

Health Ministry Announced on Saturday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic In Iran Increased to 133,570 With 133 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Pointing to the Ongoing Vienna Talks, a Member of Presiding Board Of Majlis Said That Islamic Republic Of Iran Does Not Accept Empty and Void Promises of Western States and They Must Show Goodwill in Practice

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Iran Seeks Guarantee of No Sanctions After Change In U.S. Administration

TEHRAN (MNA) – If the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is revived, Iran will need a guarantee that sanctions will not return with change in the US government, Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali said.

“We have a poor experience with the Western approach to the JCPOA: the Americans have changed government and they have violated their obligations under the JCPOA. Therefore, the people of Iran have a right to know about future guarantees so that sanctions will not be imposed again,” Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali told Sputnik.

The ambassador also said that sanctions were essentially a form of oppression against the Iranian people, which is why such guarantees are necessary.

He called for the removal of the “cruel” unilateral sanctions and said the “ball is now in the court of the West and America.”

The ambassador criticized the West for admitting Tehran’s right to use peaceful nuclear energy but trying, in practice, to prevent Iran from treading that path.

“We view negotiations as the most suitable way, but [we don’t want] negotiations for the sake of negotiations. We seek results,” he added.

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National Elections Laws Need Serious And Comprehensive Reforms



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Guardian Council Spokesman Hadi Tahan Nazif says the national elections laws need serious and comprehensive reforms to avoid any disputes.

Speaking at a press conference and felicitating the 43rd anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Tahan Nazif said that Majlis should work to reform the elections laws because it needs serious reforms. He added that the council has repeatedly called for reformed and comprehensive election laws regarding the general policies of the election. He noted that reforms in elections laws actually start from the Majlis, adding that the related commissions in Majlis have started work and the Guardian Council is ready to share more than four decades of its experience with them.

He once again reiterated that the Guardian Council is just responsible about the background and behaviors of the representatives before the elections and after it, the Majlis itself has to monitor the conducts of representatives.

Tahan also urged lawmakers to watch out their behaviors and asked them not to meddle in appointments by the government and governor generals.

Then he said the Guardian Council seeks to remove ambiguities on teachers’ ranking system bill and Water transfer project from the Oman Sea to Sistan and Baluchestan province.

He explained the views of the Guardian Council regarding the ratifications of the Majlis, the statutes of the government and the inquiries of the Administrative Court of Justice as follows:

Teachers’ ranking system bill, which had been discussed in several sessions of the Guardian Council and approved by the Majlis was pronounced ambiguous, and any further comment would only be made after ambiguities are removed.

The discussion on whether years of studying in teacher training centers will also be considered as the basis of points in the ranking process or not has been considered as ambiguous.

Another issue which was raised was Water transfer project from the Oman Sea to Sistan and Baluchestan province. The issue which was also considered as ambiguous and it was announced that any further comment would only be made after ambiguities are removed.

Ambiguity in part would be about the extent to which the government should take action in the field of domestic investment, and it should be clear if it is the responsibility of the government or the government just must provide the ground for its implementation.

Iraq Urges U.S. to Allow Cash Payments to Iran

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq is \$1.6 billion in arrears on its payments for imports of Iranian gas, its acting electricity minister has said, urging Washington to allow cash payments despite its Tehran sanctions.

Despite its immense oil and gas reserves, Iraq remains dependent on imports to meet its energy needs and neighboring Iran currently supplies one third of its gas and electricity under a tightly-controlled waiver from U.S. sanctions.

The restrictions, put in place when Washington reimposed sanctions on Tehran after president Donald Trump abandoned a nuclear deal with Iran in 2018, require Iraq to pay for its energy imports from Iran in kind, not in cash.

The restrictions then require Iran to use the gas money to fund imports of farm and drug products, which must be approved by U.S. officials on a case-by-case basis.

In an interview with state television late Wednesday, acting electricity minister Adel Karim said Iraqi arrears on payments to Iran now totalled \$1.69 billion.

“These funds remain in the Trade Bank of Iraq and have not been paid to the Iranian government,” Karim said.

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ViewPoint JCPOA Deepens Chasm in U.S.

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

When in 2016 Republican candidate Donald Trump stunned his Democrat rival Hillary Clinton in the U.S. presidential race, no American ever thought that it would lead to a chasm among the U.S. politicians and even among the nation and this revealed itself during the 2020 presidential election after Joe Biden defeated Trump in a controversial ever presidential race in the history of the U.S. and ever since the chasm among the Democratic and Republican politicians and even people has deepened and it has left the U.S. administration in limbo for making decision on any issue.

Iran’s nuclear program and talks on the U.S. return to the JCPOA seems to have made this rift wider among the American politicians and they are at odds with each other for making a decision on how to deal with the JCPOA and talks with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Biden’s Special Envoy for Iran, Rob Malley, has been summoned to the Congress and the Senate to brief the lawmakers and Senators but even his show-up has not convinced them and they have cried foul over the Biden Administration’s lax stance towards Iran. This claim both has been supported by the Republicans and even some Democrat representatives and Senators.

The current political developments in the world and even economic ups and downs in the U.S. has weakened the U.S. administration more than ever and it seems the country is moving towards the collapse that it has been predicted by some political scientists like Francis Fukuyama.

On Tuesday, Iran’s Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei in his speech said the United States is suffering blows from a totally unexpected direction.

“Today, the two presidents of the United States – the former president and the current president – have joined hands to tarnish what’s left of the image of the United States and they are doing so,” Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks.

There are several signs of lapses in the U.S. ruling politicians either the Democrats or the Republicans and it has put the country on a weaker position as the country has always claimed of being the world No.1 superpower and now nobody gives a damn on the U.S. government’s barking.

As it was mentioned talks in Vienna on the fate of the JCPOA and Iran’s peaceful nuclear program have deepened this contradiction and chaos in the U.S. ruling bodies. Although the 8th round of the Vienna sanctions removal talks has begun, many lawmakers in Washington have shown their opposition to the deal and have vowed to block any possible deal while the U.S. Administration seems to strike a deal and resolve the problem through dialogue.

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India’s Basmati Exports Plunge as Iran Trims Buying

MUMBAI (Dispatches) - India’s basmati rice exports plunged a fifth from a year ago to the lowest level in four years in 2021 as top buyer Iran slashed purchases after its rupee reserves dwindled, government and industry officials said.

The country’s basmati rice exports in 2021 fell 20% from a year ago to 4 million tons, the lowest since 2017, according to government data.

Shipments to Iran, the biggest buyer of India’s basmati rice, plunged 26% from a year ago to 834,458 tons, the data showed.

“Iran wasn’t active in the market for a few months last year after its rupee reserves with Indian banks depleted,” said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trading house.

Iran previously had a deal to sell oil to India in exchange for rupees, which it used to import critical goods, including agricultural commodities, but New Delhi stopped buying Tehran’s oil in May 2019 after a U.S. sanctions waiver expired. Tehran continued using its rupees to buy goods from India, but without crude sales, which brought down Iran’s rupee reserves.

There was slowdown in exports in the middle of 2021 but in the last two-three months buying from Iran, Saudi Arabia and other key buyers have picked up, said Vijay Setia, former president, All India Rice Exporters Association (AIREA).

India, the world’s biggest rice exporter, mainly exports non-basmati rice to African countries and premier basmati rice to the Middle East.

The country total rice exports jumped nearly 46% in 2021 from a year ago to a record 21.42 million tons as Bangladesh, China and Vietnam increased purchases.

Basmati rice production in 2021 fell around 15% from a year ago because of lower area and untimely rainfall during harvesting season, Setia said.

“Export prices of basmati rice have gone up by 20% because of lower production, but still demand is robust for February and March shipments,” Setia said.

Give Crushing Response Awaits Any Intruder Into Iran Airspace

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian military commander says the Islamic Republic’s Armed Forces will not allow any aerial objects to enter the country’s airspace without authorization, warning of a crushing response to such an intrusion.

Brigadier Ali Asadi, commander of Iran’s Western Air Defense Zone, made the remark in a ceremony held in the western province of Hamedan on Friday to commemorate the 43rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which overthrew the former US-backed Pahlavi regime in 1979.

Highlighting the role of the military division under his command over the years, Asadi said, “The [Iranian] air defense will not allow any unauthorized aerial vehicle to enter the country’s skies and will give a crushing response with great aplomb.”

The senior Iranian commander also pointed that, “The most important and fundamental factor in the victory of the Islamic Revolution was the uprising of the people who had faith in the thoughts of the founder of the Revolution who had no apprehensions other than the dignity of Iran and the Iranian nation and not being dependent on foreigners.”

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Islamic Revolution Values To Lead Iran Foreign Policy

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says the values of the Islamic Revolution will continue to lead Iran's foreign policy.

"I was honored to accompany [Iran's] President [Ebrahim] Raisi in hosting foreign ambassadors in the 43rd anniversary of our nation's Islamic Revolution," the top Iranian diplomat said in a post on his Twitter account. Iranians from all walks of life on Friday took to the streets across the

country to celebrate the 43rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which overthrew the former U.S.-backed Pahlavi regime in 1979.

The rallies this year are of considerable importance due to the failure of Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign in the face of the Iranian nation's steadfastness and the US administration's declaration that it seeks a less confrontational policy toward the Islamic Republic due to the "failed" policy.

President Raisi Invited To Pay Visit to Armenia

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan congratulated Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution on Friday and invited him to visit Armenia.

In a message to President Raisi, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan congratulated President Raisi and the Iranians on the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

While noting the determination of Armenia and Iran to strengthen peace and stability in the region, the Armenian prime minister officially invited President Raisi to visit Armenia.

It added that he is convinced that through joint efforts they will be committed to deepening Armenian-Iranian interstate relations at a high level, the multifaceted agenda of their cooperation will be further expanded for the benefit of their peoples and countries.

"We can state with satisfaction that this year we mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between our countries, the course of which has registered a steady path of development," Pashinyan said.



"I am confident that the warm and neighborly Armenian-Iranian relations, firmly based on mutual respect and trust, will reach new horizons for the benefit of the development of our countries and the welfare of the peoples."

"Highlighting the determination of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Iran to strengthen peace and stability in the region, I reaffirm the official invitation to you to visit Armenia to discuss the issues on the bilateral agenda."

The Armenian prime minister in his message wished prosperity and success for the Iranian nation and government.

Pyongyang Calls for Development of Relations With Tehran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Congratulating the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un expressed hope that bilateral cooperation will further expand and develop in various fields.

Kim Jong-un has sent a congratulatory message to the Iranian president on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, according to Pyongyang's foreign ministry Saturday, Yonhap reported.

In the message sent to Iranian President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi on Friday, Kim congratulated Iran for the anniversary and expressed hope that bilateral cooperation will "further expand and develop in various fields," according to the ministry.

Kim also said the friendship between the two countries was "forged on the road of joint struggle against imperialism" and said he wished for Iran's success in achieving "prosperity and development of the country."

Iran Boosting Refineries To Decrease Crude Sales

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran's petroleum minister says the country is working to promote its oil refineries in terms of both quality and quantity in an effort to decrease the volume of exports in the form of crude oil.

Javad Owji said Friday that the development of Iran's oil sector and investment in the field are among the Iranian administration's top priorities given the vast resources of oil and gas existing in the country.

"In the next three years, refineries will have a significant development both qualitatively and quantitatively. Besides creating jobs, such measures will help decrease the sales of crude and increase petrochemical products instead," he said.

The minister pointed to the recent launch of Iran's first super heavy oil refinery on the southern island of Qeshm, saying the country will operationalize the oil refinery in the southern city of Bushehr next year, with a refining capacity of 68,000 barrels of oil per day.

"In the next four years, the production capacity of the country's refineries will reach 1.4 million barrels per day, which will create a turning point in the country's oil industry," Owji said.

He said efforts are being made to decrease the budget's reliance on oil revenues and increase exports of refined oil products, something that will provide manifold added value.

Iran Shuts Kindergartens In Very High-Risk Cities

TEHRAN (IFP) - Kindergartens have been closed in Iranian cities where coronavirus infections have considerably risen in recent days.

The cities, known as "red" ones, will have to shut kindergartens for one week as mandated by the National Coronavirus Task Force.

Accordingly, arrangements will be made for mothers of under-six-year-olds to be able to work online for the seven-day period.

Meanwhile, those infected with the Omicron variant of the coronavirus will enjoy a 5-day sick leave.

The measures come as the spread of Omicron has pushed up the number of Iranian cities declared Covid-19 "red" zones to 247, with no blue (very low risk) cities left in the country.

The latest figures released on Saturday show that there are currently 112 orange (high risk) and 89 yellow (medium risk) cities.

Iran is grappling with its sixth wave of the respiratory disease with health officials urging the people to get their booster jabs as soon as possible in a bid to contain the latest surge of infections and deaths. On Friday, Iran reported 143 new fatalities from the disease and more than 31,000 new infection cases over the past 24 hours.

Islamic Revolution Inspires Latin America, Whole World



TEHRAN (RNA) - Given the fact that the Islamic Revolution has its roots in people's will, it has a great impact on not only Venezuela but also on other Latin American countries and the whole world, a Venezuelan diplomat said.

Carlos Antonio Alcalá Cordones, Venezuela's Ambassador to Tehran, said in an interview with IRNA on Saturday that former President Hugo Chavez resumed diplomatic and friendly relationship with Iran, which is being enhanced by the current administration in Caracas.

The ambassador underlined, "We in Latin America hold a great respect for the Islamic Revolution, Iranian people and leadership, who provided us with an honorable pattern."

All Islamic Revolution in Iran, revolution in Cuba and Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela oppose imperialism and the United States' hegemonic doctrines, he noted.

People's involvement in decision-making through elections is another commonality of both Venezuela and Iran, Cordones argued.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the envoy pointed to the expansion of trade and economic ties between Tehran and Caracas despite the United States' coercive measures against both countries, adding that in his three-year tenure in Iran the two sides have inked several agreements to boost cooperation in energy, tourism, food industry, defense, healthcare and security fields.

He urged for deepening ties and enhancing unity in order to be able to stand against the United States' unilateralism and sanctions, noting that a bloc consisted of Iran, Venezuela, Russia and China can provide each of them to resist the common enemy.

According to the top diplomat, Iran has played key role in revitalizing oil industry in Venezuela, expressing hope that the cooperation will continue in the future.

Recalling a trip by Martyr Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani to Venezuela, Cordones emphasized that the tour was very important for the Bolivarian government, because the visit helped increase bilateral ties.

The Iranian general was a symbol of love, sacrifice for homeland, government and sovereignty of Iran, as well as a great example to be followed, the ambassador said.

Iran Peaceful Nuclear Capacities to Never Removed From the Table

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani has said via a Twitter post on Saturday that "maintaining Iran's peaceful nuclear capacities" are the options that will never be removed from the [negotiating] table.

Shamkhani posted the tweet after the February 11 ceremony held across Iran to celebrate the 43rd anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"Options that are never removed from the table:

Glorious presence of Iranians in ceremonies in support of the Islamic establishment,

Maintaining and strengthening #Iran's peaceful nuclear capacities and defense capabilities, regional security-making policies of Islamic Republic."

In total defiance of the negative propaganda carried out by a few antagonistic foreign media about nation's disappointment with the system in the country, Iranians from all walks of life participated in motorcade rallies on the occasion of 43rd victory anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on February 11 to foil plots hatched by enemies of the country.

Iran, Turkmenistan Enjoying Golden Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran and Turkmenistan are witnessing the initiation of mutual golden relations as both nations are celebrating the 30th anniversary of establishing their diplomatic relations, Iran's ambassador to Ashgabat said.

Iran's embassy in Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan, held a ceremony to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries simultaneous with the 43rd anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution to commemorate friendship between Tehran and Ashgabat.

Gholam-Abbas Arbab-Khales (Iranian ambassador to Turkmenistan) expressed gratitude to the Turkmen government for paving the ground to hold such cultural programs, saying that kindly presence of Turkmen audiences in such events indicates Turkmen government's willingness to expand cooperation in cultural areas.

Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow emphasized the need for expansion of cultural collaborations, the envoy mentioned, noting that the cultural section of the Iranian embassy has tried to do its best in order to develop cultural cooperation; therefore, language training, introducing traditions, holding

festivals and competitions are among the works underway to boost cultural ties.

As to holding Iran National Day inside the country and in all representative offices around the world, he pointed to a congratulatory message conveyed by Turkmenistan's president to his Iranian counterpart, arguing that the interactions prove serious determination of high-ranking officials in both countries to deepen relationship.

Referring to Iran's independence following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the ambassador explained that in light of independence, nations can achieve progress based on their own national capabilities and civilization.

Cultural Attaché of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Turkmenistan Navid Rasouli, for his part, described Ashgabat-Tehran ties as broader than mere neighborliness, hoping that more joint cultural events can be organized in the New Year.

On Wednesday, a photo exhibition was held on the sidelines of the ceremony to display scientific and technological advancements in Iran. Turkmen visitors welcomed the photo exhibition, which was held at cultural section of the Iranian embassy in Ashgabat.

Iran Attaches Importance to Boosting Trading Ties With Neighbors

TEHRAN (IP) - The head of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture stressed the importance of Iran's trade relations with its neighbors.

According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) statistics, from the beginning of this year to the end of December 2021, 122 million and 500 thousand tons of goods worth 72 billion and one hundred million dollars were exchanged between Iran and other countries, compared to the same period last year shows 11% growth in weight and 38% in value.

The head of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Gholamhossein Shafei said: "Improving relations with neighbors and other countries in the region, can significantly reduce costs imposed on Iranian exporters and producers and act be evaluated as a driving force for the Islamic country's export development."

He added: "Increasing export and import partners, in terms of creating diversity in Iran's export portfolio will increase economic productivity and ensure the country's economic security." With less than three months to go until the end of 1400 (March 2022), Iran's foreign trade exceeded \$ 72 billion in the first nine months of this year.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) of Iran also announced that if the current trend of the country's foreign trade continues, it would reach \$ 98 billion by the end of the year.

Tehran Most Unsafe Iranian Province for Investment

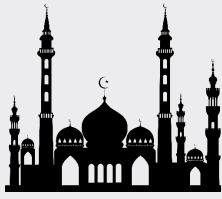
TEHRAN (IFP) - A study finds that Tehran was the "most unsafe" province in Iran for investment in the past spring, whereas West Azarbaijan Province in the northeast has been classified as the best spot for that purpose.

In the study, conducted and released by the Iranian Parliament's Research Center, 17 statistical factors were examined to determine the level of investment safety in Iran's 31 provinces.

According to the study's parameters, the closer the figure is to 10, the worse is the situation for investment, and vice versa. Iranian website Eghtesad News, quoting the research, adds Tehran Province, which is home to the country's capital city, received an average score of 5.6 to get classified as the most unsafe place for investment in Iran, followed by the southwestern province of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad.

In Tehran, cases of theft liable to Tazir and fraud as well as the number of accidents resulting in death or injury were among the main reasons behind the classification. According to the research, economic insecurity in Tehran also stems from the cases of breach of trust and commercial disputes.

On the contrary, the index for investment security in West Azarbaijan Province stands at 2.8. The number of legal cases concerning trade disputes was found to be lower compared to other Iranian provinces.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:18
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:02
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:27
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:52

109. But if they turn back, Say: "I have proclaimed the Message to you all alike and in truth; but I know not whether that which ye are promised is near or far.

110. "It is He Who knows what is open in speech and what ye hide (in your hearts).
Surah 21. The Prophets (109 - 110)

Iran, UAE Preparing Ten-Year Outlook Document For Bilateral Trade

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Iran-UAE Joint Chamber of Commerce Erfan Shakeri says Iran and the UAE are working to prepare a ten-year outlook document for their trade ties which is in the early stage.

Speaking to ILNA, Shakeri said that the UAE and Persian Gulf states are so keen to invest in Iran and Iran should prepare proper investment packages to increase the investment attraction.

Touching upon the visit of Iranian delegation to the UAE led by the Head of the Trade Promotion Organization and also the details of Industry Minister to the UAE, Shakeri said that good talks and meetings are underway in the UAE, adding that of course, these meetings have started since months ago where senior officials of the two countries were also present. He went on to say that the chamber is after using the capacities of Iranian nationals living in the UAE for increasing the trade volume between the two countries.

Shakeri noted that it has been decided some trade delegations to visit Iran, adding that of course in the past some trade delegations had been exchanged between the two countries and it is expected the number of trade exchanges to increase.

He stated the UAE and the Persian Gulf states are very interested in investment in Iran and Iran needs to prepare proper investment to increase the investment attraction and this interest is nothing new.

Shakeri reiterated the Emiratis are mostly interested in investing in the fields of modern technologies, artificial intelligence, knowledge-based industry, technical and engineering services, fisheries, agriculture and foodstuff.



He reiterated that the Iran-UAE Joint Chamber of Commerce is currently working on preparation of a 10-year outlook document for trade cooperation between Iran and the UAE, stating that the plan is in the early stage. He said currently talks between Iran's industry minister and Emirati officials are in the preliminary stage but this exchange of officials of the two countries is a positive sign.

On the probable agreement on preferential trade between the two countries, Shakeri said that there are some talks underway on the preferential trade and the private sector seeks encouraging governments of the two countries in order that economic activists can continue their trade ties easily.

He said of course this is in the negotiation stage and it is not definite, reiterating that economic issues should not be overshadowed by the political issues and tensions.

He then pointed to the latest trade condition of Iran and the UAE, and said that the trade volume of Iran and the UAE stands at around \$15b in nine months and Iran's exports just have been \$3.5b while imports from the UAE have been over \$11.5b and the trade balance has been in favor of the UAE. He reiterated that some part of the UAE exports has been the re-export of the goods like agro, foodstuff and raw materials.

Shakeri underscored that there are good capacities which can enhance the trade between the two countries to \$50b and the chamber is seeking the necessary infrastructures for materializing the boost in trade.

IME Witnesses Weekly Trade of 1,805,000 Tons of Commodities

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 1,805,000 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$504m 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 1,340,000 tons of commodities valued at almost \$230m.

On this floor, the IME's customers purchased 961,766 tons of cement, 186,785 tons of steel, 98,000 tons of iron ore, 84,000 tons of sponge iron, 14,525 tons of aluminum, 4,240 tons of copper, 1,445 tons of zinc ingots, 150 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 50 tons of lead and 9 tons of precious metals concentrate.

Furthermore, the IME saw on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 446,134 tons of commodities worth more than \$260m.

Commodities sold on this floor included 199,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 93,103 tons of bitumen, 68,792 tons of polymeric products, 28,215 tons of chemicals, 45,000 tons of lube cut, 11,930 tons of sulfur and 3,186 tons of base oil.

Last but not least was the IME's side market with 18,685 tons of commodities traded on it.

Iran Saffron Exports Down 63%



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – A member of the board of directors of Iran's National Saffron Council says according to the statistics released by Iran's Customs Administration, Iran's exports declined around 63% last month comparing to the same period last year and all should work to diagnose the reason and to find solution for it.

Speaking to ILNA, Ali Hosseini said that currently 90% of the total saffron in the world is produced in Iran but the country is unable to sell its saffron based on own price. He then pointed to the lack of infrastructure in production, distribution and trade of saffron in the country, noting that everybody expects any domestic product to surge in exports but it is better to take infrastructural measures than accusing others or ordering others because we need infrastructural measures to protect the position of the domestic saffron in the international market.

Hosseini blamed drought for the decline in production this year, adding that this year saffron production has slumped by 70% comparing to the same period last year.

He said for 30 years Iran has been the top saffron producers in the world but it has not taken any practical action in saffron processing industries.

He added that in the first 9 months this year, Iran's saffron exports have declined by 60% comparing to the same period last year and all should work to find the reason and to improve it.

Hosseini went on to say that due to multiple rise in the price of saffron, foreign purchasers do not have any appetite to buy saffron, adding that Iranians want to sell their saffron based on their own price while foreigners want to buy it based on the logical price for offering it in the international market.

He admitted that Iran's neighboring countries are trying to overtake Iran's position in the international saffron market. He said 30 years ago Spain was the world number one saffron producer but Iranians could take over the place of Spain though producing high quality saffron with lower prices but the history may repeat and Spain tops the world ranking if Iran does not offer good quality saffron with logical price.

Pakistanis Keen to Launch Joint Shipping Line With Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini during a joint online meeting with the Head of Iran's Ports and Marine Organization (PMO)

Mr. Ali Akbar Safaee said Pakistanis are eager to broaden all-out cooperation with Iran in the field of port and marine transportation especially in launching joint shipping line with Iran.

In the meeting, Safaee said the organization has had several meetings with the neighboring countries, Iranian ambassadors in those countries as well as with ambassadors of those countries in Tehran and discussed ways of cooperation in different part of the port and marine sector.

He announced readiness of the PMO for offering necessary assistance in the marine transportation and in the field of energy field to boost the joint cooperation between the two states.

He added that Pakistan can be a good market for Iran



in the field of energy and there are huge interests among Iranians in the oil and petrochemical sector and the country can consider good amount of energy exports to Pakistan but its materialization hinges on Pakistan's willingness and their involvement for a long-term cooperation.

Then Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan Hosseini said that there are three agreements between Iran and Islamabad on cooperating in the port and marine sector.

He added that Pakistanis are keen for the launch of the joint shipping line with Iran but there are some obstacles which should be removed and Iran is ready to allocate ship but it hinges on Pakistan's approval for paying the expenses.

Hosseini stated Pakistanis rely on the launch of the shipping line with Iran, Oman and the UAE, adding that supporting the private sector is of the factors which can be taken into consideration for the joint shipping line. He went on to say that Iran is ready to cooperate with Pakistan in Chabahar and Gwadar Ports.

Masuleh to Host UNESCO Assessors in Summer

RASHT (IRNA) - Head of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts office of Gilan Province said grounds have been paved for hosting UNESCO assessors in summer.

Vali Jahani said the file requesting inscription of Masuleh on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list had been sent UNESCO.

He added that according to planning, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) assessors will visit the site.

He noted that inscription of Masuleh will play an important role in developing tourism in this village

Masuleh with 350 historical houses dating back to 800 years ago has already been registered in list of national heritages in Iran.

Masouleh village is located in Sardar-e Jangal District, in Fuman town, Gilan Province, in north of the country.



Razi Cov Pars Proving More Effective Than Imported Covid-19 Shots

TEHRAN (IFP) - Officials say Iran's Razi Cov Pars COVID-19 vaccine is proving to be more effective than some imported types and there has been demand for it from a number of countries.

The head of Razi Vaccine and Serum Research Institute has emphasized that the superiority of Razi Cov Pars over china's Sinopharm was proven in the third phase of the clinical trial.

"In this phase, in the group that received the Sinopharm vaccine, two weeks after the second injection, the number of patients with Covid-19 was more than twice the number in Razi Cov Pars group. Also, during this period, we did not have any hospitalization among the recipients of Razi, but in the Sinopharm vaccine group, five cases were hospitalized," Ali Es'haghi explained.

He said the third stage of the human trial of Razi Cov Pars vaccine has been

completed, adding that the emergency use for this vaccine was authorized in September and that so far five million doses of this shot have been delivered to the ministry of health.

Noting that Razi can be a suitable vaccine for children, Es'haghi said the clinical test protocol for for children has been prepared and the relevant committee will issue a permit next week.

Saying that some countries have asked to buy the Iranian shot, he added "Our priority is to meet domestic needs, but given the good level of imports and the appropriate trend of domestic vaccine production, we expect an export license to be given to Razi Group."

Iran has been domestically producing several coronavirus shots in a bid to combat the outbreak of the respiratory disease. The Islamic Republic is also producing COVID-19 shots jointly with Cuba, Russia, and Australia.



Rents Climb 54% In Tehran Amid High Inflation

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Rents in the Iranian capital Tehran increased by 54 percent in January compared with last year, as annual inflation hovered around 40 percent and demand rose.

Real estate prices have increased sevenfold since 2018, which has put pressure on rents, experts say. Although home prices have not soared much in recent months, rents keep climbing because there is a time lag between purchase price increase and rents.

In some instances, rents equal the total income of a wage earner who is paid about \$150 a month in a fulltime job. Meanwhile, food prices rose by 60 percent in 2021 compared with the previous year.

Home prices rose in local currency because real estate is a major asset protecting savings in a country like Iran where the national currency has lost value almost eightfold since 2017.

Eight Killed in Rio Police Raid on Slum

RIO DE JANEIRO (Dispatches) - A police raid on a Rio de Janeiro slum erupted into an intense firefight Friday, leaving eight alleged drug traffickers dead, authorities said.

Police said the pre-dawn raid in the neighborhood of Vila Cruzeiro, on Rio's north side, targeted drug traffickers believed to have fled there from another slum nearby, Jacarezinho, where authorities have mounted a major anti-drug trafficking operation.

The Rio state police force said on Twitter the Vila Cruzeiro raid had led to clashes that left eight "criminals" fatally wounded.



Finland Signs Deal to Buy 64 U.S.-Built Stealth Jets

HELSINKI (Dispatches) - Finland signed a \$9.4 billion agreement on Friday to buy U.S. F-35 fighter jets, reaching a deal to bring 64 radar-evading warplanes to a country bordering Russia at a time of high tensions between Moscow and the West over Russian troops massed near the Ukrainian border.

However it will be some years before the planes enter service. Finland has previously said the planes would begin to be deployed in 2027.



Russia Masses More Troops Near Ukraine



LONDON (Dispatches) - Russia is massing yet more troops near Ukraine and an invasion could come at any time, perhaps before the end of this month's Winter Olympics, Washington said.

Moscow, for its part, ramped up its truculent response towards Western diplomacy, saying answers sent this week by the EU and NATO to its security demands showed "disrespect".

Commercial satellite images published by a private U.S. company showed new Russian military deployments at several locations near Ukraine. In his starkest warning yet to Americans in Ukraine to get out now, President Joe Biden said he would not send troops to rescue U.S. citizens in the event of a Russian assault.

"Things could go crazy quickly," Biden told NBC News. Biden was due to hold a telephone summit on Friday to discuss the crisis with the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Poland and Romania, as well as heads of NATO and the EU.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, visiting Australia, said: "We're in a window when an invasion could begin at any time, and to be clear, that includes during the Olympics."

The Beijing games end on Feb. 20.

"Simply put, we continue to see very troubling signs of Russian escalation, including new forces arriving at the Ukrainian border," Blinken said.

With alarm spreading, Japan and the Netherlands also told their citizens on Friday to leave Ukraine immediately. The Dutch diplomatic mission would be pulled from Kyiv and moved far from the Russian frontier to Lviv in Ukraine's west.

Russia has already massed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine, and this week it launched joint military exercises in neighboring Belarus and naval drills in the Black Sea.

Moscow denies plans to invade Ukraine, but says it could take unspecified "military-technical" action unless a series of demands are met, including promises from NATO never to admit Ukraine and to withdraw forces from Eastern Europe.

The West has said those main demands are non-starters. The EU and NATO alliance delivered responses this week on behalf of their member states, which they said had agreed to speak as one.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said on Friday it wanted individual answers from each country, and called the collective response insulting: "Such a step cannot be seen as anything other than a sign of diplomatic impoliteness and disrespect for our request."

Several Western countries launched diplomatic pushes this week to persuade Russia to back down, but Moscow brushed them off, yielding no concessions to French President Emmanuel Macron who visited on Monday and openly mocking British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss who came on Thursday.

Britain's Defence Secretary Ben Wallace was in Moscow on Friday, where Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told him Russia would soon respond to the NATO and EU letters over its demands.

Quad Ministers Address Indo-Pacific Coercion, Climate, COVID

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - The United States, Australia, Japan and India pledged to deepen cooperation to ensure the Indo-Pacific region was free from "coercion", a thinly veiled swipe at China's economic and military expansion.

Foreign ministers of the so-called Quad group, meeting in the Australian city of Melbourne, also promised to increase cooperation on COVID-19, cyber threats and counter-terrorism.

In a joint statement, they vowed to work on humanitarian relief, disaster assistance and the delivery of infrastructure to the region, and condemned North Korea's "destabilizing ballistic missile launches" in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

They said their informal Quad grouping was determined to deepen engagement with regional partners, and increase their capacity to combat unregulated and illegal fishing.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was to travel onwards to Fiji on Saturday to meet with Pacific island leaders to whom fishing and climate change are likely to be priority issues.

"We agreed to boost maritime security support for Indo Pacific partners to strengthen their maritime domain awareness and ability to develop their offshore resources, to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight and to combat challenges such as illegal fishing," Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said after the meeting.

The Quad partners "oppose coercive economic policies" that run counter to the World Trade Organization system, "and will work collectively to foster global economic resilience against such actions", the statement said, a reference to China's recent trade boycotts of Australia and Lithuania.

Blinken arrived in Australia this week as Washington grapples with a dangerous standoff with Moscow, which has massed some 100,000 troops near Ukraine's border and stoked Western fears of an invasion. Russia denies it has such plans.

China has denounced the Quad as a Cold War construct and a clique "targeting other countries".



UK-Russia Ties Close to Zero

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Moscow's ties with London were at a low point as he met with UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace for rare talks amid soaring tensions over Ukraine.

"Unfortunately, the level of our cooperation is close to zero and about to cross the zero meridian and go into negative, which is undesirable," Shoigu said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies.

He said he hoped for talks "without any escalation and raising the temperature even higher" in relations between Russia and the NATO bloc.

Shoigu also accused the West of "gorging" Ukraine with weapons. "It is coming from all sides and it is done publicly. It is done demonstrably. Not entirely clear why," he said.

Wallace, who is accompanied by the UK's Chief of the Defense Staff Tony Radakin, will also meet with the powerful chief of staff of the Russian army Valery Gerasimov.

He is the latest Western official to shuttle to Moscow in a desperate effort to find a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis.

Russia has around 100,000 troops stationed near its borders with Ukraine, with the West fearing the Kremlin could order an attack.

Wallace's visit comes a day after Britain's Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, met with her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Moscow for talks that appeared to be fruitless and ended in mutual accusations.

Relations between London and Moscow are at an all-time low, with Russia singling out the UK as particularly hostile of all the Western countries.

The last meeting between a UK and Russian defense minister took place in 2013.



Paris Braces for Canada-Style Convoys Against Covid Rules

PARIS (AFP) - Thousands of protesters headed toward Paris in convoys from across France, with many hoping to blockade the capital in opposition to Covid vaccination rules and other restrictions despite police warnings to back off.

Inspired by Canadian truckers paralyzing border traffic with the U.S., the French protesters set off from Bayonne, Perpignan, Lyon, Lille, Strasbourg and elsewhere with the aim of converging on Paris by Friday evening.

A police source said around 1,800 vehicles were estimated to be closing in on the capital.

The demonstrators include anti-Covid vaccination activists, but also people angry at fast-rising energy prices that they say have been a devastating blow to the finances of low-income families -- an echo of the "yellow vest" grievances that sparked widespread protests in 2018 and 2019.

They are demanding a withdrawal of the government's vaccine pass, which is required for access to many public spaces, and more help with their energy bills.

"People need to see us, and to listen to the people who just want to live a normal and free life," said Lisa, a 62-year-old retired health worker who joined a convoy of over 1,000 vehicles leaving Chateaubourg in the western Brittany region early Friday.

Like other protesters, Lisa has been active in the "yellow vest" movement that erupted over a fuel tax hike before becoming a platform for other complaints against President Emmanuel Macron.

The yellow vests often clashed with police, but Lisa said she hoped the protests on Friday would go off peacefully. "It would really annoy me if things got out of hand," she told AFP.



After spending a cold night in a parking lot, the drivers in Chateaubourg set off in a long single file of trucks, passenger cars and campers as sympathetic passers-by waved from bridges.

"All kinds of people are part of this," said Sarah, a 40-year-old tattoo artist from the northern city of Lens. "We're citizens, we have families, we work and we're all united against the government."

Paris police banned the gathering because of feared "public order disturbances," and said protesters who tried to block roads would face fines or arrest.

"We must be very firm about this," Prime Minister Jean Castex said.

An administrative court was, however, to rule on the legality of the police ban later on Friday.

Police showed off their anti-blockage arsenal on Twitter, publishing photographs of loader tractors for the removal of barricades as well trucks equipped with cranes or watercannon.

The protesters meanwhile shared information about police deployments around Paris, often via the encrypted Telegram messaging service, and exchanged tips about the easiest access routes.

"It's important that we don't interfere with other people on the roads," said one activist, Robin, on his way from Illkirch-Graffenstaden in the eastern Alsace region. "That way we'll keep the population on our side, like they did in Canada."

Many demonstrators are planning to stay in Paris overnight, and then join one of the regular Saturday protests against the government's vaccine pass.

Some then want to travel on to Brussels for a "European convergence" of protesters planned there for Monday.

Australia Claims It Thwarted Chinese Plot to Fund Election Candidates

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Chinese spies sought to fund candidates for Australia's center-left Labour opposition party in an upcoming federal election but the plot was foiled by the Australian national security agency, multiple media outlets reported.

The plot was arranged by an unnamed businessman with strong Chinese connections who sought to fund candidates in the state of New South Wales in exchange for influence in public office, said the reports.

But it was detected and stopped by the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO), the reports added, without giving details of the alleged plot such as timing or how it was thwarted. A Chinese intelligence service was behind the plot, said The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, citing unnamed security sources.

The Australian Broadcasting Corp and broadsheet The Australian also ran reports about the alleged plot.

The reports come as national security looms as a major campaign issue in a federal election due by May. The ruling conservative Coalition is trailing in most polls and recently accused Labour of being the preferred party of China.

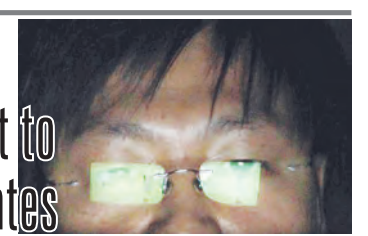
Labour leader Anthony Albanese said he was confident none of his candidates was compromised because he had spoken to ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess "and he has reaffirmed that he has not raised concerns about any of my candidates".

"I understand the government's desperate for distractions at the moment but I say to them that national security is too important to engage in game-playing," he told reporters.

In a speech on Wednesday, Burgess had made a general reference to "multiple" foreign countries seeking to interfere with Australian governments and referred to one "puppeteer" who had acted on behalf of an unnamed government to identify and bankroll candidates who would act, without their knowledge, in the interests of the foreign power.

The puppeteer referred to by Burgess was acting on behalf of China, said the reports today. An ASIO spokesperson referred Reuters to a transcript of Burgess's speech and declined to comment further.

The Chinese Embassy in Canberra did not respond to an e-mail requesting comment.



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J, balcony
fireplace
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

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

Parsian

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

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

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

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EU Chief Unveils €150b Investment Plan for Africa

DAKAR (Dispatches) - European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a more than €150-billion investment plan for Africa at a news conference in Senegal's capital Dakar.

It is the first regional plan of the European Union's Global Gateway investment scheme, which aims to mobilize investments of up to €300 billion for public and private infrastructure around the world by 2027. Seen as a response to China's Belt and Road initiative, the investment scheme will draw on private-sector investments as well as funding from EU institutions and member countries.

Von der Leyen said that she was "proud" to announce the over €150-billion investment plan for Africa.



U.S. Inflation Hits 40-Year High

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Consumer prices in the United States rose solidly in January, leading to the biggest annual increase in inflation in 40 years, which could fuel financial markets speculation for a 50 basis points interest rate hike from the Federal Reserve (Fed) next month.

The consumer price index (CPI) gained 0.6% last month after increasing 0.6% in December, the Labor Department said Thursday. In the 12 months through January, the CPI jumped 7.5%, the biggest year-on-year increase since February 1982.

That followed a 7% advance in December and marked the fourth straight month of annual increases in excess of 6%. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the CPI rising 0.5% and accelerating 7.3% on a year-on-year basis.

Effective with the January report, the CPI was re-weighted based on consumer expenditure data from 2019-2020.

The economy is grappling with high inflation, caused by a shift in spending to goods from services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Trillions of dollars in pandemic relief fired up spending, which ran against capacity constraints as the coronavirus sidelined workers needed to produce and move goods to consumers.

Soaring inflation has reduced purchasing power for households and eroded President Joe Biden's popularity. This is despite the economy growing at its strongest rate in 37 years in 2021 and the labor market rapidly churning out jobs.

The Fed is expected to start raising rates in March, to rein in inflation, which has overshot the U.S. central bank's 2% target. Financial markets are predicting a 25% chance of a 50 basis points increase, according to CME's FedWatch tool.

Market predictions are partly driven by the fact that price pressures are broadening, with several measures of wage inflation increasing strongly in recent months.

Economists, however, believe it is unlikely that the Fed would move so aggressively. They expect the central bank to raise rates by 25 basis points at least seven times this year.

"The Fed does not want to create undue volatility in its first hike, which only makes further increases more difficult," said Scott Ruesterholz, a Portfolio Manager at Insight Investment in New York. "Rather, the Fed would be more likely to guide to an accelerated pace of hikes at consecutive meetings to crack down on inflation."

Excluding the volatile food and energy components, the CPI increased 0.6% last month after rising 0.6% in December. In the 12 months through January, the so-called core CPI jumped 6%. That was the largest year-on-year gain since August 1982 and followed a 5.5% advance in December.

Rising rentals and shortages of goods like motor vehicles are fueling the core CPI. Monthly inflation could slow in the coming months amid an easing in supply bottlenecks as coronavirus infections driven by the omicron variant subside.

Government data this week showed goods imports increased to a record high in December as ships offloaded their cargo after months of delays because of labor shortages at ports. Wholesale motor vehicle inventories were increased by the most in 10 years in December.

Still, inflation will remain high for a while, in part reflecting the delayed impact of rising wages. Employers are boosting compensation as they compete for scarce workers. There were 10.9 million job openings at the end of December.

"The factors that have driven inflation higher in 2021 are only expected to dissipate gradually and are likely to keep pushing inflation higher through the first half of 2022," said Kevin Cummins, chief U.S. economist at NatWest Markets in Stamford, Connecticut.

"We expect that there will be a shift from goods inflation, particularly motor vehicle and commodities prices to more persistent services inflation, such as wages and heavily-weighted rents."

A separate report from the Labor Department on Thursday showed initial claims for state unemployment benefits fell 16,000 to a seasonally adjusted 223,000 for the week ended Feb. 5. Economists had forecast 230,000 applications for the latest week. Claims increased from the beginning of January through the middle of the month as omicron raged across the country.

They have dropped from a record high of 6.149 million in early April of 2020.

Malaysia GDP Up 3.1% for 2021

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Malaysia's gross domestic product expanded 3.1% in 2021, after logging 3.6% year-on-year growth in the fourth quarter, the central bank announced on Friday.

The result keeps the Southeast Asian economy on a recovery path after about two years of the COVID-19 crisis, which left thousands jobless and forced businesses to close up shop.

"GDP growth rebounded in the fourth quarter of 2021 supported by easing of [COVID-19] containment measures and strong external demand conditions," Bank Negara Malaysia Gov. Nor Shamsiah Yunus said.

According to the Department of Statistics, the manufacturing sector was the main contributor in the quarter, growing at a 9.1% clip after shrinking 0.8% in the third term. The growth was led by electrical, electronic and optical products followed by petroleum, chemicals, rubber and plastics.

Unemployment declined to 4.6% in the fourth quarter, while headline inflation rose to 3.2% versus 2.2% in the previous period.

The GDP figure for October-December sums up the economic roller coaster Malaysia has been on since the pandemic began. The economy contracted 0.5% in the first quarter of 2021, jumped 16.1% during the second and declined 4.5% in the third.



BoJ Defends Bond-Yield Target Against Rising Market Pressure

TOKYO (Dispatches) - The Bank of Japan showed its determination to resist a global shift towards tighter monetary policy on Thursday, offering to buy unlimited quantities of government debt next week to defend its bond yield target.

The move comes as investors test the BoJ's commitment to its "yield curve control" policy, a central feature of its monetary stance since 2016 under which it currently pledges to keep 10-year bond yields within a quarter of a percentage point of zero per cent. Earlier versions of the policy set a narrower band of tolerance.

Japan's 10-year yield climbed to a six-year high of 0.23 per cent on Thursday as traders speculate that, despite strenuous assertions to the contrary by the central bank's governor, the BoJ could become the latest central bank to respond to inflation by beginning a shift towards tighter policy.

Japan's consumer prices rose by 0.5 per cent in the year to December. Although notable in a country that has grown used to flat or falling prices, the inflation rate remains below the BoJ's 2 per cent target and far below the rates experienced in some other big economies.

The country's 10-year bond yield fell back to 0.21 per cent after the BoJ said it will buy unlimited amounts of the debt at a yield of 0.25 per cent, the first such offer since 2018. Earlier on Thursday, BoJ governor Haruhiko Kuroda said the central bank is not debating an end to ultra-loose monetary policy, and will not do so before the end of his term in April 2023.

UK Economy Rebounds By Record 7.5% From Pandemic in 2021

LONDON (Dispatches) - Britain's economy grew by a record 7.5 per cent last year on easing Covid curbs after a pandemic-driven collapse, official data showed, but analysts warned that sky-high inflation clouds the 2022 outlook.

The expansion, which was the fastest since records began in 1948, followed a record 9.4-per cent slump in 2020, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) added in a statement.

Economies across the world were slammed in 2020 by the deadly pandemic, which sparked lockdowns and other public health restrictions that have since been largely removed.

The ONS added Friday that the UK economy increased by 1.0 per cent in the fourth quarter despite the emergence of the Omicron Covid variant, matching its expansion in the third quarter.

However, gross domestic product dipped 0.2 per cent in December on fallout from the rapid spread of Omicron — which is widely regarded as less dangerous than previous variants but hit the travel sector.

"GDP fell back slightly in December as the Omicron wave hit, with retail and hospitality seeing the biggest impacts," said ONS director of economic statistics Darren Morgan.

"However, these were partially offset by increases in the Test and Trace service and vaccination programs. "Despite December's setback, GDP grew robustly across the fourth quarter as a whole with the NHS (National Health Service), couriers and employment agencies all helping to support the economy," added Morgan.

December activity held at its February 2020 level, before Covid struck.

Yet the fourth quarter of 2021 was slightly below that of the same period in 2019.

British finance minister Rishi Sunak welcomed the data.

"The economy has been remarkably resilient; with the UK seeing the fastest growth in the G7 last year," he said in a statement, noting it was boosted by the government's vast stimulus measures and speedy vaccination drive.

"I'm proud of the resolve the whole country has demonstrated, and proud of our incredible vaccine program which has allowed the economy to stay open."

The UK government is plotting the nation's full emergence from the long-running health emergency.

England will scrap the legal requirement to self-isolate after testing positive for Covid-19 later this month if infection levels remain stable, Prime Minister Boris Johnson unexpectedly announced Wednesday.

The proposed move would be one of the most dramatic easings of coronavirus rules taken by any country so far in the pandemic, as Johnson doubles down on a strategy of trying to "live with Covid".

England in late January lifted almost all remaining Covid restrictions that had been reimposed in early December to tackle Omicron.

Despite Friday's bright data, economists warn the UK outlook is darkened by a cost of living crisis that has been fuelled by rocketing domestic energy costs.

Turkey's Current Account Tumbles to \$14.9b in 2021

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's current account deficit narrowed nearly 60% to \$14.88 billion last year, less than expected, the central bank said.

Reining in the deficit is a big priority in Ankara's new economic program that stresses exports and a competitive exchange rate, while maintaining a low interest rate policy.

Turkey's import-reliant economy, worth \$717 billion in 2020, has been prone to big trade deficits and a boom-bust growth cycle that was exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

In a Reuters poll, the full-year deficit was forecast to be \$15 billion, below a government estimate of \$21 billion. The \$35.54 billion

deficit in 2020 was driven by a rising trade deficit and plunging tourism revenues amid the COVID-19 fallout.

After three months of surplus, a deficit re-emerged in the last two months of the year due to rising imports of energy and intermediary goods. The December deficit of \$3.84 billion was less than a poll forecast of \$4 billion.

The foreign trade deficit, a major component of the current account, widened 49.3% year-over-year in December to \$6.79 billion, official data showed.

Turkey's tourism income doubled to almost \$25 billion last year, reflecting a recovery from the initial wave of COVID-19 pandemic measures in 2020. The revenues are forecast to recover to \$34.5 billion this year.

Shoring up the current account deficit has been Ankara's main priority under its new economic model, which officials say will be achieved through raising exports with a competitive exchange rate.

The government has been endorsing a model based on lower borrowing costs, which it says will boost production, employment and exports, and also eventually help Turkey to solve the chronic current account deficit problem and contribute to stabilizing the Turkish lira.

To support the drive, Turkey's central bank has slashed its interest rates by 500 basis points since September to 14%, before pausing the easing cycle last month.

The lira had weakened 44% last year and hit a record low of 18.4 against the United States dollar in late December but rebounded after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's announcement of a scheme to boost lira deposits by protecting them against depreciation.

The initiative had helped the lira rally sharply to just over 10 and then settle at current levels just under 14 to the dollar.

The lira, which has traded steadily so far this year, was flat at 13.54 against the dollar on Friday.

Parsian Special Zone Iran's New Hub of Oil, Gas

BANDAR ABBAS (IRNA) - Iranian Oil Minister's Deputy for Planning said that Parsian Energy Intensive Industrial Special Economic Zone (PEISEZ) is a new hub of oil and gas in Iran and that the ministry assures investors feeding the zone.

An advantage of the PEISEZ is that it is close to the oil and gas sources in South Pars, Houshang Falahatnia said during a visit to the zone.

The deputy oil minister also inspected the progress of constructing two petrochemical plants and Parsian Port, calling the PEISEZ the best zone for development and growth of petrochemical industries.



Global Fuel Shortage Spreads to Diesel After Oil, Gas and Coal

LONDON (Dispatches) - As refiners struggle to keep pace with rapid recovery in post-COVID-19 demand, global supplies of diesel are dwindling, exacerbating an acute global energy shortage that has already driven up gas, coal and crude oil prices.

At a time when global central banks are fretting over inflation rates not seen for decades, diesel shortages would push up fuel and transportation costs further and add more upward pressure on retail prices.

The United States and Asian diesel imports on which Europe relies have been limited in recent weeks due to higher domestic consumption for manufacturing and road fuel purposes.

Gasoil inventories, which include diesel and heating oil, held in independent storage in Europe's Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp (ARA) refining and storage area fell last week by 2.5%, data from Dutch consultancy Insights Global showed.

Regional stocks were at their lowest level for this time of year since 2008, according to the data, while Singapore's onshore inventories of middle distillates also sank to multi-year lows of 8.21 million barrels.

"Diesel demand seems to be improving in (northwest Europe) but lower refining capacity compared with pre-COVID and low import levels are keeping the market under severe pressure," said Insights Global's Lars van Wageningen.

Northwest European diesel cargo prices reached \$114/bbl (barrel of crude oil) on Monday, the highest since September 2014, while margins to crude reached two-year highs last week.

Morgan Stanley analysts note that diesel prices reached around \$180 a barrel in 2008, driven by an "exceedingly tight" middle distillate market as Brent crude rose close to \$150/bbl.

"A repeat of that is not our base case, but it is notable that diesel prices have been tracking the 2007-08 period closely in recent months," they said, adding that they expected crude prices to reach \$100/bbl in the second half of this year.

Last week, a winter storm tested fuel availability in the United States with some utilities preparing to use more distillate fuel oil to meet demand, while South Korea and India have been unable to fill a supply gap left by China's recent clampdown on refined product exports due to their own domestic needs.

Tight supply has pushed Asian diesel prices for the benchmark 10ppm gasoil to their highest since Sept. 2014.

Refiners generally respond to high margins and low inventories by ramping up output. But the global oil refining complex is under strain, with capacity falling for the first time in 30 years last year as closures outweighed new additions, the International Energy Agency said last month.

Increasing diesel output would also require faster than normal crude processing rates at refineries, with downstream equipment configured to maximize middle distillate yields at the expense of light ones.



Instead, several refineries – particularly in the U.S. – are still running plants at rates below the five-year average to avoid producing too much jet fuel, where demand still lags 2019 levels, leaving companies struggling to identify a clear way to restock diesel inventories in the short term.

"Given the pressure from investors to reduce investments in fossil fuels and talk of peak oil demand, this backdrop likely reduces the incentive to invest in new refining capacity," UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo said.

"With fuel demand likely to increase in the next 10-15 years, and supply unable to keep pace, I would expect more (fuel price) volatility in the future," he added.

Tightening European supplies pushed the region's six-month diesel spread to more than \$100 a ton on Monday, its widest backwardation on record.

Backwardation means that prompt prices are higher than future contract prices, reflecting near-term demand that encourages traders to release oil from storage to sell it.

Nonetheless, preliminary diesel and gasoil flows into Europe from east of Suez, Russia, the Baltics and the U.S. this month are currently at 1.66 million tons, revised down from previous expectations of 1.83 million tons, according to Refinitiv data, and compared to 4.6 million tons in January.

"We have seen minimal diesel exporting from the U.S. Gulf Coast, and zero storage plays on clean vessels," said one U.S. clean tanker broker.

Iraq to Soon Purchase Electricity From Turkey

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Iraq will soon purchase 500 megawatts of electricity from Turkey to solve the problem of power cuts in the country.



Iraq's Electricity Minister Adil Karim made the related statements in a program on the state broadcaster.

Expressing that the negotiations for gas purchases from Qatar are continuing as well, in order to provide adequate electricity service in Iraq, Karim said: "The issue of gas purchase from Qatar will be completed within 1 year to 15 months, if the possibilities allow."

Reiterating that they also signed an energy (electricity) agreement with Saudi Arabia, Karim said the amount of electricity they will receive from Saudi Arabia in the first place is 500 megawatts, and then this will be increased to 1000 megawatts.

Karim noted that the electricity flow line with Jordan will be completed within a year, explaining that the electricity to be taken from this country will be transferred to the regions in the west of Iraq.

The Iraqi minister said that 8 million cubic meters (mcm) of gas is currently coming from Iran and this is insufficient for electricity generation.

"A delegation from the ministry will go to Tehran soon to solve the gas problem from Iran. The annual cost of Iranian gas to Iraq is less than \$4 billion. We didn't even get 1 megawatt from Iran last summer," he said.

Iraq has been grappling with a lack of electricity service for many years. In many parts of the country, only three to five hours of national electricity can be provided on average per day.

For years, Iraqis have been getting their electricity supply from neighborhood generators for a fee and in limited quantities. It is known that these generators increase environmental pollution and disease in the country.

AstraZeneca Sees Higher 2022 Sales Even as COVID Boost Wanes

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - AstraZeneca raised its annual dividend for the first time in a decade and forecast higher sales for 2022 as new drugs against cancer, kidney disease and rare conditions make up for a decline in COVID-19 products.

Early data has shown a booster shot of the drugmaker's widely-used COVID-19 vaccine and its antibody drug Evusheld both work against the Omicron coronavirus variant.

But while the company forecasts sales of Evusheld to grow this year, it expects that will be more than outweighed by a decline in sales of the vaccine amid growing competition.

AstraZeneca has started earning a modest profit on the vaccine, which was initially sold at-cost under a deal with its developers at Oxford University. But the company said it would continue to sell it to low-income nations on a non-profit basis.

While sales of COVID-19 products are expected to decline by a low-to-mid 20s percentage this year, the London-listed company forecast overall revenues to rise by a high teens percentage, with core earnings up by a mid-to-high 20s percentage.

Its shares were up around 3%, among the biggest risers on the FTSE-100 index, as some investors had braced for a weaker performance this year.

"There had been significant investor anxiety coming into today's guidance issuance, and with overall 2022 consensus numbers not likely to change on the back of the update, we believe the overhang should be largely lifted," analysts at J.P. Morgan said in a note.

Analysts currently expect 2022 earnings per share (EPS) of \$6.68 and sales of \$42.73 billion, according to Refinitiv IBES data.



The COVID-19 vaccine, with sales of \$3.9 billion, was AstraZeneca's second best-selling product last year, behind only lung cancer drug Tagrisso, which racked up over \$5 billion in revenues.

Rivals Pfizer (PFE.N) and Moderna, which have always sold their COVID-19 vaccines for a profit, have forecast 2022 sales for their shots of

about \$32 billion and \$18.5 billion respectively.

AstraZeneca's ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 shot, sold under the brands Vaxzevria and Covishield with more than 2.6 billion doses supplied as of February, remains a major weapon against the pandemic in middle-income countries.

But it is yet to get U.S. approval and its use in Europe has diminished as countries have inoculated most of their populations and tend to prefer Pfizer and Moderna's vaccines.

Chief Executive Pascal Soriot said the vaccine still had a big role to play.

"The vaccine has had a fantastic welcome and reception in Latin America, in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East, in many places around the world," he said.

AstraZeneca expects to submit the vaccine for U.S. regulatory approval in the first half of the year, much later than the original timetable for 2021. The company beat fourth-quarter earnings forecasts and said it would raise its annualized dividend by \$0.10 to \$2.90 per share.

"AstraZeneca continued on its strong growth trajectory in 2021 with ... five of our medicines crossing (the) blockbuster threshold," Soriot said, referring to products that generate more than \$1 billion per year in sales.

Total revenue jumped 63% to \$12.01 billion for the three months to Dec. 31 on a constant-currency basis, while core EPS came in at \$1.67 cents, topping estimates of an EPS of \$1.50 on sales of \$10.79 billion.

Twitter Misses Ad Revenue and User Growth Estimates

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Twitter Inc reported weaker-than-expected quarterly advertising revenue and user growth on Thursday and forecast revenue short of Wall Street targets, indicating that its turnaround plan has yet to bear fruit.

Still, the social networking site said it made "meaningful progress" toward its goal of reaching 315 million users and \$7.5 billion in annual revenue by the end of 2023, and said user growth should accelerate in the United States and internationally this year.

Shares of the San Francisco-based company rose more than 8% after the results, but pared those gains in morning trading.

Twitter has been pursuing big projects such as audio chat rooms and newsletters to end long-running stagnation and attract new users and advertisers. But the quarterly results raised questions about Twitter's plan as analysts had expected faster signs of progress.

Iraq Urges U.S. to ...

FROM PAGE 1

"With the funds, (Iran) is supposed to buy food products or drugs. This requires lengthy vetting by the U.S. government or other bodies before the purchases can go ahead.

"Given the U.S. government has allowed us to import the gas, it should also allow us to release the funds," he said.

Iraq "needs to make very large investments in renovating its infrastructure in the gas sector." Frustrated by Iraq's failure to pay its debts, Iran has already on several occasions cut its Iraqi gas and electricity deliveries, further aggravating the chronic outages that plague the Iraqi grid. The Iraqi official said Iran's interruptions in deliveries to Iraq were sometimes due to the shortfalls in its own domestic supply.

"When they need gas, they cut our supplies," Karim said.

He also noted the contract with Iran contained no penalty clauses for failure to honor agreed deliveries. "I imagine this contract was drawn up rather hastily," he added.

An Iraqi delegation was due in Tehran to discuss the issue "in the coming days," Karim said.

JCPOA Deepens...

FROM PAGE 1

The U.S. has so far failed to remove its maximum pressure sanctions, which it imposed on Iran after Washington pulled out of the JCPOA, or to give guarantees that a future administration will not ditch the deal, yet again.



Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, said that there is no coherence or cohesion coming from the U.S. on the revival of the 2015 Iran deal.

Shamkhani stressed that the U.S. administration cannot impose the cost of its internal disputes on Iran.

And I think that now what we are witnessing is a division, internally, inside the political establishment, both Democrats and Republicans, regarding a resolution to the ongoing situation with Iran, regarding whether to go back to the table and to rejoin the JCPOA, Shamkhani said.

Disparate voices from the U.S. government show that there is no coherence in the country to make political decisions leading to progress in the Vienna talks.

With the current decisions and reactions from Washington to several international issues, it has been proved to the world that the U.S. is declining and the country is losing its influence in the world and even in the U.S. itself because Biden's approval rating is nose-diving and dropped below 40% which is the lowest since his taking office and for this reason the government is suffering from "decision-making impotency" and it will help more decline of this country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran since its foundation in 1979 has been a hurdle in way of the U.S. colonialism in the region and the world and it has played more role in the current condition of the U.S. as the country was once considered the dominant world power has now turned into a normal country which is even unable to make a firm decision on an issue no matter a domestic or international one.

As the talks in Vienna continue, we expect more rifts and political clashes among the U.S. politicians and the world will benefit of it because by such rifts in the U.S., this country will be busy with its domestic affairs and it will have no time to meddle in the domestic affairs of the other countries and the fervent allies of this country will be the main losers of this decline and the Islamic Republic of Iran will be the real winner by cornering Washington to stay away from meddling in other nations' affairs.

Iran Seeks...

FROM PAGE 1

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said in a phone interview with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, early on Tuesday, saying, "The Western side must make a serious and effective decision with regard to removing sanctions and demonstrate its meaningful departure from the failed policies of the previous U.S. administration."

"This will be possible by removing all sanctions contravening the JCPOA and adopting serious measures with regard to providing guarantees [that the US will not abandon the deal again]," the Iranian top diplomat added.

Give Crushing...

FROM PAGE 1

"The high standing of Iran, especially the country's Armed Forces, has been established with the support of the Iranian people and the commitment and patriotism of its youths."

The Iranian nation toppled the despotic regime of Pahlavi, which was fully supported by the United States, in the winter of 1979 after the shah regime was forced to allow the late founder of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to return from exile.

On the 43rd anniversary of the auspicious occasion, Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) unveiled on Wednesday a new ballistic missile with a range of 1,450 kilometers (900 miles).

The precision strike ballistic missile, dubbed Khaybar Shekan, is capable of striking its designated targets with pinpoint accuracy.

A Pentagon study has recently acknowledged Iran's missile power, saying its arsenal is larger than that of any other country in West Asia.

"Iran has an extensive missile development program, and the size and sophistication of its missile force continue to grow despite decades of counter-proliferation efforts aimed at curbing its advancement," it said.

Despite decades of sanctions imposed by Washington, Iran has made significant achievements in its ballistic missiles program.

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F1 to Race in Bahrain Until 2036

LONDON (Dispatches) - The Bahrain Grand Prix will remain on the Formula One calendar until at least 2036, F1's chief executive said, in a deal that secures the event's long-term future.
The Persian Gulf island kingdom, which held its first race in 2004, is set to host this year's season opener on March 20, having also hosted the first round last year.
In addition it held two races on two different layouts of its Sakhir track during the Covid-19 pandemic-shortened 2020 season.

Schwartzman Reaches Buenos Aires Quarters

LONDON (Dispatches) - Second-seeded Diego Schwartzman of Argentina produced hot streaks in both tiebreakers and emerged with a 7-6 (2), 7-6 (4) win over Spain's Jaume Munar in the second round of the Argentina Open in Buenos Aires.
The first-set tiebreaker was level 2-2 before Schwartzman won the next five points. In the second-set tiebreaker, Schwartzman won the first six points. Munar then saved four match points before Schwartzman sealed the victory.

FIFA Backs Semi-Automated Offside System to Boost VAR

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - FIFA hopes the rolling out of its semi-automated offside technology being trialled at the Club World Cup will not only speed up decision-making but offer increased clarity for football supporters.

The optical tracking system was first tested at last year's Arab Cup in Qatar, and the ultimate goal is for it to be fully in use for the World Cup in the Gulf state later this year.

Pierluigi Collina, chairman of FIFA's referees committee, on Wednesday told reporters VAR had proved "very successful" since its introduction but conceded more consistency is needed.

"It's not yet at the very, very top... the same speed decision-making process. Being fast and being accurate don't work together," Collina said at the Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi.

"It's important the video officials get an accurate decision, but we are aware we need to reduce the time, particularly with offside."

"Sometimes it takes a bit longer to assess an offside decision, particularly in very tight incidents," he said.

"The goal is already celebrated, everybody is waiting and then there is a goal disallowed, or the other way round... and then after quite a long time there is the final decision."

The data-driven, limb-tracking technology relies on a series of dedicated cameras and broadcast cameras around the stadium to give the exact position of players on the pitch, offering referees precise information within seconds.

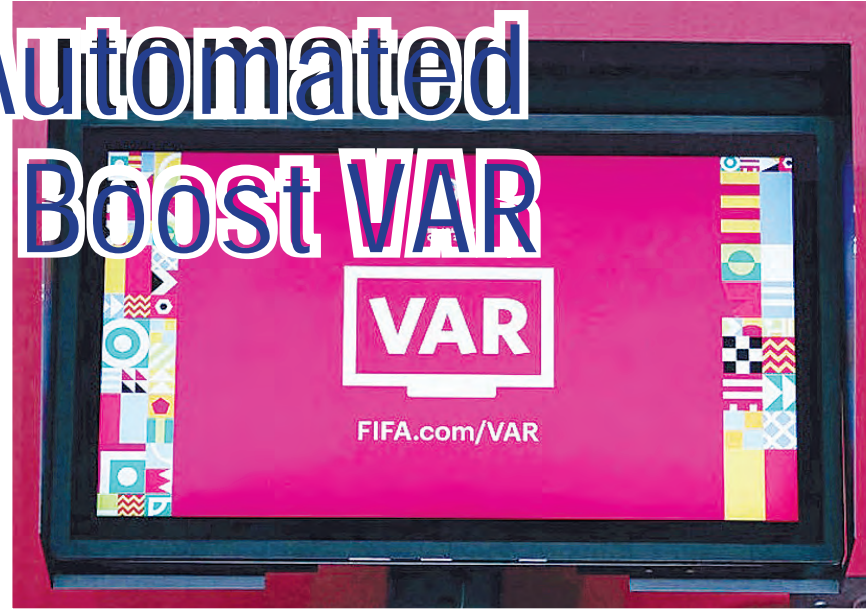
To provide improved accuracy, the system currently generates 18 data points per player -- tracking the various parts of the body to create a skeletal, three-dimensional model.

The aim is to increase that to 29 for the World Cup to provide further precision, according to the head of football technology at FIFA, Sebastian Runge.

Once a final decision is made, the artificial-intelligence driven technology turns the images into a 3D animation that can be displayed on the big screen at grounds.

"By taking that data, we can enter the 3D world and we can create animations, that can explain perfectly whether a player was onside, how much of that player was offside or onside," said Runge.

"We put that in an animation that will be shared with TV and our giant screen operators



and we can inform the spectators in a clearer way on offside and onside decisions."

Despite the ever-growing influence of technology, FIFA insisted the match officials will always make the final call.

A dedicated VAR assistant is responsible for monitoring offside, checking incidents as they happen rather than waiting for a stoppage in play.

The assistant notifies the main VAR official, who makes the decision and then speaks to the referee.

"I know that someone called it 'robot offside'; it's not. The technology is simply a tool used by human beings," said Collina.

"The referees and the assistant referees are still responsible for the decision on the field of play. The technology only gives them valued support to make more accurate and quicker decisions."

Collina used the example of a goal ruled out for offside in Palmeiras' 2-0 semi-final win over Al Ahly on Tuesday as an area where more can be done to keep fans fully informed.

"We were discussing before how to get the attention of the people in the stadium because if you don't know (the animation) is coming... you don't look at the giant screen," he said.

"It's not possible to get this image within the same stoppage of play. It takes roughly 30 seconds, that's why it's shown at the next stoppage of play."

"Maybe we need a way to alert fans to the image on the big screen."

Kremlin Fully Supports Skater Valieva in Olympic Doping Row

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - The Kremlin said it was fully behind Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva, whose Olympic gold medal hangs in the balance after she failed a doping test.

"We boundlessly and fully support Kamila Valieva and call on everyone to support her," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"And we say to Kamila: don't hide your face. You are a Russian — perform and defeat everybody," Peskov added.

He said the Kremlin was encouraging everyone to wait for the results of the investigation and for the International Olympic Committee to make its decision.

"We are convinced that this is some kind of misunderstanding," Peskov said.

The IOC and the International Skating Union are appealing against Russia's decision to allow Valieva to continue competing in Beijing after the 15-year-old tested positive in December for trimetazidine — a metabolic agent that is prescribed for the treatment of angina and vertigo.

It is banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency because it can increase blood flow efficiency and help endurance.



Man United Sign £20m Sponsorship Deal

LONDON (Dispatches) - Ahead of their English Premier League (EPL) match against Southampton on 12 February 2022, Manchester United confirmed a whopping GBP 20 million sponsorship deal with blockchain company Tezos.

Training kits, among other items, for Manchester United players and the coaching staff will be sponsored by Tezos.

For football and crypto enthusiasts trying to read between the lines, this deal could come as a hint that Manchester United might take a plunge into the world of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) in the future.

The agreement will see Man United first-team players and coaching staff sport Tezos branded jerseys during practice and warm-ups before the weekend's EPL game.

Although all details and information regarding the deal have not been disclosed, the Tezos Foundation may also make regular contributions to the United Foundation.

On the NFT and blockchain front, Manchester United also plans to introduce a number of fan experiences on the Tezos blockchain.

Talks of replacing the club's previous sponsor — American insurance company Aon — were doing the rounds as their GBP 120 million contract of eight years ended last season.

The football club had entered into talks with The Hut Group for the deal, but that eventually did not work out due to certain fan boycott concerns.

Nets Lose 10th Straight

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Brooklyn Nets capped a tumultuous day by crashing to a 10th straight NBA defeat, falling 113-112 to the Wizards in Washington.

Hours after confirming they had traded superstar James Harden to the Philadelphia 76ers -- dismantling their "Big Three" of Harden, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant — the Nets couldn't hang on to a nine-point third-quarter lead against the Wizards.



Eriksen Not Afraid to Play With ICD Implant in Premier League

LONDON (Dispatches) - Danish midfielder Christian Eriksen says he has no qualms about playing with a heart-starting device implant in a league as physical as the Premier League.

Eriksen, who collapsed during a European Championship match in Copenhagen last June and was given life-saving CPR treatment, is now fitted with a special heart-starting device known as an Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator (ICD).

The 29-year-old was forced to terminate his contract with Inter Milan in December because footballers fitted with an ICD are not permitted to play in Serie A. He signed for Brentford last month as a free agent for the rest of the season.

"I don't really have any scared feelings about it, I don't feel my ICD, so if it gets hit I know it is safe enough," Eriksen told BBC Sport.

"I am not scared of the challenges ahead and the bullies in the game, no."

The Denmark international said the doctors believe his cardiac arrest was a one-time occurrence as he had neither any history of cardiac issues nor family problems.

"I have been cleared to do everything from the doctors, so in that sense it doesn't really matter what was the reason," he added. "Continuously I have been given the green light that everything is OK for the future."

"I don't see any risk, no. I have an ICD, if anything would happen then I am safe."

Eriksen spent seven years at Tottenham Hotspur prior to his transfer to Inter in 2020. He will be unveiled as a Brentford player on Friday but says he is not yet ready to play his first competitive match since his collapse.

"I have done a lot of running and a lot of tests, so the condition is good, but the football touch is something you get in games. To get there is still a few more weeks," he said.

Champions League Tie Will Not Decide Mbappe's Future

MADRID (Dispatches) - Paris Saint-Germain coach Mauricio Pochettino does not believe Kylian Mbappe's future will be influenced by their Champions League last 16 tie with Real Madrid.

Mbappe's contract with PSG expires in the summer and while the 23-year-old French international is widely expected to join Real Madrid, he suggested in December he could yet stay in France.

Real play the first leg of the last 16 tie at Parc de Princes on Tuesday.

"I don't think that such an important decision depends on a game, or a tie," Pochettino told Spanish radio station Cadena Ser.

"He is an intelligent, mature boy, with a tremendous ability to analyze and know perfectly well what he wants for his future."

"He has many people around him who I'm sure will advise him in the best way. So I don't think that's the case. I see him calm, focused on doing the best possible for PSG. You have to respect him. He will make a decision after the tie."

The match is the blockbuster tie of the round, with Lionel Messi up against Madrid for the first time since leaving Barcelona while Sergio Ramos could be up against his former club, although the veteran defender is struggling with a calf injury.

"Leo is a genius, one of those players that emerges once in a hundred years," said Pochettino.

"I think he comes into this decisive part of the season in his best moment. I have no doubt that he is going to show the best version of himself."

Pochettino said Ramos has "suffered some relapses".

"We will see if he is available, and if not for the second leg," Pochettino added.

Neymar is also a doubt, after missing the last 11 games with an ankle injury.



James Drafts Antetokounmpo First For All-Star Game

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - LeBron James and Kevin Durant picked their teams for the NBA All-Star Game, James making Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo the first selection while James Harden went last.

Brooklyn Nets star Durant, who will captain one of the teams in the midseason exhibition in Cleveland on February 20, declined to select Harden with the penultimate pick.

Hours before, Harden was reportedly traded from the Nets to the Philadelphia 76ers in a blockbuster deal that will bring Ben Simmons, Seth Curry and Andre Drummond to Brooklyn.

That meant Harden went to Team LeBron, which has won the last four editions of the contest since the format shifted from an Eastern Conference v Western Conference format.

The current system has the captains choose their players from the starters and reserves selected by fans, fellow players and coaches.

On the televised draft programme, James made two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo the first selection, while Durant — who won't play because of a knee injury — made 76ers star Joel Embiid his first pick.

James's starting lineup will also feature Golden State Warriors star Stephen Curry, Chicago's DeMar DeRozan and reigning NBA MVP Nikola Jokic.

Durant's starting five will also feature rising Memphis Grizzlies star Ja Morant, Boston's Jayson Tatum, Atlanta's Trae Young and Golden State's Andrew Wiggins.

James's reserves are Luka Doncic, Chris Paul, Jimmy Butler, Donovan Mitchell, Fred VanVleet, Harden and Darius Garland — who James said he selected because he knew Durant wanted him.

Team Durant's reserves are Devin Booker, Karl-Anthony Towns, Zach LaVine, Dejounte Murray, Khris Middleton, LaMelo Ball and Rudy Gobert.

