

Health Ministry Announced on Wednesday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Disease In Iran Increased to 132,132 With 19 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

The New Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Singapore Said That Iran Is Interested in Expanding Cooperation With Southeast Asian Countries, Including Singapore

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Iran Hails Significant Progress In Empowering Women

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran hails making considerable progress towards empowering women and girls, despite the United States' illegal and inhumane sanctions targeting the country.

The Islamic Republic's permanent ambassador to the United Nations, Majid Takht-Ravanchi made the remarks during a United Nations Security Council meeting addressing the issue of women, peace, and security on Tuesday.

The envoy reminded how the bans not only violated the international law, but also breached the basic rights of women and girls, especially their right to development.

"However, the Islamic Republic has made significant progress in enablement of women and girls, especially in the field of education," he said.

The United States reimposed the sanctions in 2018 after illegally and unilaterally leaving a 2015 deal between Iran and P5+1 group of countries.

Washington has refused to lift the bans, even in the case of foodstuffs and medicine, despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

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Intensive Consultations to Remove Sanctions on Iran Continue

TEHRAN (MNA) - Intensive diplomatic and expert consultations continue on Wednesday as Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran's chief negotiator, arrived at the Coburg Hotel in Vienna to continue talks with the European envoys on the removal of sanctions.

Meetings at the expert level started on Wednesday morning on various topics. These meetings are taking place based on an agreement reached at the latest meeting of the Joint JCPIA Commission, during which the representatives of the P4+1 agreed to prioritize the removal of anti-Iran sanctions.

So far, two expert meetings have been held on the implementation of a possible agreement since the beginning of the eighth round of talks on December 27. The majority of the negotiating delegations confirm that progress has been made in the talks and that negotiations are advancing.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh has said some of the paraceteses, which are considered to be differences in the draft agreement, "have been cleared and agreements on ideas are being turned into words and sentences."

Meanwhile, an official close to the European negotiating team had previously said that the talks had reached a stage where the negotiators are discussing how to turn the issues agreed upon in principle into words and into documents. According to the latest reports, the negotiations are still ongoing and there is still no prospect for the end of the eighth round for the time being.

Moscow Visit Can Be a Turning Point in Iran-Russia Ties



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says Iran and Russia create security in the region and prevent unilateralism, expressing hope that his visit to Moscow could be a "turning point" in bilateral relations.

"The Iran-Russia collaboration in the region certainly creates security and will prevent unilateralism," Raisi said at Mehrabad International Airport on Wednesday morning, before leaving Tehran for Moscow on an official visit.

He said his trip comes at the invitation of his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

During his trip, Raisi is scheduled to meet Putin and address the plenary session of the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament.

According to the Kremlin, Raisi and Putin will discuss all issues related to bilateral cooperation, including the implementation of joint projects in economic and trade fields, as well as important international and regional developments.

"Undoubtedly, we have good relations with all of our neighbors, particularly Russia, and given the political, economic, and trade relations between the two countries in various fields, this trip can be a turning point in improving all of our cooperation with Russia," the Iranian president said.

Raisi said his trip will focus on bilateral relations, political, economic, energy, and trade issues, as well as aerospace cooperation.

Describing the current level of bilateral cooperation as "not satisfactory for Russians and us," he expressed hopes for the expansion of cooperation with Moscow in different fields.

President Raisi described Iran as an independent, mighty, and influential country in the region, saying Russia is also an important, powerful, and influential country, adding that dialog between the two countries can have a great impact on the security and the promotion of economic and trade relations in the region.

He noted that Iran and Russia are members of many economic and political organizations in the region, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, from which Iran gained full membership last year.

"In this [organization], we will have good cooperation with all countries, especially Russia," he said.

Given their capacities, the president went on, Iran and Russia can play a very effective role in the region and the world through their cooperation.

Iranians Marking Gaza Day to Voice Support for Popular Palestinian Resistance

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranians commemorated Gaza Day across the country to show solidarity with Palestinians residing in the besieged coastal enclave, urging them to keep up their struggles against the Aviv regime's incessant acts of aggression and criminal acts.

The ceremonies were mostly held online, amid the concerns over the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The day was designated after the full-scale offensive on the Gaza Strip, which the Israeli regime recommenced on December 27, 2008 and pounded the densely populated Palestinian territory from the air, sea and land for 22 days.

More than 2,000 Palestinians were killed in Israel's three-week-long operation, named by Israel as "Operation Cast Lead," including dozens of children and women. A total of 13 Israelis were also killed in attacks by Palestinian resistance factions. Nearly 200 Palestinians, mostly security personnel, were killed on the first day of the Israeli offensive on the seaside enclave.

Iranians also mark the Gaza Day to underscore the fact that resistance, broadly speaking, is not only the ability to fight back against an oppressor that is militarily more powerful, but also the ability to creatively resist the colonization of one's land.

Even though Israel launched massive attacks against Gaza in 2009, 2012, 2014 and in May 2020, none of its "objectives" of the genocidal onslaughts - putting an end to the rocket fire from Gaza and destroying the tunnels used by resistance fighters and obfuscating any form of unity between occupied al-Quds and Gaza - has been achieved.

Retaliatory rockets are still being launched and the Hamas resistance movement has proved to be strong enough to respond to any act of aggression by apartheid Israel against al-Quds and the holy al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

Gaza, home to some two million Palestinians, has been under Israeli siege since June 2007. The tight blockade has caused a decline in the standards of living as well as unprecedented levels of unemployment and unrelenting poverty.

Apparently caught off guard by the unprecedented barrage of rockets from Gaza, Israel announced a unilateral ceasefire on May 21, which Palestinian resistance movements accepted with Egyptian mediation.

In the latest Israeli bombardment campaign against the Gaza Strip, at least 260 Palestinians, including over 60 children, were killed in a time span of 11 days that began on May 10 last year.

Iran Oil Prices, Volumes Grow Significantly in 2021

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In its latest report, OPEC reported significant growth in the price and volume of oil produced by Iran last year.

According to the report published on OPEC's website, the average price of Iranian oil in 2021 was about \$70, 71 percent higher than in 2020.

Iran's oil production also grew by 21 percent to 2.4 million barrels per day.

Iran produced 3.8 million barrels of oil per day before U.S. sanctions.

Global oil prices fell sharply in 2020 due to the massive coronavirus outbreak, but last year it was on an upward trend due to rising global oil demand and continued to grow this year.

Brent crude oil prices rose to the highest in seven years in the past seven days. Iranian oil is usually a few dollars cheaper than Brent crude.

In another part of its report, OPEC says the global need for OPEC oil last year was 27 million and 800,000 barrels per day, about 4.9 million barrels more than in 2020. This year it will be about 28.9 million barrels per day.

Annual Non-Oil Export Expected To Reach \$46b by Late March

TEHRAN (MNA) - The value of Iran's annual non-oil export is expected to reach \$46 billion by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20), the deputy head of Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) has announced.

Foroud Asgari, the deputy head of IRICA for technical affairs, said the export of non-oil commodities has been expedited since the sixth Iranian calendar month of Shahrivar (ended on September 22, 2021), so it is expected that the figure will reach \$46 billion by the yearend.

IRICA has previously announced that the value of Iran's non-oil trade stood at \$73 billion in the past Iranian calendar year.

IRICA former Head Mehdi Mir-Ashrafi had put the weight of non-oil trade at 146.4 million tons and said that the figure showed a 25-million-ton annual decline, which is the result of sanctions and coronavirus pandemic.

Iran's non-oil export was 112 million tons valued at \$34.5 billion, and that of import was 34.4 million tons worth \$38.5 billion in the past year, the official added.

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South Korean, U.S. Diplomats Discuss Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) - South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-Kun and his American counterpart Wendy Sherman discussed a range of issues, including Iran.

Jong-Kun in a tweet on Wednesday wrote that he had a great phone call with American Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman about the South Korean-US cooperation on Myanmar, Iran, Ukraine, NATO & North Korea.

"Seeking diplomatic solutions to the global challenges is arduous art works requiring courage, persistence & power, which makes ROKUS alliance strong & more resilient", he added.

Recently, Jong-Kun paid a visit to Vienna to meet and hold talks with top negotiators of JCPOA member states as well as the United States.

According to South Korean sources, Seoul has expressed hope that the revival of JCPOA will help address the complex issues around Iran's frozen assets in South Korea due to US sanctions.

South Korea's debt to Iran for the import of gas condensate is estimated at about \$7 billion which has not been paid since 2018 under the pretext of US sanctions imposed against Iran.



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Azerbaijan Hands Over Several Prisoners to Iran

BAKU (Dispatches) - Azerbaijan extradited 21 prisoners to Iran, Iranian Deputy Minister of Justice for Human Rights and International Affairs, Fattah Ahmadi said.

According to Fattah Ahmadi, there were three women among the extradited prisoners. The deputy minister noted that the process of transferring prisoners was carried out through the implementation of the extradition agreement between Iran and Azerbaijan. "Most of the Iranian prisoners in Azerbaijan were convicted in relation to drug trafficking," Ahmadi stated.

New Road Map for Tehran-Moscow Ties

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Ahead of an upcoming visit to Russia by the Iranian president, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says that the new administration in Tehran follows a "new road map" to deepen ties with Moscow, and that Iran and Russia are determined to update a 20-year cooperation treaty they had signed in 2001.

Amir-Abdollahian noted that the administration of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi "has a new road map based on a balanced, active, dynamic and smart foreign policy, which lays an emphasis on cooperating with all neighbors, especially the Russian Federation, and advancing economic diplomacy.

The Raisi administration "is determined to further expand cooperation with this country in a bilateral or multilateral format," he said in an article for the Sputnik news agency's Persian language, published on Tuesday.

"In bilateral relations, the two countries are determined to update the Treaty on the Basis of Mutual Relations and Principles of Cooperation between Iran and Russia in harmony with global developments," Amir-Abdollahian said.

The agreement, signed in March 2001, was originally meant to last four 10 years, but it has twice been extended for five years.

Relying on their rich civilizations, both Iran and Russia are seeking to create a bright future in mutual relations and play an active role in regional and international developments on the path to peace and stability, he added.

The top Iranian diplomat said Iran viewed Russia as a powerful neighbor and friend on the basis of "cooperation, respect and mutual interests" and was willing to set the stage for a "meaningful leap" forward in various fields of cooperation and exchanges of high-ranking delegations, despite the restrictions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

He noted that consultations between the two countries covered a wide range of bilateral issues, including in the fields of politics, economy, culture, science, technology, defense and security, parliamentary ties and media, regional developments, including the Middle East, South Caucasus and Central Asia, besides international topics such as the sanctions removal talks in Vienna.

Elsewhere in his article, Amir-Abdollahian praised growing Iran-Russia relations in different fields.

At the regional level and in light of cooperation between the top authorities of the two states, bilateral cooperation on common interests, which are currently "stronger



than ever," have "surpassed the boundaries of bilateral ties" and developed into joint efforts to promote regional and international security, he said.

As two regional powers, Iran and Russia play a unique role in resolving regional conflicts and fighting terrorism, the Iranian foreign added.

"The two countries have a common view that the Middle East region is facing numerous problems, including war, instability and insecurity, due to foreign intervention and the dominance of security-oriented thinking," he said, adding that bilateral consultations are underway to settle regional issues and reinforce stability in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Libya.

Pointing to Tehran-Moscow cooperation on international issues, Amir-Abdollahian said that there was a strong correlation between the two sides on "the United States' anti-human and unilateral sanctions," the "Western interference in other countries' affairs," "prevention of third parties from playing a role in their relations," and the urgency of "respecting international law."

Iran believes that the strategy of unilateralism has failed and the era of unlawful behavior, ignorance of internationally-recognized principles and destruction of multilateralism, which is a great threat to international peace and security, is over, he said.

Referring to the ongoing sanctions removal talks between Iran and the remaining parties to the landmark 2015 agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in the Austrian capital of Vienna, the minister said Tehran entered the negotiations with a "realistic and result-oriented approach and with the purpose of achieving a good agreement."

Russia has played an "effective and constructive" role both in achieving the nuclear deal in 2015 and during the ongoing talks with the P4+1 group of countries and has taken "positive steps" to help render the US sanctions against ineffectual, he added.

Reiterating Iran's goodwill and firm determination in the new round of talks with the P4+1 countries, Amir-Abdollahian said, "The success of these negotiations depends on the effective and verifiable removal of sanctions and the return of the parties to their commitments [under the JCPOA]."

President Visit to Russia of Great Importance

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Referring to the visit of President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi to Moscow on Wednesday, the First Vice President said that his visit to Russia is of great importance.

Mohammad Mokhber made the remarks in the cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

Stating that the 13th administration has made fundamental changes in international relations, he said that Raisi's visit to Russia is one of the dimensions of the fundamental change in the government in the field of international relations.

Referring to the numerous requests made by other countries on calling Iranian officials to pay a visit, he noted that currently, relations with neighboring countries are going very well.

Heading a high-ranking political and economic delegation, President Raisi arrived in Moscow on Wednesday at the official invitation of his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

Enemies Received Iran Forces' Message of Strength

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Ground Force has lauded Iran's ever-increasing power in different fields of defense, saying the enemies have received the Iranian military's message of strength.

Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour said enemies acknowledge the power of Iran's Armed Forces, including the IRGC, in the air, at sea and on the ground, citing the confession made last year by chief of the United States Central Command General Kenneth McKenzie as an example.

McKenzie had said Iran's widespread use of drones meant that the US was operating without complete air superiority for the first time since the Korean War.

Enemies have received the message of the Iranian Armed Forces' power, he said, stressing the need for the country's forces to "grow stronger every day compared to the previous one."

He said power did not simply consist of "hardware such as missiles, submarines, armored equipment, drones, and so on."

"Hardware alone does not possess the [required] efficiency," he said. "What lends hardware additional quality and efficiency is the spiritual readiness of the human forces and servicemen."

The commander, meanwhile, specified the fivefold duties of the IRGC's Ground Force as creating sustainable security and the required infrastructures in parallel besides indigenizing security, closing border loopholes, and helping out the citizens who reside in border areas.

Speaking separately, Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, commander of the IRGC's Navy, hailed fighting global arrogance and standing up to the United States as a source of honor for the naval forces under his watch.

Iran Ready to Share Advanced Military Tech With Neighbors, Friends

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian Army commander says the Islamic Republic stands ready to provide advanced scientific and military technologies to friendly and neighborly states.

In a Tuesday meeting with foreign military attachés residing in Iran, Deputy Chief of the Iranian Army for Coordination Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari said the country had achieved self-sufficiency and scientific capabilities in the field of military power and manufacturing state-of-the-art weaponry.

"Besides progressive relations with various countries, Iran is engaged in military cooperation with some of them and is interested in sharing its advanced scientific and military technologies with other friendly and neighboring countries as well," he added.

He said the neighboring countries, in turn, need to understand the nature of Iran's power because "regional stability and security will be established based on mutual strength and interactions."

Iran has made major breakthroughs in its defense sector and attained self-sufficiency in producing important military equipment and systems. The Islamic Republic says its military might poses no threat to other countries, and that its defense doctrine is based on deterrence.

Sayyari also said Iran was facing problems in establishing ties with some of its neighbors since it has been under the "most oppressive and harsh" sanctions in the history of international relation.

"We believe, however, that these problems can be solved through interactions and dialog and there is no need for any help from foreign powers," he added. "Deeper neighborly ties will bring greater economic benefits to the West Asia region."

The Islamic Republic has always supported regional nations, has never violated their rights, and has recognized independence of all countries, Sayyari said.

The senior commander reiterated Iran's friendly and brotherly policy towards its neighbors.

He said the Islamic Republic had never cast a covetous eye on any country and believed based on Islamic teachings that common interests and regional and collective security could be achieved without the presence of extra-regional states.

Press TV's website can also be accessed at the following alternate addresses:

Austria Keen on Developing Interactions With Iranian Scholars

YAZD (IRNA) - Austrian Ambassador to Tehran Wolf Dietrich Heim expressed his country's interest in developing interactions with Iranian engineers and scientists.

He made the remarks in a meeting with Mojtaba Farahmand who is the chairman of an engineering company in the city of Yazd.

He hailed the remarkable coordination between urban development companies and those active in the area of protecting monuments in the historical city of Yazd.

Meanwhile, Farahmand described Yazd as the only Iranian city registered in the UNESCO World Heritage List which has established good cultural relations with Austria.

He welcomed taking advantage of Austria experiences in implementing prefabricated structures in Iran.



Bank Loans to Economic Sectors Increase Over 59%

TEHRAN (MNA)- Iranian banking system has paid 20.195 quadrillion rials (over \$73 billion) of facilities to domestic economic sectors in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21, 2021), registering a 59.5-percent rise from the same period in the previous year, IRIB reported.

According to the data provided by the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), the country's banking system paid 12.633 quadrillion rials (about \$45.69 billion) of facilities to various economic sectors in the previous year's first nine months.

As reported, working capital loans paid to different economic sectors in the mentioned nine months were above 13.424 quadrillion rials (about \$48.54 billion), accounting for 66.5 percent of the total provided facilities.

During the said period, the country's mining and industry sector received over 4.834 quadrillion rials (about \$17.48 billion) in the form of working capital loans, accounting for 79.2 percent of the total such facilities.

Iranian banks paid 17.274 quadrillion rials (over \$62.4 billion) of facilities to domestic economic sectors in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-November 21, 2021), which was also 59.2 percent more than the figure for the same period in the previous year.

Classes Must Be Held On In-Person Basis

TEHRAN (IFP) - Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi has said the presence of students in schools is not optional and all of them are required to attend classes.

Vahidi was speaking on the sidelines of a gathering of the Iranian Education Ministry's councils on Tuesday.

He added that at the meeting of Iran's National Taskforce for Fighting Covid, it was repeatedly emphasized that the schools should be open, and the governors were notified that if they face any shortages in this regard, they must take action to solve it.

Vahidi added that school exams were held on an in-person basis and no new cases of Covid were detected among students as a result of their participation in the exams.

He said the Education Ministry should pave the way for the formation of in-person classes so that there is no studying failure on the part of students.

Tehran Ready to Help End Yemen War

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh has announced Tehran's readiness to participate in any initiative that would end the 7-year war in Yemen.

Khatibzadeh said Iran has always supported a political solution based on ending the blockade on the Yemeni people, ending the war and preserving the country's territorial integrity.

He added that Tehran also underlines the need to prevent an escalation of the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen.

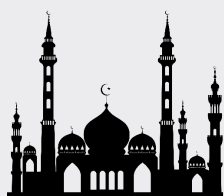
The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said the Islamic Republic of Iran always believes that the Yemen crisis is an internal issue and must be resolved by Yemenis themselves without foreign meddling.

He added that no regional crises can be resolved through war and violence and peace and stability can be achieved in the region through avoiding the continuation of tensions and the cycle of violence.

Khatibzadeh noted that the siege of Yemen and the war on the country are no solution to the crisis and such acts will only escalate tensions in the region.

His comments came a day after Yemeni forces launched a deadly drone attack on targets in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi that took the Emiratis unawares. Yemen says the attack was in response to the UAE's relentless assistance in the Saudi-led war on the Yemeni people.

Meanwhile, according to Al Mayadeen TV network, in the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes on Yemeni capital, Sana'a, 23 were killed on Monday.



PRAYER TIME

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| ■ Noon (Zohr) | 12:15 |
| ■ Evening (Maghreb) | 17:38 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr) | 05:43 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Sunrise | 07:11 |

68. They said, "Burn him and protect your gods, If ye do (anything at all)!"
69. We said, "O Fire! be thou cool, and (a means of) safety for Abraham!"

Surah 21, The Prophets (68 - 69)

Iran, Russia To Boost Oil Cooperation

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji explored ways to boost oil cooperation with his Russian counterpart Nikolai Shulginov in Moscow.

The two ministers also discussed the need for furthering mutual economic cooperation as well.

Strengthening Iran-Russia cooperation within the framework of OPEC Plus in order to safeguard both countries' interest and regulating the energy market, regional cooperation in transferring Iranian gas to Pakistan and India with the participation of Russian companies, domesticizing oil equipment in Iran, technology transfer and boosting joint investments were among the most important topics discussed during Owji's meetings with the Russian officials here.

The two ministers were meeting within the framework of the Iran-Russia Joint Economic Commission.

At the end of the session, Iranian and Russian oil ministers stressed their will to further develop cooperation in oil and gas extraction sectors.

Owji also met with the Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak when he discussed ways to expand economic relations, removing banking, customs and infrastructure obstacles, strengthening bilateral cooperation in oil and energy sectors and joint investment in infrastructure projects.

The Iran-Russia Joint Economic Commission has been held 15 times in Tehran and Moscow so far.

Meanwhile before departure for Moscow and on a TV program Owji explained the highlights of his meeting with Russian officials, and said: "Good decisions have been made in the field of gas trade, which can lead to transformation in the region."

He said: "For the past month, areas of cooperation in various sectors, including energy, have been explored with the Russian companies and government."

He added: "Today, since our arrival, good meetings have been held with the chairman of the Russian Joint Economic Commission in various fields of energy, roads and transportation, agriculture, energy, cases that were ambiguous in the past and projects that Russian companies are operating in Iran."

The Oil Minister continued: "In the field of energy, good decisions were made in the upstream sector, the development of oil and gas fields, as well as the downstream sector in the development of petroleum refineries and petrochemical plants and equipment and technology transfer, which are strategic in Iran's oil and gas industry."



Owji also referred to the meeting with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, and said that the meeting was focused on new areas of cooperation with Russia. "The two countries have good potential in the field of energy, and we hope that the agreements reached in these meetings with the Russian Ministry of Energy, the Russian Deputy Prime Minister and various large Russian companies will soon lead to the conclusion of agreements."

He stated that in the meeting with major Russian companies, good agreements have been reached on the transfer of technology and strategic equipment needed in the oil industry, adding that a comprehensive and complete plan of cooperation with Russia has been prepared and provided to this country. "We hope to reach new agreements and contracts within the framework of this plan."

Regarding the expansion of cooperation between Iran and Russia, the Oil Minister said: "The views of Iran and Russia in the OPEC+ coalition are very close, and we were on the same boat regarding the recent agreements reached by OPEC+."

"Iran, considering the existing infrastructure, is ready for gas trade and swap with Russia and other neighboring countries," he went on to add.

The Oil Minister, stating that proposals were also presented in the field of gas conversion to liquefied natural gas (LNG) and its exports, said: "Good decisions have been made in the field of gas trade, which can lead to a transformation in the region."

"Both Iran and Russia are targeted by sanctions and they can take advantage of this opportunity, and those Russian companies that do not cooperate with European and American companies can cooperate with Iran," Owji said. In the upstream sector and the development of oil fields and construction of equipment and technology transfer, companies of the two countries can do so by establishing a joint factory in Iran and producing additional equipment for use in Iran.

Regarding the agreement in other economic sectors, he said: "Good agreements have been reached in the agricultural sector. Various Russian companies have also identified numerous power plant projects; fortunately, we reached good agreements in the field of financing, which is emphasized by the various organs of the country."

The Iranian head of the Iran-Russia Joint Commission expressed hope that negotiations with Russian companies would lead to signing of contracts and provision of financial resources in various economic sectors of the country.

Oman Air to Operate Charter Flights to Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Oman Air will operate charter flights to the Islamic Republic of Iran at a rate of two flights per week from Friday, January 21, 2022, Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) said.

"Today, the Civil Aviation Authority issued its approval to operate the national carrier, Oman Air, for charter flights to the Islamic Republic of Iran at a rate of two flights per week, one of which to Tehran and the other to Shiraz, starting from Friday, January 21, 2022," CAA said in a statement.

Iran's Trade With Russia To Be Facilitated

MOSCOW (IRNA) - Iran's Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs has said that banking obstacles on the way of Iranian businesspersons residing in Russia will be removed and trade exchange will be facilitated.

Ehsan Khandouzi told IRNA in Moscow after his meeting held on Tuesday afternoon with Iranian trade persons residing in Russia.

Planning for this end has been made, the minister said, expressing hope that it will be finalized during the visit of the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Moscow.

President Raisi left for Moscow on Wednesday morning. The President's visit is taking place at the invitation of his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

As the finance minister has noted, Russia has always been an important partner for Iran.

He hoped that President Raisi's Moscow visit would be a turning point in development of economic cooperation in all areas.

Iran's Steel Exports Growth Stands at 14% in 9 Months

TEHRAN (MNA) - A study of the performance of 15 major steel production companies in the country indicated a 14 percent growth in the export of steel products in the first nine months of the current year (March 21- Dec. 22).

Iran's major steel production companies exported 5,432,329 tons of steel products in this period.

Among other domestic steel companies, Khuzestan Steel Company (KSC) exported 1,332,565 tons of steel in nine months of the current year, showing a 21 percent growth as compared to the last year's corresponding period.

Accordingly, steel exports by the domestic steel production companies hit a 31 percent decline from Nov. 21 to Dec. 22.

In that period, domestic steel production companies exported 494,475 tons of steel.

Mobile Internet Adoption Rate At Nearly 110%

TEHRAN (PresSTV) - Iran's telecoms regulator says access to the internet via mobile phones reached an ideal situation in the quarter to late December as the number of consumers reached nearly 92 million in the country of more than 84 million people.

Latest data by the Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA) published on Tuesday showed that mobile internet adoption rate in Iran has reached 109.27%, up more than 26% against figures reported in 2019.

Overall, the number of individual mobile users in Iran reached nearly 135.890 million, according to the CRA which put mobile phone penetration rate in the country at 161.67% for the quarter to December 21.

Iran's first mobile operator MCI accounted for nearly 53% customers while rival operator MTN Irancell had over 58 million or 42% of active subscribers in Iran over the period. The number of active SIM cards operated by third carrier Rightel had reached just over 5 million, showed the CRA figures.

The figures showed, however, that fixed broadband adoption in Iran had stalled at 12.9% with nearly 10.896 million customers having access to the Internet via those services over the December quarter.

Rural telecoms access in Iran had improved over the period as the overall number of villages with access to communication services rose to 51,400, around 93% of all villages, while access to home landline services was possible in 47,272 villages.

Iran has struggled to provide fast internet to a bulk of the population living in more than 55,000 villages in the country as demand for online services has increased with the spread of the coronavirus over the past two years.

Iran Rail Transit Grows 202%

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Islamic Republic of Iran Railway has reported a significant increase in the rail sector performance in transit, passenger transport, and freight transport in the last nine months.

In recent years, Iran has had plans to expand its railway network and connectivity and this is reflected in the Railway's performance report of the first nine months of the Persian calendar (March-December).

Within this period, the rail transit holds a record of 1,390 tons that shows 202 percent increase compared to the same period last year.

This record beats the highest record of rail transit within last 10 years which was 1200 tons in 2017.

Freight transport was 35 million tons and it is estimated to reach 68 million tons by the end of the Persian year (mid-March 2022).

Moreover, passenger transport was 14.7 million, indicating 110 percent increase compared to the same period last year.

Iran Ranks 17th Among Highly Vaccinated States

TEHRAN (IRNA) - As the world nations have been trying to carry out vaccination process to avoid deaths and hospitalization inflicted by COVID-19 disease, the Islamic Republic of Iran has successfully implemented its own vaccination program, standing at 17th position among highly vaccinated countries.

The COVID-19 was identified for the first time in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, then the fatal disease spread throughout the globe and the World Health Organization (WHO) announced it an pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Many companies and countries tried to develop vaccines to contain the virus. Russia's Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology was the first firm that produced a coronavirus vaccine, but it was not verified by the WHO.

Some developers from the US, Britain, China, and Russia produced vaccines named Sinopharm, Sinovac, Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, Oxford-AstraZeneca, and Sputnik V.

World states started competition to acquire authorized vaccines. There have been reported that 9.537 billion doses have been injected so far. China, India, the US, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Vietnam, Germany, Mexico, and Russia are among the countries that used the most doses of corona vaccines.

In terms of vaccination percentage on the basis of populations, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the most highly vaccinated nation, followed by Portugal, Cuba, Chile, Singapore, Canada, Italy, Japan, and France.

The Islamic Republic of Iran initiated corona vaccination on March 11, 2021. The vaccination process was reported very slow by August 22, when merely 20 percent of Iranians got the first jab.

Following the change of power in Tehran, the new administration speeded up the vaccination process. The number of Iranians who got the first and second shots is around 60 million and 53 million respectively.

Iran has succeeded in vaccinating 62 percent of the total population of around 82 million people.

IDRO Investing in Herbal Medicines Refinery of Kermanshah Province

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Deputy Industry Minister and Head of Industrial Development and Renovation Organization (IDRO) announced the investment of the organization in the project of building a construction herbal medicines refinery unit in Kermanshah Province.

Referring to this point that developmental organizations like IDRO considering the general policies of the Article 44 of the Constitutions can have joint investment along with non-government sector in the advanced industries with high technology and risky industries in any part of the country, Mr. Mohsen Salehinia said that considering the significance of producing standard material in the field of the herbal medicines and correct guidance of the cultivation process and production of the plants, the project of building herbal medicines refinery has been put on the agenda.

He went on to say that the project for investing in building the refinery with 40% participation of IDRO and 60% participation of the knowledge-based private sector with reliance on the knowledge and using the existing capabilities in the country is carried out with an aim at offering the natural effective medicines products and products with more value added with the possibility of presence in the global markets.

Mohseninia noted that Kermanshah Province is the place where the project is to be carried out with an estimated budget of 1,120b rials.

This refinery will enjoy having capacity for producing different types of essence and different kinds of natural medicines in accordance with the modern and up-to-date standards. Cultivation of medical herbs and producing their products can be considered a national necessity in the framework of certain and comprehensive program, medical self-sufficiency, occupation and development in the agro sector and it can be an effective factor in earning forex for the country.



British PM Denies Lying About Lockdown Party

LONDON (Dispatches) - UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Tuesday "categorically" denied claims by his former chief aide that he lied to parliament about a Downing Street party held during a strict lockdown.

But appearing in public for the first time after days of Covid self-isolation, Johnson also ducked questions about whether he would resign if an internal inquiry establishes that he did lie.

Johnson is battling damaging allegations that he and staff attended boozing events during Covid restrictions, prompting an investigation by senior civil servant Sue Gray. The revelations have sparked public fury, leading to a double-digit lead in polls for the main opposition Labour party over Johnson's Conservatives, and calls from some Tories for him to quit.



Barbados Holds First Election Since Becoming a Republic

BRIDGETOWN (Dispatches) - Barbados today will hold general elections called by Prime Minister Mia Mottley, the Caribbean nation's first vote since it became a republic last year by removing the British Queen as its sovereign.

Mottley, whose Barbados Labor Party now controls 29 of the legislature's 30 seats, in December said the vote would help promote unity in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, which has heavily hit the country's tourism-focused economy.

Barbados in November removed Queen Elizabeth as head of state and replaced her with President Sandra Mason in a ceremony coinciding with its independence day that included the presence of Britain's Prince Charles.



Russia Demands Answers On Security Guarantees



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia rejected new talks on Ukraine unless the West responds to its demands, as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken prepared to fly to Kiev in a show of support amid fears of a Russian invasion.

Tens of thousands of Russian troops are massed on the border with Ukraine, with Kiev and the West accusing Moscow of preparing a potential military attack on its pro-Western neighbor.

A week of talks in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna last week failed to ease tensions, with Russia insisting its demands for sweeping security guarantees -- including a permanent ban on Ukraine joining NATO -- be taken seriously.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday that there would be no further negotiations until the West gives it proper answers. "We are now awaiting responses to these proposals -- as we were promised -- in order to continue negotiations," he said at a joint press conference with visiting German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.

"Let's hope these talks will continue," Lavrov said.

Washington has outright rejected the demands, which also include limits on allied deployments in former Warsaw Pact allies like Poland and the ex-Soviet Baltic states that joined NATO after the Cold War.

The State Department announced that Blinken would fly to Ukraine and meet Wednesday with President Volodymyr Zelensky, to "reinforce the United States' commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Blinken will then head Thursday to Berlin for four-way talks with Britain, France and Germany on the Ukraine crisis, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

The four countries will discuss "joint efforts to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine, including allies' and partners' readiness to impose massive consequences and severe economic costs on Russia," Price said in a statement.

Ukraine, the United States and the European Union have all raised deep concerns over the Russian troop build-up, despite repeated denials from Moscow that an invasion is planned.

Kiev has been at war with pro-Moscow separatists in the east of the country since 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine after demonstrations ousted a Kremlin-aligned leader.

Adding to the tensions, Russia and Ukraine's neighbor Belarus on Tuesday launched snap military exercises.

The Belarusian defense ministry said it was hosting the combat readiness drills because of the continuing "aggravation" of military tensions "including at the western and southern borders of the Republic of Belarus."

Ukraine borders Belarus to the south and NATO member Poland to the west.

Neither Moscow nor Minsk has disclosed the number of troops involved, but a video published by the Belarusian defense ministry showed columns of military vehicles including tanks being unloaded from trains blanketed in snow.

Erdogan, Vucic Agree to Bring Ethnic Leaders Together for Peace in Bosnia

ANKARA (Dispatches) - "We have agreed to bring together Serb, Croat and Bosnian leaders and solve the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said late Tuesday in a press conference with his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vucic.

"International community must act together to overcome crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

"Our aim is to bring an end to tensions in Bosnia using a positive approach," Erdogan also added.

"If such an approach is realized on a win-win basis, Turkey will do everything it can."

The Turkish leader also underlined Turkey's respect towards Bosnia's territorial integrity, emphasizing the dangers of ethnic divide in the restive Balkan state.

"I have told Mr. Vucic that Turkey fully respects Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity," he said.

Last month, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar also said that "Turkey is ready to act as a mediator on the political crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina" and will do what it can to ensure stability, amid concerns over separatist moves by Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik.

As part of a visit to Sarajevo this week, Akar met with his Bosnian counterpart, the Bosnian presidency and other officials, according to the Defense Ministry.

"We view Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole. We have done all we can for its unity and stability, and we will continue to do so," Akar told reporters after his talks, referring to its Bosniak, Croat and Serb peoples making up one nation.

"If requested, Turkey can work as a mediator in Bosnia-Herzegovina," Akar said, without elaborating further. The surge in separatist rhetoric in Bosnia-Herzegovina does not serve any party, Akar also said Monday during his visit to the country.

"We believe the separatist rhetoric in Bosnia-Herzegovina benefits no one," he told a joint news conference with his Bosnian counterpart Sifet Podzic in the capital Sarajevo.

"We're following the situation closely. We invite the relevant parties to think reasonably, sensibly and act prudently. Existing and potential problems can also be resolved through negotiations and peaceful means," he said.



Metsola Becomes Third Woman to Head EU Parliament

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - Maltese lawmaker Roberta Metsola secured overwhelming support to become president of the European Parliament today, making her the first woman to hold the post for 20 years.

Metsola succeeds Italian socialist David Sassoli in the mainly ceremonial role presiding over the 705-member parliament of the European Union, after he died this month aged 65.

Metsola, of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), defeated two other female candidates, winning 458 of the 616 validly cast votes in the first round, meaning no run-off rounds - normal practice for the presidency election - were required.

"Congratulations Roberta Metsola and indeed Happy Birthday," Pedro Silva Pereira said after announcing the result, which led to a standing ovation in the chamber in Strasbourg.

Metsola, who turned 43 on Tuesday, said in a campaign message on Twitter that it was time for the assembly to be led by a woman and that it should connect with EU citizens beyond the "bubbles" of Brussels and Strasbourg where it meets.

Sassoli had been due to step down this week as part of a power-sharing deal under which parliament's socialist group would make way halfway through the assembly's five-year term for a candidate from the EPP grouping.

The European Parliament, which adopts and amends legislative proposals and decides on the EU budget, has had only two female presidents, Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine, both French, since it became a directly elected assembly in 1979.

A member of the European Parliament since 2013, Metsola campaigned as a student for Malta to become a member of the EU.

A Mediterranean archipelago with a population of just over 500,000, Malta became the EU's smallest member state when it joined the bloc in 2004.

Hospitals in Ethiopia's War-Torn North Reel From Shortages

NAIROBI (Dispatches) - Doctors in Ethiopia's Tigray region are recycling surgical gloves and using salt to disinfect wounds as essential medical supplies run out, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said.

Hospitals elsewhere in the country's war-battered north were being forced to shut, the ICRC said, and unable to keep patients alive without medicines, electricity or water.

Thousands of people have died in 14 months of fighting in Ethiopia and millions are suffering from a critical shortage of food and medical essentials in conflict-afflicted regions.

The United Nations says a de facto blockade on aid reaching rebel-controlled Tigray is creating a humanitarian crisis in a region of seven million people.

The ICRC said it was "profoundly concerned" about the shortages of medical supplies, adding that doctors were forced to make impossible decisions on their rounds.

"In Tigray, single-use items such as gloves, surgical materials and even chest drains are being washed and reused, increasing the risk of infections," Apollo Barasa, ICRC health coordinator in Ethiopia, said in a statement.

"In some places, doctors have replaced disinfectant by salt to clean wounds. Patients are receiving expired medications, oxygen plants are not working anymore, and

some health facilities cannot provide routine vaccines."

In the neighboring Amhara region, hospitals had closed because of a lack of medicines.

"People with chronic diseases are dying every day and women are giving birth at home as health facilities are not functional and often without electricity or water," Micha Wedekind, who heads the ICRC's response in Amhara and Afar, said in a statement.

Last week, the head of the UN's World Health Organization (WHO) described conditions in Tigray as "hell" and said the government was preventing medicines and other life-saving aid from reaching locals.

Addis Ababa rebuked Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus for his remarks, accusing the high-profile Tigrayan of endorsing the rebels fighting the Ethiopian army and its allies.

The UN's World Food Program (WFP) on Friday warned that its operations in northern Ethiopia "were grinding to a halt" and appealed for impositions on aid deliveries to be lifted.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered troops into Tigray in November 2020 in response to what he called attacks on army camps by the region's former rulers, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

He promised a swift campaign but more than a year later the war drags on and civilian casualties mount.



Sudanese Barricade Streets After 7 Killed In Anti-Coup Protests

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Sudanese shuttered shops and barricaded streets with burning tyres and rocks, staging angry rallies to protest against one of the bloodiest days since a coup derailed the country's democratic transition.

Security forces on Monday opened fire killing at least seven people as thousands marched against the army's October 25 takeover, taking the total number killed in a crackdown since the coup to 71, according to medics.

"No, no to military rule," protesters chanted in southern Blue Nile state, where some carried banners daubed with the slogan "No to killing peaceful protesters", said witness Omar Eissa.

The protests come as Washington ramps up pressure in a bid to broker an end to the months-long crisis in the northeast African nation, with top US diplomats expected to arrive in the capital Khartoum for talks.

Sudan's main civilian bloc, the Forces for Freedom and Change, called for two days of civil disobedience to begin on Tuesday.

"Shop closed for mourning," said a series of small signs posted on the closed outlets at the sprawling Sajane construction supplies market in Khartoum. One of the merchants, Othman el-Sherif, was among those shot dead on Monday.

Protesters -- sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands -- have regularly taken to the streets since the coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan nearly three months ago.

The military power grab derailed a fragile transition to civilian rule following the April 2019 ouster of autocrat Omar al-Bashir, with prime minister Abdalla Hamdok resigning earlier this month warning Sudan was at a "dangerous crossroads threatening its very survival".

After Monday's deaths, the United Nations special representative Volker Perthes condemned the use of live ammunition, while the U.S. embassy criticised "violent tactics of Sudanese security forces," the latest such appeals by world powers, which have not curbed a rising death toll.



Velenjak Apt (\$2600)
230sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, Sauna
J, balcony
pkg, fireplace
marble fl
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)
Parsian

Zaferanieh Villa (\$8000)
1000sq.m
600sq.m b/up
S/p, Sauna
Jacuzzi, pkg
green yard

Aghdasieh (\$1700) 200sq.m, 3bdrs, balcony, F.F
Mahmoodieh (\$2500) 220sq.m, 3bdrs, balcony, F.F
Gheitarieh (\$1600) 150sq.m, 3bdrs, balcony, F.F

Darrous (\$1600)
140sq.m, 2bdrs, S/p, F.F

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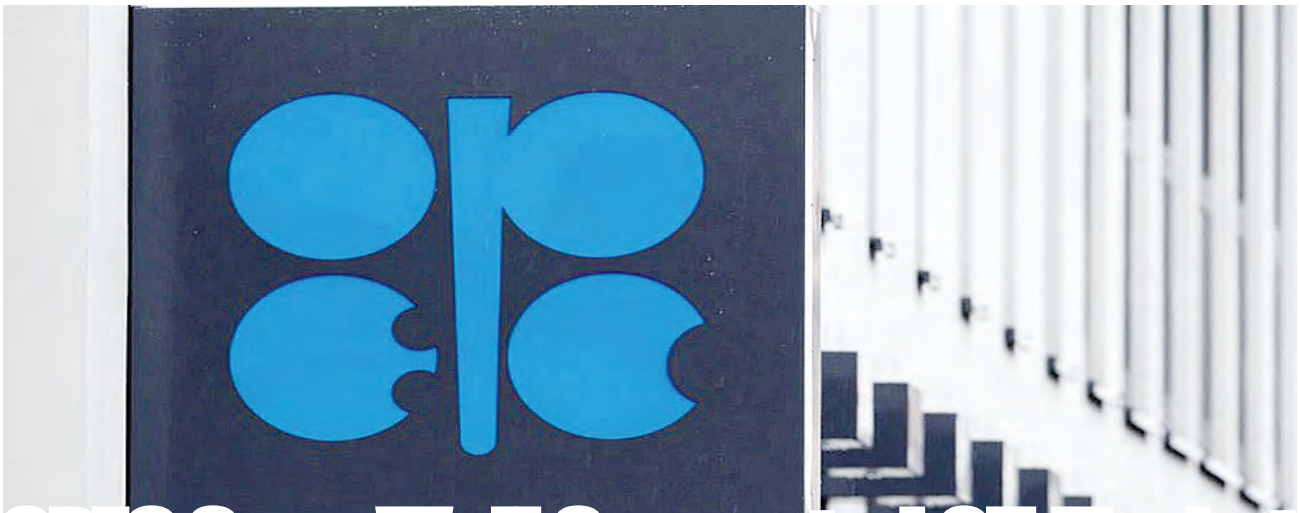
China's 2021 Diesel Exports Sink to 5-Year Low

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - China's diesel exports in December sank to their lowest monthly level since March 2015, bringing the 2021 total to the lowest since 2016 at 17.21 million tons, data showed on Tuesday.

December exports of diesel slumped to 330,000 tons, down 78% from a year earlier, amid diminishing

export quotas and as refiners curbed runs in response to a slowdown in domestic demand, data from the General Administration of Customs showed.

Total refined fuel, including diesel, gasoline, aviation fuel and low-sulphur fuel oil, fell 45% from a year earlier to 3.23 million tons last month, the lowest monthly level since July 2020.



OPEC Sees Well-Supported Oil Market In 2022, Despite Omicron

LONDON (Dispatches) - OPEC stuck to its forecast for robust growth in world oil demand in 2022 despite the Omicron coronavirus variant and expected interest rate hikes, predicting the oil market would remain well supported through the year.

The upbeat view from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries comes as oil prices have reached the highest since 2014. Tight supply has given impetus to the rally, and OPEC's report also showed the group undershot a pledged oil-output rise in December.

In a monthly report, OPEC said it expects world oil demand in 2022 to rise by 4.15 million barrels per day (bpd), unchanged from last month. Oil use will surpass the 100 million bpd mark in the third quarter, also in line with last month's forecast.

"While the new Omicron variant may have an impact in the first half of 2022, which is dependent on any further lockdown measures and rising hospitalization levels impacting the workforce, projections for economic growth remain robust," OPEC said in the report.

Interest rate rises, expected in 2022 to keep a lid on inflation and seen by some as risk to oil demand, are unlikely to dent the outlook, OPEC said. Expected U.S. rate hikes in the second quarter would coincide with the northern hemisphere driving season, which boosts fuel demand, it said.

"Monetary actions are not expected to hinder underlying global economic growth momentum, but rather serve to recalibrate otherwise overheating economies," OPEC said.

"The oil market is expected to remain well-supported throughout 2022."

This year's demand rise will take oil use above pre-pandemic levels. On an annual basis according to OPEC, the world last used over 100 million bpd of oil in 2019.

Oil rose after the report was issued and was trading close to \$88 a barrel, having hit \$88.13 on Tuesday, the highest since October 2014.

The report also showed higher output from OPEC as the group and allies, known as OPEC+, gradually unwind record output cuts put in place last year.

OPEC+ has aimed to raise output by 400,000 bpd a month, with about 253,000 bpd of that due to come from the 10 OPEC members covered by the deal, but production has increased by less than that as some producers struggle to pump more.

The report showed OPEC output in December rose by 170,000 bpd to 27.88 million bpd, undershooting the rise OPEC was allowed. Libya and Nigeria both had a drop in output alongside gains in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

Traders are watching for signs of a big rebound in U.S. shale supply as higher prices prompt more investment, which could prove a headwind to OPEC+ efforts to support the market. OPEC raised its forecast for growth in 2022 production of U.S. tight oil, another term for shale, to 670,000 bpd from 600,000 bpd. The growth forecast for overall non-OPEC supply in 2022 was left unchanged.

OPEC said it expects the world to need 28.9 million bpd from its members in 2022, unchanged from last month and theoretically allowing further increases in output.

BoJ Lifts Inflation Forecast, No Policy Change

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan's central bank revised its inflation forecast today and adjusted its view of price risks, while leaving its monetary easing policy in place in a nod to lingering pandemic uncertainty.

As prices rise swiftly in other economies, Japan's inflation remains relatively feeble, and still far below the long-held two per cent target seen as necessary to turbo-charge the world's third largest economy.

In a quarterly report on prices and the economy, the central bank said it now forecasts inflation of 1.1 per cent for the fiscal year to March 2023, up from its previous forecast of 0.9 per cent.

It also revised up its forecast for the fiscal year to March 2024 to 1.1 per cent from 1.0 per cent, leaving the projection for the current year unchanged.

"The projected rate of increase in the CPI (consumer price index) for fiscal 2022 is somewhat higher, mainly reflecting a rise in commodity prices and the pass-through of that rise to consumer prices," the central bank said.

It declared "risks to prices are generally balanced," adjusting its previous assessment of risk as "skewed to the downside."

The BoJ revised down its growth forecast for the current fiscal year to 2.8 per cent from the previous 3.4 per cent.

But it now sees faster-than-expected 3.8 per cent growth in the fiscal year to March 2023, with a slight downward revision of 1.1 per cent growth in the year to March 2024.

"Risks to economic activity are skewed to the downside for the time being, mainly due to the impact of Covid-19," it added.

The central bank maintained its longstanding target of two-percent inflation, which remains far off despite years of efforts and prices surging globally.

Even with the latest upward revision in prices, "a change in (the BoJ's) policy stance is hard to imagine" as the inflation target "is still far away," said economist Masamichi Adachi of UBS in a note ahead of the Tuesday decision.

"With no Board member expecting inflation to come close to the two percent target for the foreseeable future, talk of policy tightening is premature," added Marcel Thieliant, senior Japan economist at Capital Economics.

"We are even more pessimistic than the Bank about the medium-term outlook for inflation," he added in a note.

"We're sticking to our view that the Bank will keep interest rates low for the foreseeable future."



Toyota Yearly Production Target Hit by Chip Shortage

TOKYO (Dispatches) - The world's top-selling carmaker Toyota said it no longer expects to meet its annual production target with operations hampered by the global chip crunch.

A worldwide shortage of microchips -- essential components of modern cars -- has forced many automakers including Toyota to slow or temporarily halt production.

In September, the Japanese giant lowered the number of vehicles it hopes to make in the year to March 2022 to nine million, down from 9.3 million.

But on Tuesday the company said fresh cuts to a planned bumper factory output next month meant it was unlikely to meet its new target.

"Current demand is very strong, therefore we were aiming for a high February production plan," Toyota said in a statement.

But "due to the impact of the continuing demand for semiconductors across all industries", the company said it had reduced its global production target for February to around 700,000 units, some 150,000 fewer than before.

"As a result of the revision, the full-year production forecast for the fiscal year... is expected to be lower than the previous forecast of nine million units," it said.

Next month's target is still higher than the 668,000 units Toyota made in February 2021, however, as it scrambles to make up for lost output due to the semiconductor shortage and pandemic disruption to supply chains in Southeast Asia.

The targets are for Toyota and Lexus vehicles only, not the auto group's other brands Daihatsu and Hino. Toyota said it would halt operations for several days next month on 11 production lines at eight of its 14 Japanese plants.

The company offered its "sincerest apologies to our customers and suppliers for the various inconveniences these adjustments may cause".

Croatians Urged to Bank Cash Ahead of Euro Switch

ZAGREB (Dispatches) - Croatia's prime minister urged people yesterday to put cash they keep at home into banks to facilitate the switch from the kuna to the euro, which the Balkan nation expects will happen in a year.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said prices will be displayed in both kunas and euros

from September ahead of the introduction of the single currency, which the government hopes will happen next January.

"We urge people who have cash at home to put it now in banks since the savings in kunas will be automatically converted into euros," he said.

Croatia joined the European Union in July 2013, but like other new members from eastern Europe, has taken some time to fulfill the economic conditions to adopt the single European currency.

The government wants the switch to be "simple and without costs for citizens," Plenkovic said while presenting a bill on adopting the euro.

Due to lack a longstanding lack of trust in institutions and banks many Croatians keep their savings in cash at home.

Officials repeatedly stress the benefits of introducing the euro, in particular that it will lower borrowing costs and boost foreign investment into the country, as well as eliminate currency risks with its main trading partners.

Around 80 per cent of bank deposits are already in euros.

But many Croatians fear that the introduction of the euro will lead to a hike in prices, in particular that businesses will round up prices when they convert into euros.

Finance Minister Zdravko Maric called it "one of the most important issues".

He urged "everyone to make sure that there is no unjustified price increase ... no shady stuff".

An Eurobarometer survey last year showed that 61 per cent of Croatians support the switch to the euro.

Out of the 27 EU member states, 19 currently use the euro as their currency.

Croatia's tourism-oriented economy remains one of the EU's weakest.

In October, the average salary was €952 (RM4,543).

Turkey-Azerbaijan Pipeline To Be Laid This Year to Supply Nakhchivan

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Following the liberation of Azerbaijan's occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region, Baku is now looking to ensure the uninterrupted supply of natural gas to Nakhchivan with a project to be carried out in cooperation with Turkey that foresees the pipeline being laid this year.

Under the project, the Turkish side will invest TL 100 million (\$7.38 million) in the pipeline this year. It is being built under the memorandum of understanding (MoU) on natural gas supply to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic that was signed between Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Dönmez and his Azerbaijani counterpart Parviz Shahbazov at the end of 2020.

It will be constructed as a continuous line to the Igdir Natural Gas Pipeline located in the easternmost Turkish province of Igdir. The pipeline will be 82 kilometers (50.95 miles) long and will transfer the natural gas obtained from Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan.

A safe natural gas supply will be provided to the Azerbaijani enclave as it had been before the Armenian occupation of Karabakh.

The project will be carried out in cooperation with Turkey's Petroleum Pipeline Company (BOTAS) and Azerbaijan's state energy company SOCAR.

According to Turkey's 2022 Annual Investment Program, the total investment budget allocated for the project is around TL 185 million that will be facilitated until 2023.

Turkey, which will make TL 100 million of the investment this year, will make the rest next year.

The project, dubbed a big step that will be taken in terms of natural gas supply security and resource diversity of Nakhchivan, which has a population of up to 500,000 and natural gas consumption of 500 million cubic meters (mcm). The pipeline aims to deliver 1.5 mcm of gas to the region daily via Igdir.

A measurement station will also be established in Igdir's Diluceu district under the project. The station, which will be built on a large area of 20,000 square meters (215,278 square feet), will provide the flow balance of the line and ensure that the natural gas will reach Nakhchivan in the safest way.

The Turkey-Nakhchivan natural gas pipeline is one of the latest examples of broader energy cooperation between Ankara and Baku.

There is currently the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) that allows Azerbaijani natural gas to reach Turkey and European markets.

It was inaugurated in June 2018 thanks to successful cooperation between the two countries.

Another pipeline, the 878-kilometer (545.5-mile) Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), has also begun commercial operations.

Risk of Central Bank Hikes Prompts Investors to Shun Tech



LONDON (Dispatches) - High-flying tech stocks, the darling of the pandemic, are the most shunned counters in the opening weeks of 2022 as investors see a flurry of rate hikes from central banks as the top risk to markets, investor surveys said today.

A BofA survey conducted from Jan 7-13 among investors with combined assets under management of more than US\$1.2 trillion (RM5 trillion) showed fund managers had cut their overweight positions to their lowest levels since December 2008.

A separate monthly survey conducted by Deutsche Bank showed an overwhelming majority of respondents believed US technology shares are in bubble territory as investors remained more bearish on hawkish policy moves and higher yields.

"Higher-than-expected inflation continued to be the predominant driver of those bearish fears, but its counterpart, a more aggressive Fed, drew much more concern from respondents this month," Deutsche Bank strategists said in a monthly note.

In response to more central bank rate hikes being likely this year, investors have ramped up their positions in equities, particularly in Europe, cyclical banks, commodities and industrials — sectors perceived to benefit from higher rates.

The change in positioning has been extreme compared to historical averages. Investors have ramped up bullish bets in banks, commodities and materials, and cut positions in technology, emerging markets and bonds.

Investors have become more bullish on European stocks from a global reopening trade perspective and want to increase their exposure as well in the next 12 months, according to BofA's survey.

The top three crowded trades were long technology stocks, short US Treasuries and short Chinese stocks, according to the US investment bank.

Kuzeh Konan to Be Registered as National Pottery City

TABRIZ (IRNA) - Historical city of Kuzeh Konan, 75 kilometers west of Tabriz in East Azarbaijan Province, has been nominated to be registered as a national pottery city in Iran.

Kuzeh Konan city, located in the central district of Shabestar county, is one of the hubs of pottery in Iran. Due to abundance of high quality clay in the city, residents of Kuzeh Konan have turned into well-known pottery masters across Iran. Today, the number of pottery workshops in the city has decreased to about 30, but their products are still shining in public places and people's houses.



With Omicron, Global Economy Spots Chance to Push Past Covid

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Governments worldwide are easing quarantine rules, reviewing coronavirus curbs and dialing back pandemic-era emergency support as they bid to launch their economies back into some version of normality.

The moves, motivated by the lower severity of the Omicron variant and the need to keep workers in work and the global recovery on track, have generated a whiff of optimism that has lifted oil and stock prices.

Health experts say the variant's rapid spread may yet herald a turning point in the pandemic. However, they add, much depends on how authorities manage ongoing vaccination rollouts and balance other health measures still needed, while persuading their citizens not to throw caution to the wind.

"We are taking a big step and that also means we're taking a big risk," Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said last week before stores, hairdressers and gyms reopened in a partial lifting of a lockdown despite record numbers of new cases.

That lockdown was already something of a rarity, with most western countries well past that stage and focussed on how to safely open up further.

Around half a dozen have cut quarantine times from 10 to five days, citing Omicron's faster infection cycle as grounds to loosen rules that have led to a wave of worker absences hitting businesses.

Britain and Israel have eased requirements for follow-up PCR tests after a lateral flow result as Omicron's soaring infection rates overload laboratories. Local media say Britain could announce further easing of restrictions later this month.

Omicron's ability to rifle quickly through a population without causing a proportionate rise in hospitalisations and deaths even prompted Spain's prime minister to suggest it be treated akin to an endemic illness like flu.

While few are using that specific word, policymakers whose priority now is to wean economies off the cheap money fuelling inflation have started to depict the coronavirus as something businesses and households must learn to live with.

"What we are seeing is an economy that functions right through these waves of Covid," US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said last week.

"If the experts are right and Omicron is going to go through really quickly and peak perhaps within a month and come down after that, I think it is likely you will see lower hiring and perhaps a pause in growth, but it should be short-lived."

Such a scenario would facilitate the Fed's full-on turn towards normalising policy this year with as many as three interest rate hikes. Other central banks also looking to wind back stimulus share that view.

"(It (Omicron) is proving very contagious but less deadly, so economies will live with it," one European Central Bank policymaker told Reuters, adding the bank's baseline scenario assumed a "continued resolution of the health crisis in 2022".

Similarly the Bank of Japan, while listing Omicron as a risk, is seen sticking to its view that the local economy will pursue a recovery driven by robust exports and massive state spending.

If that upbeat outlook materialises, governments would also be able to start winding back the emergency fiscal support which, according to the International Monetary Fund, led to the largest one-year surge in global debt since World War II.

In October, the Fund forecast global economic growth of 4.9 per cent this year, while underscoring uncertainty posed by the coronavirus. It postponed the release of its latest outlook to January 25 to factor in latest Omicron developments.



The rosy economic picture is also predicated on vaccination campaigns at sufficient levels to limit serious illness.

That means ramping up access to shots in the developing world as wealthier countries focus on the boosters that widespread evidence, including hard data from Italy and Germany, shows offer significant protection against the risk of hospitalisation, intensive care and death.

Dutch Covid-19 hospitalisations, for instance, while off all-time pandemic peaks around 2,000, remain above 900.

That is impacting workplace absences and acute care for other conditions, and the government is hoping to quickly increase a booster shot coverage rate of around 50 per cent of adults, relatively low by euro zone standards.

Another fly in the ointment for any early return to normal may prove to be China's resolve to pursue a strict "Covid-zero" strategy likely to lead to shutdowns hitting supply chains and therefore its trade partners.

And while the belief that the global recovery can live with Omicron may be expedient, it may yet run up against the hard facts of epidemiology.

Lawrence Young, Professor of Molecular Oncology, University of Warwick, said US and Japanese studies showing that more than 30 per cent of cases remain highly infectious after five days suggest moves to relax quarantine rules could backfire.

"This is a policy decision... based on the need to get people back to work," he said. "... Returning people after five days risks highly infectious people returning to work or school."

He and other experts said those risks could be mitigated by strict enforcement of lateral flow testing, mask-wearing and contact-limiting — a tricky health message for authorities perceived to be easing up on some rules.

"There's a big sense that we're coming out of all of this," said Young. "But I think it's an interesting, dangerous period if people are too complacent about it."

ExxonMobil Targets Net Zero Emissions at Operations by 2050



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - ExxonMobil pledged to reach "net zero" greenhouse gas emissions in its operations by 2050, but stopped short of extending the promise to products it sells throughout the global economy.

The petroleum giant's promise covers "Scope 1" and "Scope 2" emissions, which account for carbon emissions from ExxonMobil operations, as well as emissions associated with the purchase of heating or cooling at its facilities, according to a company press release.

But the U.S. oil giant avoided targets on "Scope 3" emissions, which are those from products sold, such as the gasoline consumers buy. Some European companies such as Total have pledged to cut these emissions as well.

Environmental activists have argued that oil needs to be phased out if the world is to avoid catastrophic climate change, necessitating immediate plans to reduce "Scope 3" emissions.

The announcement comes on the heels of ExxonMobil's earlier announcements to boost spending on lower-emissions technologies, including through major projects on carbon capture and storage.

ExxonMobil also cited programs to reduce routine flaring of gases and employ more renewable energy and lower-emission power sources throughout company operations.

The company will release "detailed roadmaps" addressing 90 per cent of operations-related greenhouse gas emission by the end of 2022, with the remainder in 2023, the ExxonMobil said in a press release.

Chief Executive Darren Woods cited the company's work in the Permian Basin, a major oil-producing region in the United States, as a spot where superior technology has enabled it to grow production while mitigating the risk of climate change.

Latin America's Currencies Signal Economic Damage Despite Commodities Boom

LONDON (FT) - What was good for copper was good for Chile's peso. The fortunes of the currency of the world's largest copper exporter were closely tied to the price of its main export.

Last year the pattern broke. World copper prices rose 25 per cent in 2021, but the Chilean peso's value crashed by nearly 17 per cent against the US dollar — one of the worst performances by any major emerging market currency.

Chile's experience was not unusual. Despite a strong global rise in commodity prices last year, the currencies of all major Latin American economies weakened, some dramatically.

The Colombian peso lost 16 per cent of its value against the dollar, while the Peruvian sol weakened by more than 9 per cent. Brazil's real suffered its fifth consecutive year of devaluation, losing nearly 7 per cent.

Economists say the striking divergence — unprecedented in recent years — points to a deep sickness in Latin America's economies.

"It's very bad news," said Ernesto Revilla, chief Latin America economist at Citi. "This shows the region is coming out of the pandemic with deeper structural damage than we thought."

The pandemic's combined impact on Latin America's people and economies was greater than in any other region in 2020. After a struggle to procure vaccines early last year, most Latin American governments managed to buy sufficient stocks during 2021 and the region ended the year as the world's most vaccinated.

However, while the most serious health effects of the pandemic are fading, the economic damage looks much longer-lasting. Latin America was already the emerging world's slowest-growing region before the pandemic, managing just 0.9 per cent year-on-year increases in GDP on average from 2014 to 2019, according to Goldman Sachs data.

Now, despite higher commodity prices, it risks settling back into mediocre growth, this time with fresh problems:



extra debt taken on during the pandemic, rapidly rising inflation and much greater political risk as voters punish incumbents and swing towards populist outsiders.

"The market is treating Latin America as if it had suffered a structural shock and not a cyclical shock," said Revilla.

Alberto Ramos, head of Latin America economics at

Goldman Sachs, highlighted the region's lurch towards political extremes in 2021. Peru and Chile elected hard left governments and socialist candidates are leading the polls for presidential elections this year in Brazil and Colombia.

"In a period of rallying commodity prices, the correlation [between commodity prices and currency strength] has broken because of political risk, to a large extent," he said. "In Colombia, Chile, Peru and Brazil, the political and policy risks are quite high."

Chile epitomised the trend. It elected last May a special assembly dominated by the left to rewrite the constitution, which is widely regarded as one of the region's most investor-friendly. Seven months later, voters chose Gabriel Boric, a hard-left millennial former student activist, as president.

Boric has vowed to abolish the country's private pension system, raise taxes by 5 per cent of gross domestic product to fund a big increase in public spending and impose restrictions on the mining industry.

Investors have noticed the region's drift towards political extremes. About \$50bn has been pulled out of the country since political unrest erupted in October 2019, according to the central bank. Peru suffered the biggest capital flight last year since records began in 1970, with some \$15bn leaving the country.

The exception to the weak currency rule in Latin America has been Mexico, whose leftwing populist president has pursued nationalist and interventionist policies but also free trade with the US and fiscal discipline. Reflecting this, the Mexican peso fell only 4.5 per cent against the dollar last year, by far the best performance of any major Latin American currency.

Iran Hails Significant...

FROM PAGE 1

"The Islamic Republic attaches much importance to the women's role in socioeconomic development and the Iranian society's sociopolitical life," the envoy stated.

Takht-Ravanchi, meanwhile, touched on the situation of women in West Asia, expressing dismay over the destructive effects of occupation and foreign intervention, as well as terrorist activities targeting girls and women in the region.

He said the oldest case for such impairment would be the Palestinian women, who continued to suffer the consequences of decades of Israeli occupation and human rights violations.

"In disputes and conflicts, efforts should be focused on addressing the root causes of violence against women," the Iranian official said.

Annual Non-Oil Export...

FROM PAGE 1

Among the country's non-oil export destinations, China was the first, with importing \$8.9 billion worth of products, Iraq was the second with importing \$7.3 billion, the United Arab Emirates the third with importing \$4.6 billion, Turkey the fourth with importing \$2.5 billion, and Afghanistan the fifth with importing \$2.2 billion, Mir-Ashrafi announced, and named gasoline, natural gas, polyethylene, propane, and pistachio as Iran's major exported products during the past year.

He further named Iran's top sources of non-oil imports in the said time, as China with exporting \$9.7 billion worth of products to the Islamic Republic, the UAE with \$9.6 billion, Turkey with \$4.3 billion, India with \$2.1 billion, and Germany with \$1.8 billion, respectively, and mentioned corn, cellphone, rice, oil meal, and oilseeds, wheat, and raw oil as the major imported items.

Iran Exclusive Exhibition in Tajikistan a Desirable Opportunity To Boost Trade Ties

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian ambassador to Tajikistan said his country's sixth exclusive exhibition in Tajikistan would be a desirable opportunity for the economic development.

Talking in a webinar on Iran-Tajikistan trade cooperation hosted by Mashhad, northeastern Iran, Mohammad-Taqi Saberi also added the fifth solo exhibition of Iran in Tajikistan helped the two countries sign several economic contracts.

The envoy continued the sixth exhibition is aimed at introducing Iran's products and services and also exploring all avenues for expanding economic and trade cooperation with Tajikistan.

Earlier the Khorasan Razavi deputy governor general for coordination of economic affairs said that the northeastern province will hold the solo exhibition in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe from February 26 to March 1, 2022.

Morteza Ashrafi added that the specialized exhibition will be organized by Mashhad International Exhibition Company. The Company held Iran's exclusive exhibitions in Dushanbe in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2011 and 2019.

Central Asia office, also speaking in the webinar, said the trade between Iran and Tajikistan is expected to hit 500 million dollars by 2030.

Rahmatollah Khormali added that the Iranian products recently exported to Tajikistan constituted six to seven percent of the three-billion-dollar market of that country, expressing hope the outlined plans on bilateral relations would help achieve the goals in the near future.

Based on the economic goals for the next four years, Iran should increase its exports to Tajikistan from 55 million dollars to 200 million dollars, he explained.

Tajikistan is in dire need of foodstuff, petrochemical products and construction materials, Khormali concluded.

Iran Among World's Top 14 Power Plant Constructors

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran is one of the top 14 constructors of power plants in the world, said a Ministry of Energy official on Wednesday.

The deputy energy minister for research and human resources said the Iranian experts have taken major strides toward developing the country's power grid.

Reza Anjom-Shoa added the installed power plants are generating over 86,000 megawatts, continuing that the length of the country's power transmission networks stands at 54,800 kilometers that supply some 30 million subscribers with electricity.

The government of President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi pays special attention to the water and power sectors, said the official, adding that the Ministry of Energy having 200 affiliated and subsidiary companies is making every effort to render various services to people.

Court Blocks S. Korea Speed

Skating Champion's Olympic Bid

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean speed skating star Shim Suk-hee's Beijing Olympic hopes were dashed Tuesday as she lost a court battle over a two-month ban that will rule her out of the Winter Games, local media reported.

Shim is one of short track superpower South Korea's most successful skaters, winning four Olympics short track medals, including relay golds at the 2014 and 2018 Games. She was handed a two-month suspension by the Korea Skating Union (KSU) in December over expletive-laden texts about her teammates, leaving her participation at the Beijing Games hanging by a thread.

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Riessle Left out of Germany Nordic Combined Squad

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Olympic gold medallist Fabian Riessle will not compete in next month's winter Games in Beijing after being left out of Germany's Nordic combined squad by coach Hermann Weinbuch.

Riessle, together with Vinzenz Geiger, Eric Frenzel and Johannes Rydzek, won gold in the men's team large hill 4x5km event at the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics. He also won silver in the men's individual large hill/10km.

The 31-year-old has, however, slipped to 19th place in the Nordic Combined World Cup standings, behind six other German skiers.

Murray Wins Basileashvili Thriller to Reach Next Round

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Andy Murray dipped into the depth of his defensive skills to tame big-hitting Nikoloz Basileashvili during a thrilling 6-1 3-6 6-4 6-7(5) 6-4 win on Tuesday to reach the second round of the Australian Open for the first time in five years.

The former world number one, a five-time finalist at Melbourne Park, has seen his ranking plummet since hip surgery in 2019 and long injury layoffs that followed and needed a wildcard into the main draw of this year's tournament.

The 113th-ranked Murray, who won the last of his three major titles at Wimbledon in 2016, showed he still had the game to trouble top players on the tour and forced the 21st seed from Georgia into making a litany of errors.

It was Murray's first match at Melbourne Park since a five-set defeat by Roberto Bautista Agut in 2019. He skipped the 2018 and 2020 tournaments with injury and also missed the last edition after testing positive for COVID-19 in the leadup.

"It's amazing. It's been a tough three-four years. I've put in a lot of work to get back here," Murray said in his on-court interview. "I've played on this court many times and the atmosphere is incredible. I've always had fantastic support."

"This is the one where I thought potentially I'd played my last match on three years ago but amazing to be back winning a five-set battle like that. Can't ask for anything more."

This was the third meeting between the pair with the British 34-year-old, who reached the fourth round at the Australian Open in 2017, triumphing in both previous encounters including last week's win en route to the final in Sydney.

Basileashvili, 29, committed 99 unforced errors, many of which came when the Murray ran from one end of the court to the other to defend doggedly and making his opponent play an extra shot in the rallies.

Meanwhile Greek world number four Stefanos Tsitsipas put on a clinical show against familiar opponent Mikael Ymer of Sweden during a 6-2 6-4 6-3 victory in the opening round of his Australian Open campaign.

Booker Scores 48 as Suns Top Spurs

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Devin Booker poured in a season-high 48 points and the Phoenix Suns were at their best in the final nine minutes while pulling away for a 121-107 win over the host San Antonio Spurs.

Phoenix has won four straight games, all on the road, to improve on the league's best record away from home (17-4). The Suns have won seven of their past eight games overall after defeating San Antonio for the third time in three meetings this year.

Booker hit 18 of 33 shots, including 5 of 13 from 3-point range. Bismack Biyombo scored 17 points and grabbed 14 rebounds for the Suns, with Chris Paul adding 15 points and 12 assists. Deandre Ayton was out with a right ankle injury.

Jakob Poeltl paced the Spurs with 23 points and 14 rebounds. Dejounte Murray added 18 points and Doug McDermott scored 15.

Lakers 101, Jazz 95

LeBron James scored 25 points and Stanley Johnson added a season-high 15 as host Los Angeles rallied to knock off Utah and end a three-game losing streak.

Russell Westbrook also had 15 points and Malik Monk added 14 points for the Lakers, who won for the first time since Jan. 7 despite facing a 10-point deficit late in the third quarter. James contributed seven rebounds and seven assists.

Utah's Rudy Gobert scored 19 points and grabbed 16 rebounds in his second game back from a five-game COVID-19 absence, and Mike Conley added 20 points. The Jazz fell for the fifth time in their past six games.

Hornets 97, Knicks 87

Miles Bridges scored a career-high 38 points as Charlotte drubbed host New York.

Bridges shot 14 of 20 from the field, making five 3-pointers. Terry Rozier added 22 points and seven assists as the Hornets won for the fifth time in their last six games. Charlotte won without star guard LaMelo Ball (non-COVID illness).

Julius Randle and RJ Barrett both notched 18 points for the Knicks, who made the final score respectable by finishing the game on a 16-3 run. Randle grabbed 10 boards and Barrett corralled 12.



Meanwhile in women's event, Britain's teenage sensation Emma Raducanu cleared a dangerous first-round hurdle at the Australian Open, seeing off experienced American Sloane Stephens 6-0 2-6 6-1 in a topsy-turvy contest.

Raducanu, who rocketed to fame in September with a fairytale run to the U.S. Open title as a qualifier without dropping a set in what was only her fourth senior tournament, raced through the opening set in 17 minutes, leaving only four points.

But former world number three and 2017 U.S. Open champion Stephens finally found her rhythm and range to take charge of the second set from 2-2, reeling off four games as errors began creeping in to 17th seed Raducanu's game.

It looked ominous at that point for the 19-year-old Raducanu whose build-up to her Australian Open debut had hardly been ideal, having had COVID-19 and suffering a heavy defeat in her opening match in Sydney.

World number one Ash Barty will continue her quest for a maiden Australian Open title and end the country's 44-year wait for a homegrown women's singles champion when she takes on qualifier Lucia Bronzetti in the second round on Wednesday.

Barty, who is looking to emulate Chris O'Neil's 1978 feat, set the tone with a devastating 6-0 6-1 victory in her opener against Lesia Tsurenko and will be the overwhelming favorite against her Italian opponent in their first meeting.

Diego Costa Leaves Brazilians Atletico

RIO DE JANEIRO (Dispatches) - Former Spain international forward Diego Costa has quit Brazilian champions Atletico Mineiro just five months after returning to his country of birth.

Brazil-born Costa had spent almost his entire senior professional career in Europe before moving to Atletico in August 2021.

He was capped twice by Brazil in 2013 friendlies before acquiring authorization to switch nationalities and play for Spain, where he has played the majority of his career.

"Today I'm officially leaving Atletico. I want to thank all the fans for the warm support and affection I received from the first day," Costa said in an Instagram post on Sunday night.

His short stint in the city of Belo Horizonte was a successful one as Atletico sealed a league and cup double in 2021.

Costa's contract had been due to run until the end of this year.

Until joining Mineiro, Costa had never played senior football in his homeland, having moved to Portuguese side Braga as a 17-year-old in 2006.

"Thanks for being part of my childhood dream: to play in Brazilian football and win trophies," added Costa in his post, alongside a photo of him holding the Brazilian Serie A trophy.

Queiroz Brushes Off Criticism



YAOUNDE (Dispatches) - Egypt coach Carlos Queiroz said he will not be swayed by critics of his underperforming team as the seven-time Africa Cup of Nations champions target a spot in the knockout rounds.

The Pharaohs were to take on Sudan in Yaounde knowing a draw will be enough to send them through to the last 16, where they would face the winners of Group E, and a possible showdown with Ivory Coast.

Egypt lost 1-0 to Nigeria in their opening match in Garoua but bounced back to beat Guinea-Bissau by the same scoreline thanks to a goal from star man Mohamed Salah.

Queiroz has come under fire for his tactics, with Egypt yet to hit their stride and demonstrate they are capable of ending a 12-year wait for another continental crown.

"We're living in a different world (with Covid-19), a different society, a different football," Queiroz told a news conference.

"The only thing that didn't change is criticisms for ourselves (coaches)." "The coach can't make a magic situation," he added.

"We're doing our best and people on TV or in the media criticise. This is part of the show, we need to be ready for this event."

Asked to explain Egypt's strategy and positioning of players, Queiroz dryly replied that was not his problem. "I advise you to hire some experts to read the game and then you will see in which formation we play," he said.

"Football is a game of opinions, of mistakes. I have mine, you guys, you have yours. As far as we respect each other, there's nothing wrong in the game, everything is correct."

Conte Shocked by Premier League Call Offs for Injuries



LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham manager Antonio Conte has expressed his dismay at the Premier League's decision to call off Sunday's north London derby with Arsenal.

The Gunners requested the postponement on the basis of not being able to field a team with 13 senior outfield players due to a number of injuries and players away at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Tottenham have now had four league matches postponed in the past two months.

Spurs suffered an outbreak of coronavirus among their squad in December and Conte believes that should remain the only reason for calling matches off.

"I think that if the Premier League decides to postpone games for injury it means that maybe they have to try to make a best schedule and to reduce (the number of) games," said Conte ahead of one his side's rearranged games at Leicester tomorrow.

"This is the first time in my life that there is a league that has postponed the game for injuries. It is very strange and surprising for this."

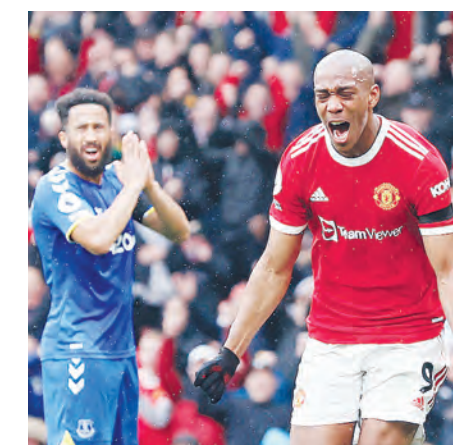
Spurs were furious after the match was called off with little over 24 hours notice for fans. A total of 22 Premier League games have been postponed over the past two months, which threatens to cause a fixture pile up in the final months of the season.

"My feeling is that when there is a situation to play, we have to play. Not to postpone games for injuries, for international duty," added Conte.

"I think we have a big problem to solve and it's Covid, but only about this situation can you decide to postpone, not for other situations."

"Honestly, it's my first time in my life — and I've had a bit of experience in football — to see this type of decision. It was very strange."

Rangnick Says Martial Issue Resolved After Talks



MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United interim manager Ralf Rangnick said he had held clear-the-air talks with Anthony Martial after a public clash over the French international's absence from the weekend's 2-2 draw at Aston Villa.

Rangnick said after Saturday's game that Martial, who has been linked with a move away from Old Trafford this month, "didn't want to be in the squad".

Martial countered on social media, stating he would "never refuse to play a match for Man United".

The 26-year-old has not played a single minute since Rangnick took charge in November. "I'm here now for six weeks. All the things that needed to be said, I said after the press conference," commented Rangnick ahead of United's trip to Brentford tomorrow.

"I had a conversation with him on Sunday, a personal conversation with him about what happened and how I saw the whole situation. The matter is now resolved."

"He didn't train yesterday and the day before yesterday. He will probably train today and after training I will then take the decision if he is nominated or not (for the squad)."

Martial is highly unlikely to feature, with Cristiano Ronaldo and Marcus Rashford back in contention after returning to training. However, it is the return of Paul Pogba that has caught Rangnick's eye.

The French World Cup winner has been sidelined by a thigh injury since early November, but returned to training on Monday.