispatches) - China's Eileen Gu recovered from a disappointing first run to claim her second victory in three days in the halfpipe competition at the FIS Freestyle Ski World Cup in Calgary, Canada.

Gu recorded 92.80 points to beat local favourite Rachael Karker (89.40) and American Hanna Faulhaber (88.60) on Saturday to secure her third win in three halfpipe competitions so far this season.

"I'm super, super happy," said the 18-year-old, who is tipped to win gold at the Beijing Winter Olympics from Feb. 4-20.

8 IRAN NEWS

SPORTS

TUESDAY JANUARY 4, 2022

DeRozan Makes Historic NBA Consecutive Buzzer Beaters

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Chicago's DeMar DeRozan became the first NBA player to sink game-winning buzzer beaters on back-to-back nights while Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo delivered a triple double in the reigning champions' victory.

DeRozan's three-pointer from the left corner at the final horn gave the Bulls a 120-119 victory at Washington and completed a 28-point performance.

"I don't know if I'm dreaming or if it's real right now," DeRozan said. "Willing to step up whenever that moment is called for and to be ready for it, that's all I can do."

The Bulls stretched their win streak to seven games while Milwaukee's grew to six in a row as Antetokounmpo powered the host Bucks over New Orleans 136-113.

NBA overall leader Golden State beat Utah 123-116, snapping a six-game Jazz win streak, but the talk was all about DeRozan.

"Dude is incredible," Chicago's Zach LaVine said of DeRozan after scoring a game-high 35 points. "I can't say much more than that."

DeRozan, whose game-ending three-pointer Friday lifted Chicago over Indiana, made two free throws with 49 seconds remaining. But Kyle Kuzma's three-pointer with four seconds remaining gave the Wizards a 119-117 advantage, setting the stage for DeRozan's closing heroics.

"DeMar's shot again was unbelievable," Bulls acting coach Chris Fleming said. "He had the presence of mind to look down and find out where his feet were to make that shot. Incredible shot."

No other player has made back-to-back game-winning shots on consecutive nights. He became the first to manage the feat in consecutive games since 1985 by Boston's Larry Bird, who had an off day between triumphs.

DeRozan, the NBA's top fourth-quarter scorer, is hitting a career-high 37.3 percent from three-point range this season. Greek star Antetokounmpo scored 35 points, grabbed 16 rebounds and passed off 10 assists for his second triple double of the season and the 27th of his career.

"I try to stay aggressive the whole game," Antetokounmpo said. "I'm at my best when I'm aggressive. I can create open shots."

Antetokounmpo hit 12-of-18 from the floor and 9-of-12 from the free throw line. He moved one shy of NBA legend Michael Jordan's career triple double total.



"I'm so locked in and focused on what we've got to do, those moments go -- not unnoticed, it's a great compliment to be mentioned with those guys -- but you just brush it off," Antetokounmpo said.

"As I get older, I've got to live in the moment and enjoy this moment. I've got 27 triple doubles. It's insane."

Milwaukee improved to 25-13, third in the Eastern Conference behind Brooklyn and Chicago, while the Pelicans fell to 13-23.

It was the 400th career NBA victory for Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer.

At Utah, Stephen Curry scored 28 points, Andrew Wiggins added 25 and Otto Porter netted 20 to lead Golden State (28-7) over the Jazz, who fell to 26-10, still third in the league.

Nikola Jokic had 24 points and 11 rebounds to lead Denver to a 124-111 victory at Houston while Eric Bledsoe scored 27 points to lead the Los Angeles Clippers over host Brooklyn 120-116.

James Harden had a triple double for Brooklyn with 34 points, 12 rebounds and 13 assists while Kevin Durant added 28 points for the Nets.

At Detroit, Saddiq Bey sank a three-pointer with 2.1 seconds remaining in overtime to give the host Pistons a 117-116 victory over San Antonio.

The Dallas Mavericks said All-Star guard Luka Doncic, Tim Hardaway Jr. and Maxi Kleber have cleared NBA Covid-19 health and safety protocols and could return Sunday.

The team went 5-5 without Doncic, who is averaging 25.6 points, 8.0 rebounds and 8.5 assists a game. Doncic hurt his ankle last month and was set to return when he entered Covid protocol.

Oklahoma City will play Dallas on Sunday without star guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, who entered Covid-19 protocols Saturday.

BBC Declares Salah Premier League Player of 2021

LONDON (Dispatches) - The BBC awarded Egyptian international football star and Liverpool striker Mohamed Salah the "Premier League player of 2021" title, according to a public poll.

The BBC put the vote for fans to choose the best player in the English Premier League for the year 2021, with Salah earning 60 percent of the votes.

He came ahead of English player Declan Rice, the captain of West Ham United, who got seven percent, while the Portuguese Rubin Dias, the Manchester City defense star, came in third after receiving six percent of the total votes.

Salah in 2021 made an impressive performance with Liverpool, where he is the top English Premier League scorer with 15 goals and made nine assists.

He finished last season as the second top scorer with 22 goals behind Harry Kane.

Earlier in November, Salah also won the English Football Association's award in northwest England "Ladbrokes North West Football", for best player in the English Premier League for the 2021 season.

In October, he became the first player in the history of Liverpool to score in nine consecutive matches in all competitions, after scoring two goals in a match between Liverpool and Atletico Madrid that ended two-three for Liverpool, according to the Opta statistics network.

In September, Liverpool's official website listed the top ten scorers in Liverpool's history with Salah ranking 10th, replacing Sam Raybould.

India Can Improve on First Test Performance

JOHANNESBURG (Dispatches) - India coach Rahul Dravid said on Sunday that his side had room for improvement ahead of the second Test against South Africa starting at the Wanderers Stadium.

Speaking at a pre-match press conference, Dravid sent out a clear message that there was no room for complacency following India's 113-run win in the first Test in Centurion.

Dravid praised the Indian bowlers for twice bowling out South Africa for under 200 and gave credit to the top-order batsmen for setting up the game with their batting on the first day.

"It's not very often you come to overseas conditions and get to 272 for three on the first day," he said. "We know we could probably have got more (runs). To get bowled out for 327, that's something we'd like to improve."

Dravid added that India could also have batted better in the second innings, when they were dismissed for 174.

"It was a good Test match but there are areas where we can learn and improve because we know we are going to have to do it in this game."

India's recently-appointed coach said there was an awareness in the team that in the past that "maybe we've slipped up a little after winning a game. We're going to work very hard because I expect South Africa to respond tomorrow".

Dravid gave credit to Virat Kohli's role as captain and said it was "just a matter of time" before Kohli started making big scores again.

"Virat has been a phenomenal leader on and off the field. I thought the team was in a really good space leading into the first Test and a lot of that was due to Virat."

Dravid said he expected a typical Wanderers pitch. "There might be something for the bowlers, as there usually is, and then for it to flatten out a bit, although it does get a little harder for batsmen towards the end."

"We know we have to play well because both teams are capable of taking 20 wickets and there is probably going to be a result over five days if the weather holds."



Messi Tests Positive for Covid

PARIS (Dispatches) - Lionel Messi has tested positive for Covid-19 and has entered self-isolation, his club Paris Saint-Germain announced on Sunday.

The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner was one of four PSG players to test positive for the virus ahead of a French Cup match against Vannes.

The Argentinian star has endured a difficult start to life in the French capital since an

emotional exit from Barcelona last summer.

Messi has scored only one goal in 11 league appearances for PSG, although he has netted five times in the Champions League.

He will miss cup tie and will likely also be sidelined for PSG's first Ligue 1 match since the winter break, at Lyon next Sunday.

The other players to test positive were full-back Juan Bernat, back-up goalkeeper Sergio Rico and teenage midfielder Nathan Bitumazala.

"They are currently respecting isolation and are subject to the appropriate health protocols," PSG said.

The number of Covid cases in France has topped 200,000 a day this week.

Medvedev Suffers Shock Defeat to Humbert

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Daniil Medvedev suffered a shock defeat in his opening match of the season against France's Ugo Humbert Sunday at the ATP Cup, upsetting his preparations for the Australian Open.

The U.S. Open champion is leading a Russian team in Sydney depleted by injuries and Covid-19 as they look to defend the title won against Italy last year.

But world number two Medvedev, who captured four tour-level titles in 2021, was stunned by impressive 35th-ranked Ugo Humbert on a hot Sydney day.

The Frenchman rallied from a set down to pull off a big upset 6-7 (5/7), 7-5, 7-6 (7/2) in a gruelling 2hr 55min as Medvedev, red-faced from the heat, ran out of steam.

"It was very tough today, but I'm very happy," said Humbert after one of the biggest wins of his career.

"I had some opportunities in the first set, and I just tried to stay relaxed, stay focused on what I had to do and it was a great match."

With fifth ranked Andrey Rublev missing after contracting coronavirus at an Abu Dhabi exhibition last month, unheralded Roman Safiullin was drafted in as Russia's second singles player.



Kobayashi Leads World Cup Standings

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan's Ryoyu Kobayashi claimed his second successive victory in the Four Hills ski jumping tournament in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany with a narrow win over local favourite Markus Eisenbichler.

Kobayashi, who won the first leg in Oberstdorf earlier this week, pulled off jumps of 143m and 135.5m to score 291.2 points, only 0.2 ahead of Eisenbichler. Slovenia's Lovro Kos finished third with 286 points.

The result means a second Four Hills Grand Slam could be on the cards for Kobayashi, who swept the tournament in 2018-19 to become the third athlete to have won all four events in the same season.

With the Beijing Winter Olympics in sight, the win was Kobayashi's third straight World Cup victory of the season and fifth overall as he leapfrogged Germany's Karl Geiger, who finished seventh in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, to lead the overall standings with 696 points.

"I'm super, super happy. I was really buzzed in the first round and really nervous in the second. Considering that, my form wasn't bad," the 25-year-old was quoted as saying by Japan's Kyodo News. The next stage of the Four Hills tournament takes place in Austria, on Jan. 3 in Innsbruck and on Jan. 5 in Bischofshofen.

