

Health Ministry Announced on Saturday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to 137,747 With 154 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh Says the IRGC's Missile Firepower and Its Ability to Launch Projectiles Simultaneously Have Increased Sevenfold

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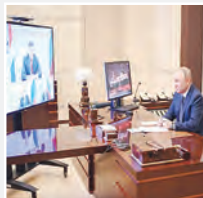


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IRGC Unveils Two Missile, Drone Bases

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

The Aerospace Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has unveiled two missile and drone tunnel bases built at the heart of high mountains.

On Saturday, the IRGC Chief Commander Major General Hossein Salami unveiled the bases, which house ground-to-ground missile systems with advanced equipment, as well as attack drones that can penetrate the enemy's radar and defense networks.

The bases are also home to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) with a range of 2,000 kilometers, two-missile launch platforms and multi-drone launch platforms, which were unveiled during the IRGC's Great Prophet 17 joint military exercises in Iran's southern shore in December 2021.

During General Salami's visit to the bases, Brigadier General Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, presented a report on the new measures taken by the elite military force and its achievements.

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Israel Biggest Enemy Of Muslim, Arab World

TEHRAN (PresSTV) - Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani says Israel remains the "biggest enemy" of the Muslim and Arab world, reiterating that Tehran seeks cooperation with neighbors to secure regional interests against Tel Aviv.

Iran's top security official tweeted on Saturday that, "We must not forget that the Zionist regime is the biggest enemy of the Islamic world and the Arab world."

Shamkhani also referred to the direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, saying Tehran's "active participation" in the Iraq-hosted negotiations "stems from the Islamic Republic's principled strategy of cooperation with its neighbors based on securing bilateral and regional interests."

The remarks came after bin Salman described Israel as a "potential ally" with shared interests, not an enemy - but that it must solve its conflict with the Palestinians first.

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Tehran Calls for Nonpolitical Cooperation From IAEA



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Head of Iran's nuclear energy organization has called for "nonpolitical cooperation" from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after meeting the UN body's director general Rafael Grossi in Tehran.

Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, made the remarks Saturday in a joint news conference with Grossi who arrived earlier in the day for his third visit under the new Iranian administration.

Grossi said he had been in regular contacts with his Iranian counterpart, but the two sides "did have a number of important matters" that had not been resolved for a long time and, hence, they had now "decided to try a practical, pragmatic approach" to overcome them.

The visit comes as talks in Vienna between Iran and the P4+1 group of countries aimed at reviving the 2015 deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), are coming to a close.

Grossi said the Vienna talks and the Iran-IAEA cooperation are interrelated, adding if Iran and the IAEA do not reach an agreement on safeguards issues, it will be difficult to reach an agreement in the Austrian capital.

Eslami said he reviewed with Grossi the remaining issues on the IAEA chief's previous trips to Iran and those of Iranian officials to Vienna, and "reached a conclusion".

"It was decided to exchange the necessary documents between Iran and the IAEA" by the end of the Iranian month of Khordad on June 21, he added.

The remaining issues, Eslami said, should be resolved in a normal way and hoped that "the new interaction and path we are establishing" with the agency would lead to Iran's development.

"We hope that the process of cooperation will be nonpolitical and the Iranian nation will see its effects in their lives," he said.

"Political influence and lobbying should not impact the decisions of the IAEA. Iran and the IAEA should follow their issues in a completely professional way and behave within the framework of expertise," Eslami said.

"There is no room for any political action."

The IAEA chief later met Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

Grossi said he was committed to advancing the IAEA's cooperation with Iran and helping the Iranian people move towards prosperity.

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Iran Devising Mechanism for Free Trade With Pakistan

PESHAWAR (Dispatches) - Consul General of Iran Hamid Raza Ghomi said the Islamic Republic of Iran is devising a mechanism for free trade with Pakistan to strengthen economic relations between the two brotherly Islamic countries.

"If the policy based on the mechanism is implemented, the set mutual trade target 5 billion dollars between the two countries could be achieved easily," said Hamid Raza Ghomi while talking to Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) President Hasnain Khurshid at the Chamber's House here on Friday.

SCCI's other office-bearers and officials of the Iranian Consulate General, including Hossein Maliki, Imtiaz Ali, Dr Fazal Azeem were present on the occasion.

The Iranian diplomat said both countries enjoyed cordial relations owing to common culture and religion. He said the option of barter trade was available to cement the mutual relationship between Iran and Pakistan.

The Iranian consul general suggested signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between the SCCI and Industries and Mines Ministry in Iran for joint initiatives to promote bilateral trade.

Earlier, the SCCI chief emphasized that joint efforts should be made to enlarge mutual trade and economic relations between Pakistan and Iran. Hasnain Khurshid pointed out that it was getting difficult to achieve mutual trade targets for lack of proper banking channels between the two countries.

An ambitious 5 billion dollars mutual trade target is being set between Pakistan and Iran, but in the last year, 504million dollars trade was carried out between the two countries, the SCCI chief pointed out. However, he hoped the constitution mechanism for free trade would lead to the achievement of the afore-stated set Pak-Iran mutual trade target.

He said the exchange of business delegations, joint exhibitions, signing of agreements between chambers and taking benefits from each other's experiences and launching of joint ventures would cement bilateral trade relations between Pakistan and Iran.

The SCCI chief stressed the need for early completion of the Pak-Iranian Gas pipeline project.

Ghomi said a delegation led by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly Speaker Mushtaq Ghani would soon visit Iran. He suggested to the SCCI chief to become part of the delegation as that would ensure the representation of the business community.

The Iranian diplomat agreed to the proposals made by the SCCI president and other participants. He said the SCCI should get practical and sign an agreement with the Mashhad Chamber of Iran, assuring his full assistance in this regard at every level.

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Can Biden Be Trusted?

When Joe Biden was elected as the U.S. President in a controversial presidential election in 2016, many pro-West politicians in Iran claimed that it is the best time for direct talks with the U.S. Administration because Biden is a moderate president and Iran can make a deal with him but Supreme Leader Seyed Ali Khamenei warned Iranians over trusting the West and any U.S. President and he cast doubt on Biden and despite the flexible approach in Vienna talks, Biden revealed his true nature as the U.S. President on Thursday he extended a national emergency against Iran for another year, in yet another act of bad faith as diplomats are engaged in the final stages of talks in Vienna.

In a statement on Thursday, Biden said the national emergency declared by former president Bill Clinton on March 15, 1995, must continue in effect beyond March 15, 2022.

The actions and policies of the Government of Iran continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States, the statement read.

"Therefore, in accordance with section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)), I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency with respect to Iran declared in Executive Order 12957," it added.

Earlier, the European Union's deputy foreign policy chief, Enrique Mora, who coordinates the Vienna talks, tweeted that "we are at the final stages of the Vienna Talks on JCPOA."

In recent days, diplomats participating in the eighth round of negotiations in the Austrian capital have said that "a deal is within reach" provided that the remaining, narrowed-down issues are resolved.

What Biden did shows this point that the U.S. presidents either Democrat or Republican cannot be trusted and they just differ in forms and they have no major difference in content which is arrogance regarding other states.

Biden with extending national emergency revealed his true nature that he does not do a favor regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran in Vienna talks and what the West is doing in Vienna is just because of Iran's power which has forced Biden and his colleagues to give in Iran's demands.

As the Supreme Leader has repeatedly emphasized, the U.S. cannot be trusted and the country is a wolf in disguise which tears apart any country which is weak or shows weakness.

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Vienna Talks May End In Deal Next Week

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - While British and French envoys believe that Vienna talks are close to reaching an agreement, the Russian envoy in the talks says a deal may be reached in the middle of next week.

Ongoing indirect talks between Iran and the United States are close to reaching an agreement, the chief British and French envoys said on Friday as they and their German colleague flew home to brief ministers.

"We are close. E3 negotiators leaving Vienna briefly to update Ministers on state of play. Ready to return soon," Stephanie Al-Qaq said on Twitter, referring to the chief British, French, and German diplomats involved in the talks, Reuters reported.

"Hoping to return quickly to reach a conclusion because we are very, very close to an agreement," the French envoy, Philippe Errera, said on Twitter.

"As far as I know, the Iranians are not ready for direct talks," Russian envoy Mikhail Ulyanov also told reporters, referring to some claims that Tehran and Washington might be preparing to sit down together through diplomats.

"We will have a deal maybe in the middle of next week. We are talking about the last efforts before crossing the finish line", the Russian senior diplomat added.



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€4.5b Allocated to Strengthen Iran's Defense Power

TEHRAN (MNA) - The government was obliged to allocate €4.5 billion to strengthen defense power and strategic defense research using the financial resources of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC).

On Saturday, Lawmakers in an open session of Parliament obliged the government to allocate €4.5 billion worth of budget, using financial resources of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), to strengthen defense power and strategic defense research programs.

Gov't Sets Health Protocol Conditions for New Year Holiday

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Referring to the coming days and holidays, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi said that attending gatherings and celebrations, traveling and attending the Rahian-e Noor field trips permissible by observing health protocols.

Speaking on Saturday morning in the meeting of the National Task Force Against Coronavirus, President Raisi congratulated the Sha'ban holidays and said, "As usual, we have meetings and gatherings during the upcoming days and festivals. These ceremonies are not against observing health protocols, physical distancing and wearing masks".

The President said that the priority for travel and the presence of people in Rahian-e Noor field trips is to inject 3 doses of vaccine, adding, "Of course, according to the decision of the National Task Force Against Coronavirus, if someone has not received the third dose of the vaccine, they can still use social services by providing their negative COVID-19 results".

Emphasizing that the policy announced by the National Task Force Against Coronavirus is to persuade the public to inject 3 doses of COVID-19 vaccine, Raisi said, "Explain to people through various methods how much the injection of 3 doses of corona vaccine is for their own health and to protects the health of others".



"Use every means and advertising tool to persuade people to get the corona vaccine," he said.

In another part of his speech, the President referred to the issue of unification of nursing tariffs and emphasized, "This issue is a serious demand of the country's nursing community, which the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution has underscored the implementation twice, so it should be implemented as soon as possible".

Raisi also talked about the needs of the Red Crescent Organization's warehouses, saying, "The Red Crescent Organization is one of the most important relief institutions in the country, whose warehouses should never face shortages".

The President referred to the issue of exporting COVID-19 vaccine and said, "The Ministry of Health should take action to identify target markets for vaccine export and provide vaccine to countries that cannot afford the vaccine, taking into account domestic needs".

Iran Has Enough Effective Domestically-Manufactured Arms



TEHRAN (MNA) - Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Major General Hossein Salami has said that Iran has enough effective weapons manufactured with indigenous knowledge.

The IRGC top commander Major General Hossein Salami made the comments at the unveiling ceremony of two new missile and UAV bases of the IRGC Aerospace on Saturday.

Addressing the ceremony, he hailed the IRGC Air Force for its achievements in the field of producing domestically-made deterrence and defensive weapons.

He pointed to the fall of the Afghanistan government under Ashraf Ghani which was overthrown by the Taliban in less than two months and said, "The well-equipped army supported by the US troops did not fight for even 10 minutes in Afghanistan."

He went on to say that faith and the will of Iranian troops matter more on the battlefield than the weapons while adding that Iran has enough effective weapons manufactured with indigenous knowledge.

Iranian Firms Have Good Opportunity for Broader Presence in Russia

TEHRAN (IP) - Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Russian Federation said that Keeping in mind the sanctions imposed against Russia, the Iranian firms have a good opportunity for broader presence in that country.

Kazem Jalali, speaking in a video conference with the governor-general of East Azarbaijan province Abedin Khorram, pointed to the superior and unique position of East Azarbaijan in the country and its pivotal role in foreign relations, asking for the province's merchants and business leaders in the Russian markets.

Jalali was referring to President Ebrahim Raisi's diplomacy of expanding relations with the neighboring countries.

He said that Russia's imports in the year 2021 were around 300 billion dollars, adding that the major part of Russia's needed products are provided through imports and Iran's share of this huge market is not appropriate with the capacities of our country.

"Last year, the trade volume of our country with Russia reached its highest level, which was 4 billion dollars, and now we need to increase that volume drastically," he said.

For his part, the governor-general of East Azerbaijan referred to the long-term perspective for the ideal strategic ties between Iran and Russia, saying, "The East Azarbaijan province can play a decisive role in materializing that objective and the historical necessity can play an important role in this respect."

Khorram referred to the opportunities for making joint investments, arguing that identifying the products that can be exported to Russia and those that can be imported from that county can facilitate and speed up the presence of the Iranian firms in the vast Russian markets and allocate a large share for Iran in that market under the current conditions.

Official Warns About Lowest Ever Fertility Rate

TEHRAN (IFP) - Health Minister Bahram Einollahi issued a stark warning about Iran's alarmingly declining fertility rate.

Iran's population growth is unfortunately in a critical situation, the minister said on Saturday adding that the fertility rate is at its lowest level.

"At the Ministry of Health, we have to provide services for population growth, we promise to pay for the health expenses of pregnant mothers, and if a pregnant mother does not have insurance coverage, she will be covered for free," Einollahi stated.

The Iranian health minister said earlier this week that free maternity services will be offered to all pregnant women in a bid to encourage childbirth.

According to the Statistical Center of Iran, childbirth rate fell to 1.6 per woman in the year ending March 2021, which is one of its lowest in decades.

The Iranian government has been working on a package of incentives to prevent population decline. Authorities are offering low interest loans for each newly-born baby among other incentives.

The current population of Iran is more than 85,000,000 as of last March.

Iran to Train Tajikistan's Electricity Industry Operators

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran as a powerful country in developing electricity networks plans to provide Tajik electricity industry operators with expertise training, an Iranian official said.

Deputy Minister of Energy for International Affairs Mohammad-Ali Farahnakian said that Tajikistan and Iran have reached agreement that Tajik electricity specialists travel to Tehran in order to take part in educational courses in this field.

Pointing to a recent visit by Tajikistan's Minister of the Energy and Water Recourses Daler Juma to Tehran, the Iranian official noted that Mr. Daler Juma also Presides Tajik side of the Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Commission, who traveled to the Islamic Republic to review expansion of mutual cooperation.

Iranian Minister of Oil Javad Owji and the Tajik minister reached very good agreements to bolster collaboration in crude oil sector, Farahnakian mentioned.

The deputy minister went on to say that Tajik and Iranian officials have agreed upon holding training courses in Tehran to get Tajik electricity operators acquainted with state-of-the-art technology in Iran.

Turkey and Iran are great producers and exporters of electricity in West Asia, but Tajikistan has shown interest to dispatch Tajik electricity operators to Tehran to receive training, the Iranian official added.

Moreover, Iran has not experienced blackouts for 18 years, while many other countries, including neighboring states, suffer from the problem every now and then, Farahnakian said, arguing that such an important issue is among the reasons that persuaded the Tajik side to send electricity operators to Iran for specialized training.

Cooperation in energy sector and training courses for Tajik operators can help boost bilateral ties between the two countries, he noted.

Iran Not Hoping for Miracle in Vienna Talks Reviving Idle Mines Increases Mineral Output

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - President Ebrahim Raisi reaffirmed his administration's commitment to the nullification of sanctions and adopting a balanced foreign policy, stressing that Tehran does not expect any miracle in the Vienna talks on the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal.

Speaking to reporters after a visit to the northern province of Golestan on Friday, Raisi said it is not possible to restrict the country's relations to a few countries.

Highlighting his administration's efforts to promote and strengthen ties with neighbors and regional countries, the president emphasized the need for balance in foreign relations.

Deploing his predecessor for the orientation of its foreign policy towards the West, the president said the country needs to move forward without depending on Western governments.

Commenting on the Vienna talks for saving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Raisi said Iran has pinned its hopes firstly on God, then on the people.

"We do not hope for a miracle in Vienna. We are and will be after the removal of sanctions, but more importantly, we are pursuing the nullification of the sanctions," he added.

The Vienna talks between Iran and the other parties to the Iran deal began in April on the assumption that the U.S., under the administration of Joe Biden, would be willing to rejoin the JCPOA.

TEHRAN (MNA) - Reviving small idle mines across Iran has added over 22,000 tons to the country's minerals production output in the first 11 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2021-January 20, 2022), an official with the Industry, Mining and Trade Ministry announced.

According to Reza Azimi, who directs the ministry's program for reviving and developing small mines, over 453 such mines have been revived and developed in the mentioned 11 months creating job opportunities for over 3,500 people, IRNA reported.

Azimi said the most important goal of this program, which is being implemented by the Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO), is to activate the country's mines, which will result in increased production and employment, especially in deprived areas.

"Our focus is on the development and supporting of inactive and expandable mines across the country using private sector capital," the official said.

According to Azimi, the total number of revived mines has reached 852 since the launch of the program in late March 2019 until January 20, 2021.

From the beginning of this year to the end of the Iranian calendar month of Bahman (January 20), operations were conducted on 503 mines in collaboration with provincial working groups, and necessary measures were taken which include the removal of administrative barriers, providing investment, and resolving local conflicts, he said.

IME Touches Higher Records In Trade Value and Volume

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 2,874,000 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$920m, posting growths of 23% in volume and 15% in value of trades compared to the figures of the previous week.



According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange traded on its metals and minerals trading floor 2,565,000 tons of commodities valued at more than \$680m.

Commodities sold on this floor included 1,210,000 tons of cement, 641,479 tons of steel, 550,000 tons of iron ore, 120,500 tons of sponge iron, 27,330 tons of zinc, 12,060 tons of aluminum, 5,080 tons of copper, 250 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 50 tons of lead and 14 kg of gold bars.

Furthermore, the IME saw trade 298,568 tons of commodities on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor valued at more than \$228m.

The exchange customers purchased on this floor 94,285 tons of polymeric products, 46,864 tons of bitumen, 62,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 51,000 tons of lube cut, 39,762 tons of chemicals, 5,250 tons of sulfur, 3,203 tons of base oil, 200 tons of insulation and 100 tons of argon.

Last but not least was the IME's side market with 11,010 tons of commodities traded on it.

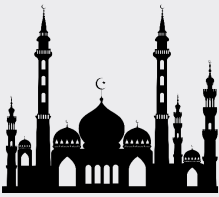
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PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)

■ Evening (Maghreb)

■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)

■ Tomorrow's Sunrise

12:15

18:21

05:02

06:26

31. See they not how many generations before them we destroyed?
Not to them will they return:
32. But each one of them all - will be brought before Us (for judgment).

Surah 36, Ya-sin (31 - 32)

Iran, Armenia Ink Agreement to Reduce Transit Tariffs

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade announced an agreement with Armenian officials to reduce tariffs on truck traffic in the two countries, as well as joint production of medicine and home appliances.

speaking on the sidelines of a meeting with the Armenian Minister of Economy on Friday evening, Reza Fatemi Amin, Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade, said: "We had agreements with Armenian authorities that Iranian companies active in the field of medicine and home appliances export technology, raw materials or parts to Armenia, to produce a joint product in Armenia and export it to other countries."

Fatemi Amin added: "In the two days that we traveled to Armenia, we also had effective meetings with the officials of this country so that Iranian and Armenian companies could have joint activities in the field of production, transit, marketing and sales."

He also stated that Iran had two agreements with Armenia regarding the transportation and transit of goods, one of which was to reduce the transit tariff for trucks in both countries in the short term and based on the amount in the long run; Iranian companies were also involved in completing road infrastructure in Armenia.

Fatemi-Amin described development of the International South-North Transport Corridor as a high priority for the Islamic Republic in boosting ties with Armenia.

"One of the four main routes of the South-North Transport Corridor passes through Armenia. The transport connectivity between Iran and Armenia should be implemented to this end," Fatemi-Amin said during his official visit to Armenia on Thursday.

Iran has already announced its readiness to cooperate with Armenia in the construction of a new transportation route (Kajaran-Sisian road).

The 64-kilometer-long route part of Iran-Armenia-Georgia Transportation Corridor which comes as part of Iran's bid to launch the North-South Transport Corridor.

The International North-South Transport Corridor is a 7,200-kilometer-long multi-mode network of ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between Iran, India, Afghanistan,

Azerbaijan, Russia, Armenia, Central Asia and Europe.

The project is aimed at boosting trade connectivity among the regional, as well as ultra-regional states.

The Iranian minister of industry, mine and trade also said Tehran is ready to launch a joint venture with Yerevan to manufacture automobiles in Armenia.

"Iran Khodro Co. (IKCO) Joint venture factory manufactures 10 cars a day in Azerbaijan. We can also have a joint venture to produce cars in Armenia."

IKCO is Iran's leading car manufacturer and is viewed as the largest automobile producer in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The auto giant has exported over 150,000 vehicles to other countries mainly in the Middle East and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region.

In a meeting with the Armenian Minister of Economy Vahan Kerobyan, Fatemi-Amin touched on the economic capacities of Iran and Armenia, describing the economies of the two neighboring countries as "complementary."

He also called for boosting trade ties between Tehran and Yerevan via both trade exchange and joint ventures.

This is the first visit to Armenia at this level by high-ranking Iranian officials since President Ebrahim Raisi took office back in August 2021.

Fatemi-Amin says his visit to Armenia is aimed at expanding bilateral trade ties via joint investments.

Iran and Armenia have many similarities due to the long-standing relations between the two countries; this positive background has been influential in various aspects of relations between the two countries, and for this reason, Armenia has a good position in relations with Iran among neighboring countries.

Transit Rivals of Chabahar Port

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Director General of Ports and Maritime Department of Sistan-Baluchestan Province Mr. Behrouz Aqaei in an article pointed to the significance of Chabahar Port and heavy competition with other countries for transit of goods via this port.

He wrote: Favorable utilization of the transit infrastructures of Iran requires a change in approach, synergy and cooperation of all related bodies in reducing the time and cost of transfer of goods. However regarding good capacities created in the national ports especially in Chabahar Port, the country has not been successful in taking advantage of opportunities especially increasing its share of trade and international transfer of goods because of lack of a proper strategy and approach in developing transit and transfer of goods via the country.

Aqaei added: The flow of global trade will not wait for ignorance of the governments or delays, cumbersome rules and the approach of the businesses and the neighboring countries are competing tensely for attracting and transfer of goods of other countries to be transited via their lands. The evident example for it in the region is the launch of national rail line of East to West from Russia including the national railway of TSR and TCR.

In the east, neighboring country Pakistan despite its political problems with Indian government and conflict of interests of China and India in Pakistan is seeking both completing the OBOR project with China and easing the transfer of goods transit with India via the land passages.

In the west of the country and with the launch of Umm Qasr Port, the flow of goods transfer from this port and Basra to North Iraq and from there to Turkey is underway.

In the south of the country transfer of goods and commercializing the transportation of goods is of the main priorities of the Persian Gulf states. First, coordination and efforts of all bodies are strongly required to facilitate it and eliminate the unnecessary formalities in transfer of goods in the country. Definitely efforts for facilitating the transit will be possible with a shift in approach of managers and decision-makers of the country from needs of neighboring and regional states to the transfer of goods from the country to the transit of goods as an effective and economic opportunity in developing the country.

Aqaei added that activating strong diplomacy with neighboring countries for rail and road transfer of goods from the border checkpoints is of the necessary actions. Developing infrastructures and developing the facilities in the border checkpoints and elimination of some tariffs is also necessary. He concluded paying attention to the needs of the private sector international transportation and renovation of road navigation fleet which should be taken into consideration of the government officials in the transit sector.

Iraqi Ministers to Visit Tehran to Discuss Gas Imports

TEHRAN (MNA) – A spokesman for the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity said that three ministers will visit Tehran at the head of a high-ranking delegation with the aim of resuming gas import and supplying Iraqi energy network.

Spokesman for Iraqi Ministry of Electricity Ahmed Musa said on Friday that the three Iraqi ministers at the head of a high-ranking delegation will visit Tehran in the near future with the aim of resuming imports of Iranian gas and electricity.

Supplying gas from Iran to Iraq is not satisfactory and is still very low, he said, adding, "It is envisioned that Iran could supply more than 45 million cubic meters of gas to Iraq."

He put the current supply of gas from Iran to Iraq at only 8 million cubic meters.

Musa reiterated that a high-ranking delegation of Iraq composed of three ministries of electricity, finance and oil along with the Director-General of Iraqi Tejarat Bank will soon travel to Iran with the aim of finding solutions for importing energy from Iran to their country.

Earlier in February, Iranian and Iraqi oil ministers discussed increasing Iran's gas exports to Iraq and "paying off Iraq's gas debts to Iran."

Iran Tapping Capacity of Banks, Holdings to Finance Oil Projects

TEHRAN (Shana) – Oil Ministry Javad Owji said his Ministry would not be delayed by foreign investors and was using the power and capacity of large holdings and a consortium of domestic banks to carry out projects in the industry.

Mr. Owji said that the Oil Ministry plans to use the power of a large number of local contractors and holdings with good financial capacity to carry out projects in the upstream and downstream sectors.

"We plan to award the development projects of fields and associated gas collection to the private sector and this initiative started with the Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (PGPIC) and Bidboland Gas Refinery."

A ceremony was held on Thursday to launch the facilities and storage tanks for export products and independent wharf of Bidboland Persian Gulf Gas Refining Company in the presence of Iranian Minister of Petroleum Javad Owji, Morteza Shahmirzaei, the CEO of the National Petrochemical Company, Mohsen Khojastehmehr, the CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company, and Abdolali Ali Asgari, the CEO of the Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (PGPIC).

Iran, Spain Expand Cooperation on Olive Cultivation

SPAIN (IP) - Iran and Spain signed a memorandum of understanding to implement a plan to develop olive cultivation in Iran.

Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Mohammad Mehdi Borumandi, met with the Chairman of the International Olive Council (IOC) Abdul Latif Ghadira on Friday in Madrid, Spain.

At the meeting, the two sides reviewed the

implementation of past joint projects. They emphasized the implementation of plans of IOC for cooperation with the Agriculture Ministry of Iran for the development of olive cultivation in Iran.

The main headquarters of IOC is in Madrid, Spain, and includes Algeria, Croatia, the European Union, Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Monaco, Morocco, Serbia and Montenegro, Syria, and Tunisia as member states.

Iran, Tajikistan Cooperate in Energy Sector

Export Route of Iranian Goods to Russia to Be Eased

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Tajikistan's minister of energy and water resources said that Tajikistan is engaged in a program that includes construction of 700 megawatts of solar and wind power houses and keeping in mind Iran's invaluable experience in this field we hope to establish a valuable bilateral cooperation in this field.

Minister Juma Daler Shofakir in his meeting with the Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian at the Energy Ministry in Tehran added in a press conference: Iran and Tajikistan have valuable experience in construction of the Sang-Tudeh 2 power house and "we hope in our bilateral cooperation in construction of solar and wind power houses that experience will help us".

"The Iranian firms have broad participation in Tajikistan's project and of our country's largest Raqoon Dam and Water Power House is one of the major projects under construction in collaboration with Iranian engineering companies," he added.

Tajikistan's minister of energy and water resources said that the Raqoon Power House can generate 3,700 megawatts of hydropower.

Juma Daler Shofakir added that in upcoming years Tajikistan will construct new water power houses, as this is included in that country's development plan.

"We are glad that we have signed the contract on construction of the Sang-Tudeh Dam with Iran, and today we talked about construction of new power houses," he added.

TEHRAN (MNA) - Vice-Chairman of Non-Oil Exports Commission of Iran Chamber of Commerce said that given the latest developments between Ukraine and Russia, as well as Western sanctions, Russia will facilitate the export route for Iran.

Stating that the current situation in Russia will provide Iran with a good capacity of this country's market, Seyyed Mostafa Mousavi said in an interview with IRNA that with the closure of the European route and Western sanctions imposed against Russia, the Russian market needs an alternative to supplying the materials it needs.

Russia needs imports from Eastern Bloc to supply the goods it needs at the market, he said, adding, "China is one of the countries that can replace Europe in this regard, but Iran has more advantages to increase trade with this country due to its proximity to Russia."

Referring to Iran's sea and land routes with Russia, Mousavi said, "The current situation shows that Iran can get a good share of the Russian market and export many goods to this country so that Iran enjoys high capacity to develop its trade with Russia."

Housing Rental Rises 48% In Tehran City in a Month

TEHRAN (MNA) - Central Bank of Iran (CBI) has announced that the rental price has increased 48.4 percent in Tehran city during the eleventh Iranian calendar month Bahman (ended on February 19), as compared to the same month in the past year.

The CBI has also announced that the average housing price has increased 0.4 percent in the capital Tehran during the eleventh month, from its previous month, and 16.4 percent from the same month of the past year.

Housing prices in Iran have been constantly rising over the past year due to various internal and external factors.

And, for the upcoming months, a number of factors are mentioned to affect the housing market in Iran.

One factor is the possibility of reviving a 2015 nuclear deal signed between Iran and world powers.

Some experts believe that if the mentioned deal, known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is revived, housing price will experience its biggest historical drop.

As Mostafa Gholi Khosravi, the head of Iran's Property Advisers Union, has recently stated, "The housing market is waiting for the results of the [JCPOA] negotiations, and with the positive shock that the agreements bring to the market, sales will increase in the coming months."

He believes that the market will stabilize towards the buyer and the price will decrease.

Burkina Faso Junta Names PM

PARIS (Dispatches) - Burkina Faso strongman Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba on Thursday named economist Albert Ouedraogo the new prime minister of the West African country.

The 53-year-old Ouedraogo, whose appointment came in a decree signed by President Damiba, has headed a consulting and auditing firm since 2007.

“The new prime minister has solid experience in the field of public administration management, development projects and private companies,” Damiba’s office said. Damiba, a 41-year-old lieutenant-colonel, seized power on January 24, toppling elected president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who has been under house arrest.



UN Council Votes to Probe Rights Abuses in Ukraine

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Russia appeared more isolated than ever following a historic vote at the UN Human Rights Council on Friday to launch an investigation into violations committed in Moscow’s Ukraine war.

“The message to (Russian President Vladimir) Putin has been clear: You’re isolated on a global level and the whole world is against you,” Ukrainian ambassador Yevheniia Filipenko told reporters after the overwhelming vote.

Thirty-two of the council’s 47 members voted to establish the highest-level probe possible, in a bid to hold perpetrators responsible.



Russia Has No Bad Intention Toward Neighbors



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned Russia’s neighbors against escalating tensions amid an ongoing war with Ukraine, reassuring that the Kremlin has “no bad intention toward” the neighboring countries.

Speaking at a televised speech on the ninth day of the military conflict in Ukraine, Putin said, “There are no bad intentions towards our neighbors. And I would also advise them not to escalate the situation, not to introduce any restrictions.”

“We fulfill all our obligations and will continue to fulfill them,” Putin said, adding that the Kremlin did “not see any need here to aggravate or worsen our relations.” “And all our actions, if they arise, they always arise exclusively in response to some unfriendly actions, actions against the Russian Federation,” he said.

The Russian leader ordered a military campaign in Ukraine over concerns about NATO military activities close to its borders.

Putin said that, “Russia is open to dialog with the Ukrainian side, as well as with everyone who wants peace in Ukraine. But under the condition that all Russian demands are met,” according to the Kremlin.

These include the neutral and non-nuclear status of Ukraine, its “denazification,” recognition of Crimea as part of Russia and of the “sovereignty” of people in eastern Ukraine.

Last month, Putin signed a decree recognizing the breakaway Lugansk and Donetsk regions in eastern Ukraine as independent republics. The Russian president also expressed “hope that during the planned third round of talks, the representatives of Kiev would take a reasonable and constructive position.”

Russia and Ukraine are holding talks in Belarus for finding a way out of the conflict.

During the second round of talks on Friday, the two sides agreed to create humanitarian corridors to evacuate civilians from unspecified locations. A third round of talks is expected to take place next week.

In a phone conversation with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin also denied reports that Russian troops were bombing Ukrainian cities. He dismissed such information as “gross propaganda fakes,” according to his office.

The president’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that the negotiations “were a good opportunity to clearly convey to the Ukrainian side our vision of solving this problem.”

“Going forward, everything will depend on the reaction of the Ukrainian side,” he told reporters.

He said that no documents had been agreed on with Kiev at the talks, but that Moscow had told the Ukrainian side how it saw the solution to the war. In response to a controversial call by US Senator Lindsey Graham on Twitter for someone in Russia to “take out” Putin, Peskov said it was an example of hysterical Russophobia.

“Of course, these days not everyone is managing to preserve a sober mind, I would even say a sound mind,” said the Russian official.

Peskov also called for all Russians “to unite, be together, and unite of course around our president.”

In a related development, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations denied Western media reports that Russian forces had shelled Europe’s largest nuclear power plant in southeastern Ukraine.

A fire broke out in a building adjacent to the Zaporizhzhia power plant during intense fighting on Thursday night. Western media outlets accused Russia of attacking the plant.

Vassily Nebenzia, however, told the Security Council on Friday, “These statements are simply untrue.”

“This is all part of an unprecedented campaign of lies and disinformation against Russia,” he added.

He said that Russian troops had exchanged small arms fire with Ukrainian forces at the power plant, but had not shelled the facility.

After the incident, China urged all sides of the conflict to ensure the safety of nuclear facilities in Ukraine.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said Beijing “will monitor the situation and call on all sides to exercise restraint, avoid escalation and ensure the safety of relevant nuclear facilities.”

He also said that China is “very concerned” about the situation.

Reports of the fire raised concern from world leaders and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which called for a stop to fighting around the facility.

The IAEA said Ukrainian authorities had reported background radiation levels were normal and the fire had not affected “essential” equipment, though.

NATO Rejects Ukraine No-Fly Zone, EU Eyes More Russia Sanctions

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - NATO rejected Ukrainian calls to help it protect its skies from Russian missiles and warplanes, wary of being dragged into Moscow’s war on its neighbour, but Europe promised more sanctions to punish Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy appealed to NATO to set up a no-fly zone over his country, which Russia invaded by land, sea and air on Feb. 24.

“We are not part of this conflict,” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in denying Ukraine’s request.

“We have a responsibility as NATO allies to prevent this war from escalating beyond Ukraine because that would be even more dangerous, more devastating and would cause even more human suffering,” he said following a NATO meeting in Brussels.

Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, wants to join the European Union and NATO, moves which Moscow says threaten its security and influence. Russia has shelled residential areas and civilian infrastructure, as well as capturing two nuclear sites.

Terrorist Bombing at Shia Mosque in Pakistan Kills Dozens

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - A massive explosion ripped through a Shia mosque in Pakistan’s northwestern city of Peshawar on Friday, killing at least 30 people and injuring dozens more, according to reports.

The blast took place as worshippers had gathered in the Kucha Risaldar mosque in Peshawar’s old city area for congregational Friday prayers, reports quoted local authorities and eyewitnesses as saying.

Peshawar city’s police chief, Muhammed Ejaz Khan, told reporters that the violence ensued when two armed assailants opened fire on policemen outside the mosque.

In the exchange of fire, one assailant and one policeman were killed and another policeman was wounded. After that, one attacker barged inside the mosque and detonated his explosives.

Videos and photos circulating online showed ambulances rushing through congested narrow streets and ferrying the wounded to Lady Reading Hospital.

More than 60 people were injured, most of them critically, and the death toll is likely to rise, said hospital spokesman, Mohamed Asim.

No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

Many anti-Shia terrorist groups are active in the South Asian country. Both Daesh and Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have previously carried out similar attacks in the region, located near the border with Afghanistan.

“We are in a state of emergency and the injured are being shifted to the hospital. We are investigating the nature of the blast but it seemed to be a suicide attack,” police officer Mohammad Sajjad Khan was quoted as saying in news reports.

One witness, identified as Shayan Haider, said he was about to enter the mosque when a powerful explosion threw him back on the street.

“I opened my eyes and there was dust and bodies everywhere,” he said.

Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan has reportedly condemned the bombing but no statement has been issued by his office so far.

The development came a week after two people were killed and several others wounded in fresh round of clashes between Pakistani and Afghan security forces in a border town.



UN Plan to Help 1.6m Displaced by Ethiopia War

GENEVA (Dispatches) - The United Nations appealed Friday for \$205 million to deliver life-saving assistance to more than 1.6 million people who have fled the fighting in northern Ethiopia.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, said \$117 million was needed to support Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in the Afar, Amhara, and Tigray regions.

A further \$72 million is required to help Ethiopian refugees in Sudan, while \$16 million would be earmarked for contingency measures in other neighboring countries.

Ethiopia’s war broke out in November 2020 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray to topple the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, a move he said came in response to the rebel group’s attacks on army camps.

The war has spread to neighboring regions, killed thousands and, according to the UN and the United States, driven hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation.

“Sixteen months of conflict in northern Ethiopia has created a humanitarian crisis,” UNHCR spokeswoman Shabia Mantoo told reporters in Geneva.

“Civilians, including refugees and internally displaced people have been displaced, amid widespread reports of gender-based violence, human rights abuses, loss of shelter and access to basic services, and critical levels of food insecurity.

“More than two million Ethiopians have fled in search of safety within the country, and almost 60,000 across the border into Sudan.

“Several camps and settlements hosting Eritrean refugees have been attacked or destroyed, further displacing tens of thousands within Ethiopia.”

UNHCR welcomed the Ethiopian government’s speed in identifying new sites to settle displaced refugees, and said it was aiming to get 20,000 refugee children back into school.

In eastern Sudan, the agency aims to build more durable shelters and improve the provision of health care and education.



Support for Macron Shown Rising Amid Ukraine War Crisis



PARIS (Dispatches) - A new poll Friday showed a surge in support for French President Emmanuel Macron ahead of presidential elections next month, a day after he confirmed he was running for a second term.

The survey measuring voting intentions from the BVA polling group found he had gained a massive five points in the last fortnight ahead of the first round of voting on April 10, with voters seemingly impressed by his handling of the Ukraine war crisis.

It suggested Macron would finish first with 29 percent in the first round and would then triumph in a second run-off vote irrespective of his opponent, with far-right candidate Marine Le Pen seen as his closest challenger.

“Emmanuel Macron is benefiting from his triple status as head of state, protector of the people and their values, (and) head of the army and national diplomacy,” BVA said in a statement.

Macron confirmed his plans to seek a second term on Thursday evening in a low-key letter addressed to voters, saying he was seeking their “trust” for another five years “to defend our values that are threatened by the disruptions of the world.”

He acknowledged that the election campaign would be overshadowed by Russia’s war on its neighbour, which has seen him take a prominent role in Western efforts to find a diplomatic solution.

“Of course, I will not be able to campaign as I would have liked because of the context,” he said.

Some of his opponents welcomed the declaration, less than 24 hours before a deadline to do so, while others scoffed at it.

“The democratic debate, of one program versus another that I have been calling for for months, can finally take place,” Socialist Party candidate Anne Hidalgo said.

Mahmodieh (\$3700)
400sq.m, 4bdrs
S/pool, S, J
L.balcony
Nice view
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

Shariati Villa (\$3500)
1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p, S
J, balcony
pkg, & yard

Parsian

(\$1800)
Darrous Apt
160sq.m, 3bdrs
balcony, & F.F

Niavaran Apts
(\$1700) 2bdrs, S/p, F.F
(\$2300) 3bdrs, S/p, F.F
(\$3000) 4bdrs, S/p, F.F

(\$8000)
Velenjak bldg
5storey, 20bdrs
S/p, yard, & pkgs

Vanak (\$1500)
130sq.m, 2bdrs
balcony, & Nicely Furn

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Toyota Suspends Operations at Russia Plant

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Toyota said it would suspend operations at its only factory in Russia and stop shipping vehicles to the country, citing "supply chain disruptions" linked to Moscow's assault on Ukraine. The world's top-selling carmaker said its plant in Saint Petersburg produced around 80,000 vehicles last year, mainly for the Russian market and representing just a fraction of the 10.5 million vehicles made worldwide by the Japanese group. The Saint Petersburg plant employs around 2,600 people, a Toyota spokeswoman told AFP, confirming the supply disruption was linked to the conflict.



Russian Firms Rush to Open Chinese Bank Accounts

SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - The Moscow branch of a Chinese state bank has seen a surge in enquiries from Russian firms wanting to open new accounts, a person familiar with the matter said, as the country's businesses struggle with international sanctions after its invasion of Ukraine.

"Over the past few days, 200-300 companies have approached us, wanting to open new accounts," the person, who works at the Moscow branch of a Chinese state bank and has direct knowledge of its operations, told Reuters.

He declined to be named or have his bank identified as he is not authorized to speak with media.

It was not clear how widespread Russian demand for new accounts at Chinese banks was, but the banker source told Reuters many of the companies seeking new accounts do business with China and that he expected yuan transactions by such firms to increase.

Western governments are shutting off Russia's economy from the global financial system, pushing international companies to halt sales, cut ties and dump tens of billions of dollars' worth of investments.

China has repeatedly voiced opposition to the sanctions, calling them ineffective and insisting it will maintain normal economic and trade exchanges with Russia.

A handful of Chinese state banks operate in Moscow, including Industrial & Commercial Bank of China, Agricultural Bank of China, Bank of China and China Construction Bank.

China Construction Bank declined to comment. The other three Chinese state banks did not respond to Reuters' request for comment.

A Chinese businessman with long-term ties with Russia, who also did not want to be identified, said several Russian companies he works with are now planning to open yuan accounts.

"It's pretty simple logic. If you cannot use U.S. dollars, or euros, and U.S. and Europe stop selling you many products, you have no other options but to turn to China. The trend is inevitable," the source told Reuters.

As a growing number of Western companies abandon Russia, the willingness of emerging market giants such as China to sustain business relations with Moscow highlights a deep rift over Europe's biggest crisis since the World War Two. That trend could threaten to chip away the dominance of the U.S. dollar in global trade.

FESCO Transportation Group, a major Russian transport and logistics company, said this week it will accept Chinese yuan from customers, after some Russian banks were kicked out of the global financial messaging system SWIFT.

"It's natural for Russian companies to be willing to accept yuan," said Shen Muhui, head of a trade body that promotes links between Russia and China.

But small Chinese exporters are suffering from a tumble in the rouble and many are suspending deliveries to avoid potential losses, he said.

The Russian currency dived to a record low of more than 17 rouble to the yuan, having lost nearly 40% of its value against the Chinese unit over the past week.

Sri Lanka Sacks Energy Minister as Economic Crisis Deepens

COLOMBO (Dispatches) - Sri Lanka's president sacked his energy minister as fuel shortages left the near-bankrupt island facing its worst blackouts in 26 years and the nation's buses largely sidelined.



Udaya Gammanpila was booted from the cabinet a day after publicly criticizing the government's monetary policy, saying it had worsened the dollar shortage that has slammed oil imports.

Another cabinet member who had accused Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa, a younger brother of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, of mismanagement was also sacked.

"The president used his executive powers to remove Industries Minister Wimal Weerawansa and Energy Minister Udaya Gammanpila with effect from today," presidential spokesman Kingsly Rathnayaka said.

No reason was given for the summary dismissals, but official sources said the president was livid over their scathing attacks on the government's handling of the worsening economic crisis.

Earlier in the day, the International Monetary Fund had warned the country's foreign debt was "unsustainable", and called for devaluation and higher taxes to revive the economy.

Since Wednesday, Sri Lankans have been subject to nationwide power cuts of seven-and-a-half hours a day, the worst since 1996, after thermal power stations ran out of fuel.

Public transport has also been crippled, with many fuel retailers out of diesel and some bus drivers reporting queueing for up to seven hours to top up.

Sri Lanka is in the grip of a severe foreign exchange shortage, with the country's external reserves falling to \$2.3 billion in January, down 25 percent from the previous month.

A wide-ranging import ban imposed in March 2020 to save foreign exchange has led to shortages of essentials, including food, medicines and industrial raw materials.

International rating agencies have downgraded Sri Lanka, saying there were doubts if the South Asian nation can service its \$51 billion foreign debt. Colombo has insisted it will honour its obligations.

Japan to Release 7.5m Barrels of Oil From Reserves

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan will release 7.5 million barrels of oil from private reserves as a part of the International Energy Agency (IEA)-led coordinated release, its industry minister Koichi Hagiuda said.

The United States and other member states of the IEA on Tuesday agreed to release a total of 60 million barrels of oil reserves to compensate for supply disruptions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Japan is gathering information about Exxon Mobil Corp's recent announcement to exit the Sakhalin-1 oil and gas project in which a Japanese consortium owns a 30 per cent stake to assess the impact on the country's energy supply.

"With the global crude oil supply and demand structure becoming unstable, the Sakhalin-1 is an important project for Japan which imports about 90 per cent of its crude oil from the Middle East in terms of stable supply of energy," Hagiuda said.

"In light of intensified international sanctions against Russia, we will take measures appropriately in line with the G7, treating stable supply of energy and energy security as a national interest that should be protected to the maximum extent possible," he said.

Exxon said earlier this week it would exit Russian oil and gas operations including managing large oil and gas production facilities on Sakhalin Island in Russia's Far East as a result of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Turkey's Annual Inflation Tops 54.4%, a 20-Year High

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's annual inflation rose more than expected to 54.44% in February, official data showed, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine raising concerns of further price pressure.

The reading that marked a two-decade high was fueled by a slide in the Turkish lira late last year and higher commodity prices.

Month-over-month, the consumer prices index (CPI) surged 4.81%, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) said.

Surveys had forecast the annual inflation could reach 53%, while the estimate for the monthly CPI was 3.8%.

Elsewhere, annual inflation increased by a record 5.8% in the eurozone in February and by 7.5% in the United States in January - the fastest pace in 40 years.

The producer price index in Turkey soared 7.22% month-over-month in February for an annual rise of 105%, the data showed, reflecting the rise in commodity prices amid Russia-Ukraine tensions.

Inflation has surged since last fall amid soaring global commodity and energy prices and as the lira weakened after the central bank in September embarked on an easing cycle, which saw its policy rate being slashed by 500 basis points to 14%.

The policy easing came as the government endorses a new economic program that prioritizes growth, investment and exports while keeping rates low.

Last month's inflation was driven by food and nonalcoholic drink prices, which soared 8.41% month-over-month, while furniture prices rose 7%.

Annually, transportation prices surged 75.75%, while furniture prices rose 64.83%, data showed.

Turkey's energy bill surged last year as global prices and demand rose, leading Ankara to hike energy prices at the start of the year, including a 50% hike to electricity prices for lower-demand households.

In an effort to soften the impact on households, the government last month cut tax on basic goods to 1% from 8% and subsidized a significant amount of electricity bills.

On Monday, it announced a value-added tax (VAT) cut on electricity used for residential and agricultural irrigation purposes to 8% from 18%.

It also introduced a set of measures to reduce surging power bills, including readjusting the level under which higher electricity tariffs for households and some businesses using more energy kick in.

Persian Gulf States Resist Pressure to Raise Oil Output

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sent energy prices surging, but the oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchies have so far resisted

Western pressure to raise output, prioritizing their own strategic and economic interests.

The price of a barrel of West Texas Intermediate crude topped \$115 on Thursday, the highest since 2008, as the war and sanctions against Moscow stoked fears about global supplies.

Russia is the world's second biggest crude exporter after Saudi Arabia, which is close to Western governments but also to Moscow.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies (OPEC+), led by Riyadh and Moscow, failed Wednesday to respond to a call to produce more and faster, despite pressure on the Gulf states in particular.

The group argued that the "current volatility is not caused by changes in market fundamentals but by current geopolitical developments," according to a press release.

"Persian Gulf countries are testing their ability to have a strategic autonomy, to defend their own national interests," Hasan Alhasan, a Middle East specialist at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told AFP.

The Persian Gulf countries, which had suffered from declines in oil prices since 2014, now seem all the more reluctant to take immediate action as they benefit from the short-term price surge.

If the barrel stays above \$100, this will mean that none of the six Persian Gulf Cooperation Council countries will face a budget deficit by 2022, wrote researcher Karen Young of the Washington-based Arab Persian Gulf States Institute.

Amena Baker, an analyst with Energy Intelligence, said that according to OPEC+ "there is no physical shortage of crude in the market."

"The impact of the Western sanctions against Russia's hydrocarbon exports is still unknown," she told AFP.

Baker said the only two OPEC+ countries able to truly open the floodgates are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but that even they would be unable to make up for Russian exports.

"Overall our calculations put spare capacity of OPEC+ at 2.5 million barrels per day and that's much less than what Russia exports... Russia's exports are closer to 4.8 million bpd," she said.

However, producing countries are aware that high prices risk depressing the global economy and accelerating the energy transition away from fossil fuels, at a time of fragile post-Covid recovery.

"What is most important for Saudi Arabia is oil price stability," said Alhasan, who added that the kingdom counts on Russia's cooperation in this.

India to Raise Fuel Prices From Next Week



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India will raise petrol and diesel prices next week for the first time in more than four months as global crude prices soar after Russia's invasion of Ukraine last week, three government officials said, amid growing concern about inflation.

Asia's third-largest economy, which imports 80% of its oil needs, faces retail inflation staying above the central bank's tolerance limit of 6% as companies pass on a nearly 40% rise in crude prices since November, as well as rises in prices for other imported raw materials, economists said.

State-run oil companies, which control the domestic market, have not raised prices since Nov. 4, aiming to help Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in crucial state assembly elections including in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh.

"The oil companies would be free to raise prices in a phased manner once the election is over on March 7," a senior government official with the knowledge of internal discussions on oil prices told Reuters.

Higher fuel prices could lead to some protests but with the important state elections out of the way, the political risk for Modi has been reduced. Opposition parties will push for fuel tax cuts when parliament meets from March 14.

Oil prices surged after Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, with Brent rising above \$116 a barrel on Thursday, while supply disruptions have hit global prices of wheat, soybean, fertiliser and metals like copper, steel and aluminum - raising worries about prices and economic recovery.

State oil companies have told the government that they need a price increase of 10-12 rupees per liter for petrol and diesel, a second official said.

A senior official at a state-run oil marketing company confirmed that they were facing difficulties though he declined to give figures.

FATF Places UAE on Its Gray List

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Financial Action Task Force dedicated to combating money laundering and illicit cash flows on Friday placed the United Arab Emirates on its “gray list”. The UAE has been placed on the grey list over concerns that the Persian Gulf country isn’t sufficiently stemming illegal financial activities, Bloomberg said. Being put on the grey list and being subject to greater oversight is due to shortcomings in tackling illicit finance, potentially complicating local operations for Wall Street banks and multinationals that use Dubai as their Middle Eastern hub.



How Commercial Satellites Are Shaping the Ukraine Conflict

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - From a huge Russian military convoy snaking its way to Kyiv to missile strikes and refugee crossings, commercial satellite imagery of the Ukraine conflict is helping lift the fog of war, illuminating for the public what was previously the domain of spy agencies. Technologies that can pierce cloud cover and work at night are also coming to the fore, as a growing army of open-source intelligence analysts offer near real time assessments of battleground developments. “Governments are no longer the only place to go for high precision satellite data,” Craig Nazareth, a former U.S. intelligence officer turned scholar at the University of Arizona, told AFP. Thanks to the explosive growth of the private satellite industry, the volume of imagery is greater and turnaround time faster compared to prior conflicts, such as Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. While most Western governments have their own sophisticated satellite assets, their classified nature means the images can’t be shared. And with public trust in the U.S. and British governments shaken after the 2003 Iraq war, third-party imagery has helped plug credibility gaps. “They’re saying ‘Look, it’s not us, this is actually happening, we’re not making this up,’” Nazareth said. Beyond helping shape narratives, the images are directly aiding Ukrainian forces in their war efforts. “Capella Space is working directly with the US and Ukrainian governments as well as other commercial entities to provide timely data and assistance around the ongoing conflict,” Payam Banazadeh, the company’s CEO confirmed in a statement to AFP. It was images taken by the San Francisco startup that led a group of independent researchers to realize the invasion was underway, before Vladimir Putin announced his “special military operations” in the early morning of February 24. Hours before that speech, Jeffrey Lewis of the Middlebury Institute in California tweeted that Google Maps showed a “traffic jam” on the road from Belgorod, Russia to the Ukrainian border. It was the precise spot Capella Space previously saw a convoy of military vehicles, and the congestion likely reflected Russian civilians getting stuck at roadblocks while military vehicles passed. “Someone’s on the move,” he correctly hypothesized. While most satellite imaging requires daylight and clear skies to capture images, Capella Space works with synthetic aperture radar (SAR) -- in which sensors shoot down energy, then record the amount that reflects back to them. SAR “penetrates clouds and smoke, even in very large storm events or fires, so we can reliably capture clear and precise images of the Earth under almost any conditions,” said Dan Getman, the company’s vice president of product.



Another company whose pictures have been used heavily by news media is BlackSky, which released what it believes was among the first engagements of the war -- an attack on the Luhansk Thermal Power Station a little after 4:00 pm local time on February 23. “We have a constellation of small satellites that can see dawn to dusk, not just at certain times of the day” the company’s CEO Brian O’Toole told AFP. In traditional polar orbits, which fly north-south, a satellite could take only two snaps of a particular spot per day -- but BlackSky flies its hardware counter-clockwise to the planet’s rotation, allowing them to revisit areas more often. Clients receive the images within 90 minutes, and are helped in interpreting them by AI-enabled software. Perhaps the most grabbing image of the conflict so far has been a picture of the 40 mile (64 km) long Russian convoy, captured by Maxar, “the granddaddy of the industry,” according to Chris Quilty, of Quilty Analytics. He explained that unlike traditional satellites that only point downwards, Maxar’s satellites have gyroscopes that allow them to swivel and target with more precision. The U.S. government, through the National Reconnaissance Office, is one of Maxar’s main clients, dictating “shutter time,” which helps explain why the company and others are spending so much time over Ukraine right now. But the selective release of what the satellites are seeing could eventually lead to ethical concerns. Maxar and others “are inevitably capturing imagery of Ukrainian troop movements and defensive positions and that information is not being released to the public,” said Quilty. Looking ahead to future conflicts, “There is absolutely an ability to color the narrative depending upon what imagery is made available,” he said.

Long Road Ahead For Iraq Pledge to Phase out Gas Flares



BASRA (Dispatches) - In the oilfields of southern Iraq, billions of cubic feet of gas literally go up in smoke, burnt off on flare stacks for want of the infrastructure to capture and process it. The flares produce vast amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, contributing to global warming without any economic or social benefit. Analysts say the waste is particularly egregious, as Iraq is a significant importer of natural gas, meeting a third of its needs through expensive and not always reliable supplies from neighboring Iran. The government has pledged to phase out the practice by 2030 but the road to a greener, less wasteful energy sector is proving a long one. For the oil companies exploiting the mega fields around Basra, it is actually cheaper to flare off the associated gas than to capture, process and market it, despite the obvious environmental costs. Currently, only half of the three million cubic feet of gas that comes out of Iraqi oil wells each day is captured and processed. The rest is burnt off in flares creating the plumes of acrid black smoke that blight the skies. “Flared gas, if captured and processed, could provide electricity to three million homes,” said Yesar al-Maleki, Persian Gulf analyst at Middle East Economic Survey. “This could definitely help the country end its acute power shortages that go up all the way to a supply and demand gap of nine gigawatts in summer.” In December, Iraq’s oil minister Ihsan Ismail pledged to cut flare gas by 90 percent by 2024. But despite contracts with foreign oil majors, including France’s TotalEnergies, the target is likely to face bureaucratic obstacles in a sector which provides 90 percent of government revenues. Over the past two years, the government has cut flare gas by just five percent. The captured gas is fuel that Iraq desperately needs for its power stations.

Bangladesh Revives Elite Forgotten Fabric

TARABO (Dispatches) - With wooden spinning wheels and hand-drawn looms, Bangladesh is painstakingly resurrecting a fabric once worn by Marie Antoinette and Jane Austen but long thought forever lost to history. Dhaka muslin was stitched from threads so fine that popular folklore in European parlours held that a change in the light or a sudden rain shower would render its wearer apparently naked. The textile once brought magnificent riches to the lands where it was spun. But to revive it, botanists had to hunt halfway across the world and back for a plant believed gone from the face of the earth. “Nobody knew how it was made,” said Ayub Ali, a senior government official helping shepherd the revival project. “We lost the famous cotton plant, which provided the special fine yarn for Dhaka muslin,” he told AFP. The muslin trade at one time helped turn the Ganges delta and what is now Bangladesh into one of the most prosperous parts of the world, historians say. Flowing dress garments weaved from the cloth were worn by generations of the Mughal dynasty then ruling India before the fabric enchanted European aristocrats and other notables at the end of the 18th century. A muslin shawl belonging to Austen -- supposedly hand-embroidered by the “Pride and Prejudice” author herself -- is on display at her former home in Hampshire, while a 1783 portrait of Marie Antoinette depicts the French queen in a muslin dress. But the industry collapsed in the years after the 18th century conquest of the Bengal delta by the East India Company, paving the way for British colonial rule. The mills and factories that sprung up in England after the industrial revolution produced much cheaper textiles, while European tariffs killed the foreign market for the delicate fabric. The quest to bring back Bangladeshi muslin began with a painstaking five-year search for the specific flower used to weave the fabric, which only grows near the capital Dhaka.

Tehran Calls for...

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“It is very important to reach a mutual understanding for cooperation. Nuclear energy is very important for the development of countries, including Iran.” However, he took a hands-off approach toward the question of documents in the custody of the IAEA or its reports being leaked to news agencies and certain regimes. “I have asked myself this question many times. Unfortunately, some members do not respect this secrecy, and this is unfortunate,” he said. “There has been a lot of talk in the agency about making rules, but when someone wants to release information, it can’t be stopped,” he added. Prior to his trip to Tehran, the IAEA chief tweeted that his visit takes place at “a critical time but a positive outcome for everyone is possible.” “It is expected that general issues between us and the agency will be reviewed regarding how to pursue various matters in the future. God willing, there will be an understanding,” AEOI spokesman Behrouz Kamlavandi said Saturday. In a post on his Twitter account, Russia’s Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov wished Grossi “fruitful and successful” discussions with Iranian officials on outstanding safeguards issues. In Tehran, Grossi sidestepped questions about Israel’s threats against Iran’s nuclear energy program and its declaration that the regime would continue its acts of

sabotage irrespective of the results of the Vienna talks. The agency’s focus, he said, was on working with Iran and doing its job with professionalism. Grossi was also asked about numerous cases raised against Iran on the basis of alleged Israeli documents, claiming that the IAEA was not influenced by any party and that the basis of its judgments was independent of the opinions of other sides. Eslami said the aim of the JCPOA and other negotiations is to dismiss and fend off accusations against Iran, warning that “if someone wants to obstruct the negotiations with false claims, we will use our authority and deal with it”. “We are very optimistic that the hurdles created by the enemies on the path of the country’s development have been eliminated and the measures have resulted in the advancement of Iran’s nuclear movement, a clear example of which were the actions of the Zionist regime and the assassination of nuclear scientists.” With the Vienna negotiations being in the final rounds, “one of the red lines of Iran is that the alleged cases are closed forever and no disturbance is caused”, Eslami said. “The agreements reached are steps that are in the form of mutual cooperation and provision of documents that should lead to cooperation. The fake regime of the Zionist regime is not bound by any law and has placed the greatest obstacle in the way of Iran’s peaceful nuclear program, but it will not achieve any result,” he added.

Can Biden...

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Fortunately the current government in Iran and the negotiating team is determined to end the talks with defending full rights of the nation and they will not bow down to pressures like what Iran’s former reformist president and negotiating team did in 2015.



In recent days Western negotiating teams in Vienna talks have tried to increase the pressure on their Iranian counterparts by resorting to different claims. On Monday, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price threatened that Washington is prepared to “walk away” if Iran displays “intransigence to making progress.” Iran has maintained that if the Vienna talks do not lead to an agreement, the U.S. and its three major European allies are to blame due to their failure to guarantee their strict adherence to the JCPOA.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian also said the Western side’s hurriedness to reach an agreement via the Vienna negotiations will not make Tehran turn a blind eye to its red lines.

Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in a phone call with European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on Friday, referring to the diplomatic efforts to revive the 2015 Iran deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

“We are ready to immediately finalize a good agreement,” he said. “But the Western side’s rush and haste cannot prevent Iran’s red lines from being observed.”

The problem for reaching an agreement lies in the West’s arrogant attitude towards Iran and as long as this attitude exists, there will be no agreement between Iran and the JCPOA signatories because Iran will never accept any bully from any country and bully will lead to duly and strong response to those who resort to bully.

So Biden and his allies are better to forget the current arrogant approach towards Iran because they are too weak to stop Iran as they have shown their weakness regarding Ukraine crisis. If Biden wants to reach a deal with Tehran in the JCPOA, he is better to put aside his hostile approach because hostility brings hostility and he is better to quit former U.S. President Donald Trump’s path of creating chaos in the international relations.

The Islamic Republic of Iran since its establishment in 1979 has proved that it is not a country which can be brought to its knees by bully and arrogance of any country, especially world arrogance and the West is better to put aside hostility against Iran and stretch friendship hands towards Iran which will benefit all parties.

IRGC Unveils...

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Iranian military experts and technicians have in recent years made great progress in indigenously developing and manufacturing a broad range of defense equipment, making the armed forces self-sufficient in this regard. Iranian officials have repeatedly underscored that the Islamic Republic will not hesitate to build up its defense capabilities, emphasizing that such abilities are entirely meant for the purpose of defense and will be never subject to negotiations. Meanwhile yesterday Iranian Ministry of Defense in a ceremony unveiled new defense achievements in the field of ground, air, naval combats. During the ceremony that was held on Saturday, seven new achievements in the field of ground combat, two achievements in the field of air combat and one achievement in the field of naval combat have been unveiled in the presence of the Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani. “The goals, policies and strategies set in the field of armaments and the acquisition of advanced military technologies have been well and systematically formulated in the Ministry of Defense and have been achieved by the Defense Industries Organization,” said the minister. Referring to the importance of the achievements unveiled, Ashtiani said that these new products will increase the effectiveness of combat operations and accelerate deterrent activities.

Israel Biggest Enemy Of...

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“We don’t look at Israel as an enemy,” he said during an interview with The Atlantic, the full text of which was published by the Saudi state news agency, SPA, on Thursday. “We look to them as a potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together. But we have to solve some issues before we get to that.” Asked about Riyadh’s ties with Tehran, the Saudi heir to the throne said the kingdom intends to continue “detailed talks” with Iran to reach a satisfactory agreement for both. The talks, he added, would enable reaching “a good situation and mark a bright future” for both sides. “Iran is a neighbor forever. We cannot get rid of them and they cannot get rid of us,” bin Salman noted.

McIlroy Grabs Early Lead at Arnold Palmer Invitational

MIAMI (Dispatches) - Rory McIlroy got off to another hot start at Bay Hill, firing a first-round 65 to take the lead in the U.S. PGA Tour Arnold Palmer Invitational. The Northern Ireland star, who won the event in Orlando in 2018 and has top-10 finishes in his last five appearances, had a two-shot lead with afternoon starters still on the course. "I feel there's a nice flow to this golf course where you can really build a score," McIlroy said.

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Bryan Brothers to Raise Funds for Ukraine Aid

LONDON (Dispatches) - Bob and Mike Bryan, the most successful men's doubles team in tennis, said they will raise funds at this month's Indian Wells tournament to support Elina Svitolina's drive to provide humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees. Former world number three Svitolina is trying to unite the tennis world behind her country following Russia's invasion and said she would donate her prize money from the ongoing Monterrey Open in Mexico to the Ukrainian army.

Heat Ruin Kevin Durant's Return to Nets

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Bam Adebayo totaled 30 points and 11 rebounds as the Miami Heat overcame a 16-point deficit to beat Kevin Durant and the Brooklyn Nets 113-107 in New York.

Durant returned from missing 21 games with a sprained MCL in his left knee and scored 31 points for Brooklyn. He hit 10 of 21 shots but missed two in the final minute.

Adebayo made 12 of 15 shots as the Heat earned their 10th win in 12 games by outscoring Brooklyn 72-53 in the final 29 minutes. Tyler Herro added 27 points and eight assists as the Heat shot 51.9 percent. Caleb Martin contributed 22 points and Max Strus chipped in 21 by hitting six of Miami's 10 3-pointers.

Bruce Brown added 21 points and Patty Mills chipped in 14 for Brooklyn, which shot 47 percent.

Mavericks 122, Warriors 113

Luka Doncic exploded for a game-high 41 points and host Dallas, after needing a rally to beat Golden State four days earlier, held onto its own advantage this time for a win in a rematch.

The Warriors erased a 17-point, third-quarter deficit to tie the game in the fourth quarter before the Mavericks pulled away again. Dorian Finney-Smith scored 18 points for Dallas.

Jordan Poole had 23 points and Stephen Curry put up 21 for the Warriors, who lost a third game in a row for the first time this season.

Clippers 132, Lakers 111

Reggie Jackson scored a season-high 36 points and added nine assists and eight rebounds as the Los Angeles Clippers beat the visiting Los Angeles Lakers for the seventh straight time.

Ivica Zubac had 19 points and nine rebounds as the Clippers swept a four-game season series between the teams for the first time since 2015-16.

LeBron James had 26 points and eight rebounds and Russell Westbrook added



17 points and eight rebounds as the Lakers lost their fourth consecutive game since star Anthony Davis went down with a right foot sprain. They fell for the seventh time in their past eight contests.

Hawks 130, Bulls 124

Trae Young sank four 3-pointers in the fourth quarter and finished with 39 points as Atlanta registered its first victory over Chicago in four tries this season.

Young shot 11-for-18 from the floor and 7-for-9 from 3-point range while handing out 13 assists as the Hawks won for the fourth time in six games. He scored 16 points in the final quarter. Bogdan Bogdanovic scored 13 of his 20 points in the final quarter, and the Hawks got 18 points from DeAndre Hunter and 17 points from Kevin Huerter.

DeMar DeRozan and Zach LaVine scored 22 points apiece as the Bulls lost third straight. Nikola Vucevic had 21 points and 11 rebounds, and Ayo Dosunmu and Coby White each scored 15 points.



LONDON (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic now seems likely to participate in the French Open after France loosened COVID-19 restrictions.

Prime Minister Jean Castex announced that vaccine passports will no longer be required as of March 14.

The French Open, where the unvaccinated Djokovic is the defending champion, begins on May 22.

Djokovic, 34, was deported from Australia due to his vaccination status just before the start of the Australian Open in January.

The Serbian star later said he was willing to skip future grand slam events rather than get the COVID-19 vaccine.

"That is the price I'm willing to pay," Djokovic told the BBC last month.

With France now rolling back its protocols, Djokovic could head to Roland Garros looking for a record-tying 21st grand slam title. Spain's Rafael Nadal won his 21st at the Australian Open.

Djokovic slipped to No. 2 in the world rankings released Monday, with Russia's Daniil Medvedev taking over the top spot.

Chelsea to Face Giant-Killing

Middlesbrough in FA Cup

LONDON (Dispatches) - Middlesbrough will look to knock another of the Premier League's major clubs out of the FA Cup after being drawn at home to Chelsea in the quarter-finals.

Boro, eighth in the second-tier Championship, followed up their fourth-round win over Manchester United by defeating Tottenham Hotspur 1-0 on Tuesday.

Manchester City visit Southampton in an all top-flight encounter, while Liverpool are assured of Championship opposition after being drawn Thursday against the winner of Nottingham Forest and Huddersfield, who play on Monday.

Crystal Palace will face either Everton or Boreham Wood, with the draw for the last eight taking place shortly before the Toffees took on the only non-league side left in this season's competition at Goodison Park.

Quarter-final ties will be played over the weekend of March 18-21.

Draw for quarter-finals of FA Cup:

Crystal Palace v Everton or Boreham Wood

Nottingham Forest or Huddersfield v Liverpool

Middlesbrough v Chelsea

Southampton v Manchester City

Ties to played on the weekend of March 18-21

Azarenka Devastated By Ukraine Violence

LONDON (Dispatches) - Former world tennis number one Victoria Azarenka of Belarus has said she is devastated by the suffering of people amid violence in Ukraine after Russia invaded last week.

The invasion has killed more than 2,000 Ukrainian civilians and destroyed hundreds of structures including homes, hospitals, kindergartens and transport facilities, Ukraine's emergency service said.

"I'm devastated by the actions that have taken place over the last several days against and in Ukraine," Azarenka said on Twitter.



Barty said in a statement released by on Wednesday in the California desert.

"I don't believe I am at the level necessary to win these events and as a result I have

Barty Pulls out of Indian Wells, Miami Tournaments

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Top-ranked Ashleigh Barty has withdrawn from the prestigious hardcourt tournaments at Indian Wells and Miami saying she hadn't been able to prepare in the wake of her Australian Open triumph.

"Unfortunately my body has not recovered the way I'd hoped after the Australian Open and I have not been able to adequately prepare for Indian Wells and Miami," organizers of Indian Wells, which starts

decided to withdraw from both tournaments," added Barty, who would have been seeking a third straight title in Miami later in March.

Barty said she hoped to be back on court representing Australia in the Billie Jean King Cup in April.

"After missing the BJK Cup last year I can't wait to wear the green and gold again," she said.

In January, Barty became the first Australian to win her home Grand Slam in 44 years. She was 5-1 down in the second set against American Danielle Collins but came storming back to triumph 6-3, 7-6 (7/2).

Barty captured her third Grand Slam title after her breakthrough French Open success in 2019 and Wimbledon last year.

She joined Serena Williams as the only active players to win majors on all three surfaces. Collins also pulled out of Indian Wells due to a nagging injury. Her status for Miami remains uncertain.

Kante Calls for Focus After Surprise Of Abramovich Sale

LONDON (Dispatches) - Chelsea midfielder N'Golo Kante said the Premier League team's players were caught off guard by Roman Abramovich's decision to sell the club following Russia's invasion of Ukraine but urged them to stay focused on their quest to finish in the top four.

Russian Abramovich said on Wednesday he would sell Chelsea after 19 years amid growing calls for sanctions on the metals magnate, similar to those imposed on other Russian oligarchs, following Russia's invasion.

Abramovich has made vast fortunes since the break-up of the Soviet Union but denies close links to Russian leader Vladimir Putin, whose country calls its actions in Ukraine a "special operation."

"It was something we were not prepared for," Kante told Sky Sports on Thursday, referring to the announcement by Abramovich.

"It came quick, but the only thing we can do because we don't control these things, is do as best what we have always done ... playing football.

"Playing football is the best for us, for the club and for the fans ... it's the only thing that we control and we want to do that."

"We are in a good position for the top four, we are fully focused on going game by game and securing that," the French player said.

"It will not be easy as we still need to win many games but we train hard and hope to do it, starting this weekend."



PSG to Try Everything to Keep Mbappe

PARIS (Dispatches) - Paris Saint-Germain sporting director Leonardo says the club will do "everything" in its power to extend Kylian Mbappe's contract as Real Madrid threaten to prise him away on a free transfer.

The France star has long been linked with a move to Madrid, who reportedly tabled an unsuccessful offer worth up to €180 million (RM832 million) for Mbappe in August.

Despite the feted arrival of seven-time Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi, Mbappe has underlined his status as the key to PSG's pursuit of European success. His 24 goals this season easily outnumber those of the team's second leading scorer, Messi, on seven.

The 23-year-old equalled Zlatan Ibrahimovic's tally of 156 goals in PSG colours in last weekend's win over Saint-Etienne. Only Edinson Cavani has scored more goals for the club (200).

"As long as there's no signature, we're going to try everything. We're going to do everything to keep him," Leonardo told French sports daily L'Equipe.

The Brazilian denied claims from both Spanish and French media the club had offered Mbappe an annual salary of €50 million on top of a €100 million "loyalty bonus".

"It's not true, we haven't made a specific offer," said Leonardo, who believes the financial aspect of any new deal is "secondary" in the eyes of Mbappe.

"The last thing we'll put on the contract will be the amount."

Mbappe said last month he had yet to make a decision over his future, and that he would not talk to Madrid while the two teams were facing each other in Europe.

