

Iran's Foreign Trade Volume in the First Five Months of the Administration of President Ebrahim Raisi Increased 34% Comparing To the Last Five Months of His Predecessor's Administration

IRAN NEWS

Health Ministry Announced on Saturday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus in Iran Increased to 132,380 With 24 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

VOL. XXVII, No. 7425 TEHRAN Price 40,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SUNDAY JANUARY 30, 2022 - BAHMAN 10, 1400

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President Calls for COVID Booster Jabs



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DOMESTIC

Iran, Kazakhstan Need to Sign Joint MoUs To Boost Trade Ties

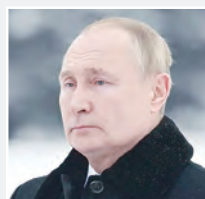


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Putin Says West Ignoring Russia's Security Concerns



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SPORTS

Medvedev to Play Nadal In Australian Open Final



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S. Korea Urged to Return Iran's Frozen Assets

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Central Bank of Iran (CBI) has submitted a letter of intent (LOI) for Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), requesting South Korea to return its frozen assets locked in Korean banks.

According to a foreign ministry official in Seoul on Friday, the government received the LOI last September and has been seeking to resolve the dispute over Iran's frozen assets under US sanctions.

Iran will likely complain to the International Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes if the two countries do not find a negotiated solution within the next six months after accepting the letter.

If the two countries fail to find any solution through negotiations within six months after the LOI was accepted, Iran may file an Investor-State Dispute (ISD) suit.

Informed sources told Yonhap News Agency today that officials in Seoul and Tehran are planning a working meeting next month to discuss Iran's frozen assets in South Korean banks.

Earlier, the deputy foreign ministers of Iran and South Korea met in Austria to discuss Tehran's blocked money in Seoul banks.

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Iran-Russia Trade Turnover Breaks Record in 2021

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Russian Trade Representative in Iran Rustam Zhiganshin said that Russian Federation's trade volume with the Islamic Republic of Iran hit a historical record high in 2021 and reached about \$4 billion.

Speaking in an interview with TASS news agency on Friday, Rustam Zhiganshin Russia's Trade Representative in Iran said that trade value exchanged between Iran and Russia in 2021 hit an unprecedented record high.

"The turnover surged by 89.4% during the first eleven months as compared to the same period of last year and stood at \$3.76 billion. Grounds are in place to expect we will reach the record-high figure of \$4 billion as of 2021 year-end," the Trade Representative said.

"Agricultural produce accounts for about 80% of the trade turnover between the countries," Zhiganshin said.

"Grains and oil-bearing crops moved up in our export in the first instance," he said. "Export of vaccines can be noted among new positions - our relevant supplies to Iran totaled \$45 million," the Trade Representative stated.

"Implementation of certain projects in the energy sphere is underway, which became more active in 2021. This backed the turnover growth over the last year," Zhiganshin noted.

"Vegetables, fruits, dried fruits and nuts are imported from Iran in the first instance," he added.

Tourism, Iranians' Language of Peace With the World



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The 15th International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition (TITE) and the 35th National Handicrafts Exhibition were inaugurated in Tehran yesterday by Minister of Cultural Heritage and Tourism Mr. Ezatollah Zargami in the presence of some activists in the fields of tourism and handicrafts as well as diplomats.

Addressing the opening ceremony Zargami said that during the past 42 years, tourism has been the Islamic Republic of Iran's missing link and these considerable capacities of the country in this field have been neglected and all infrastructures should be provided and hurdles should be removed for boosting tourism industry and return of the pick-up to this field.

He then compared the local tourism exhibitions with Spain's FITUR Exhibition and said Iranian experts and capacities are not less than FITUR of Spain. He hailed the advantages of Iranian tourisms and said Iran's tourism is not confined only to cultural and eco-tourism and the country is not less than the top countries in the tourism industries but it needs the hurdles to be removed and this industry should be supported and it needs hurdles to be removed.

Zargami said that B2B meetings are very effective in the tourism and the country should provide opportunity for direct contact with people from other countries and this will continue by the year end.

He reiterated that the ministry will support activities of the households in the field of handicrafts and the ministry facilitates the ground for them to sell their products. He also urged the media to boost tourism and handicrafts industries and his ministry welcomes fair and constructive criticisms.

Meanwhile deputy minister on tourism Mr. Ali Asghar Shalibafan, briefed the participants in the gathering about the exhibition, and said due to the public vaccination and the drop in the number of deaths because of the COVID virus, the country expects return of the domestic and foreign tourists as it has started from November but admitted that the cost of travel has increased. He then said some workshops and special panel discussions are to be held on the sidelines of the exhibition.

He went on to say that several issues relating to the tourism will be top themes of this year's exhibition, reiterating that all health protocols will be observed in the exhibition because the ministry is committed in protecting the public health.

Meanwhile head of tourism fraction of Majlis Mr. Dashti Ardekani, for his part, said maybe next year the country would witness pick-up in tourism after two years of recession in this industry due to the pandemic.

He reiterated that tourism is the only language of peace of Iranians with the world and it can be the language of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the world.

The three-day exhibition will run till February 1 and it will be open to the public from 9 a.m. to 17 a.m.

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Just for the Sake of Fist of Dollars More

Although Syrian forces have thwarted the terrorists and rebels atrocities and have retaken the occupied forces and there is no need to the uninvited foreign forces, the U.S. forces continue their presence in Syrian territories under the pretext of fighting the terrorist and IS forces but everybody knows it well that it is just for the sake of a fist of dollars more and looting the oil from Syria and dominating in the region.

This presence and meddling into domestic affairs of Syria has caused different problems in this country which is trying to put side years of wars with terrorists and the IS forces.

On Thursday, Iran and Syria both demanded complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria, arguing that the latest spate of deadly violence in the Arab country's northeastern province of Hasakah is the upshot of illegal presence of occupation troops, particularly Americans.

Speaking at a UN Security Council session in New York on Thursday, Zahra Ershadi, deputy permanent representative of Iran to the UN, described last week's attack by the Daesh terrorists on the Kurdish-run Ghwayran jail in Syria's northeastern province of Hasakah as a wake-up call that once again showed that the foreign-sponsored Takfiri terrorists remain a significant threat to regional security and stability.

Ershadi noted that Iran is closely monitoring developments in the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, stressing that Hasakah violence clearly showed that the occupying forces and their allies have not been able to ensure security and order in their occupied territories, and the status quo has helped Daesh to extend its influence there and endanger the lives of local population.

"It is deeply unfortunate that countries that have repeatedly alleged to be pioneers in human rights are refusing to repatriate their nationals, especially women and children, who have been caught up in deplorable conditions of conflict zones," she said.

Ershadi added, "Given the threats posed by foreign terrorists to the security and stability of the region, the Security Council should prioritize their repatriation to respective countries."

The Iranian diplomat highlighted that the fight against terrorism should not be an excuse to violate Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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Iran to Start Limited Gas Flow to Turkey

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Iran has started gas supply testing to Turkey in limited quantities, which is expected to alleviate natural gas cuts to the country's industry starting on Jan. 31, Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAS) said Friday.

Iran had previously confirmed it would not send natural gas to Turkey starting from Jan. 20 for 10 days due to technical problems at the Gurbulak gas entry point on the Turkey-Iran border. In response, and to ensure an equitable supply-demand balance, BOTAS implemented a 40% reduction in gas power to its industrial consumers.

The state operator further confirmed that by Jan. 31 from 8 a.m. local time (5 a.m. GMT) it would only cut gas supplies by 20% to industrial users.

The sudden stoppage in the flows through the eastern Agri province has already forced Turkey to impose restrictions to limit gas use and cut electricity supplies for industrial sites.

A part of the delegation sent to Iran to defuse the situation has returned to Turkey, while the other is said to remain in Tehran to maintain contacts to address the issue.

First evaluations by the team reportedly determined that rather than a technical malfunction, Iran opted to use the gas to meet its growing domestic demand.

Iran is known for suffering from natural gas shortages during winters and summers when local consumption skyrockets.

The delegation reportedly did not encounter any major technical fault and found that rough winter conditions made Iran cut the gas flow to Turkey.

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Iraq Released Funds, Iran to Import Food, Medicine

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iraq has released Iran's funds blocked at Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI) for the import of food and medical items by the Islamic Republic, an Iranian official says.

In a letter addressed to all associations of food, pharmaceutical and health industries, Homa Alvandi, caretaker of the Office of Food and Pharmaceutical Industries at the Iranian Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade referred to the capacity created for the use of Iran's foreign exchange resources at TBI.

She asked the associations to announce their proposed import items and specify their urgency.

The exact amount of the Iraqi debt is not known. In the past, Iranian officials have said between \$6 billion and \$7 billion of Iranian funds are held in the Arab country.

Iraq owes the money to Iran for importing gas and electricity, which has continued despite illegal US sanctions, but Tehran has been unable to obtain its assets frozen in Iraqi banks under US pressure.

Iraq has paid some of its debts over the years, but US sanctions and economic troubles in the Arab country have made the transfer of money much slower than Iran expected.

Iran gets paid partly in cash, but it mostly receives goods from Iraq to cover the debt.

The country imports a wide range of goods from Iran, including food, agricultural products, home appliances, air conditioners and car parts.

Iranian officials have repeatedly stated in previous years that they are unable to receive demands for gas exports from Iraq because of U.S. sanctions, and that \$5 billion of Iranian money has been blocked in the country.

Attack on Baghdad Airport Aimed at Destabilizing Iraq

TEHRAN (MNA) – Condemning the attack on Baghdad airport on Friday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman says that such moves aimed at bringing unrest and instability to Iraq.

In a statement on Saturday, Saeed Khatibzadeh condemned the rocket attack on Baghdad airport on Friday.

Such suspicious actions cause insecurity and unrest in Iraq and pave the way for ill-wishers and secessionists, Iranian senior diplomat said, adding that it will impact the government's services for Iraqi citizens.

President Calls for COVID Booster Jabs

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi stressed the need to follow health protocols more precisely in the current situation, saying, “In order to comply with these guidelines and the need to protect the lives of citizens, the government’s provincial trips will not be made temporarily until further notice”.

Speaking on Saturday at the meeting of the National Task Force Against Coronavirus, Raisi thanked all those who are working in any way in the field of prevention and treatment of COVID-19, and said, “With regard to the re-emergence of coronavirus’ prevalence, it is necessary to be more sensitive to observing health protocols, and especially wearing masks”.

The President added, “It is necessary to explain the necessity of receiving the third dose of COVID-19 vaccine to the people in a wider way until the vaccination statistics of the booster dose reaches the statistics of receiving the first and second doses of the nationwide vaccination”.

He pointed out, “Also, the related agencies such as the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and the Plan and Budget Organization should pursue the provision of necessary resources to equip medical centers and eliminate any shortages and deficiencies in the field of equipment and drugs for corona treatment”.

The President stated, “Necessary coordination should be done with agencies such as the Red Crescent and various sections of the Armed Forces so that, if necessary,



the capacities of these institutions, including their medical and treatment facilities, can be used to deal with special situations”.

Raisi stated, “Provincial headquarters of the National Task Force Against Coronavirus have the authority to decide and implement restrictions in certain cities of each province in special circumstances and according to local necessity within the general plans of the National headquarters”.

He emphasized, “The nationwide closure of schools and universities must not be done in the previous form and based on previous indicators, because it has caused many problems, including a very high academic level”.

The President pointed out, “Any information about the outbreak of corona must be in full and accurate coordination so that while informing the people, it does not cause unnecessary concern in the society”.

In today’s meeting of the National Task Force Against Coronavirus, it was approved that due to the increasing prevalence of Corona, the match between the national football teams of Iran and the UAE be held without the presence of spectators.

Iran Attaches Great Importance to Enhanced Ties With Latin America

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says the Islamic Republic attaches great importance to the expansion of relations with Latin American countries, particularly Nicaragua.

In a phone conversation on Friday, Amir-Abdollahian and Nicaragua’s Foreign Minister Denis Moncada discussed possible ways to deepen bilateral cooperation in different fields.

The Iranian diplomat invited his Nicaraguan counterpart to pay a visit to Tehran and said, “Fortunately, political relations between the two countries are in a good status and I hope that we will be able to further expand economic cooperation in the near future.”

He offered congratulations over the victory of Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista alliance in the November presidential election in Nicaragua and said Iran is ready to further expand mutual relations with Managua.

Amir-Abdollahian said the participation of Iranian Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaei in Ortega’s swearing-in ceremony showed attaches great significance to the deepening of ties with Nicaragua and other Latin American states.

Ortega overwhelmingly won the November 7 presidential election, clinching a fourth consecutive term. He has been sworn in as the Nicaraguan President on January 11, only hours after the US and European Union imposed fresh sanctions on several figures in his government.

The Nicaraguan foreign minister, for his part, said the two countries have reached agreements in various economic, medical, scientific, technological and industrial sectors, adding that Managua is ready to implement these accords with Tehran as soon as possible.

Iranian, Azeri FM’s Discuss Cooperation, Region Over Phone

TEHRAN (MNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Azeri counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov discussed the development of bilateral cooperation between the two countries and developments in the region.

In this conversation, Amir-Abdollahian told his Azeri counterpart that President Raisi has invited the President of Azerbaijan to visit Tehran.

He also referred to the upcoming visit of Iran’s parliamentary friendship group to Baku and expressed hope that the cooperation between the parliaments of the two countries would develop and expand in all areas.

Amir-Abdollahian hailed the cooperation of the Azerbaijani government in the transfer of a large number of Iranians imprisoned in Azerbaijan to Iran.

He also expressed hope that a joint consular commission between the two countries would be held in Baku soon.

Referring to the good relations between Tehran and Baku, the Iranian top diplomat called for facilitating the issuance of visas between the two countries, especially for Iranian students and businessmen.

The Azeri Foreign Minister also expressed satisfaction with the development of cooperation between the two countries in recent months.

The joint economic commission of the two countries will be held, he said, adding, “We are trying to hold this commission on time.”

He also described the recent meeting of the Iranian and Azeri presidents in Ashgabat historic and conveyed the greetings of the President of Azerbaijan to President Raisi.

Tehran Resolved to Reach Good, Lasting, Reliable Agreement in Vienna

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says Iran is firmly determined to reach a “good, lasting and reliable” agreement with the five remaining parties to the 2015 deal, as the eighth round of talks are ongoing in the Austrian capital of Vienna to revive the landmark U.S.-abandoned accord.

Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks at a session of the Iranian Parliament’s Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, during which he briefed the lawmakers on the latest developments in the talks between Iran and the P4+1 group of countries in Vienna aimed at reviving the deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), by bringing the US into compliance.

The top Iranian diplomat said no direct talks have so far been held between the negotiating teams of Iran and the US in Vienna, and the two sides’ technical views are



exchanged within the format of unofficial written notes and through mediation by the European Union coordinator.

During the four-hour meeting, Amir-Abdollahian answered the questions posed by lawmakers on sanctions removal, nuclear commitments, guarantees and verification mechanisms.

The eighth round of the Vienna talks between Iran and the remaining participants to the JCPOA began on December 27 with a focus on the removal of all sanctions that the United States had imposed on Iran after its unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA. The US is not allowed to directly attend the talks due to its pullout in 2018 from the deal with Iran.

In a Friday phone call with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the Iranian foreign minister described as positive the process of the ongoing US sanctions removal talks in Vienna.

Independence, Self-Reliance Salient Achievements of IR

TEHRAN (MNA) – Deputy Coordinator of Army Ideological-Political Organization said that independence, self-credence and self-reliance are of the salient achievements of the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Speaking at the 2nd Conference of Statement of Second Phase of Revolution, held at the venue of Imam Ali Officers’ University of Army Ground Forces on Saturday, Brigadier General Mohammad Akraminia the Deputy Coordinator Army Ideological-Political Organization said that independence, spirit of self-confidence and self-reliance, challenging the West and thwarting US plots in the region are of the salient achievements of the Islamic Revolution.

He went on to say that Islamic Republic of Iran experienced many ups and down after the glorious victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, adding that the country, under the wise leadership of the Islamic Revolution, managed to thwart all plots and conspiracies waged by enemies against the Islamic Revolution successfully.

In recent years, Islamic Revolution has introduced and institutionalized a new model of resistance and defense against threats of enemies, which is very influential and effective with transnational and transnational characteristics and could create deterrence against enemies, he underlined.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he pointed to the salient achievements of the Islamic Revolution and reiterated, “After the elapse of more than four decades, Islamic Revolution has adhered to its principles and has brought about security, peace and stability in the country in every arena.”

Benefited from expert talents and manpower, Islamic Republic of Iran has presently managed to reach the apex of scientific progress and new technologies in the international arenas.

Independence, spirit of self-credence and self-reliance, challenging against the West and neutralization of U.S. malicious plots in the region are of the other achievements of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Brigadier General Akraminia added.

European Firms Keen to Provide Iran With Solar Panel Production Lines

TEHRAN (MNA) - Head of the Energy Committee of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) has said European companies, especially German firms, are currently willing to provide Iran with solar panel production lines, IRNA reported.

According to Arash Najafi, the mentioned companies are also ready to purchase the electricity generated by the solar farms established by the mentioned panels on a guaranteed price basis.

Najafi noted that the government should consider bartering crude oil and oil products with the necessary equipment and machinery for manufacturing solar panels and renewable power plants in order to help develop this sector.

“The government can invest in renewable energies for a limited time by bartering oil and petroleum products in order to help the development of renewable energy and increase the capacity of such power plants in the country, and this is a logical solution,” he said.

He also mentioned the Energy Ministry’s program for obligating high-consumption subscribers to install PV stations to generate their own electricity, saying: “The government’s offer to high-consumption subscribers to use renewable energy is a sensible offer that will help develop this sector.”

The official noted that promoting the use of rooftop PV stations is a good way for developing the renewable industry in the country.

Earlier this month, Energy Ministry and some of the country’s private contractors signed memorandums of understanding (MOU) for cooperation in the construction of renewable power plants to generate 10,000 megawatts (10 gigawatts) of electricity across Iran.

30% Drop in Iranian Purchases of Bullion, Gold Coins

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In its latest annual report, the World Gold Council says the purchase of bullion and gold coins by Iranian citizens has declined for the fourth consecutive question, dropping about 30 percent last year compared to 2020.

Statistics from the World Gold Council show that Iranians have greatly increased the purchase of gold bullion and coins after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and accelerated the drop in the value of the rial to nearly 62 tons in 2018, but since then the purchase of bullion and gold coins has gradually declined, reaching 25.5 tons last year.

Reports indicate that people have sought refuge in the gold coin and bullion market in recent years to preserve their financial assets. The tax administration began collecting taxes from coin holders in 2018, and each year these taxes increased, which has been effective in reducing purchases.

Production by Major Automakers Exceeds 760,000

TEHRAN (MNA) - Three major Iranian carmakers, namely Iran Khodro Company (IKCO), SAIPA Group, and Pars Khodro, manufactured 760,527 vehicles during the first 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2021-January 20, 2022), the data released by Codal website showed.

According to the data, the production by the mentioned companies has risen just 4.1 percent compared to the previous year’s same 10 months in which the output stood at 730,477, IRNA reported.

During the said 10 months, IKCO manufactured 381,321 vehicles, which was 1.74 percent less than the output in the same period of the previous year.

During this period, this industrial group was able to produce 254,875 vehicles in the Peugeot group, 41,940 vehicles in the Samand group, 42,499 Dena vehicles, 29,366 Rana vehicles, 5,466 Haima vehicles, and 7,059 Tara vehicles.

SAIPA manufactured 279,055 vehicles in the mentioned period.

Production by this automaker rose 6.06 percent in comparison to the previous year’s same time span.

Pars Khodro also manufactured 100,151 vehicles in the period under review, 24.1 percent more than the output in the first 10 months of the past year.

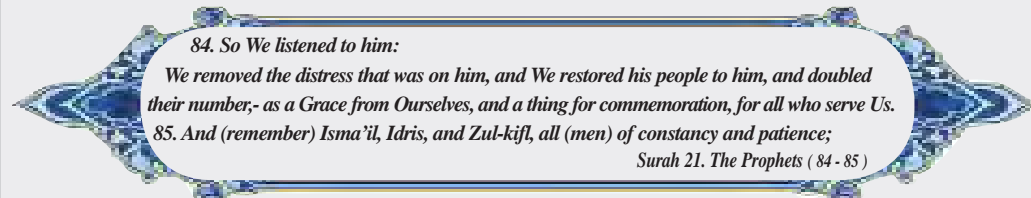
Earlier this month, Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi-Amin announced the implementation of a two-year plan for the auto industry based on which this industry will undergo serious changes and improve significantly.

Stating that nine transformation projects have been prepared for the automobile industry, Fatemi-Amin said: “The general plan is that in [the Iranian calendar year] 1401 (begins on March 21) the structure of the automobile industry and the relations between parts manufacturers and automakers will be reformed and the overall promised production target will be achieved in [the Iranian calendar year] 1404 (begins in March 2025).”



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:17
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:48
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:39
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:05



Iran, Kazakhstan Need to Sign Joint MoUs To Boost Trade Ties

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Head of Iran-Kazakhstan Joint Chamber of Commerce says Iran and Kazakhstan need to sign MoUs for boosting their trade ties as the current trade level is not satisfactory despite their great potentials.

Speaking to ILNA, Amir Abedi talked about the latest developments on the trade between Iran and Kazakhstan, saying that recent studies and statistics of the Iran Customs Administrations show that the total exports of Iran to Kazakhstan in nine months this year have been 360.3k tons in terms of weight and \$132.6m in value.

He said that Kazakhstan is one of the founders of the Eurasian Economic Union and the World Bank studies show that Kazakhstan's economy in recent years has improved and the per capita revenue of Kazakhs has soared considerably. He added that Russia, China and some European countries are among the main trade partners of Kazakhstan. He reiterated that Kazakhstan is the biggest country in the Central Asia which is Iran's neighbor via the Caspian Sea.

Abedi added that access to the Caspian Sea can be an especial opportunity for Iran's trade for exporting its products to Kazakhstan while exports to Kazakhstan can be done by land, too. He noted that as Iran and Kazakhstan have had good relations for long years, improvement of trade ties with Kazakhstan can be important for Iranian traders.

He stated Iran's exports to Kazakhstan in the first three quarters of the current year have been 360.3k tons in weight and \$132.6m in value while the total imports from Kazakhstan have been around \$37.9m. He noted that so the total trade of Iran and Kazakhstan stands at \$170.5m.

Abedi went on to say that Iran's exports to Iran last year were \$167.9 while the



imports from Kazakhstan were valued at \$37.4m.

He said that agro and food products, different types of mining and construction stones and home appliances have been major exporting items of Iran to Kazakhstan.

Abedi reiterated that Russia is the main exporter to Kazakhstan which shows the economic dependence of this country to Russia. He said in 2020, Russia accounted for 35% of Kazakhstan's required imports which is a considerable figure. He noted that China with 17% is the second exporting country to Kazakhstan and South Korea with 13% is the third country while the U.S. only accounts for 3% of Kazakhstan's required imports.

He went on to say that if technical and engineering services to Kazakhstan are added, the bilateral trade between Tehran and Nur-Sultan can hit \$450m which is higher than what has been registered in the customs administration.

Abedi said that on exports, Kazakhstan is west-bound and Western countries have been Kazakhstan's destinations for exports but Russia and China still have a considerable share in Kazakhstan's exports.

He said due to high capacities and potentials, Iran and Kazakhstan can expand their economic cooperation and it needs good planning and studies, reiterating that signing joint MoUs is another effective way for improving trade between Ira and Kazakhstan.

Weekly Trade on IME Exceeds 1,572,000 Tons

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 1,571,000 tons of commodities with a total trading value of almost \$480m on its physical market.



According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange traded on its metals and minerals trading floor 1,311,000 tons of commodities valued at more than \$282m.

On this floor, the IME's customers purchased 746,056 tons of cement, 234,252 tons of steel, 175,000 tons of iron ore, 112,000 tons of sponge iron, 35,420 tons of zinc ingots, 5,480 tons of copper, 4,900 tons of aluminum, 350 tons of lead ingots, 150 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 22 kg of gold bars.

Furthermore, the IME saw on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 250,215 tons of commodities worth more than 186 million USD.

Commodities sold on this floor included 84,382 tons of polymeric products, 53,754 tons of bitumen, 48,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 37,000 tons of lube cut, 22,297 tons of chemicals, 350 tons of sulfur, 2,352 tons of base oil, 500 tons of slops wax and 150 tons of argon.

Last but not least was the IME's side market with 10,873 tons of commodities traded on it.

Dushanbe Welcomes Promotion of Cultural Ties With Tehran



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Deputy Head of Mission of Tajikistan in Iran Marufjon Abdurahmonov said on Friday that his country welcomes promotion of cultural ties with Tehran.

Speaking in a meeting held on the sidelines of the Second Tehran Virtual Book Fair to review the publications in Iran and Tajikistan, the Tajik official noted that enjoying cultural similarities, Tehran and Dushanbe will extend their cooperation on various fields including publishing books.

The meeting was also attended by Hazhir Tehrani, a member of the Iran-Tajikistan Friendship Association, Majid Asadi, an Iranian writer as well as Ali-Ashraf Mojtahed-Shabestari, the head of the Iran-Tajikistan Friendship Association who attended the meeting via videoconference.

Referring to the cultural similarities between the two countries, he said that Tajikistan celebrates Avicenna Day on August 18, Rudaki Day on September 22 and Rumi Day on September 30 every year.

"Reading the poems of Ferdowsi (Shahnameh), Rumi, Saadi, Hafez and Bedil Dehlavi has become a tradition in Tajikistan with the aim of encouraging the thoughts of these great poets," the Tajik official noted.

The first Tajik newspaper, Bukhara-ye Sharif, was published on March 11, 1912, and on October 7, 1925, Erfan, the Tajik publication was published, headed by the poet Abolqassem Lahouti.

He added that the National Library of Tajikistan plays an important role in saving historical books and publications.

Will The Crypto Dream Succeed?

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - For the purpose of understanding Crypto Currencies and how they work, first, we should understand the revolutionary technology behind it all and how it has made Crypto is available and useable for almost anybody with an electronic device and a steady internet connection.

'THE BLOCK CHAIN' or the block chain technology behind this new and upcoming industry is, as it is called, a technology in which it enables us to store all sorts of data using very complex mathematical algorithms.

The reason it is called block chain is because the information that are being stored in real time are sectioned and put into different blocks, which the so called 'MINERS' have to 'MINE' the complex algorithm with their mining devices and give that transaction block a unique 'HASH CODE' which is what differentiates and separates each 'BLOCK' from one another, so that the transactions and the information that is stored (in this case a simple payment), cannot be hacked or modified in any way, shape or form. That is the whole premise behind the safety of Crypto Currencies as a whole. There are also other explanations about what 'HASH' is and terms in the Crypto world such as 'HASH RATE' that I'm not going to get into.

So, now that we understand what the technology



behind the entire industry is and how, with its safety and availability, it is going to be a revolutionary industry just like the beginning of the internet as we know it today, we can go into what Crypto Currencies actually are and what uses they have in the real day, today lives of the average person. Crypto Currencies can be categorized into many different industries such as Gaming, Payments, Smart Contracts, NFTs (Non-fungible token), De-fi (Decentralized Finance), metaverse and many more...

Each one of these industries have their own unique 'Ecosystem' in which they operate in, but one of the most revolutionary and relevant industry to the Banking System is DE-FI or Decentralized Finance. De-Fi is only possible with the help of 'Smart Contracts' in which there is no 'middle man' in any transaction or any financial decision makes which normally had to be checked and confirmed with a bank. Loans, payments, you name it, all of them can be done without any regulation or mind boggling paper work which commonly exist in the 'Centralized Banking System' that currently exists in the world. At the end of the day, there is no doubt that this upcoming and newly developed industry is going to be revolutionary and soon deeply integrated in our daily lives, we just need to accept it and learn as much as we can about it because it is the future.

MAPNA Group Among Iran's Top Ten Companies

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – MAPNA Group was named as the eighth top company of the country during the 24th Iranian Top 100 Companies (IMI-100) which was held by Iran's Industrial Management Institute.

According to the reports, during the IMI-100 conference which was held last week, 13 companies of MAPNA Groups were ranked among the top 500 companies of the country and MAPNA Group ranked 8th.

In the ranking of the top 100 companies in terms of sales, MAPNA Group was ranked 8th with the sales worth of 611894b rials which happened last year. Meanwhile the group was ranked seventh in terms of highest value added, eighth in terms of sales and tenth in terms of the highest value added. By the way MAPNA Group was ranked fifth in terms of earning the highest profit.

Some 13 subsets of the group were ranked among the top 500 companies of the country.



Gas Condensate Line of Persian Gulf Star Refinery Repaired



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Persian Gulf Star Oil Company (PGSOC) says the transfer line of gas condensates of the super refinery of Persian Gulf Star which had been damaged during recent flood were repaired by the capable and young experts of the company and it started its function.

According to the public relations of the company, Mohammad Ali Dadvar announced the resumption of the activities of the gas condensates transfer line of the super refinery of Persian Gulf Star which had suffered heavy damages during recent floods near the village of Gachin. He added that all safety issues regarding pipe laying in the bed of the rivers had been observed but what happened at Gachin village was because of the deviation of the route of the flood towards the routes of the transfer line of feeding of the refinery and due to the pressure of the water, the transfer pipeline suffered damages in two points.

He added that immediately after the incident, team of experts of the company was dispatched to the venue and the operation for controlling the damage began. He hailed the technical staff of the company for their round-the-clock efforts in recent years to repair the damages for the immediate return of the transfer line to the network and now the transfer pipe line has started its function.

The pipe line of Persian Gulf Star Refinery is 388 kilometers and after crossing an impassable route from Bushehr, Fars and Hormozgan provinces to get the refinery and the company is in charge of maintenance and repair of this transfer pipeline.

KSC Investing 450b Tomans on Expanding Pellet Production Capacity

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Khorasan Steel Complex Company (KSC) with investing 450b tomans at the industrial site of the company in Neishabour will increase its pellet production capacity considerably.

The CEO of the company Mr. Kasra Ghafoori said that the company under his management will increase at least by 10 percent the speed of transfer and exploitation of the input raw material to the pellet producing plant through implementing the project of mechanizing the storage and retrieval of concentrate.

He added that this project which has been designed in three stages and entered into the implementation has created considerable change in equipment and the process of storage, retrieval and transfer of raw materials inside the site and it is aimed at reforming the process, improving the production output and reduction in consumption and waste.

Ghafoori noted that implementing the project of installing the mechanized equipment so-called "Stacker and Reclaimer" will lead to the decrease in the number of the stoppages, improvement of the quality of the transfer process of raw material, acceleration of transfer of materials, boosting the

energy efficiency and 10 percent improvement of production productivity in this unit.

He went on to say that implementation of this project as a part of the complementary package of the developmental projects will cost the company 450b tomans and due to observing timely financial obligations by the company, all required parts and equipment have been manufactured by the Chinese company DHHI and they are currently being loaded at Dalian Port of China.

Ghafoori reiterated that this complementary and developmental project is very crucial for increasing the capacity for increasing production of pellet at Khorasan Steel Complex Company and it will come on stream early next year.



Rwanda to Reopen Uganda Border

KIGALI (Dispatches) Rwanda said it would reopen its land border with Uganda next week after a three-year closure, a major breakthrough in repairing relations between the neighbors.

The move follows a visit to Kigali by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's powerful son Muhoozi Kainerugaba last weekend, when he and Rwandan President Paul Kagame pledged to restore relations.

The border was abruptly closed in February 2019 as political tensions between Kigali and Kampala spiralled, with the two East African nations trading accusations of espionage, abductions and meddling.



Nearly 40% of Tigrayans Face Extreme Lack of Food

ADDIS ABABA (Dispatches) - Nearly 40 percent of people in Ethiopia's Tigray are suffering "an extreme lack of food" in the face of an extended de-facto blockade of the war-hit region, a UN agency said Friday.

The dire assessment published by the World Food Programme (WFP) comes as humanitarian groups are forced to increasingly curtail activities because of fuel and supply shortages, with aid having to be delivered by foot.

Fresh fighting in northern Ethiopia, which has been gripped by deadly conflict for almost 15 months, is also limiting avenues for getting in aid.



Putin Says West Ignoring Russia's Security Concerns



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - President Vladimir Putin told French counterpart Emmanuel Macron that the West was ignoring Moscow's security concerns over Ukraine but added that Russia would hold off from taking action immediately.

Putin and Macron spoke by phone amid deep fears that a Russian troop build-up on the Ukrainian border is a precursor to a Russian invasion of its pro-Western neighbour.

Russia denies any plans to invade but has demanded wide-ranging security guarantees from the West, including that Ukraine never be allowed to join NATO.

The Kremlin said in a statement that Putin and Macron held a "long telephone conversation" and that Putin expressed his dissatisfaction with a US response to Moscow's demands that was delivered earlier this week.

"The U.S. and NATO responses did not take into account Russia's fundamental concerns including preventing NATO's expansion and refusing to deploy strike weapons systems near Russia's borders," Putin told Macron, according to a readout of the call from the Kremlin. "The key question was also ignored," Putin said, pointing to the "principle of the indivisibility of security" in international affairs, that no country should strengthen its security at the expense of others.

He said Russia would "carefully study" the responses "after which it will decide on further actions".

Russia has deployed some 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders in recent weeks, prompting warnings from the West of severe consequences should it invade its pro-Western neighbour.

Macron had announced earlier this week he would hold the telephone talks with Putin in the spirit of a "demanding dialogue" with Russia for clarification over Moscow's intentions on Ukraine.

"Now the ball is in Putin's court," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told RTL radio Friday.

"It's up to Vladimir Putin to say if he wants confrontation or consultation. We are ready for consultation. But it still takes two to do it," he said.

The Elysee on Wednesday hailed as a "positive signal" talks in Paris between Russia and Ukraine -- as well as France and Germany -- which produced the first joint written statement on the conflict in eastern Ukraine signed up to by Moscow and Kyiv since 2019.

They agreed to preserve a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine -- where pro-Moscow separatists declared breakaway regions -- and to hold new talks in Berlin in February.

Putin on Friday told Macron it was important for Ukrainian authorities to establish "direct dialogue" with separatist leaders.

"Taking into account the results of the meeting" in Paris, the Kremlin said, "the mood for further work of Russia and France in this format was confirmed."

Castro Becomes First Woman President of Honduras

TEGUCIGALPA (Dispatches) - Leftist Xiomara Castro was sworn in as the first woman president of Honduras, vowing to reform the crime- and poverty-stricken nation into a "socialist and democratic state."

Castro, 62, took the oath at a massive ceremony attended by international dignitaries after an embarrassing week of fighting within her party that challenged her authority.

In her first official address at the Tegucigalpa National Stadium, Castro denounced "the social and economic tragedy confronting Honduras" and promised to make work of improving education, healthcare, security and employment.

She said she was inheriting a "bankrupt" country which she intended to reshape into a "socialist and democratic state." Honduras's public debt is about US\$17 billion.

The oath was sworn before Judge Karla Romero, flanked by Castro's choice of Congress president, Luis Redondo, who draped the presidential sash over his new boss before a crowd of about 29,000.

The guests included US Vice President Kamala Harris, King Felipe VI of Spain and Taiwan Vice President William Lai.

Castro's election last November brought an end to 12 years of right-wing National Party (PN) rule that followed the ousting of her husband Manuel Zelaya as president in a 2009 coup.

"Twelve years of struggle, 12 years of resistance. Today the people's government begins," Castro said on Twitter Thursday.

But the lead-up to the swearing-in was marred by a disruptive rivalry within her Libre party, which is in a majority alliance in Congress.

Libre factions split on who should be the legislature's new president, coming to blows in the Congress chamber and then holding rival inaugural sittings.

Castro accused supporters of Redondo's rival for the Congress presidency, Jorge Calix, of being in cahoots with the PN and other forces she said wanted to undermine her anti-corruption drive.



Syria Prison Attack Shows Need to Deal With ISIL Detainees

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Men, women and children with alleged ISIL links held in Syrian prisons 'have never been charged with a crime, yet remain in prolonged detention, uncertain of their fate', UN official says.

The attack by ISIL (ISIS) on a Syrian prison holding 3,000 of its fighters and about 700 children is a predictable tragedy spotlighting the need for urgent international action, a United Nations official said.

The deadly siege underscores that efforts must be made to deal with those allegedly linked to the armed group in prisons and camps in the country's northeast, UN Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov told the Security Council.

ISIL "has been highlighting and calling for jail breaks" and "there have been previous instances in Syria and elsewhere in the world", Voronkov, the UN's counterterrorism chief, said.

Most of the men, women and children with alleged links to ISIL who are held in Syrian prisons and camps "have never been charged with a crime, yet remain in prolonged detention, uncertain of their fate", he added.

Using the Arabic acronym for ISIL, Voronkov said: "It is a reminder also of why Daesh continues to embed itself in Syria."

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned the ISIL threat is growing, including in Syria where Voronkov said it is organized in small cells "hiding in desert and rural areas, while they move across the border between Iraq and Syria to avoid capture".

The latest attack at the al-Sina'a prison, located in the northeastern city of Hassakeh, was the biggest since the fall of the group's "caliphate" that once spanned significant parts of Syria and neighbouring Iraq in 2019.

Voronkov said the fighting also affected the civilian population and resulted in the escape of an unknown number of fighters.

U.S.-backed Kurdish forces said on Wednesday they had taken control of the last section of the prison controlled by ISIL and freed a number of child detainees they said had been used as human shields, but Voronkov said the fighting was "ongoing".

Kazakh President Voted In as Ruling Party Leader

NUR-SULTAN (Dispatches) - Kazakhstan's president was on Friday voted chairman of the ruling party, replacing former head of state Nursultan Nazarbayev in the role, his office said, as he moves to cement control following a bloody national crisis.

"By the decision of the extraordinary XXI Party Congress, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart (Tokayev), was unanimously elected Chairman of the Nur Otan Party," his office said on Twitter.

Nazarbayev, 81, ruled ex-Soviet Kazakhstan for close to three decades before hand-picking Tokayev, 68, a career diplomat and then-loyalist, to replace him as president in 2019.

Nazarbayev last year announced his decision to hand the party leadership over to Tokayev—a move that seemed to confirm Tokayev would stand for another presidential term even if many thought his predecessor still pulled Kazakhstan's political strings.

But in the aftermath of bloody unrest that left 225 people dead, Tokayev on January 11 questioned his former mentor's legacy, in particular widening inequality between the elite and the poor in Central Asia's richest country.

Tokayev said Nazarbayev's rule had created "a layer of wealthy people, even by international standards" in the speech that all but confirmed rumors of a power struggle between the pair.

In the days that followed, Nazarbayev's once-powerful relatives and in-laws were effectively jettisoned from top corporate and political posts.

Tokayev took over Nazarbayev's most powerful position—chairmanship of the national security council—on January 5.

Appearing for the first time since the crisis began on January 18, Nazarbayev denied any conflict with his successor, referring to himself as "a pensioner".



Le Pen's Campaign Hit By Niece Calling Zemmour A Better Candidate



PARIS (Dispatches) - Marine Le Pen's niece Marion Marechal, a popular figure among far-right French voters, on Friday said Eric Zemmour was a better presidential candidate, piling woes onto a campaign already troubled by the defection of two EU lawmakers.

Le Pen ranks second or third in opinion polls that show a tussle among right and far-right candidates to win a second-round runoff spot against President Emmanuel Macron in the April elections. Macron himself is leading polls and seen as likely to secure the other spot.

Marechal, a 32-year old former lawmaker, told Le Parisien and Le Figaro in separate interviews that she considers her aunt's far-right rival Zemmour had adopted a better strategy, even though he is currently running fourth in opinion polls.

"Unlike Marine Le Pen, Zemmour still has ample room to rise further (in polls)," Marechal told Le Figaro newspaper.

She said that because he was new to politics and was seeking to bridge gaps between parties, Zemmour was better placed to get wide-ranging support than Le Pen's party, which other parties, including on the mainstream right, often shun.

Her comments went to the heart of a debate that could re-define France's right and far-right for years to come.

Marechal, once a rising star in the Le Pen family's National Rally party, quit politics five years ago.

She said on Friday she wanted to return but hadn't quite decided yet whether to rally with Zemmour's campaign for fear it would revive feuds that had torn the Le Pen family and the party apart for years.

But the divisions she said she wanted to avoid creating were immediately clear with her aunt's reaction.

"It's brutal, it's violent, it's tough for me," a visibly moved Le Pen told CNews, adding it was "painful" on a person level and "incomprehensible" politically.

The 53-year-old veteran politician noted that polls showed her and not Zemmour as likely to reach the second round in April, in a repeat of the 2017 match that Macron won.

Zaferanieh Apt (\$2400)
250sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, S, J
L.balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

Parsian

Niavaran (\$2000)
3bdrs, S/p, S, J, & F.F

Elahieh Apt (\$1800)
180sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, F.F

Darrous Villa (\$5000)
1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
S, J, balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

Apt Farmanieh
220sq.m, 3bdrs
S/pool, Sauna, J
(\$2200) F.F

bldg Velenjak
5storey, 20bdrs
S/p, S, J, pkg lots
(\$10000) New

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3bdrs, balcony, & F.F

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German Economic Growth Expected to Slow Down in 2023

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German economic growth will slow down to 2.3% in 2023, Economy Minister Robert Habeck said.

The government cut its economic growth forecast for 2022 this month to 3.6% from 4.1% seen in October.

Habeck told the Bundestag lower house of parliament that he expected the economy to reach pre-pandemic levels in the second quarter of 2022.



High Inflation to Stick This Year, Denting Global Growth

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - Persistently high inflation will haunt the world economy this year, according to a Reuters poll of economists who trimmed their global growth outlook on worries of slowing demand and the risk interest rates would rise faster than assumed so far.

This represents a sea change from just three months ago, when most economists were siding with central bankers in their then-prevalent view that a surge in inflation, driven in part by pandemic-related supply bottlenecks, would be transitory.

In the latest quarterly Reuters surveys of over 500 economists taken throughout January, economists raised their 2022 inflation forecasts for most of the 46 economies covered.

While price pressures are still expected to ease in 2023, the inflation outlook is much stickier than three months ago.

At the same time, economists downgraded their global growth forecasts. After expanding 5.8% last year, the world economy is expected to slow to 4.3% growth in 2022, down from 4.5% predicted in October, in part because of higher interest rates and costs of living. Growth is seen slowing further to 3.6% and 3.2% in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

Nearly 40% of those who answered an additional question singled out inflation as the top risk to the global economy this year, with nearly 35% picking coronavirus variants, and 22% worried about central banks moving too quickly.

"The odds of an accident have risen and the likelihood of a soft landing in 2022 requires some favourable assumptions and a modicum of good luck," Deutsche Bank group chief economist David Folkerts-Landau said, noting high inflation, the persistence of supply chain strains and the pandemic, as well as international political tensions.

This month's Reuters polls found 18 of 24 major central banks were expected to lift rates at least once this year, compared to 11 in the October poll.

The U.S. Federal Reserve on Wednesday signaled it would raise the benchmark federal funds rate from a record low of 0-0.25% in March after shuttering its bond purchase program.

The Bank of England was the first major central bank to raise rates since the pandemic started and is expected to act again, the Bank of Canada is also seen hiking soon.

In contrast, most economists expect the European Central Bank and the Bank of Japan to stay put at least until the end of next year.

While the tightening cycle is in early days in developed markets, many emerging market central banks, with a few notable exceptions like Brazil and China, are waiting for the Fed's cue while grappling with the pandemic and their own economic challenges.

"Over the past three decades, developed market central banks led by the Fed have been inclined to see supply shocks boosting inflation as a drag on growth that should be cushioned," noted Joseph Lupton, global economist at J.P. Morgan.

However, with major central banks showing concern about bringing inflation expectations close to their targets, emerging economies face a similar challenge.

China's 2022 Crude Imports Seen Rebounding

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - China's crude oil imports could rebound by 6-7% this year, reversing 2021's rare decline as buyers step up purchases for new refining units and to replenish low inventories, analysts and oil company officials said.

Robust demand from China, which accounts for a tenth of the global crude trade, would help underpin global oil prices, keeping supplies tight amid forecasts for a jump in crude prices to \$100 a barrel or more. Demand recovery, however, is not expected until the second half of the year as China continues to combat COVID-19 outbreaks and limit production by smaller refiners.

For 2022, crude oil imports into China look set to grow by 600,000-700,000 barrels per day (bpd), offsetting last year's 590,000 bpd fall to match or beat 2020's record volume of 10.85 million bpd, analysts at FGE, Rystad Energy and Energy Aspects told Reuters.

Brent and West Texas Intermediate futures, are already at 7-year highs near \$90 a barrel as investors look beyond the demand hit from the Omicron variant.

"We expect China's refinery runs to grow by 500,000 bpd, mainly driven by new refinery capacity coming online in 2022 and the recovery in transport and aviation fuels picking up the pace in the second half of the year," said Julie Torgersrud of Rystad Energy.

Imports are likely to make a slow start initially as Beijing's zero-tolerance virus control measures keep a lid on fuel demand, while reduced import quotas and narrowing refining margins will limit production by independent refiners.

Refinitiv data showed January arrivals totaled 41.13 million tons (9.69 million bpd), below 44.6 million tons in January 2021 and 46.1 million tons two years ago.

A possible release of state petroleum reserves (SPR) in coming weeks will also dampen national oil companies' purchases, analysts said.

Demand is set to recover later in the year, driven by new refining capacity at integrated petrochemical producers, in particular Zhejiang Petrochemical Corp and Jiangsu Shenghong Petrochemical.

"We expect crude imports to grow by 600,000 bpd year-on-year, driven by new capacities and a return of stockpiling," said Mia Geng, analyst with FGE.

East China-based Zhejiang Petrochemical, the country's single-largest refiner, aims to operate its newly built 800,000-bpd crude units at full rates this year, said two company executives. That will represent an increase of 280,000 bpd versus 2021.

Newly commissioned Shenghong Petrochemical is expected to reach commercial operation in May at its 320,000-bpd plant in Lianyungang, two other sources said.

Apple Sales and Profit Top Estimates

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Apple Inc is overcoming the costly global shortage in computer chips, posting record sales over the holiday quarter, beating profit estimates and forecasting that its shortfall is narrowing.

The iPhone maker, which is world's largest company by market capitalization, has handled supply-chain challenges such as factory shutdowns and shipping delays brought on by the pandemic better than any of its top peers, analysts said. Apple shares rose about 5% in after-hours trading, erasing half their losses on the year. The gains came after the company teased its ambitions for augmented reality in the metaverse.

More people wanted iPhones, iPads and other gadgets over the holiday quarter than Apple had to sell, costing the company over \$6 billion in sales, or in line with what it feared. Yet, Apple, which is many part suppliers' biggest client, used its buying power to squeeze those vendors to ship enough gadgets to power record sales in its iPhones, Mac and wearables and accessories segments. Apple executives said chip shortages are mostly affecting older models of its products and particularly slowed iPad sales.

"They've navigated the supply chain better than everybody, and it's showing in the results," said Ryan Reith, who studies the smartphone market for industry tracker IDC. The four best-selling phones in urban China were all iPhone models, Apple said, as competitors struggled to manufacture rival offerings. It was the top-selling vendor in China for the first time in six years, research firm Counterpoint Research reported on Wednesday.

Nicole Peng, who tracks China's smartphone sector at research firm Canalys, said comparatively low prices and the retreat of chief rival Huawei from the market led to a strong quarter.

Global Coal Prices Surge as Ukraine Tensions Worsen Supply Woes

CHENNAI (Dispatches) - Global coal prices have shot back towards record highs as the Ukraine crisis raises expectations that European buyers will start loading up on the fossil fuel for fear that a standoff between Russia and western nations will cut off gas supplies.

The benchmark Newcastle coal index has soared by over a third this month to \$262 a ton, fueled initially by a month-long export ban by top supplier Indonesia and now by worries that any military engagement in

Ukraine will sever gas supplies from Russia.

Europe relies on Russia for around 35% of its natural gas, and has been grappling with a gas shortage since last summer that sent local prices to record highs late last year.

Gas prices started to ease in recent weeks as imports surged, but have rallied again as the escalating tensions with Russia raise concerns about a potential supply disruption.

To protect themselves from any fuel shortages, European utilities have stepped up imports of coal, further tightening a market that has yet to recover from Indonesia's shock ban that cut coal flows during the peak winter demand season.

"Spot cargoes are becoming scarcer in the near term, with movement towards Europe where prices are jumping due to gas prices and the simultaneous effect of the recent Indonesian ban," said Puneet Gupta, founder of Indian coal marketplace Coalshashtra.

While Europe's coal use has declined sharply in recent years - accounting for just 6.2% of global coal use in 2020, according to BP data - European buyers have aggressively stepped up purchases since mid 2021.

Under pressure to meet climate targets, several EU countries have shut down old coal-fired power plants. Some countries retain coal plants for use for back-up supply but many have already been fired back up due to high gas prices.

According to commodity flows tracking firm Kpler, Europe is on course to import 5.58 million tonnes of thermal coal in January, the highest monthly total since November 2019, and over 1 million tonnes more than the monthly average in 2021.

The buying has helped coal prices snap back sharply after drifting off record highs struck last October on shortages in China and India amid extreme weather and post-pandemic industrial demand.

The rise in European consumption could squeeze out other buyers, especially in number two coal consumer India.

French 2021 Economic Growth Strongest in 52 Years at 7%

PARIS (Dispatches) - France posted its strongest growth in over five decades last year, hitting 7% as the euro zone's second-biggest economy bounced back from the COVID-19 crisis faster than expected, data showed.

Despite a resurgence of COVID-19 underway, the strongest boom in a generation bolsters President Emmanuel Macron's economic credentials less than three months from an April election in which he is widely expected to run for a second term.

The economy grew 0.7% in the final three months of the year after a particular strong third quarter when it grew 3.1%, the INSEE statistics agency said in a preliminary report.

Economists polled by Reuters had on average forecast fourth quarter growth of 0.5%.

The better-than-expected end to the year meant the economy grew 7% in 2021 as a whole, the strongest since 1969, after an 8% contraction in 2020 when strict coronavirus lockdowns were in force.

"The French economy has rebounded spectacularly and that's erased the economic crisis," Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said on France 2 television.

"There are still some sectors that are still having trouble, like tourism and hotels, but most are recovering very strongly and that's creating jobs."

Businesses and consumers are once again having to contend with tighter health restrictions as France faces its fifth wave of COVID-19, which has pushed new infection levels to record levels.

While the economy is starting 2022 on a softer footing, the central bank has said the economic impact of the current wave should be minimal as the economy has largely adapted to living with a pandemic.

"All told, the economic stage is set for April's presidential election. Emmanuel Macron will clearly be pleased with the 2021 GDP numbers," Capital Economics senior Europe economist Jessica Hinds said.

"But whether Macron can convince the French electorate to give him another five years is still not a done deal," she added.

Macron currently has a comfortable lead over the closest contenders from the conservatives and far right who are trying to push identity politics and security to the fore in the election where Macron is much less at ease.

INSEE said that the economy had recovered to pre-crisis levels of activity in the third quarter as a vaccination campaign gained momentum and the government eased COVID-19 restrictions.

In the fourth quarter, growth was driven by consumer spending rising 0.4% even though it slowed from an exceptionally strong 5.6% jump the previous quarter as the economy re-opened after a lockdown.

Indonesia's 2022 Palm Oil Exports Seen Down 3% y/y



JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia's palm oil exports this year are expected to fall 3% on a yearly basis to 33.21 million tons as local demand for the edible oil rises, industry group GAPKI said on Friday, adding that output is seen up by 4.5%.

It was not clear if the forecast took into account the government's announcement a day earlier of a new measure to limit palm oil exports to try to curtail surging local cooking oil prices.

Shipments from Indonesia, the world's biggest producer and exporter of palm oil, in 2021 reached 34.23 million tons, while output stood at 46.89 million tons.

Under the new export rules, palm oil producers must set aside 20% of their planned exports for the domestic market. The rules apply for CPO, olein and used cooking oil.

The market had anticipated 25% production to be set aside for the domestic market, AmInvestment analyst Gan Huey Ling said in a client note on Friday.

"It appears that the allocation for the domestic market would be smaller than expected. Hence, there is more room for exports," the note said.

Anilkumar Bagani, research head of Mumbai-based vegetable oils broker Sunvin Group, said there was about 5.7 million kiloliters of cooking oil available locally.

"This new regulation is to ensure that quantity remains available domestically since the CPO price keeps increasing," Bagani said.

Indonesia's move, combined with concern over Malaysia's production woes, have been the main drivers of the palm oil rally.

Malaysia's benchmark palm oil contract hit a new record high of 5,525 ringgit per ton on Friday.

Bagani expects the market focus to switch back to Malaysia's production concern.



Iranian Film to Be Screened At French Festival

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian short film 'Daily Massacre in Tehran' directed by Hessam Hamidi will be screened at Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in France.

Written and produced by Hossein Tehrani, 'Daily Massacre in Tehran' will be screened at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in France.

Hamidreza Karami, Mehran Atashzai, Roozbeh Sinaki, Mehrmoosh Salimi are among the film's cast members.



Global Gas Rally to Kickstart Long-Stalled U.S. LNG Projects

HOUSTON (Dispatches) - High global natural gas prices are breaking a two-year logjam of new U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects with at least three of the multibillion-dollar proposals likely achieving enough supply contracts to start construction this year, said developers and industry experts.

A Louisiana project that received a green light in 2019 was the last wholly new U.S. plant to receive a go-ahead, benefiting from then-strong demand from China and utilities swapping to LNG from coal. A dozen others were stalled, first by the China-U.S. trade war and then by the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental concerns.

But super-hot demand for the fuel in northern Europe and China have pushed global gas prices to near record highs, reviving financing prospects for plants that chill natural gas into liquid for transport by seaborne tankers.

A key benchmark price for natural gas deliveries in northern Europe has more than quadrupled from a year ago, to about \$30 per million British thermal units per day (mmBtu).

Europe's declining gas production and increased dependency on Russia for its supplies also has driven worldwide LNG prices higher and focused attention on the need for new LNG plants in the United States and Asia.

China stopped taking most U.S. LNG by imposing a 25% tariff on imports in mid-2019 at the height of a U.S.-China trade war. But in November, top Chinese energy companies agreed to buy more U.S. gas than ever before through long term contracts.

Such contracts are keys to winning financing for these \$4 billion to \$8.5 billion projects and breaking the development logjam, said Carlos Sole, an attorney at law firm Baker Botts who has been involved in the development and financing of multiple U.S. LNG export projects.

"Last year capital was not willing to deploy itself on a speculative basis without long-term contracts," Sole said. "Assuming those are achieved, which is the general expectation given current market conditions, then capital should be available."

Atop the list of proposals likely to get financial approval are Venture Global and Tellurian Inc plants, both in Louisiana, and a Cheniere Energy Inc project in Corpus Christi, Texas, said Craig Pirrong, a finance professor at the University of Houston and commodity trading expert.

"The banks are finally realizing that this is an existential issue," said Tellurian Executive Chairman Charif Souki, referring to the recent lack of energy investments.

Construction on the first phase of Tellurian's Driftwood project that would export about 11 million tons per annum (MTPA) of LNG, or around 1.5 billion cubic feet per day (bcfd) of natural gas, could start this summer once financial hurdles are cleared, he said earlier this month.

The three new projects would increase U.S. export capacity by about a third at mid-decade. Plants already under construction should lift peak U.S. capacity to 13.9 bcfd by the end of this year, estimates the U.S. Energy Information Administration, a figure surpassing Qatar and Australia, now the two largest LNG exporters.



"This is the best macro environment that the LNG business has ever seen," Delfin LNG Chief Executive Dudley Poston said in an interview, adding he was "very confident" that Delfin's project off the Louisiana coast would be approved for construction this year.

Still, optimism has never been in short supply among project developers despite repeated setbacks.

Financial go-aheads for projects including Tellurian's Driftwood, NextDecade Corp's Rio Grande and Sempra Energy's (SRE.N) Port Arthur LNG plants were promised and delayed last year, in some cases for a second time.

Investors remain wary of investing in new projects in which the expected revenue stream is supported by inexperienced or untested buyers, said Tessa Davis, a partner at law firm Morrison & Foerster LLP who has been involved in financing LNG projects in Indonesia and Qatar.

The rise of LNG buyers in Southeast Asia, Africa and South America aiming to build smaller regasification facilities or LNG-to-power projects presents hurdles for new suppliers, she said.

The shift to "inexperienced and less-creditworthy offtakers will increase the uncertainty financiers may have relating to the risk profile of new LNG projects," Davis said.

But Roald Nashi, who represents investors in energy and infrastructure projects at law firm Kirkland & Ellis, said a cold northern hemisphere winter will be good for encouraging long-term contracts needed to finance plants.

Those long-term contracts "should continue to be available as last year," Nashi said.

Just for the Sake...

FROM PAGE 1

The continued occupation of Syrian territories creates favorable conditions for terrorist activities in Syria, and must end immediately, she underlined.

"As per the UN Security Council resolutions, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria must be respected. The Syrian government has a legitimate and inalienable right to counter terrorist activities on its territories, and any action taken to combat terrorism must be coordinated with the Syrian government," Ershadi stressed.

Iran says the long-running crisis gripping Syria could only be resolved through ending the occupation of uninvited foreign forces and uprooting terrorists.

The Iranian diplomat went on to highlight that the Syrian nation continues to suffer, and nothing is more important than ending Israel's aggression in order to ensure the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

She said, "Serious efforts are needed to remove unilateral sanctions imposed on Syria. Those unlawful measures have prolonged the sufferings of the people and adversely affected the work of international and national humanitarian agencies there."

At the same time, Syrian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Bashar al-Jaafari lambasted U.S.-led sanctions against his country, saying the bans amount to economic terrorism and have catastrophic impacts on Syria's human rights situation.

Separately, Dmitry Polyanskiy, deputy permanent representative of Russia to the United Nations, renewed Moscow's call on all foreign occupation forces to immediately withdraw from Syria.

"We demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces, who are illegally deployed, from Syria," Polyanskiy said at the UN Security Council session. "It is clear that the United States does not deal with the fight against terrorism even on a domestic level, let alone on a global scale."

He stressed that "Russia will not stop fighting terrorism in Syria in cooperation with the country's authorities."

"Syrian forces, with the support of the Russian Air Force, continue to hunt down and eliminate the Daesh militants in Syria," the Russian diplomat said.

The U.S. military has stationed forces and equipment in eastern and northeastern Syria, with the Pentagon claiming that the deployment is aimed at preventing oilfields in the area from falling into the hands of the Daesh terrorists. Damascus, however, says the unlawful deployment is meant to plunder the country's resources.

After failing to oust the Syrian government with the help of its proxies and direct involvement in the conflict, the U.S. government has now stepped up its economic war on the Arab country.

Unfortunately the international bodies like the United Nations are indifferent towards the crisis in Syria which is just mostly because of the illegal and uninvited presence of foreign forces. As soon as Syrian forces take serious actions against the terrorists to clear the country from their presence, American forces begin some operation under pretext of fighting terrorists and they actually help the terrorists survive and continue their crimes which is the best scenario for providing opportunity for the U.S. to loot Syria's oil fields and at the same time the Zionists air forces rush to help these terrorists.

Syria has to take a firm action against the illegal forces if they want to clear the country from the filth of occupiers and to restore its pride and dignity as an independent country because international bodies like the UN are impotent to take any action against the American and other illegal forces in Syria.

S. Korea...

FROM PAGE 1

"South Korea and Iran plan to hold working-level talks in Seoul next month to find ways to resolve the years-long dispute over Tehran's frozen assets," Yonhap was quoted as saying by an informed source.

At the meeting, which was held at the request of the Korean side and held at the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Vienna, the Deputy Foreign Minister of South Korea, referring to the importance of Seoul-Tehran relations, explained the blocked Iranian assets with South Korea, saying that his country is trying to repay its debt to Iran.

The frozen asset issue started in 2018 when former U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal and reinstated economic sanctions against Iran.

"Dune," "Licorice Pizza" and "West Side Story" Top Hollywood Guild Nominees

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Sci-fi epic "Dune," coming-of-age drama "Licorice Pizza" and musical remake "West Side Story" received major boosts in Hollywood's awards season race Thursday as several of the film industry's top guilds unveiled their nominees.

The movies earned nods from Tinseltown's directors', producers' and writers' unions, putting them in contention alongside presumed early Oscars frontrunners "Belfast" and "The Power of the Dog" -- which also secured multiple nominations.

But hopes that mainstream crowdpleasers such as superhero blockbuster "Spider-Man: No Way Home" or 007 installment "No Time To Die" might enter the awards race were thwarted.

Hollywood's guilds each host their own annual ceremonies to honor the year's best films ahead of the season-capping Academy Awards.

The guild awards are often considered bellwethers for the Oscars and, by coincidence this year, Academy members also began voting for their own nominees on Thursday.

The Directors Guild of America's top award-winner in particular has a strong track record of predicting the Oscar for best director -- the same victor has been selected for both prizes on 16 of the last 18 years.

This year, the DGA shortlisted Kenneth Branagh for "Belfast," Jane Campion for "The Power of the Dog," Denis Villeneuve for "Dune," Paul Thomas Anderson for "Licorice Pizza" and Steven Spielberg for "West Side Story."

Those same five films also featured in the 10-strong shortlist

unveiled by the Producers Guild of America on Thursday.

There has only been one best picture Oscar winner in the 31 years of the PGAs which did not start off with a nomination from Hollywood's producers -- "Braveheart" in 1996.

Notably absent from any of Thursday's nominations were Joel Coen's "The Tragedy of Macbeth" and Ridley Scott's "House of Gucci."

Thursday's nominations provided a particular boost to films such as "Dune," a star-studded adaptation of Frank Herbert's sprawling novel set on a desert planet plagued by monstrous sandworms.

"Dune" had failed to land any major nominations from the Screen Actors Guild earlier this month.

"Licorice Pizza," a nostalgic 1970s love letter to Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, and "West Side Story" had also missed out in the leading SAG categories.

The Writers Guild of America announced its own nominees Thursday, again including "Dune," "Licorice Pizza" and "West Side Story."

"Belfast," which captures the outbreak of violence in 1969 Northern Ireland from a child's perspective, and "The Power of the Dog," a gothic Western set in 1920s Montana, were not eligible under the WGA's rules, but have scored strongly in nearly all other nominations.

This year's awards season has been elongated after the Oscars were pushed back to March 27, reportedly to avoid clashing with February's Winter Olympics and the Super Bowl in Los Angeles.

NASA Aims to Make Observations From Space Junk Collision With Moon

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - NASA said it aims to survey the crater formed when the remains of a SpaceX rocket are expected to crash into the Moon in early March, calling the event "an exciting research opportunity."



The rocket was deployed in 2015 to put a NASA satellite into orbit and its second stage, or booster, has been floating in the cosmos ever since, a common fate for such pieces of space technology.

"On its current trajectory, the second stage is expected to impact the far side of the Moon on March 4, 2022," a NASA spokeswoman told AFP.

The impact of the rocket chunk weighing four tons will not be visible from Earth in real time, nor will NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO), which is currently orbiting the Moon, be in a "position to observe the impact as it happens," the spokeswoman said.

The LRO could be used later, however, to capture images for before-and-after comparisons. Finding the crater "will be challenging and might take weeks to months," the spokeswoman said, adding that the "unique event presents an exciting research opportunity."

Studying a crater formed by a hurtling object with a known mass and speed (it will be traveling at 9,000 kilometers per hour), as well as the material that the impact stirs up, could help advance selenology, or the scientific study of the moon.

Spacecraft have been intentionally crashed into the Moon before for scientific purposes, such as during the Apollo missions to test seismometers, but this is the first unintended collision to be detected.

Astronomer Bill Gray, creator of a software used to determine the trajectories of asteroids and other objects, was the first to calculate the booster's new collision course with the Moon.

He believes that space junk should always be directed towards the moon when possible: "If it hits the moon, then we actually learn something from it," Gray said.

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Kiwi Ko Grabs LPGA Lead at Boca Rio

MIAMI (Dispatches) - New Zealand's third-ranked Lydia Ko fired a bogey-free nine-under par 63 to seize a two-stroke lead after Thursday's opening round of the LPGA at Boca Rio. The 24-year-old South Korean-born Kiwi, last year's Tokyo Olympic bronze medalist after taking silver in 2016 at Rio, made three straight birdies on both the front and back nines at the resort in Boca Raton, Florida. American Danielle Kang, last week's winner at the LPGA Tournament of Champions in Orlando, was second on 65 with India's Aditi Ashok third on 66.

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E-Mail Address:
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ISSN 1024-6053
P.O. Box: 15875-8551
Address: No 13, Pajouhesh St., Golestan II St, Golestan St.Marzadaran Blvd., Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
Printed by:Honar Sarzmin Sabz
Distributed by:
Cities of Iran Cultural and Artistic Institute
Managing Director: Fereydoon Taherpour Asl

Schenk Shares lead With Rahm, Thomas

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Unheralded Adam Schenk birdied eight holes in a row to share the lead with top-ranked Jon Rahm and Justin Thomas after Thursday's second round of the US PGA Farmers Insurance Open. A day after his 30th birthday, Schenk torched the North Course at Torrey Pines for a career-low 62, 10-under par, to stand on 13-under alongside fellow American Thomas and Rahm, who won last year's US Open on Torrey's South Course.

8 IRAN NEWS

SPORTS

SUNDAY JANUARY 30, 2022

Medvedev to Play Nadal In Australian Open Final

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Daniil Medvedev won a tempestuous Australian Open semi-final against Stefanos Tsitsipas and will face Rafael Nadal, who is bidding to become the all-time men's Grand Slam leader, in Sunday's final.

World number two Medvedev beat fourth-ranked Tsitsipas 7-6 (7/5), 4-6, 6-4, 6-1 to reach his second straight Australian Open final.

Earlier the 35-year-old Spanish great powered past the Italian seventh seed Matteo Berrettini 6-3, 6-2, 3-6, 6-3.

Nadal is level on 20 majors with his golden era rivals Novak Djokovic, who was deported on the eve of the tournament, and Roger Federer, who is absent with injury.

It gives the Spaniard an opportunity to go clear at the top in Sunday's final and add to his lone 2009 Melbourne Park crown in his sixth Australian Open final.

Medvedev was in a fiery mood and given a code warning after raging at the chair umpire during his clash with fourth seed Tsitsipas, whose father Apostolos was also given a warning for coaching from the player's box before inadvertently helping trigger his son's collapse.

Medvedev is shooting for back-to-back major titles after upsetting Djokovic in last year's U.S. Open final.

Like in New York last September, when he stopped Djokovic from completing a calendar Grand Slam of titles, Medvedev will be trying to derail Nadal's tilt at making men's tennis history.

"I'm going to play against one of the greatest and someone going for the 21st Slam," Medvedev said.

Mladenovic-Dodig Win Australian Open Mixed Doubles Title

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - France's Kristina Mladenovic and Croatia's Ivan Dodig were crowned Australian Open mixed doubles champions with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Australian pair Jaimee Fourlis and Jason Kubler.

It was a second Melbourne Park mixed doubles title for Mladenovic, who won in 2014 with Daniel Nestor. She also owns two women's doubles titles in Australia from 2018 and 2020.

Veteran Dodig has three other Grand Slam mixed titles -- two at the French Open and one at Wimbledon, along with two men's doubles successes, including at last year's Australian Open with Filip Polasek.

Vlahovic at Juventus for Medical Ahead of Transfer

TURIN (Dispatches) - Serbia striker Dusan Vlahovic arrived at Juventus for a medical ahead of a much-anticipated winter break transfer to the Italian giants.

An official announcement on the move from fellow Serie A club Fiorentina was expected later today.

Often compared to Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the Serb has 17 goals in Serie A this season and Juventus are ready to pay around €70 million (RM326 million) for the youngster as they seek to fill the goal gap left by Cristiano Ronaldo. Vlahovic's signing is expected to help Juventus in its bid to get in the Champions League.

The team is currently a point off the top four, having played a game more than fourth-placed Atalanta. Juventus tweeted a picture of a 21-year old smiling Vlahovic outside his medical, doing a double thumbs up.

Gosens Joins Inter

ROME (Dispatches) - Inter Milan said they had signed Germany's Robin Gosens from fellow Serie A club Atalanta.

Gosens, 27, who has been sidelined since September with a hamstring injury, will leave the Bergamo side after joining from Heracles Almelo in 2017. "Inter Milan are delighted to announce that an agreement has been reached with Atalanta for the signing of Robin Everardus Gosens," the Italian champions said.



"To me it's more important to be in the final of the Australian Open and fight to win another Australian Open than the rest of the statistics for the history of the sport.

"I just feel happy to be part of this amazing era of tennis, sharing all these things with another two players.

"That's it. In some ways it doesn't matter if somebody achieve one more or one less."

It has been an extraordinary effort from Nadal at the year's opening major, having to modify his game to compensate for a degenerative bone disease in his left foot that ended his 2021 season last August.

He then caught Covid in December which, he said, made him "very sick".

Yet Nadal brushed aside Berrettini's challenge with precision shot-making, while last year's Wimbledon finalist could not overcome his sluggish start.

Later in a stormy night semi-final under a closed roof because of rain, Medvedev had a massive blow-up with the chair umpire during a changeover at 5-4 in the second set.

He was furious at the umpire over what he claimed was coaching from Tsitsipas's coach and father Apostolos from the player's box and the Russian received a code violation. Medvedev raged at the umpire.

"His father can talk every point. Can you answer my question please?" he pleaded.

Tsitsipas levelled up taking the chaotic second set as tensions bubbled over and Medvedev went ahead by taking the third set to gain the edge in a titanic duel shortly after Apostolos Tsitsipas was warned for coaching.

Alisson Hails VAR After Two Red Cards Rescinded



QUITO (Dispatches) - Alisson said the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) had prevented his side from being "punished unfairly" after the Brazil goalkeeper had two red cards rescinded in Thursday's 1-1 draw with Ecuador in a World Cup qualifier.

Alisson was shown a red card after 25 minutes for a fierce tackle and another in stoppage time for felling Ayrton Preciado as he attempted to punch the ball, but on both occasions the referee consulted VAR and changed his mind.

"I think this was the first time this has happened in the history of football," the Liverpool keeper said.

"I think that I acted properly in the moves and I think my team mates helped me a lot, they were incisive in their complaints to the referee. This shows once again the importance of using VAR in football.

"I am happy with the VAR, if it wasn't for the VAR we'd have been punished unfairly."

Brazil took an early lead through Casemiro and both sides had already been reduced to 10 men when Alisson was shown his first red card.

Felix Torres equalized for the home side with a header 15 minutes from time and then Alisson was again at the centre of controversy in stoppage time as Ecuador pushed for a winner.

Bayern Munich Confirm Departure of Sule



linked to Chelsea, Newcastle and Barcelona. Sule will be the third defender to leave Bayern in the last 12 months, after David Alaba's

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich CEO Oliver Kahn confirmed today that Germany center-back Niklas Sule will leave at the end of the season after turning down a contract extension.

"We made him an offer, which he told us he didn't accept. He wants to leave the club at the end of the season," Kahn said in a press conference.

The towering 26-year-old will leave on a free transfer and has reportedly been

transfer to Real Madrid and Jerome Boateng's switch to Lyon.

Kahn was vague about whether Bayern will sign a new defender to replace Sule, "we have a lot of options when it comes to central defense".

However, senior club bosses reportedly met with the agent of Chelsea defender Andreas Christensen in December.

Sule has made 158 appearances for Bayern since they signed him from Hoffenheim in 2017 for €20 million (RM95 million).

He is set to be a key player for Germany at the World Cup in Qatar, which kicks off in November.

He was part of the squad which won the Champions League in 2019/20, but missed the first six months of that season after suffering a torn cruciate ligament knee injury for the second time in his career.

Serie A on the Verge of Financial Ruin

ROME (Dispatches) - Italy's Serie A is at risk of insolvency and needs more financial support from the government during the pandemic as well as stadiums at higher capacity, according to Inter Milan chief executive Giuseppe Marotta.

In an interview with Italian newspaper Il Sole 24 Ore, Marotta said that the country's political institutions could no longer ignore the financial plight of Italian football.

"It is a system at the edge of the abyss, which without a doubt had already issues before Covid but which has received virtually no support in these two years in the pandemic," he said.

Marotta is also a member of the federal board of the Italian football association (FIGC) representing Serie A. A spokesperson at the Italian FA told Reuters that they do not usually comment on statements made by board members.

Serie A clubs had agreed unanimously earlier this month to cut stadium capacity to 5,000 for two rounds of matches to help curb Covid-19 cases, but Marotta urged all stakeholders to allow more spectators now.

Italy put off matches and closed stadiums soon after Covid-19 reached the country at the start of 2020 and has kept stadiums at a limited capacity of up to 50 per cent ever since it started lifting restrictions.

"Outdoor facilities are without a doubt safe with FFP2 masks, super green pass and capacity reduced to 50 per cent. Cutting tickets to 5,000 spectators has been further proof of taking things seriously and another sacrifice for us," he said.



James, Durant Named Captains for NBA All-Star Showcase

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James was named an NBA All-Star Game captain for the fifth-straight season on Thursday as the league revealed the starting players for the mid-season showcase in Cleveland.

James was the leading vote getter from the Western Conference.

Brooklyn Nets star Kevin Durant topped the East voting and got the nod as a team captain, although he is expected to miss a second straight All-Star Game after spraining his left knee earlier this month.

Durant and James were among the 10 players voted in as starters for the February 20 game at the Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse. The All-Star reserves will be named next Thursday.

Fan voting accounts for 50 percent of the total vote to pick the starters, while current players and media make up the other half. The reserves are chosen by NBA head coaches, and league commissioner Adam Silver chooses injury replacements, if necessary.

James and Durant will draft their teams from the eligible pool of players and they are not required to draft based on conference affiliation or position.

The 2020 All-Star lineup features some familiar faces, rising stars and first-time players. James' 18 All-Star nods ties Kobe Bryant for second place all-time behind Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (19). Denver's NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic (West) and Philadelphia 76ers Joel Embiid (East) nabbed starting frontcourt spots.

Embiid has 21 games of 30 or more points this season and six with 40 or more.

