

Health Ministry Announced on Monday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to **140,650** With **34** More Iranians Killed by the Virus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours

# IRAN NEWS

Some Arab Media on Monday Announced Oman's Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi Is To Visit Tehran Today to Tehran But Its Details Were Not Revealed

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## 2 DOMESTIC

President Urges Media to Create Hope in Society



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## 3 DOMESTIC

Tehran, Doha to Boost Bilateral Maritime, Air Cooperation



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## Iran-Russia Trade Planned to Exceed \$10b in Next 2 Years

TEHRAN (MNA) - The negotiations between the Iranian trade delegation with the Russian government official and directors of big Russian companies ended on the fourth day of a trade conference in Moscow.

At the end of the trade conference between the Iranian trade delegation and the Russian participants in the joint trade conference on Sunday, new contracts and agreements were signed between the two sides in different fields of agriculture, industry, petrochemical and other knowledge and technology, according to a report by the IRIB.

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## Tehran-Beijing Trade Can Be Doubled If Sanctions Lifted



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Chairman of Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce Majid Reza Hariri believes the trade

between Iran and China can be doubled but it hinges on the result of the Vienna talks and removal of sanctions.

Speaking to ILNA, Hariri said that if Vienna talks bear fruit and sanctions on Iran are lifted, the trade capacity of the country with China is at least two times more than the current level. Touching upon the outlook of the trade between Iran and China this year, he said that if the current situation remains and no certain development happens, the current trend of trade with China will continue because Iran's trade is under sanctions. He added if some changes happen this year, they will be for short time and the rise in the crude oil market will actually lead to the rise in the trade volume of Iran and China but it will have no significant change in terms of weight.

He went on to say that last year, Iran's trade with China saw 38% rise in terms of value but it was less than 7% in weight because major non-oil export of Iran to the world and especially to China is crude oil. He noted since the value of petrochemical and mineral products are day in day facing price hike, it affects the value of Iran's exports to China.

He admitted that the amount of crude exports to China is more than to any country, adding that raw materials account for 92% of Iran's exports to China while exports to other countries like Iraq and Afghanistan are not merely crude oil and other products are also exported.

Hariri stated that the trade volume of Iran and China was around \$24b last year while it was around \$17b in the preceding year but despite this rise in value, there was no considerable rise in weight and the rise was mainly because of the rise in the price of crude or products.

On the effect of Vienna talks on Iran-China Trade relation, he said that if sanctions are lifted, Iran's trade capacity is in a way that it will be able to double the current trade exchange with China and Tehran can witness fast growth in its trade with China otherwise the condition will not change.

Hariri went on to say that in 2016 when China's President visited Tehran, both countries set the target of \$600b bilateral trade in ten years and it means the annual trade would be \$60b but due to sanctions, both sides failed to reach even half of the set target but if sanctions are removed, the bilateral trade with China can even exceed \$60b per year.

He admitted that implementation of the 25-year cooperation document is waiting for the result of the Vienna talks as both sides have started the early stages for implementing their joint projects but the issue of finance awaits the sanctions removal. Therefore we should wait for the result of the talks, he noted.

Hariri also said that Iran-China Joint Chamber's office is to be launched in China which will help the trade between the two countries to increase and some talks are underway for the launch of a permanent exhibition of Iranian goods in China.

## 4 INTERNATIONAL

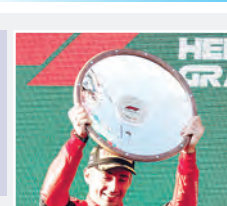
Macron, Le Pen Head for French Election Runoff



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## 8 SPORT

Leclerc Wins Australian GP as Verstappen Fails to Finish



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## Fate of Vienna Talks Awaits U.S. Decision

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh says the text of an agreement that would conclude the Vienna talks is not yet finalized "for us to talk about".

"We really do not know whether we reach a nuclear agreement or not. The reason is the United States has not yet shown the necessary will for an agreement," he said in his weekly presser, in response to the letter by a group of lawmakers to the Iranian president on the Vienna talks.

"So far, red lines have been observed. If we were to cross the red lines, the agreement would be achieved several months ago. We are yet to reach the point where the American side shows it is committed to its obligations. What is important for us is that there are clear benefits for the people from removal of the sanctions."

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## Release of Iran Frozen Fund in Seoul In Final Phase

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A senior regional official is visiting Tehran on Tuesday to, among other things, finalize the mechanism for releasing seven billion dollars of Iran's frozen funds.

Reviewing the implementation mechanism for releasing Iran's blocked funds in the framework of the recent agreement is among the main goals of the upcoming visit.

IRNA reported last week that Iran had reached agreements with some countries on a framework to unfreeze a considerable part of its funds blocked abroad.

The blocked funds should be received in Iran's bank accounts within a specific timeframe of few weeks, according to the framework.

The framework resembles the one agreed upon with the UK that led to the transfer of 470 million euros to Iran's bank accounts.

The funds to be released under the recent agreements amount to seven billion dollars.

This could be a sign of gradual mitigation of banking restrictions against Iran in a way that was unprecedented even after the nuclear deal was signed.

## Pakistan Lawmakers Elected Sharif as New PM

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Shehbaz Sharif on Monday was elected as Pakistan's new prime minister, but the country still faces months of political crisis with ousted premier Imran Khan vowing disruption from the wings.

Khan was dismissed Sunday after losing a no-confidence vote, paving the way for an opposition alliance that faces the same issues that bedeviled the cricket star-turned-politician.

Sharif, leader of the centrist Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) is certain to be chosen ahead of the token candidacy of Khan loyalist Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the former foreign minister.

Whether Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) lawmakers even take part remains to be seen, with a party committee recommending they quit en masse to protest against what they say has been "regime change" by the United States.

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ششمین جشنواره فجر تلاوت

ماقروا سحر

انتخاب برترین قاری، حافظ، مرتل مردمی

۱۴۰۰

هَذَا بَيَانٌ لِلتَّاسِ (ششمین فجر تلاوت) زمان برگزاری ۲۶ فروردین ۱۴۰۱ محل برگزاری تالار وحدت

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## CBI to Release List of Major Defaulters on Bank Loans

TEHRAN (MNA) - Central Bank of Iran will release the list of major defaulters on bank loans in the next Iranian calendar week (starts on Saturday April 16).

CBI Public Relations Director Mostafa Qamari-Vafa announced in a tweet: “The central bank, within the framework of the comprehensive plan to reform the banking network and based on financial discipline and credit health of

banks, according to paragraph D of Note 16 of Budget Law of 1401 (current Iranian calendar year) will publish the names of major defaulters on bank loans from next week.”

According to the CBI, the table related to the large bank debtors’ information will be completed in the middle of the next Iranian calendar month (April 20-May 20) after receiving the relevant information from the banks.

# President Urges Media to Create Hope in Society

*IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK*

**TEHRAN – President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi called hope-making information as one of the most important parts of Jihad of Enlightenment and stated, “In this part, from me as the President to each of the managers and employees of the government and the media, we all have a responsibility to provide responsible information to rebuild people’s hope and trust, and take steps to thwart the enemy’s conspiracy”.**

Speaking in a meeting with a group of managers and members of the media on Sunday evening, President Raisi said, “I have firmly advised all my colleagues to have regular meetings with elites and even those who oppose the government, and use their ideas”.

The President described administering justice as the central approach of the Popular Government and added, “The administration of justice is what people want, and it is the legal duty of the government, the emphasis of the Supreme Leader and one of the serious backwardness in the Islamic Republic”.

He called on the media to be a bridge between the government and the people by providing honest and fair information and said, “As the Supreme Leader has emphasized, the revolutionary and pious people are the most important component of power in the Islamic Republic, and it is very important to maintain their hope and trust “.

Pointing out that today is the era of narrative warfare, the President stated, “The media have an effective role in accurate, clear, fast and hopeful narration of various events, and without professional, fair and committed media, it is not possible to confront the enemies in the field of narrative warfare”.



Referring to some issues raised at the meeting, including the process of nuclear talks, Raisi said, “We have repeatedly stated that our strategy in the nuclear talks is the strategy announced by the Supreme Leader”.

“Sometimes some people try to induce that the issue of nuclear negotiations is the only issue in the field of foreign policy of the country, but this is incorrect in our opinion. From the government’s point of view, nuclear negotiations are one of the country’s foreign policy issues, not all foreign policy issues,” he said.

Raisi stated, “The Secretariat of the Supreme National Security Council is appointed by the government as a source of information and communication with the media and elites in the field of nuclear negotiations, and the media regularly holds meetings with relevant officials in the Secretariat to be informed of the process of the negotiations”.

Referring to the government’s efforts to increase investment in the country, he continued, “The government has invited large companies and complexes and banks to enter the field of investment in infrastructure and large projects based on a specific plan”.

The President stated that the government’s efforts to attract foreign investment have also begun, stating, “Work has begun in this area, but the process must reach a certain stage so that the details can be announced”.

Raisi stressed the need to strengthen the field of information and explain the actions of the government and said, “In this part, from me as the President to each of the managers and employees of the government and the media, we all have a responsibility to provide responsible information to rebuild people’s hope and trust, and take steps to thwart the enemy’s conspiracy”.

The President emphasized, “The enemy seeks to spread despair and disappoint the people, and you, the members of the media, have an effective role in thwarting the enemy’s conspiracies and achieving victory in the battle of narratives with a hope-creating information strategy”.

## Tehran, Damascus to Boost Economic, Trade and Investment Cooperation

TEHRAN (IP) - Syrian Ambassador in Tehran met with representatives of various Iranian commercial, industrial, and craft sectors, discussing the means to boost and develop economic, trade, and investment cooperation between the two countries.

During the meeting at the Syrian Embassy in Tehran on Sunday, Shafiq Diop stressed the importance of benefiting from the new Investment Law No. 18 for 2021, which aims to create an attractive and suitable investment environment for Arab and foreign investors.

Diop called for establishing joint companies between Syria and Iran and strengthening the role of the private sector to serve the interests of the two friendly countries in the economic and commercial fields.

He further emphasized the need to work together to establish joint technology companies, exchange knowledge experiences, and search for suitable alternatives to overcome the impacts of the unilateral and illegal coercive sanctions imposed on the two countries.

Diop affirmed the importance of exerting more efforts to strengthen economic and trade relations to rise to the level of the strategic political relations between the two countries and establishing exhibitions in a way that contributes to introducing their citizens to the products and goods produced in both countries.

He invited Iranian companies and businessmen to participate in the 3rd conference for the reconstruction of Syria, entitled “Investment Prospects and Vision,” to be held in Damascus next May.

In turn, the Iranian delegation stressed the importance of cooperation with Syria in various economic, medical, industrial, technological, and knowledge fields, calling for addressing all technical issues in a way that contributes to strengthening relations between the two countries.

## World Health Day 2022 Commemorated in Tehran

TEHRAN (MNA) – World Health Day 2022 was commemorated by the World Health Organization in Iran in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Medical Education during a formal event organized on Sunday by Shahid Beheshti University.

The event welcomed students in different fields of health and medicine at the university, as well as experts and specialists from a myriad of backgrounds and provided a platform for keynote speeches by WHO Representative and Head of Mission in Iran Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain, University Chancellor Dr Alireza Zali, and Deputy Minister for Public Health Dr Kamal Heidari.

World Health Day is seen each year as an opportunity by governments and organizations to draw worldwide attention to a subject of major importance to global health including the Islamic Republic of Iran. The joint commemoration of the global occasion, held to mark WHO’s founding, will continue through a number of initiatives and events that officially commence on the 7th and run until the last week of April.

“We need to highlight operationalizing health in all policies, strengthening the partnership of health and non-health sectors, the focus of political, economic, and social drivers and their impact on health and well-being,” said Dr Hussain in his speech. “Our vision in the region is Health for all

by all and this is not achievable without the intersectoral collaboration of all sectors.”

Under the theme ‘Our Planet, Our Health’ for this year’s World Health Day, WHO is focusing global attention on urgent actions needed to keep humans and the planet healthy and foster a movement to create societies focused on well-being in the midst of a pandemic, a polluted planet, increasing diseases like cancer, asthma, and heart disease.

## Internet Protection Bill to Return to Majlis Floor

TEHRAN (IFP) - A member of the Iranian parliament’s presiding board has said the internet protection bill is back at the legislative body to be put to a vote.

On Monday morning, the bill was debated by MPs and 120 lawmakers voted for the bill’s return to parliament’s floor. 109 MPs didn’t vote for the bill’s return to the parliament floor and that means it must be reviewed at the joint commission of the legislature.

Alireza Salimi, the member of the Iranian parliament’s presiding board said parliament’s going to soon debate the bill.

A special parliamentary committee in late February ratified the outlines of the legislation that critics believe will lead to tighter restrictions on online activity in Iran.

The Protection Bill was first introduced three years ago but MPs temporarily shelved it last July after business groups and internet users said it would harm them.

Supporters of the legislation argue that it will protect the moral integrity of the internet and the society against vices

## Iran Reportedly Appoints New Ambassador to Iraq

*IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK*

TEHRAN - The Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson disclosed the name of Iran’s next ambassador to Iraq, who will replace the incumbent Iraj Masjedi, state media announced.

The Ambassador-Designate is Hossein Al-e Sadeq, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh announced.

Khatibzadeh said that Al-e Sadeq will be inaugurated “soon”, without giving a date. He did not provide any additional information on the newly-appointed envoy.

Outgoing Ambassador Masjedi was named Iran’s ambassador to Iraq in 2017. He was once an advisor to Quds Force commander Martyr Qassem Soleimani.

## Iran Negotiating With Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan on Water Right

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said that negotiations have been held with Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan on water rights in border rivers and building dams.

Amirabdollahian made the remarks referring to Foreign Ministry’s measures with regard to water diplomacy.

He said that the ministries of foreign affairs and energy have formed a committee to address issues related to border rivers and building dams by some neighbors.

He pointed to negotiations with Turkey on dams constructed on Aras River.

He also referred to his talks with Afghanistan, saying that a delegation from Turkey visited Iran and a joint committee has been designed in this regard.

## Collapse of Zionist Regime Accelerated

TEHRAN (MNA) – Turning to recent brutalities of Zionist regime against Palestinians in different parts of the occupied lands, spokesman for the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said that collapse of Israeli regime has been accelerated.

Speaking at the second policy-making and planning meeting of Intifada (Uprising) and Al-Quds Headquarters of Islamic Development Coordination Council, Brigadier General Ramazan Sharif said that the process of annihilation and collapse of the Zionist regime has been accelerated.

The spokesman pointed to the impact of factors affecting the current year’s International Day of Quds and the trend of struggles of Palestinians in recent months, saying that struggles of Palestinians in the holy month of Ramadan have had special sensitivities but this year, due to the coincidence of one of the occasions of the Zionist regime with this auspicious month and presence of Jews and Muslims at Al-Aqsa Mosque, this sensitivity has doubled at the threshold of International Day of Quds.

Security is the most important issue for the Zionist regime to preserve the Jewish population in the occupied lands and territories, he said, adding that loss of security and population actually means the loss of its identity and collapse of this regime.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif pointed to the significance of the International Day of Quds and stated that organizing the ceremony of this auspicious day means the preservation of ideals and causes of the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

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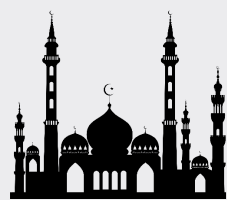
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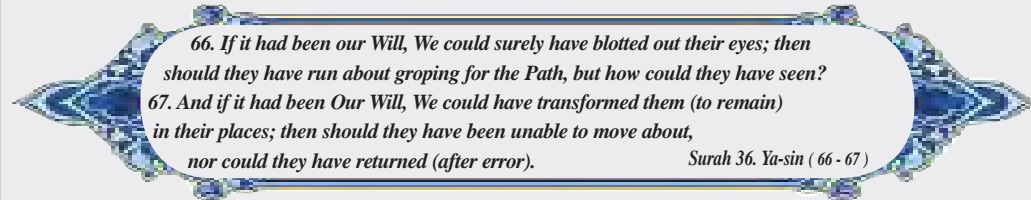
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## PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:05
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:53
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:06
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:34



## Tehran, Doha to Boost Bilateral Maritime, Air Cooperation

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - Minister of Roads and Urban Development and the Qatari Minister of Transport and Communications emphasized the development of bilateral maritime and air cooperation.**

The Qatari Minister of Transport and Communications was heading a delegation to Kish Island in southern Iran.

Minister of Roads and Urban Development Rostam Qhasemi in a joint meeting with Qatari Minister of Transportation and Communications Jassim bin Saif Al Sulaiti on Kish Island on Sunday evening, noting that during the same visit, a flight agreement was reached between Iran and Qatar.

"Air travel is coming to an end, in a special session we will also develop sea travel," he said.

Qhasemi also referred to the issue of holding the World Cup in Qatar and added: "We are ready to cooperate in the World Cup in terms of supporting and providing food and hosting tourists who want to see Iran, so that many World Cup travelers can choose Kish and travel to Qatar to watch the matches."

Regarding the permission to fly from Iran's skies, the Iranian Minister said that Iran's skies are ready to welcome foreign flights, and even many Iranian provinces are requesting direct flights to Qatar, and the volume of flights should increase.

Qatari Minister of Transport and Communications Jassim bin Saif Al Sulaiti also said during the meeting that the fields of cooperation between Iran and Qatar are very wide and joint committees will be formed to expand cooperation.



Jassim bin Saif Al Sulaiti added that the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 is not just a matter for Qatar, but for the whole region, in which Iran's role is undoubtedly important.

The Qatari Minister of Transport stated that the volume of interaction between Iranian ports should be increased, adding that the very short distance between Iran and Qatar requires the development of technical and maritime cooperation between the two countries.

Meanwhile on Monday, Iran and Qatar signed six documents and agreements on air transportation and World Cup 2022.

The signing ceremony was held in Kish Island, southern Iran, attended by Qasemi and Qatar's Saif Al Sulaiti.

The documents included the agreement sign by Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi on his trip to Qatar, three cooperation documents on air transportation, a cooperation document on maritime transportation and the document detailing cooperation grounds regarding Qatar World Cup 2022.

The Qatari minister arrived in Kish Island yesterday to meet his Iranian counterpart. Qatar's Ambassador to Iran also attended the meetings.

## Necessity for Improvement of Periphery In Developmental Organizations

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade and Head of Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran (IDRO) Mr. Ali Nabavi pointing to the historic role of the organization in the development of the national industry said that the agile and full flexible of activities areas of developmental organizations should be provided in close cooperation of different organs.



Nabavi noted that spread of various directives to the developmental organizations which should basically have super organizational agility and flexibility reduces capability and reflex of these organizations in most cases.

He termed upgrading the strategy and moving towards current needs in the field of industry as one of the main priorities of IDRO which will be carried out through different channels of modern technologies and knowledge-based achievements, laying the ground for the fourth industrial revolution in line with the upstream documents in the field of industry and production.

Nabavi also pointed to the task of the organizational development stipulated at the Article 44 which is the balanced development and job creation in the underprivileged areas with investment in the new fields and called for broad and precise process for privatization of the enterprises.

He also pointed to the accumulated knowledge and with over half a century of organizational maturation and called necessary facilitating and supportive interactions of this organization with the private sector for implementing the projects in line with the strategy of the year which has been set by the Supreme Leader.

Then the outgoing head of IDRO Mr. Mohsen Salehinia briefed Nabavi of the performance of the organization during his tenure.

## Construction of Soleimani Petro-Refinery to Begin Soon

TEHRAN (Shana) – Oil Minister Javad Owji said construction of a 300,000-barrel/day petro-refining plant will begin during the current calendar year, which ended on March 21.

Owji stated the 300,000-barrel Shahid Soleimani petro-refinery is the first concentrated petro-refining project in the country, and its construction will begin in April next to the Persian Gulf Star refinery.

The Oil Minister continued: "For refineries such as Bandar Abbas, Tehran and Tabriz, the quality improvement plan and value added of their products have been defined in the form of eight projects."

Owji underlined the time the projects will be commissioned, saying from the next two to three years, these projects will come online; this both contributes to environmental friendliness and adds refinery value and employment to the society.



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## Transmission Line of Phase 16 of SP Returns to Production Circuit



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Deputy for Operations and Logistics at Pars Oil and Gas Company (POGC) announced return of the transmission line of phase 16 of South Pars to the production circuit.

According to the public relations of POGC, Yahya Rashidi announced the return of the transmission line of the phase 16 in South Pars to the production, adding that with repair and reconstruction of the damaged parts of the 32-inch offshore line of gas transmission, exploitation from this platform resumed.

He said the offshore pipeline that links the first deck of Phase 16 (SPD 16A) of South Pars Gas Field in the Persian Gulf to onshore gas refining facilities was damaged on December 31 and caused operations in the rig to stop temporarily. He added that fortunately due to endeavors of his colleagues, the damaged parts were repaired and reconstructed and after conducting tests, the platform SPD16 became ready to transmit gas to the onshore refinery.

He hailed the taken measures by his colleagues at the gas platform for maximum gas production, adding that due to these efforts, South Pars provided required amount of gas for the country. He also hailed the proper performance of the oil ministry in saving energy consumption in the winter.

Rashidi then delved into details of repair process of the pipeline and hailed the knowledge-based domestic companies for providing the required equipment for reconstruction of the pipeline.

POGC, a subsidiary of the National Iranian Oil Company, dismissed reports of a fire at the facility, saying no fire broke out on the platform and that facilities are safe.

## Quality of MSC Products Soars in 1400

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN – Manager of the Quality Control of Mobarakeh Steel Company (MSC) says the quality of products of the company boosted in last Iranian calendar year (1400) which ended on March 20.



Alireza Key Yegane said that the most important indicator of MSC products bespeaks the quality and quality output of all products of the company, adding that quality output of the company comes from its steelmaking, hot rolling and cold rolling units.

He divided products of Mobarakeh Steel Company into four categories of conforming products, nonconforming products grade 1, non-conforming products grade 2 and scraps. And the quality output is resulted by the weight percentage of the conforming products and it indicates the amount of the accorded products production based on orders, he added.

Key Yegane then announced 88.82% growth in the quality output indicator of the productions of the company last year, adding that this indicator was 83.94 and 86.88 percent in Iranian calendar years of 1398 and 1399 respectively. He added that one can say that improvement of the quality last year was 5% comparing to 1398 and 2% to 1399 and this result is achievement of personnel of MSC which is effective either directly or indirectly on the quality of the products.

He said that improvement of quality of products leads to rise in the customers' satisfaction, productivity, lowering the waste and more profitability as well as timely delivery of the products.

Key Yegane reiterated that this achievement was attained while the country is under sanctions and several problems have emerged in the market and expressed hope that this improvement would continue in the upcoming years.

He then hailed the staff of the company and their role in attaining such achievement and expressed hope MSC as a leading organization would do its best in materializing the slogan of the year in the current year.



# Two Palestinian Women Killed

TEL AVIV (Dispatches) - Israeli forces killed two Palestinian women on Sunday after one ran towards troops and the other stabbed a soldier in separate incidents in the occupied West Bank, Israeli security officials said.

The bloodshed follows a string of deadly Arab attacks in Israel. There have also been Israeli raids in the West Bank against what Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has called “a new wave of terrorism”.

No weapon was found on the body of the woman shot in Bethlehem after she ignored soldiers’ calls and warning fire to stop approaching, the Israeli military said, adding that it had launched an investigation.



# Former Ecuador Vice President Released From Prison

QUITO (Dispatches) - Former Ecuadorean vice president Jorge Glas was released from prison on Sunday, after a judge ruled his physical and psychological well-being were at risk, officials and Glas’ supporters said.

Glas had been sentenced to jail in 2017 after a court found him guilty of receiving bribes from Brazilian construction company Odebrecht in return for handing the scandal-ridden firm state contracts. He served four-and-a-half years.

A judge ruled on Saturday that he should be released after a habeas corpus petition, a court in Santa Elena province said in a statement.



# Macron, Le Pen Head for French Election Runoff



PARIS (Dispatches) - France’s incumbent leader Emmanuel Macron and far-right challenger Marine Le Pen are heading for an April 24 presidential election runoff, projections showed after first round voting on Sunday.

Macron garnered 28.1-29.5% of votes in the first round while Le Pen won 23.3-24.4%, according to separate estimates by pollsters Ifop, OpinionWay, Elabe and Ipsos. Those estimates, published as voting ended, are usually very reliable in France.

If confirmed, that outcome would set up a duel between an economic liberal with a globalist outlook in Macron and a deeply eurosceptic economic nationalist who, until the Ukraine war, was an open admirer of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Who next holds the Elysee Palace will depend on how those who backed Macron and Le Pen’s rivals cast their ballots.

Conservative candidate Valerie Pécresse, the Socialists’ Anne Hidalgo, the Greens’ Yannick Jadot and the Communists’ Fabien Roussel said they would back Macron to block the far-right. “So that France does not fall into hatred of all against all, I solemnly call on you to vote on April 24 against the far-right of Marine Le Pen,” said Hidalgo.

Pécresse warned of “disastrous consequences” if Macron did not win the runoff.

But another far-right candidate Eric Zemmour will call on supporters to back Le Pen, Marion Marechal - who is an ally of Zemmour and Le Pen’s niece - told BFM TV.

To cheers of supporters chanting “We will win! We will win!,” Le Pen said she wanted to unite all French. The runoff “will be a choice of civilization,” she said, adding that her platform would protect the weak and make France independent.

Not for two decades has a French president won a second term.

Barely a month ago, Macron was on course to comfortably reverse that, riding high in polls thanks to strong economic growth, a fragmented opposition and his statesman role in trying to avert war on Europe’s eastern flank.

But he paid a price for late entry into the campaign during which he eschewed market walkabouts in provincial France in favor of a single big rally outside Paris. A plan to make people work longer also proved unpopular, enabling Le Pen to narrow the gap in opinion polls.

She, by contrast, for months toured towns and villages across France, focusing on cost-of-living issues that trouble millions and tapping into anger towards the political elite.

“Marine Le Pen knew how to talk to people about their more concrete problems. During the next two weeks he (Macron) will have to pay more attention to what is happening in France, take a diplomatic break,” said Adrien Thierry, a 23-year old supporter.

# Battle Looms in Ukraine’s East, Washington Commits to Weapons Supply

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian forces continued shelling targets in eastern Ukraine on Sunday, as Washington said it would meet Kyiv’s request for more military aid by providing “the weapons it needs” to defend itself against Russia.

Russia has failed to take any major cities since it launched its invasion on Feb. 24, but Ukraine says it has been gathering its forces in the east for a major assault and has urged people to flee.

Russian forces fired rockets into Ukraine’s Luhansk and Dnipropetrovsk regions on Sunday, officials said. Missiles completely destroyed the airport in the city of Dnipro, said Valentyn Reznichenko, governor of the central Dnipropetrovsk region.

Russia’s defense ministry said that high-precision missiles had destroyed the headquarters of Ukraine’s Dnipro battalion in the town of Zvonetsky.

Reuters could not immediately confirm the reports.

Since Russia invaded, Zelenskiy has appealed to Western powers to provide more defence help, and to punish Moscow with tough sanctions.

## Shehbaz Sharif Seeks to Become Pakistan PM

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Opposition politician Shehbaz Sharif submitted his nomination to be Pakistan’s next prime minister to the legislature on Sunday, his party said, after incumbent Imran Khan lost a no-confidence vote in parliament after nearly four years in power.

The younger brother of three-times prime minister Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz, 70, has led a bid by the opposition in parliament to topple former cricket star Khan, and he is widely expected to replace him following a vote.

But Khan’s party also submitted papers nominating the former foreign minister as a candidate, saying their members of parliament would resign en masse should he lose, potentially creating the need for urgent by-elections for their seats.

Khan, the first Pakistani prime minister to be ousted by a no confidence vote, had clung on for almost a week after a united opposition first tried to remove him.

On Sunday, he repeated allegations that a foreign conspiracy was behind the regime change.

“The freedom struggle begins again today,” he said via his Twitter account, which is followed by more than 15 million and still describes him as Prime Minister of Pakistan in his biography section.

Even before the vote Khan had called for protests, which were expected to take place late on Sunday.

“I tell all of my supporters across Pakistan, on Sunday, after Isha (evening) prayers, you all have to come out of your homes and protest peacefully against this imported government that is trying to come to power,” he said in an address to the nation on Friday.

His government fell in the early hours of Sunday after a 13-hour session that included repeated delays and lengthy speeches by lawmakers from his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party.

Opposition parties were able to secure 174 votes in the 342-member house for the no-confidence motion, giving them the majority they needed to enable Monday’s vote to elect a new premier.

# China Slams U.S. Virus Accusations as Shanghai Lockdown Drags on

SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - China blasted the United States for making “groundless accusations” about its Covid-19 policy, after surging cases in Shanghai prompted the American consulate to let some staff leave the locked-down megacity.

Beijing’s zero-Covid strategy has come under strain since March as over 100,000 cases in Shanghai have seen its 25 million inhabitants locked down in phases, inciting complaints of food shortages and clashes with health workers.

The U.S. embassy said Saturday it would permit non-essential employees to leave its consulate in Shanghai due to the case surge, warning citizens in China they may face “arbitrary enforcement” of virus curbs.

In response, Beijing expressed “strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to the US side’s groundless accusations about China’s epidemic control policy”, according to a statement issued Saturday on the foreign ministry’s website.

“This is the U.S.’s own decision. However, it must be pointed out that China’s epidemic control policy is scientific and effective,” ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said, adding that Beijing had lodged “solemn representations” with American counterparts.

“We have full confidence that Shanghai and other places will overcome this round of the epidemic.”

China is sticking fast to a policy of snap lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions to staunch the spread

of the virus even as Shanghai’s daily case numbers have spiralled under an Omicron-fuelled wave.

The business hub reported a record 24,943 new infections on Sunday -- mostly asymptomatic, accounting for over 90 percent of the national total.

Authorities have readied tens of thousands of new beds in over 100 makeshift hospitals as part of a policy of isolating every person who tests positive for the virus -- whether or not they show any symptoms.

Locals have begun to chafe at lockdown restrictions with many taking to social media to vent anger at food shortages and heavy-handed controls -- including the recent killing of a pet corgi by a health worker.

An unpopular policy of separating infected children from their virus-free parents -- now softened -- also triggered a rare show of public anger this week. But officials are not budging on their zero-tolerance approach.

City health official Wu Qianyu said during a Sunday press conference the city “would not relax in the slightest”.

Major online delivery platforms said they would bolster food stocks and draft in thousands of drivers to strengthen the supply of basic goods.

In an interview with a local news outlet on Saturday, Zhang Wenhong -- a top doctor in Shanghai’s pandemic fight -- acknowledged the impact on the healthcare system but said “realising dynamic zero ... will help to resume normal medical order as early as possible”.



# Tunisians Protesters Accuse President of Failed Dictatorship

TUNIS (Dispatches) - Tunisians protested against President Kais Saied, accusing him of imposing one-man rule in the North African country after he dissolved parliament last month.

A political crisis in the country intensified last month when more than half of the members of parliament held an online session to revoke Saied’s decrees.

“We are facing a failed dictatorship that is leading the country to an economic disaster.. We will continue to protest in the streets until a coup is forced to reverse its decisions,” Chaima Issa, an activist, said.

Many members of parliament participated in the protest on Sunday, which took place with a heavy presence of anti-riot police. Protesters chanted: “The people want to overthrow the coup.”

“We will continue to resist the coup and we will not retreat. We will not accept this dictatorship,” Samira Chaouchi, one of two deputy speakers of parliament, said.

After last month’s online session, which Saied dissolved, anti-terrorism police summoned the main opposition figure Rached Ghannouchi and other lawmakers for questioning, prompting criticism from abroad as well as at home.

Ghannouchi, who is the parliament’s speaker and head of Islamist Ennahda party, said other virtual sessions would be convened.

A delegation from the European Parliament will visit Tunisia on Monday to urge the return of the democracy established after the 2011 revolution that ended the autocratic rule of the late President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Saied, took control of executive power in the middle of last year and has ruled by decree, which his opponents describe as a coup.

He has rejected his opponents accusations and said he would hold talks on political reforms, but that “traitors and thieves” would not participate.

Saied has previously said he would form a committee to rewrite the constitution, put it to a referendum in July and hold parliamentary elections in December.

The country’s two main parties Ennahda and Free Constitutional, which are bitterly opposed, have both said they will oppose those plans.





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## Russian Bank VTB Loses Control Over European Subsidiary

FRANKFURT (Dispatches) - Germany's banking regulator said it had stripped Russia's VTB of control over its European subsidiary as sanctions hit the second-biggest Russian bank over the war in Ukraine.

The Russian group "no longer has control" over its Germany-based subsidiary VTB Bank SE after a ban on exercising its right to vote, financial markets authority BaFin said in a statement.

The regulator said VTB can no longer access the financial assets of its subsidiary, which is now "completely isolated" from the Russian group. The European entity's activities can continue, but its board cannot follow directives from VTB, which was placed on an EU sanctions list on Friday.



## Crisis-Hit Sri Lanka Nearly out of Medicine

COLOMBO (Dispatches) - Sri Lanka's doctors warned on Sunday they were nearly out of life-saving medicines and said the island nation's economic crisis threatened a worse death toll than the coronavirus pandemic.

Weeks of power blackouts and severe shortages of food, fuel and pharmaceuticals have brought widespread misery to Sri Lanka, which is suffering its worst downturn since independence in 1948.

The Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA) said that all hospitals in the country no longer had access to imported medical tools and vital drugs.

Several facilities have already suspended routine surgeries since last month because they were dangerously low on anaesthetics, but the SLMA said that even emergency procedures may not be possible very soon.

"We are made to make very difficult choices. We have to decide who gets treatment and who will not," the group said Sunday, after releasing a letter they had sent President Gotabaya Rajapaksa days earlier to warn him of the situation.

"If supplies are not restored within days, the casualties will be far worse than from the pandemic." Mounting public anger over the crisis has seen large protests calling for Rajapaksa's resignation.

Thousands of people braved heavy rains to keep up a demonstration outside the leader's seafront office in the capital Colombo for a second day.

Business leaders joined calls for the president to step down on Saturday and said the island's chronic fuel shortages had seen their operations haemorrhage cash.

Rajapaksa's government is seeking an IMF bailout to help extricate Sri Lanka from the crisis, which has seen skyrocketing food prices and the local currency collapse in value by a third in the past month.

Finance ministry officials have said sovereign bond-holders and other creditors may have to take a haircut as Colombo seeks to restructure its debt.

New finance minister Ali Sabry told parliament on Friday that he expects \$3 billion from the IMF to support the island's balance of payments in the next three years.

A critical lack of foreign currency has left Sri Lanka struggling to service its ballooning \$51 billion foreign debt, with the pandemic torpedoing vital revenue from tourism and remittances.

Economists say Sri Lanka's crisis has been exacerbated by government mismanagement, years of accumulated borrowing and ill-advised tax cuts.

## S&P Cuts Russia's Foreign Currency Rating to Selective Default

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - S&P lowered Russia's foreign currency ratings to "selective default" on increased risks that Moscow will not be able and willing to honor its commitments to foreign debt-holders.

Facing waves of sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine, Russia could face its first sovereign external default in over a century after it made arrangements to make an international bond repayment in rubles this week, even though the payment was due in dollars.

S&P said in a statement it understood that Russia had made coupon and principal payments on dollar-denominated Eurobonds in rubles on Monday.

"We currently don't expect that investors will be able to convert those ruble payments into dollars equivalent to the originally due amounts, or that the government will convert those payments within a 30-day grace period."

Sanctions on Russia are likely to be further increased in the coming weeks, the agency said, "hampering Russia's willingness and technical abilities to honor the terms and conditions of its obligations to foreign debt-holders."

Russia's finance minister on Thursday said the country will do everything possible to pay its creditors, but investors in Russia's international bonds face an increasingly uncertain path to recover their money should the country default.

S&P assigns a selective default rating when it believes the debtor has selectively defaulted on a specific issue or class of obligations but will continue to meet its payment obligations on other issues or classes of obligations in a timely manner.

Russia has not defaulted on its external debt since the aftermath of its 1917 revolution, but its bonds have now emerged as a flashpoint in its economic tussle with Western countries.

## UAE Set to Attract More Investments in Region

DUBAI (Dispatches) - The UAE's image as global hub will further strengthen as it is poised to see new dialogues which will attract more investments and opportunities in the region in 2022, said Dr Raphael Nagel, chairman, The Abrahamic Business Circle, on the sidelines of the recently concluded seminar 'Let Money Talk' investment summit.

Dr Nagel, a popular business facilitator, heads The Abrahamic Business Circle (The Circle), which is an exclusive Private Members Network organisation focused on promoting global economic diplomacy through investments. One of The Circle's initiatives for its exclusive members whose businesses are located in the UAE and Israel

is to augment the multilateral economic partnerships between countries by providing a platform for entrepreneurs and investors to integrate into creating business collaboration.

The Circle provides a platform for entrepreneurs and investors, an economic hub for industries including startups, technologies, fundraising, and investments which underpin cooperation not only between the UAE-Israel but also on a global scale.

"Since the formation of The Abrahamic Business Circle, regional trends have reached a broader aspect. The Circle has grown into a global network of high-profile individuals and companies. We are expecting to see global transactions to provide entrepreneurial opportunities, which will promote economic diplomacy," said Dr Nagel. "This year 2022's initiative, The Circle will bring high-profile individuals and investors to Bogotá, Colombia under the high patronage of the President of the Republic of Colombia, Iván Duque Márquez." In the later part of the year, the investor's roundtable will be held at Zurich, Switzerland.

Recently a high-level UAE delegation travelled to Israel to conclude talks on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and, following the final round of negotiations, the agreed text is now being finalized ahead of an expected formal signing between the nations' respective leaders in the coming weeks. The deal is expected to boost trade and increase investment, boost tourism, accelerate digital advances and promote collaboration in priority sectors such as energy, education, healthcare, food security, entrepreneurship, cybersecurity and advanced technology. The UAE-Israel CEPA will substantially reduce or remove tariffs on a wide range of goods, enhance market access for services, promote investment flows, create jobs, promote new skills, enhance climate action and deepen cooperation on strategic projects. It will also create mechanisms for SME expansion.

## Turkish Inflation to Show Lasting Fall by Year-End: Nebati

ANKARA (Dispatches) - The public will see Turkey's inflation showing a downward trend and a lasting fall by the end of this year, the country's treasury and finance minister said.

The government has pledged to curb soaring consumer prices to safeguard households and has been taking steps to permanently lower inflation, which hit a new 20-year high in March.

"We will all see altogether how inflation is falling every month in this country from December onwards. Things are going to get better," Nureddin Nebati told an iftar event, a dinner to mark the breaking of the daily fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

The event was organized by one of Turkey's top business associations, the Independent Industrialists and Businesspersons Association (MÜSIAD), in Istanbul.

Turkey's annual consumer inflation leaped to 61.14% in March, according to official data, fueled by rising energy and commodity prices and the fallout of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Nebati praised the Turkish economy's performance in 2021 despite multiple challenges spearheaded by the coronavirus pandemic.

The country's gross domestic product (GDP) expanded by 11% last year, its highest rate in a decade, as the economy bounced back from the fallout of the outbreak.

Nebati said the capacity utilization rate of Turkey's manufacturing industry neared 80%, while exports leaped to a record \$225 billion (TL 3.3 trillion) in 2021.

Turkey's inflation has surged since last autumn when the Turkish lira declined after the central bank launched a 500 basis-point easing cycle, which came as the government endorsed a new economic program - prioritizing low-interest rates to boost production and exports.

The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) has held its key policy rate steady at 14% in three monetary policy meetings this year and said disinflation should begin in part due to base effects and the resolution of Ukraine war.

The bank is expected to keep its one-week repo rate unchanged again when its monetary policy committee meets this week, according to surveys.

The government has said inflation will fall to single digits next year under its new economic path aimed at achieving a current account surplus.

To counter rising prices and soften the impact on households, Turkey has introduced several value-added tax (VAT) cuts and subsidized a significant amount of electricity bills.

The government last week introduced a tax cut on several products, including hygiene products and medical equipment, and rearranged tax in the real estate market.

## Malaysia Targets Up to RM77b In Tourism Revenue in 2025



KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Malaysia's Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry (Motac) aims to generate between RM47 billion and RM77 billion in tourism revenue through the arrival of 16 million to 22 million international tourists in 2025, said its minister Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri.

"The reopening of the country's borders from April 1 came as good news to the entire chain of the tourism and culture sector to generate income.

"Therefore, Motac also aims to attract about two million international tourists this year with RM8.6 billion in tourism receipts. However, this is only an early projection which will of course be influenced by the current situation," she said in her speech when officiating at the Kid's Safe Travel campaign organized by Ola & Oli Sdn Bhd here.

Also present were Ola & Oli Sdn Bhd founder Dr Nur Shasha Ain Abdul Aziz and Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) chief operating officer Mohd Zain Mat Taha.

In the meantime, Nancy said the collaboration of various sectors including transportation, hospitality and recreation centres could ensure the smooth running of the tourism and culture ecosystem and, in turn, help accelerate the country's economic recovery phase.

"I commend the organization of programs that involve strategic cooperation with other parties such as the one conducted by Ola & Oli and KTMB with small and medium enterprises born from the tourism ecosystem.

"Motac welcomes such cooperation and even provides the Tourism, Arts and Culture Matching Grant (GPPSB) to assist industry players from various sectors and backgrounds in organizing high-impact tourism, arts and culture programs or events in 2022," she said.

## Suzuki to Invest \$1.3b in India Electric Vehicle Production

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Suzuki Motor will invest \$1.3 billion into electric vehicle and battery production in India, the Japanese car maker said Sunday, as it accelerates long-term plans to achieve carbon neutrality.

In a deal signed with the Indian state of Gujarat in the presence of visiting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, Suzuki said it planned to increase production capacity for electric vehicle manufacturing in the state.

It aims to begin operations in 2025.

The company will also build a plant manufacturing EV batteries on land near its Gujarat plant, while a joint venture — Maruti Suzuki Toyotsu India — will construct a vehicle recycling facility at the same site, the statement said.

"Suzuki's future mission is to achieve carbon neutrality with small cars," the company's president Toshihiro Suzuki said.



The announcement comes as major automakers move to boost production of green cars in a bid to reduce emissions.

Early this month US car titan Ford said it would separate its conventional and electric-auto businesses as it steps up production of emission-free vehicles.

Sony also announced it was teaming up with Honda to create a joint venture that will develop and sell electric vehicles, after its January unveiling of the Vision-S, a new prototype.

Nissan, Renault and Mitsubishi Motors have promised to offer 35 new electric models over the next five years, while Toyota recently hiked its 2030 EV sales goal by 75 per cent.



## Iranian Children Shine in Kao Int’l Painting Contest

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Three Iranian children have won big prizes in the 12th Kao International Environment Painting Contest for Children in Japan.

The contest themed «Let's make our environment sustainable, together!» had four categories in the individual competition with over 7,000 paintings submitted from around the world.

Selen Arami, a seven-year old girl from Ahvaz city in southeast Iran, won the Planet Earth Grand Prix.

Fatemeh Abiri, a ten-year old girl from capital Tehran, received the Kao Prize and Kian Jamshidpoor, a ten-year old boy from Kermanshah, gained the Eco Friend Prize Jury's Special Prize.



## Oil and Gas Revenues Give Russia’s Economy \$3.4b Cushion

MOSCOW (FT) - Russia has boosted the fund that cushions its sanctions-hit economy with \$3.4bn in additional oil and gas revenues thanks to rising energy prices since the start of its war with Ukraine, as it edges closer to its first debt default since 1998.

Moscow said on Sunday that it would direct an additional Rbs273.4bn (\$3.4bn) to its rainy day fund, of which Rbs271.6bn comes from oil and gas revenues it received in the first quarter of this year.

The additional money “will be used, among other things, to implement measures aimed at ensuring economic stability in the context of external sanctions”, the government said. The Russian economy is likely to contract by 10 per cent this year, according to economists’ consensus forecasts.

Despite this, earnings from commodity exports and harsh capital controls have helped Moscow to stabilize its currency and prevent a financial collapse in the face of severe economic sanctions imposed by western countries and their partners.

So far, Russia’s economy has been buoyed by oil and gas revenues and draconian capital controls, which block most foreign traders from exiting their investments.

However, S&P Global Ratings downgraded Russia’s credit status to a “selective default” this weekend after Moscow announced that it would make payments on the latest tranche of its foreign bonds in roubles, when they are due in dollars.

Russia has kept up payments on its dollar bonds since the start of the invasion, confounding many investors’ expectations that western sanctions and Russian currency controls would drive the country to its first foreign currency debt default since 1998.

But last week, Moscow had been due to make an \$84mn coupon payment and a \$552mn repayment of a maturing bond, for which it offered payment in roubles rather than dollars after American authorities blocked US banks from processing the payment.

Moscow has a 30-day grace period to get the cash to investors before it is in default, but S&P said this was unlikely to happen.

“We currently don’t expect that investors will be able to convert those rouble payments into dollars equivalent to the originally due amounts, or that the government will convert those payments within a 30-day grace period,” S&P said in a note.

“Sanctions on Russia are likely to be further increased in the coming weeks, hampering Russia’s willingness and technical abilities to honor the terms and



conditions of its obligations to foreign debt holders,” it added.

The US last week imposed its most severe level of sanctions on Sberbank, Russia’s largest financial institution, and Alfa-Bank, the country’s biggest private bank, preventing the lenders from transacting with any US institutions or individuals. It also prohibited any new US investments in Russia.

The EU also approved a fifth package of sanctions late last week, including an import ban on Russian coal.

A default is considered selective when it affects some international repayments but not others.

Russia has said that any default — should one take place — would be “artificial” since it is able to pay, but if its foreign reserves remain sanctioned it would make the payments in roubles.

Rating agency Fitch warned last month that an attempt to make dollar interest payments in the Russian currency would indicate “that a default or a default-like process has begun”.

## Nepal Bans Luxury Items’ Imports



KATHEMANDU (Dispatches) - Nepal has banned the import of luxury items to thwart the decline of the foreign exchange (forex) reserves of the country.

The biggest challenge at hand for the Nepalese government is the proper management of forex reserves, Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) spokesperson Gunakar Bhatta said on April 7, reported myRepublica, an English-language National daily newspaper published by Nepal Republic Media in Kathmandu.

He added that the government is trying to prevent further problems at the earliest by ceasing the import of luxury items and remaining watchful.

“The import of luxury items has been stopped to prevent the decline in foreign exchange reserves due to the rising deficits and high imports,” Bhatta said.

He added that the NRB had to halt the import of some items to handle the external sector to prevent further problems to the country’s economy.

Bhatta also stated that the NRB has not stopped the import of luxury items because of an economic crisis in Nepal. He mentioned that there was no need to panic as rumored concerning the problems with the economy.

NRB has forex reserves to support sustain the import of goods and services for 6.7 months, Bhatta said, adding that the economy has shown positive signs lately.

Stating that several people have begun leaving the country for foreign employment, he noted that the flow of remittances may improve very soon.

The import of bicycles, design vehicles, mopeds and necessary motor equipment, rice, textile products, machinery and spare parts, gold, paddy, electrical appliances, readymade garments, silver and thread has been banned.

Besides these items, a Letter of Credit (LC) will also not be open for the import of cement, toys, jars, sports goods and related items, stone decoration materials, silver, silver carved materials, chimney utensils, furniture and related items, and bottles until further notice.

The LC will also not be opened for the import of wood, hair creams and shampoos, perfumes, walking sticks, footwear and boots, make-up items, braces for teeth, charcoal and furniture, umbrellas, feathers, and weaving clothes.

The imports of several items comprising plants, chillies, fish, vegetables and nuts, dairy products, betel nuts, chickpeas, natural honey and eggs, bananas and chips, meat, optical, medical and surgical equipment has also been banned.

## Finland Gears Up for Historic NATO Decision

HELSINKI (Dispatches) - Finland is preparing for a potentially historic decision “before midsummer” on whether to apply to join NATO as a deterrent against Russian aggression.

The Nordic nation of 5.5 million has traditionally been militarily non-aligned, in part to avoid provoking its eastern neighbor, with which it shares a 1,300 kilometre (830 mile) border.

But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24 saw public support for joining NATO double from 30 to 60 percent, according to a series of polls.

“Never underestimate the capacity of Finns to take rapid decisions when the world changes,” former Finnish prime minister Alexander Stubb told AFP.

Himself a long-time NATO advocate, Stubb now believes Finland making a membership application is “a foregone conclusion” as Finns re-evaluate their relationship with their neighbour.

Next week a government-commissioned national security review will be delivered to parliament, the Eduskunta, to help Finnish MPs make up their own minds, before it is put to a vote.

“We will have very careful discussions but not taking any more time than we have to,” Prime Minister Sanna Marin told a news conference on Friday.

“I think we will end the discussion before midsummer,” she added.

“My guess is that the application will be filed sometime during the month of May” in time for the



June NATO summit in Madrid, Stubb said.

Finland declared independence in 1917 after 150 years of Russian rule, only for its vastly outnumbered army to fight off an attempted Soviet invasion during the Second World War inflicting heavy losses on the Red Army. Hostilities ended in a peace deal that saw Finland ceding several border areas to the Soviet Union.

Finnish leaders agreed to remain neutral during the Cold War in exchange for guarantees from Moscow that it would not invade.

The country’s forced neutrality to appease its stronger neighbour coined the term “Finlandization”.

Finland has remained outside the transatlantic military alliance, and despite some cuts after the Cold War it has focused on maintaining well-funded defence and preparedness capabilities.

“We’re able to mobilise 280,000 to 300,000 men and women within a matter of days,” Stubb said, adding that 900,000 reserves could also be called up.

Last week Finland’s government agreed a 40-percent hike in defense spending by 2026, to further strengthen the country’s position.

“We have walked a long way when it comes to our security policies, and they have worked so far,” said Centre Party MP Joonas Kontta.

Like the majority of his parliamentary colleagues, the 32-year-old used to think that NATO membership was “something that we don’t need at the moment”.

## Shell in Race for \$1.1b Spanish Green Energy Projects

MADRID (Dispatches) - Oil major Shell and utilities Naturgy and Verbund are preparing binding bids to buy renewable energy assets in Spain valued at about 1 billion euros (\$1.1 billion), three sources close to the matter told Reuters.

Spanish fund manager Q-Energy is selling the portfolio, taking advantage of strong appetite among European energy companies feeling increasing pressure from investors and governments to tackle climate change.

Competition for market share is intensifying as oil and gas companies set ambitious green targets, jostling with utilities and existing renewables businesses to lead the energy transition.

Binding bids are due by the end of April, the sources said.

Shell, Naturgy and Q-Energy declined to comment. Verbund did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Mainly consisting of solar projects, the assets up for sale are scattered from near Guadalajara in central Spain down to the sunny southern coastal region of Andalucia, one of the sources said.

The winning bidder is also likely to take on a team of about 25 people to develop the assets, the sources said.

Shell has made a number of solar acquisitions and this year won licences with Iberdrola’s Scottish Power to develop wind farms in the British North Sea.

Naturgy changed its name from Gas Natural in 2018 and has since set out a plan to focus on renewable energy and distribution grids. Verbund generated 90% of its electricity from renewable sources last year and has said it is looking for opportunities to increase its investment in the sector.

The portfolio being sold includes about 75 megawatts (MW) of solar capacity covered by an old subsidy regime that guarantees core earnings of roughly 60 million euros a year, one of the sources said.

### Iran-Russia...

FROM PAGE 1

Alireza Peymanpak, Iran’s deputy industry minister, Ahmad Khani Nowzari, Iran’s deputy labor minister, and Iran’s ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali, who headed the Iranian delegation in the conference held meetings with Russian officials, the result of which was gaining an agreement on Iran’s membership in the free trade agreement with the framework of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which was signed on 29 May 2014 by the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and came into force on 1 January 2015.

The Iranian trade delegation told the reporter that the Iranian side hopes to finalize the agreement on free trade with the EAEU before the end of this year while stressing that more than 70% of the negotiations and agreement has been done so far.

The directors and representatives of as many as 70 Iranian companies held face-to-face meetings with the representatives of the Russian corresponding companies in the conference, the reporter said.

According to the report, it was planned that the value of bilateral trade between Iran and Russian amounts to \$ 10 billion in less than the next two years.

### Fate of Vienna...

FROM PAGE 1

“Unfortunately, the U.S. is trying to maintain parts and elements of its maximum pressure against Iran. What is important for us is that people clearly reap the economic benefits of the removal of sanctions. The American side has put up barriers to minimize the people’s benefit from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. We are fully aware of this and have reminded these issues to the other party,” he said.

Khatibzadeh also answered a question on the US keeping the IRGC’s Quds Force on its list of sanctions.

“All elements of maximum pressure should be removed. What remains to be agreed is beyond a single issue,” he said.

The spokesman also said any country that had “miscalculations” in connection with Israel have repeatedly reaped the results.

“No matter where the regime steps in, it causes insecurity there,” he said.

Khatibzadeh also talked about South Korea’s debt to Iran. He said South Korea’s debt for its purchases of oil and natural gas from Iran is clear. South Korea has taken no effective step to repay the debt.

Khatibzadeh also questioned the resolution the UN Human Rights Council approved against Russia.

“The resolution was completely politicized and was an abuse of UN mechanisms to advance the political objectives of the western countries,” he said

On the statement of the 51st ministerial meeting of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, Khatibzadeh stressed that the Iranian islands of Abou Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb in the Persian Gulf, are inseparable and eternal parts of the Iranian soil and the tedious repetition of unfounded accusations of this council against Iran is an indication of the lack of knowledge of member countries about the regional situation and the fact that the cooperation council has been taken hostage by one or two specific countries that are against the spirit of cooperation.

“These meddlesome remarks are within the sphere of our national sovereignty and national territory and are strongly rejected and condemned,” he added.

### Pakistan...

FROM PAGE 1

Up to 20 of PTI’s 155 lawmakers had said they would cross the floor ahead of Khan’s no-confidence vote on Sunday, but in the end the defection of a coalition partner meant their support wasn’t needed.

Sharif’s first task will be to form a cabinet that will also draw heavily from the center-left Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), as well as find space for the smaller conservative Jamiat-ulema-e-Islam-F (JUI-F) group.

The PPP and PML-N are dynastic parties that have dominated Pakistani politics for decades -- usually as bitter rivals -- but their relations are sure to fray in the lead-up to the next election, which must be held by October 2023.

They need to tackle soaring inflation, a feeble rupee and crippling debt, while militancy is also on the rise -- with Pakistan’s Taliban emboldened by the return to power last year of the hardline Islamist group in neighboring Afghanistan.

Shehbaz Sharif is the younger brother of disgraced three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, and Pakistan media are already speculating the latter may soon return from exile in Britain.

The elder Sharif was dismissed in 2017 and later jailed for 10 years by an accountability court on graft charges after revelations from the Panama Papers, but was released to seek medical treatment abroad.



## Kwiatkowski Wins Amstel Gold Classic in Photo Finish

**V**ALKENBURG (Dispatches) - Poland's Michał Kwiatkowski won the Amstel Gold classic on Sunday for the second time in his career after being judged the winner following a thrilling photo finish with France's Benoit Cosnefroy. Ineos Grenadiers rider Kwiatkowski's strong finish to the line snatched victory to add to his success in the 2015 edition of the Dutch one-day classic. It was a frustrating finish for Cosnefroy, riding for AG2R Citroen, who organisers had initially declared winner of the 254km race in the hills of South Limburg.

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## Steelers QB Haskins Dies at 24

**N**EW YORK (Dispatches) - Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Dwayne Haskins died at the age of 24 after being hit by a vehicle, according to a report on the NFL website on Saturday. Haskins, a former first round draft pick who was expected to compete with two others for the Steelers' starting quarterback role after the January retirement of Ben Roethlisberger, was reportedly in South Florida training with team mates.

## Leclerc Wins Australian GP As Verstappen Fails to Finish

**S**YDNEY (Dispatches) - A flawless Charles Leclerc led from start to finish to steer his Ferrari to an action-packed win at the Australian Grand Prix on Sunday with world champion Max Verstappen failing to finish.

The world championship leader from Monaco started from pole, held his position at the first turn and never looked back, scorching round the 58-lap Albert Park circuit to take the chequered flag by a massive 20.5 seconds.

Red Bull's Sergio Perez was second with George Russell an encouraging third for the struggling Mercedes and his seven-time world champion teammate Lewis Hamilton fourth. "It's amazing, the car was incredible today. What a race and what a pace today," said Leclerc after clocking a fourth career win and second of the season.

"Honestly, what a car today. I did a good job all weekend but it's not possible without the car. I'm just so happy.

"Obviously we have only had three races so it's difficult to think of the championship but we have a very strong car and a reliable car. It's great to be back in this position," he added.

The McLarens of Lando Norris and Daniel Ricciardo were fifth and sixth.

Alpine's Esteban Ocon came seventh ahead of Valtteri Bottas in an Alfa Romeo, with Pierre Gasly's AlphaTauri and Alex Albon's Williams rounding out the top 10.

But there was disaster for Red Bull's Verstappen, the winner two weeks ago in Saudi Arabia, who pulled over on lap 39 when second, saying on the team radio: "I smell some weird fluid."

He jumped out with smoke coming from the engine, grabbing a fire extinguisher to help marshals put out the flames. It was his second retirement in three starts this season.

"These kinds of things, if you want to fight for the title, are unacceptable," the Dutchman fumed. "We are so far behind (Ferrari)."

In contrast, Russell was delighted with his podium place after Mercedes' early season struggles with porpoising -- bouncing at high speed.

"We've got to be in it to win it and capitalise



on others' misfortune and obviously we got a little bit lucky today twice, but we'll take it," he said, referring to two safety cars.

Ferrari's Carlos Sainz and Aston Martin veteran Sebastian Vettel also failed to finish after spinning out. Victory consolidated Leclerc's championship lead after three rounds with the Ferrari ace, who also won the year's opening grand prix in Bahrain, earning the extra point for the fastest lap to add to 25 for the race victory.

He now sits on 71 points ahead of Russell on 37. Verstappen is sixth with only 25.

The Albert Park circuit was revamped this year for the first time since 1996, promising to be faster and with better overtaking opportunities and it delivered for the fans.

Starting on medium tyres, Leclerc got a perfect getaway from his 11th pole in 83 grands prix starts and built a gap of 0.6 seconds on Verstappen after the opening lap.

Hamilton, who started fifth, was a big mover off the grid, powering into third at the first turn ahead of Perez and Norris.

But Sainz had a horror day. After starting ninth, he lost traction on lap two, and was lucky not to take out any rivals as he slid across the track and got stuck in the gravel forcing the first safety car.

After the restart, Leclerc and Verstappen increased their advantage over Hamilton before Perez grabbed third place back from the Briton on lap nine.

Leclerc stormed away to a 3.3-second lead over Verstappen by lap 12, lapping half a second faster than the Dutchman, who pitted on lap 19 and switched to hard tyres.

Leclerc waited until lap 22 for his tyre change, retaining the lead when he blasted back out 6.9 seconds in front of Verstappen.

## Isner, Opelka Set Up All-American Houston Final

**H**OUSTON (AP) — Tall, big-hitting Americans John Isner and Reilly Opelka joke about being "serve-bots" and their similar styles of play will be on display against each other in the final of the U.S. Men's Clay Court Championship.

The fourth-seeded Isner, who won the Houston title in 2013, hit 17 aces Saturday to eliminate reigning champion Cristian Garin 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 in the semifinals. The third-seeded Opelka had 21 aces while beating Nick Kyrgios 6-3, 7-5.

The final will be the sixth career meeting between the 24-year-old Opelka, who is listed by the ATP at 6-foot-11, and the 36-year-old Isner, who is listed at 6-10.

Opelka leads 4-1 head-to-head, with four victories in a row.

"When guys like Reilly and I lock horns," Isner said, "it's going to be tiebreakers."

Talk about an understatement.

The last 12 sets they contested all went to tiebreakers, including one Isner called "ridiculous" on Saturday. That's because it went to 24-22 in the semifinals at Dallas in February — the longest tiebreaker in an ATP match since 1990. Opelka landed 39 aces in that win, 18 more than Isner.

## Ronaldo Apologizes for Outburst after knocking Phone out of fan's hands

**L**ONDON (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo on Saturday apologised for knocking a mobile phone out of the hands of a supporter as he left the pitch following Manchester United's 1-0 defeat to Everton.

Footage on social media emerged which appeared to show the Portugal star clashing with an Everton supporter as he headed for the tunnel at Goodison Park.

"It's never easy to deal with emotions in difficult moments such as the one we are facing," 37-year-old Ronaldo wrote on Instagram.

"Nevertheless, we always have to be respectful, patient and set the example for all the youngsters who love the beautiful game.

"I would like to apologise for my outburst and, if possible, I would like to invite this supporter to watch a game at Old Trafford as a sign of fair-play and sportsmanship."

United's lacklustre performance at relegation-threatened Everton left them in seventh place in the table, six points adrift of the Champions League places.

## Djokovic Vows to Use Tough Experiences To Fuel His Season

**P**ARIS (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic plans to use the challenging experiences he has endured this year due to being unvaccinated against COVID-19 as fuel for the rest of the season, the world number one said ahead of his return to action in Monte Carlo.

The 20-times Grand Slam champion was unable to defend his Australian Open title in January after being deported from the country, having initially been admitted to the tournament despite not taking the vaccine.

"I try to be optimistic in life and consider myself a very optimistic, positive person," Serbian Djokovic told reporters. "I take lessons available in every experience, particularly in something as large as what happened in January.



## Tiger's Epic Comeback Resumes

**A**UGUSTA (Dispatches) - Tiger Woods began Sunday's final round of the Masters, and resumed his incredible return from severe leg injuries, with a routine par while leader Scottie Scheffler eyed his first major title.

Woods, who opened with bogeys in the second and third rounds at Augusta National, teed off before thousands of supporters as his efforts stole the spotlight at the year's first major golf tournament.

His opening tee shot was left of the fairway but the 46-year-old medical marvel landed his approach 29 feet from the hole and two-putted for par.

The 15-time major champion arrived at Augusta chasing a record-tying sixth Masters crown 14 months after a car crash that caused him to wonder if his right leg might have to be amputated.

After weeks hospitalized and months unable to walk, Woods rehabilitated his battered body and returned to top-flight competition on the same course where he won his first major title

25 years earlier, his right leg held together with metal rods, pins, plates and screws.

The buzz around Woods and his amazing effort grew after he fired a one-under par 71 in his opening round. He was still in contention after a 74 on Friday after making his 22nd consecutive Masters cut, one off the all-time record run.

But on Saturday, Woods slumped to a 78 -- his worst-ever Masters round -- in cold and windy conditions, unable to recapture the putting touch that once dazzled fans worldwide.

"I felt like I didn't really hit it that bad, but I had four three-putts and a four-putt," Woods said. "I just could not get a feel."

Woods, who stood 16 strokes adrift of Scheffler's lead on seven-over par 223 for 54 holes, said his goal for the final round would be to reach level par for the tournament, which would require a stunning 65 in his first attempt since his accident at playing 18 holes for a fourth consecutive day.

That would match his lowest-ever Masters score, shot in the third rounds of his 1997 and 2005 victories.

Meanwhile, world number one Scheffler put himself in position to capture the green jacket and a \$2.7 million top prize from a \$15 million purse with a breakthrough major triumph.

## Man City Retain Title Advantage After Liverpool Draw

**L**ONDON (Dispatches) -Manchester City preserved their one-point lead at the top of the Premier League after a pulsating 2-2 draw against title rivals Liverpool on Sunday.

Pep Guardiola's side twice led in the blockbuster showdown at the Etihad Stadium thanks to goals from Kevin De Bruyne and Gabriel Jesus.

Liverpool hit back to equalize on both occasions through Diogo Jota and Sadio Mane, but it was City who finished happier with the result of a high-quality encounter between arguably the world's two best teams.

With just seven games left, reigning champions City remain in pole position to pip second placed Liverpool to the title.

That would give City a fourth English title in five seasons as they look to win a treble of the Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup this term,

Liverpool's hopes of a second top-flight crown in three years have undoubtedly been dented by their failure to take three points home from Manchester.

Jurgen Klopp's team will need a slip from City during the run-in if their bid for an unprecedented quadruple is to come to fruition.

Since the start of the 2018-19 season, combining the four campaigns, City and Liverpool are separated by just a single point and the latest instalment of their title rivalry is set to go down to the wire again.



## United Do Not Deserve European Football

**L**ONDON (Dispatches) - Ralf Rangnick says Manchester United do not deserve to play European football next season if they carry on performing in such a limp fashion as in Saturday's 1-0 defeat to Everton.

The German has failed to spark the revival the Manchester United board were hoping for when he stepped in as interim manager after Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was sacked in late November.

United have won just eight of the 17 Premier League games Rangnick has been in charge for and Saturday's defeat leaves them six points off Tottenham Hotspur, who occupy the fourth and final Champions League spot.

Rangnick, who is due to stay on as an advisor once a full time replacement is named, says based on the Everton display United are lacking in what is required to play in Europe.

"If we play like we did here we just don't deserve it," said Rangnick.

"The players themselves should be eager to play international football, if possible Champions League.

"In order to qualify for Europe you have to be able to score in 95 minutes in a game like this."

Rangnick was embarrassed by his side's inability to score against an Everton side that had lost 3-2 to fellow strugglers Burnley in midweek. "With all respect to Everton -- because they have a good team -- but if you don't score against a team who conceded three goals against Burnley, you cannot expect to get anything out of it," said the 63-year-old German.

