

Health Ministry Announced on Monday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic In Iran Increased to 140,996 With 21 More Iranians Killed by the Virus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

Calm Has Returned to the Islam-Qaleh Border Area Between Iran And Afghanistan Following Tensions In Recent Days, the Acting Defense Ministry of the Taliban Gov't in Afghanistan Announced on Monday

VOL. XXVIII, No. 7482 TEHRAN Price 40,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

TUESDAY APRIL 26, 2022 - ORDIBEHESHT 6, 1401

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Iran Foils Large-Scale Cyber Attack Against Infrastructures

TEHRAN (IFP) - An Iranian cyber security institution says its experts have thwarted a large-scale cyber attack originating from IPs in Western states against the country's infrastructure, conducted through the security loopholes of an application commonly used at different institutions.

In a statement on Sunday, the AFTA Strategic Management Center, which operates under Iran's Presidency, said the body succeeded in fending off the cyber attack on the back of "timely action" taken by its security operations command center.

"The hackers were planning to exploit the security hole in one of the widely used applications at [Iranian] organizations to get access to the infrastructures and their data, inject them their own malware, and give them their desired commands," it said.

AFTA experts, however, managed to discover the "clues and the behavioral patterns" used in the cyber raid and detect the ultimate targets, which included over 100 important e-services in both state and private sectors of the country.

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China Accounts for 30% of Iran Exports

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian customs office (IRICA) says China bought nearly 30% of all Iranian exports in the year to late March as the East Asian country continued to defy US pressure and deepened its trade ties with the Islamic Republic.

IRICA spokesman Rouhollah Latifi said that Chinese purchases of Iranian non-oil exports had amounted to \$14.323 billion over the past calendar year.

Exports to China increased 58% in value terms compared to the year to March 2021, said Latifi.

The official added that Iranian imports from China had totaled \$12.744 billion over the 12 months to March 2022, an increase of 29% year on year.

China has been a main trade and economic partner for Iran since the United States pulled out of an international agreement on Tehran's nuclear program in 2018 and imposed a series of sanctions on the country.

Higher volume of trade with China has been a major boost to Iran's efforts to diversify its economy away from crude.

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New Tehran-Riyadh Talks "Progressive and Positive"



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has confirmed that it held a fifth round of "positive" talks with Saudi Arabia in Baghdad on normalizing bilateral relations.

The two countries started direct fence-mending talks last year, but Iran announced a temporary halt in March after Saudi Arabia executed 81 men in its biggest mass execution in decades.

"The fifth round of talks between Saudi Arabia and Tehran were held in Iraq and the talks were progressive and positive," Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told a televised weekly news conference on Monday.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said Sunday Baghdad would host a new round of talks between Tehran and Riyadh. Hussein told the official Iraqi News Agency that the fifth round of talks was held a friendly atmosphere earlier this week.

Hussein had earlier stated that the Iraqi government would make every effort in order to create a suitable opportunity for a common understanding between the two regional powers.

Iran's Nour News, affiliated with the country's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), first announced the fifth round of negotiations on Saturday.

The outlet described the negotiations as "positive", with the two sides exchanging views on the main challenges hindering the resumption of bilateral relations.

"The positive atmosphere of the recent meeting has raised hopes for the two countries to take a step towards the resumption of relations. It is expected that a joint meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries will be held in the near future," the news agency said in a tweet in Persian.

Meanwhile Khatibzadeh also condemned the latest acts of aggression by Israeli forces against worshippers at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of occupied al-Quds, stating that the issue of Palestine is the top priority of the Muslim world.

"We are witnessing that the first issue of the Muslim world, which is Palestine, has slipped into oblivion. The Zionist regime is cunningly and deceitfully trying to sideline the matter," he said.

He added that Palestine is still the most crucial issue of the Muslim world, irrespective of all conspiracies being hatched by the Tel Aviv regime against it.

Khatibzadeh also noted that the issue of Palestine is the top priority of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and all freedom-loving countries that stand against racism.

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Call for Serious Punishment for Afghanistan Bombing Perpetrators

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's top general has slammed recent serial bombings in Afghanistan, calling for expedient measures to bring the perpetrators to justice and identify the root causes of such attacks.

In a message issued on Sunday, Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Baqeri vehemently condemned the recent terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and expressed sympathy with the families of the victims.

"Adoption of expedient measures as well as serious and practical steps ... to discover the reasons and causes of such disasters in addition to identification and categorical punishment of those groups and elements that are behind them is a necessity," General Baqeri said in his message.

He added that the perpetrators of such terrorist acts have targeted the "security of this Islamic land, including its schools, mosques and [other] religious locations in line with the evil strategy of the White House and enemies of the Grand Prophet [of Islam]."

Afghanistan has been in turmoil since the Taliban, who had previously ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, took power again on August 15 last year amid a chaotic US troop withdrawal from the war-torn country.

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Gov't Determined to Prevent Wheat Smuggling

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The proposed strategies of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance to prevent the smuggling of wheat to neighboring countries and the need to optimize bread consumption in the country were discussed at a meeting of the Cabinet's Economic Coordination Board.

In this meeting, which was chaired by President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi, a proposal from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance was considered, according to which the price of wheat and bread for the consumer will not change.

Based on the decision of the members, it was decided that considering the government's efforts to control the price of bread and prevent its price increase, the various aspects of this plan will be reviewed by the related agencies and the result will be presented to future meetings.

In this meeting, the issue of currency outflow in the form of capital from the country was also discussed and it was decided that the related agencies will design and present the necessary preventive policies in this field.

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Hezbollah Chief Warns of Plots to Plunge Lebanon Into Strife

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - The secretary-general of the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement has warned of a slide towards violence in a country grappling with a major economic crisis after at least six people, including a child, died as a boat carrying dozens of migrants sank in the eastern Mediterranean.

"We must not allow anyone to take the country to strife, and this incident must be addressed at the national level," Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said during a speech in the Lebanese capital city of Beirut on Sunday evening. He made the remarks on the occasion of Laylat al-Qadr or the Night of Destiny - a holy night during the last 10 days of the holy month Ramadan in which the first verses of the Holy Qur'an were revealed to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) some 14 centuries ago.

"All of the elements of the investigation are known and hurrying up in the probe is the least duty that one can do," the Hezbollah leader added.

Nasrallah also called on the government to "stand by the victims' families."

Earlier on Sunday, at least six people died and 48 people were rescued after a boat carrying about 60 migrants sank off the coast of Lebanon.

"The army's naval forces managed to rescue 48 people and retrieve the body of a dead girl ... from a boat that sank while trying to illegally smuggle them out," the army said in a statement.

"Most people on board were rescued," the army said, without specifying their nationalities.

The army retrieved five corpses off Tripoli's coast, the state-run National News Agency reported, hours after the body of a little girl was returned to shore.

The latest incident stoked public anger in Tripoli, Lebanon's second city and one of its poorest.

Since late 2019, Lebanon has been mired in a deep financial crisis that has caused the Lebanese pound to lose around 90 percent of its value to the US dollar and led its banking system to collapse, plunging the bulk of Lebanese into poverty.

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Two Anti-Iran Terrorists Get 16-Year Jail Sentences

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An Iranian court has sentenced two members of the anti-Iran terrorist Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) to 16 years in prison for their involvement in plots against the country's national security.

On Monday, a court convicted the two, who were only identified by their initials, for spreading corruption on earth, conspiring against the Islamic Republic, and spreading fake news against the country.

The two terrorists were arrested while committing a terrorist attack inside Iran in spring 2019.

The two had previously committed terrorist attacks in several areas across the capital Tehran.

The MKO has conducted numerous assassinations and bombings against Iranian statesmen and civilians since the 1979 victory of Iran's Islamic Revolution. Its members fled Iran in 1986 to Iraq, where they enjoyed backing from former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

Out of the nearly 17,000 Iranians killed in terrorist assaults since the Islamic Revolution, about 12,000 have fallen victim to the MKO's acts of terror.

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Leader to Meet Students Today

TEHRAN (IP) - Representatives of political, scientific, cultural, and student groups from among the Iranian university students will meet and exchange opinions with the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyed Alli Khamenei, tonight.

For the past two years, the Leader's meetings were held online to observe coronavirus health protocols.

Iran Principled Policy Is to Support Peace, Stability

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN – New Ambassadors of Montenegro, Estonia, Latvia, Armenia, Burundi and Nepal yesterday met President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi and submitted their credentials to him

In meeting with new envoy of Montenegro Perisa Kastratovic, the President said that supporting peace, stability, and progress has always been the principled policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the international level.

He went on to say that Iran and Montenegro have good capacities to expand the level of relations in various fields.

The President described the history of the war in the Balkans as a bitter experience for the region and the world, stressing that war is by no means a desirable event.

Supporting peace, stability, and progress has always been the principled policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the international level.

The new ambassador of Montenegro also expressed hope to strengthen and to expand interactions and relations between Iran and Montenegro in areas of interest.

Speaking in the meeting with the new Estonian envoy Ms. Anelli Kook, the president said that Iran and Estonia enjoy many capacities for boosting cooperation in the political, economic, and trade fields.

Efforts should be made to realize these capacities, especially in the North-South corridor, he also said.

Strengthening bilateral relations between Iran and Estonia will pave the way for enhancing international interactions between the two countries, Raisi stressed.

New ambassadors of Estonia, for her part, said that her country is interested in expanding relations with Iran in various fields.

Meanwhile in meeting with new ambassador of Latvia Mr. Peteris Vaivars, President Raisi stated that the two countries have always had favorable bilateral relations and international cooperation, adding, "Today, we are facing serious problems in the international stage and oppression and aggression against countries such as Afghanistan and Palestine".

The President added, "The presence of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan was nothing more than destruction and killing, and it was not security-building for Afghanistan or the region".

Stating that the Islamic Republic of Iran opposes any move that would lead the world to unilateralism and war, the President said, "War and conflict in Ukraine must not drive attention away from the crisis in Afghanistan and people's problems".

"We are interested in expanding relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran on the basis of mutual understanding and friendship in order to ensure the interests of the two countries," said the new Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia.

Meanwhile in meeting with Nepalese envoy Mr. Tapas Adhikari, the President described the rich cultural and civilizational history of Iran and Nepal as a suitable ground for the expansion of interactions between the two countries, saying, "The two countries can develop their relations in various political and economic fields by relying on this rich background".

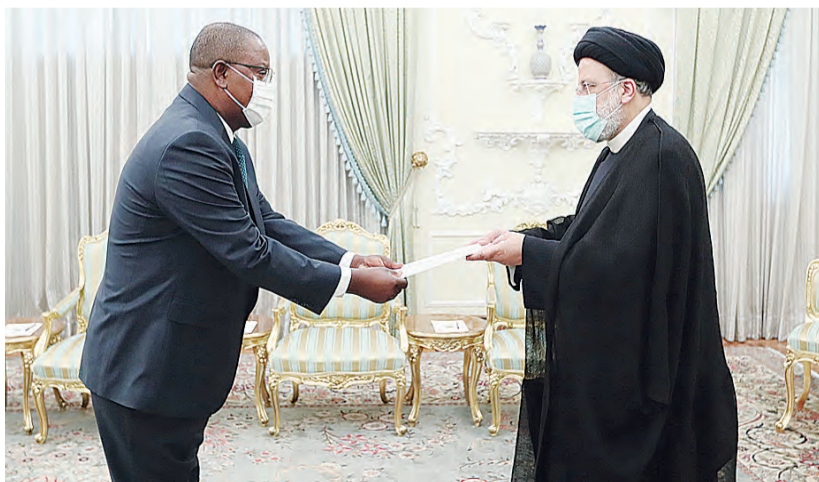
Raisi referred to the cultural and civilizational common grounds among Asian countries, including Iran and Nepal, and said, "The two countries can enrich their relations and interactions by relying on their rich cultural and civilizational background in various political, economic and especially cultural fields".

"Iran and Nepal have always had good and friendly relations," he said, adding, "Today, western domineering powers have put the emphasis of their cultural invasion on rich cultural resources of non-western countries, and it is essential that we make more efforts to protect our culture and civilization, including in the field of human rights".

Nepal's ambassador, for his part, expressed his country's interest in further enhancing relations and interactions with the Islamic Republic of Iran, saying, "The two countries have very close common grounds and cultural closeness, in a way that there are hundreds of Persian words in Nepali language, and we must use these appropriate cultural contexts to develop relations in various fields".

Meanwhile Raisi in receiving Armenian envoy Mr. Arsen Avakian said that Tehran-Yerevan relation has always been based on respecting neighbors, adding that there are several grounds for enhancing ties between the two states.

In meeting with new ambassador of Burundi Mr. Gerard Ntahorwaroye Bikebako, President Raisi said that Iran attaches importance on boosting its relations with African states.



MP Urges Western States to Give Up Excessive Demands

TEHRAN (MNA) - Stating that negotiations on the removal of sanctions imposed against Iran should produce positive results, a member of Parliament urged Western countries in Vienna talks to give up excessive demands on the way of talks.

Esmail Kowsari said that Western countries especially the United States must correct their behaviors towards negotiations and give up their excessive demands and let negotiations produce positive results.

Turning to the trend of Vienna talks, the lawmaker emphasized that Western countries as parties to Iran's nuclear deal and the United States breached their promise and for this reason, these countries are not dependable.

Iran has proved that it is seriously determined to follow up the negotiations in order to reach a positive result, he said, adding that pursuing the inalienable rights of the noble nation of Iran is the main objective behind negotiations and the Iranian delegation is vehemently trying to regain people's rights in the process of talks in Vienna.

The United States and Western countries as JCPOA parties must correct their mistakes and live up to their JCPOA commitments, Kowsari added.

Cuba Seeking to Make Joint Investments With Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) – The ambassador of Cuba to Iran said that the country is set to host an exclusive exhibition of Iranian products and is also keen to attract Iranian investors.

Alberto González Casals made the remarks after a recent tour of various pharmaceutical and food industry units in the northwestern city of Tabriz, capital of East Azarbaijan Province.

The Cuban ambassador was in Tabriz heading a group of representatives from Cuban companies.

Referring to the "ideal" potential of Iran's East Azarbaijan Province for making joint investments with their Cuban counterparts, the ambassador announced that his country is scheduled to host an exclusive exhibition of Iranian products.

Iran and Cuba enjoy friendly relations, characterized by economic and diplomatic cooperation. Iran has a productive trade balance with Cuba. The two governments signed a document to bolster cooperation in January 2006.

Covid Delta Variant Could Re-Enter Iran

TEHRAN (IFP) - The scientific secretary of Iran's Taskforce Against the Coronavirus says Iran is not facing new outbreak of the deadly delta variant of the virus, but there are concerns that the variant could re-enter the country through such countries as Turkey.

Hamidreza Jamaati told ISNA that the virus now circling in Iran is the BA2 sub-variant of Omicron.

Jamaati says infections and deaths from this variant are on the decline, despite fears that the BA2 sub-variant could trigger a new surge in cases.

"With respect to the current conditions, if we do not face a new problem and new sub-variants in other countries, it seems that we will not have a new peak and a new wave in the coming months, and at least before the cold seasons begin," he said.

Jamaati also touched on the concerns the Nowruz holidays had caused, saying the family visits and travels led to a little rise in the number of outpatients and hospitalizations, but it does not seem to trigger a new wave.

The official, however, warned that health protocols, including masking, should be strictly observed and booster shots should be administered to ensure the country avoids another wave of the virus outbreak.

He said fourth dose boosters for the elderly are especially significant to avoid hospitalizations and deaths.

Paris-Persepolis Eco-Rally Arrives in Iran

TEHRAN (IP) - Motorcyclist tourists known as Paris-Persepolis Eco-Rally from Paris have arrived in Iran and they will visit the natural, historical, and tourist attractions of the country.

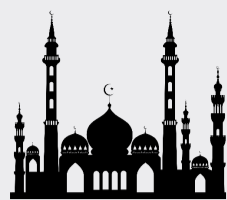
Twenty people from France, Switzerland and the Netherlands started the tour from Paris with 16 motorcycles and three cars on Friday, April 22, 2022. They arrived in Iran through the West Azerbaijan province in the northwest.

The event aims to confront Iranophobia and introduce Iran's culture, civilization,

monuments, and historical and tourist attractions.

The tourists will visit the historical and tourist attractions of Kandovan, Tabriz, Saqez, Kermanshah, Golpayegan, Isfahan, and Yasuj during their 3-day stay in Iran.

They will stay in Shiraz for four days, and after visiting the historical and tourist attractions of this city on their return, they will travel through Isfahan, Arak, Qazvin, and Gilan provinces and then leave for France.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:02
■ Evening (Maghreb)	20:05
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:44
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:16

5. And they say: "Tales of the ancients, which he has caused to be written: and they are dictated before him morning and evening."
6. Say: "The (Qur'an) was sent down by Him who knows the mystery (that is) in the heavens and the earth: verily He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

Surah 25. The Criterion, The Standard (5-6)

No Foreign Company Dares to Invest in Iranian Ports for Now

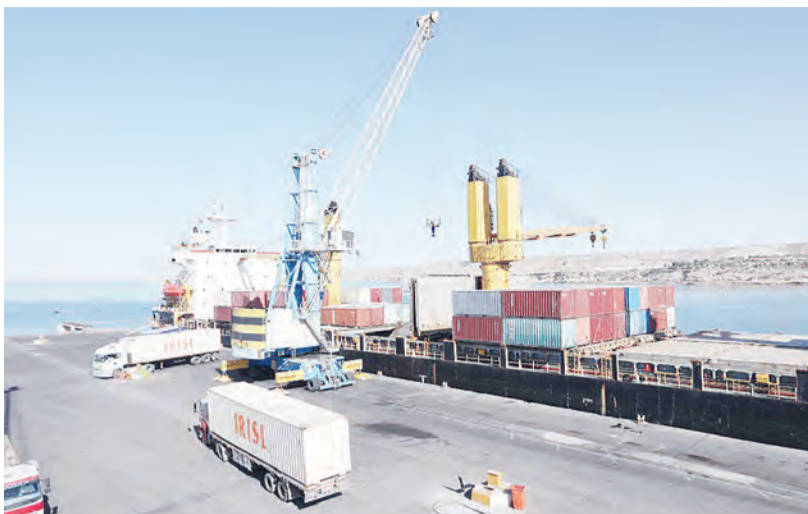
IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Board of Directors of Shipping Association of Iran says currently no foreign company has courage to invest in Iran's ports, adding that Indian Company is also trying to buy time to see the fate of the Vienna talks on the JCPOA and for this reason they are playing in Chabahar Port to buy more time.

Speaking to ILNA, Rouzbeh Mokhtari talked about reasons for the delay of Indians in fulfilling their obligations and signing the 10-year agreement of India Ports Global Limited (IPGL). He said, "We could have better exploitation in Chabahar Port but it did not happen and with a realistic glance at the developments, we should say that all vows given by both Iranian and Indian sides for development of Chabahar Port have not been implemented."

He reiterated that first some actions should have been taken for pickup in trade, economy and jobs in Chabahar Port and to this end, officials needed a professional marketing for the port that so far its custodian has not been determined.

Mokhtari reiterated that the country did not take advantage of exemption of the port from the U.S. sanctions as the country could do much better for transit between countries.



He emphasize that an independent marketing management is needed for the port to meet the national interests.

He went on to say that Indians at Shahid Beheshti Port behave in a way to buy time, reiterating that no foreign company has currently courage to invest in Iranian ports and they are waiting for the fate of the Vienna talks and Indians also are trying to buy time.

He noted that despite greenlight and easing way for investment of Indians in Chabahar Port, this Indian company has problem in banking transactions and it fears U.S. punishment for sanctions despite the U.S. waiver for investment in this port.

He reiterated that nobody has been aware of the details of contract with Indians but it seems Indians seek amendment in the contract.

According to reports, Indian banks refrain from giving facilities to this Indian company for investment in Chabahar because EXIM bank of India which is set to grant \$150m credit for the project due to the U.S. sanctions is reluctant to do so.

He also criticized choosing a weak Iranian company as the contractor of the Indian operator and this decision has harmed this project.

HOSCO Has Special Plans for Production, Job Creation and Knowledge-Based

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) in an interview revealed that the company has special plans in three fields of production, job creation and knowledge-based for the current year.

Dr. Ataollah Maroufkhani in an interview revealed the plans of the company for increasing the production and using the knowledge-based in line with materializing the Supreme Leader's recommendations.

He said that the issue of production is so important that the Supreme Leader for several consecutive years has emphasized that many problems of the country will be resolved through the rise in introduction.

Maroufkhani added that HOSCO as a mother industry that many other industries are dependent on its products has plans for increasing production and productivity. He said that setting up development committees in the exploitation, purchase, human resources, technology and development, financial and economic, sales and social responsibilities units is one of the important steps in monitoring all units of the company and reaching a joint goal for increasing production and productivity.

He went on to say that registering two records in production of slab and iron sponge products are of the outcome of these correct plannings as well as high motivation of the human forces in the company. He added that with producing 150,000 tons of slab in the first month of the current Iranian calendar month Farvardin, the company surpassed the nominal production capacity, adding that increase in production in Farvardin and setting record for monthly production of slab and iron sponge as the two major products of HOSCO brought this hope that in case of removal of hurdles in way of production that energy supply is the most important of them, the company can scale the steps of excellence with full speed.

Maroufkhani added that the most important program of the company for this year in line with increasing the production is to boost the production of steelmaking ceiling up to 500,000 tons.

He then pointed to some of the plans of the company like easing contracts with the knowledge-based companies, purchasing the indigenized products, research contracts with universities, technology and research and scientific parks.

He reiterated that the company held in Bandar Abbas one of the most important scientific events in the field of steel industry in March which was aimed at supporting the knowledge-based companies.

Annual Exports to Russia Rise 14%

TEHRAN (MNA) - The value of Iran's export to Russia rose 14 percent in the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20), the Iranian Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) data showed.

According to the mentioned data, Iran exported 1,139,992 tons of commodities worth over \$579 million to Russia in the past year, IRIB reported

The Islamic Republic had exported 1,060,793 tons of commodities worth \$509.917 million to Russia in the Iranian calendar year 1399 (ended on March 20, 2021).

The main Iranian products exported to Russia in the previous year were fresh or dried pistachios, ordinary non-expandable polystyrene, fresh kiwi and synthetic fibers, and other types of polyester.

Wheat, sunflower seed oil, safflower, and raw corn were also major products imported from Russia.

Iran and Russia have been taking serious steps for boosting their mutual trade over the past few years.

More Firms Ready to Be Listed on Stock Exchange

TEHRAN (MNA) - Head of Securities and Exchange Organization (SEO) Majid Eshqi has said 25 new major companies are ready to offer their shares at the country's stock exchange.

"Many initial public offerings (IPOs) are going to be made in the near future, and now about 25 companies are ready to enter the market," Eshqi told IRNA.

"Over the last six months, we have been preparing initial offerings in accordance with market conditions and the balanced entry of liquidity into the market. Currently, Tehran Stock Exchange (TSE) and Iran Fara Bourse (IFB) officials and experts have made the necessary plans so that the initial public offerings can be made in accordance with the best conditions for capital to enter the market," he explained.

According to the official, the initial offerings will start in the current Iranian calendar week (ends on Friday) and will continue in accordance with the market conditions.

Eshqi further mentioned some of his organization's programs for ensuring positive growth in the market, saying: "SEO's programs for this year include intelligent and electronic monitoring of the market. In this regard, we will strengthen the capital market monitoring center, which was launched in March, so that there is no violation in the market trading process. We will identify violations quickly."

Another program is to monitor financial institutions like brokerage firms, portfolio companies, and investment funds to ensure that they perform in accordance with the rules and regulations of the market, the SEO head added.

"These two measures are among the main programs of the Securities and Exchange Organization and to realize them, it is necessary to take serious measures to improve IT infrastructure, and to amend capital market regulations and laws or even apply new regulations," he said.

Gov't Issues Building Permits for 4 GW of Solar Power Plants

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Energy Ministry has issued permits for construction of 4 gigawatts (GW) of new solar power plants in the country.

Energy Ministry's renewables department SATBA said on Sunday that building the new power plants will finish within the next two years.

SATBA spokesman Ja'far Mohammadnejad said the permits were issued after the government committed to provide "the considerable financial resources" required for construction of the power plants.

Mohammadnejad said the new plants are part of a 10 GW new renewables capacity that the Iranian government aims to develop until 2025.

"The government has set a target to build 10 GW of power plants in cooperation with the (Iranian) private sector. That includes 3 GW of wind farms and 7 GW of

solar power plants," he was quoted as saying by the IRIB News.

Iran is facing a rapid surge in demand for electricity as authorities predict brief daily power cuts would be possible in large cities over the upcoming summer.

A Sunday statement by the Energy Ministry showed that total electricity generation capacity in Iran had exceeded 88 GW. However, government estimates suggest that actual production will be around 10 GW short of a peak demand that is estimated to be around 60 GW on hot days in July.

Solar and wind currently account for a small portion of Iran's electricity generation capacity. That comes as recent statements by Energy Ministry officials show the country has around 12 GW of hydroelectric capacity in its renewables mix.

House Price Growth Continues

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran's Central Bank statistics show that since the government of Seyed Ebrahim Raisi was launched last August, the price per square meter of housing in Tehran has peaked from about 30 million tomans to over 35 million tomans in March 2022.

Over the past few days, media outlets close to the government have reported a six fold increase in house prices in the past four years, but did not mention the rate of growth in Raisi's Government.

The central bank has not yet released the April figures, but details of last year's figures show that house prices remained almost constant from the beginning of last year to July, but grew by 17% from August to March when Raisi's government took office.

Over the past few years, many people have invested in the housing market, coins and stock exchanges to prevent the decline of their rial assets.

NICICO Begins the Year With 8 Production Records

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of National Iranian Copper Industries Company (NICICO), pointing to the production record of the company in the first month of the new Iranian calendar year Farvardin, said that jihadi endeavors of NICICO helped the company to attain considerable records in production of copper cathode, copper concentrate and sulfuric acid.

Dr. Ali Rostami said that with production of 26,673 tons of mineral rich copper in the first month of the current year, the company witnessed 9% growth. He then pointed to the outcome of prepared reports in the field of production and efficient performance of the tireless personnel for the progress of the company, adding that fortunately the reports indicate that NICICO in the new year is moving on the track of growth and progress with full speed.

He then pointed to the Supreme Leader's naming of the year "Production, Knowledge-Based and Job

Creation" and said that accordingly, NICIOC has prioritized its activities on materializing the slogan of the year for increasing production.

Dr. Rostami went on to say that the amount of the cathode production in Farvardin was 25,145 tons, adding that the amount of the produced cathode last year was 24,615 tons that this year the company has witnessed 4% growth according to the schedule.

He then pointed to the 10 percent growth in copper concentrate production this year, adding that the company has produced 111,237 tons of copper concentrate this year while the figure was 109,144 tons last year.

He reiterated that the amount of the produced sulfuric acid in the first month last year was 64,076 tons while the figure has increased to 85,882 tons this year which shows 35% more than the schedule.

Rostami also pointed to some other records of the company in the first month of this year and said the company produced 4,817 tons of sulfuric ore which shows 7% growth ahead of the schedule.



ESCO Sets Up National Center For Repair of Industrial Valves



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN – The caretaker CEO of Esfahan Steel Company (ESCO) Eng. Iraj Rokhsati, accompanied by some managers, experts and officials of the company, attended the workshops of the plant and got acquainted with the environment and areas of the workshop and talked with personnel of them.

The visit was made aimed at equipping the workshops of the plant like setting up and launch of the center for repairs of industrial valves of steel industry and at production lines of the industrial companies in different pressure classes which is one of the daily and important requirements of this gigantic industrial plant and other companies and industries of the company.

In the meeting, Mr. Rokhsati hailed the efforts of endeavors of the company who attained several records and achievements with their strong determination and reliance on the experience and technical knowhow of the domestic experts.

He said that the goal behind his visit was to review the idle workshops of the company and it is now the time these workshops to be activated with using successful experiences of the experts of the company in repairing the valves in order to set up a center for national repair of valves which can meet the demands of ESCO and offering services to other industries in the country. Rokhsati then emphasized employing all existing capacities for choosing the site of this center and starting the operation for its launch.

El Salvador President Requests State of Emergency Extension

SAN SALVADOR (Dispatches) - El Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele asked lawmakers to extend the country's state of emergency for a month today, as police said that more than 16,000 gang members had been arrested since it was imposed.

"I am calling the Council of Ministers to ask the Legislative Assembly to extend the (state of emergency) for another 30 days," Bukele said on Twitter.

Ernesto Castro, president of the Legislative Assembly—controlled by Bukele's ruling party—summoned members to a plenary session.



Egypt Releases 41 Political Prisoners

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Egypt on Sunday released 41 political prisoners from pre-trial detention, according to a politician-turned-negotiator, in a country where many more remain behind bars.

"Forty-one of those held on remand detention on political charges and (charges related to) freedom of thought and expression" have been released, Mohamed al-Sadat said.

Long a fixture of Egypt's political scene, Sadat is a nephew of former president Anwar al-Sadat and has recently emerged as an unofficial negotiator for political prisoners.

Rights groups estimate that tens of thousands of such prisoners are being held in Egypt.



Macron Beats Le Pen To Win Second Term



PARIS (Dispatches) - French President Emmanuel Macron defeated his far-right rival Marine Le Pen on Sunday by a comfortable margin, early projections by pollsters showed, securing a second term and heading off what would have been a political earthquake.

The first projections showed Macron securing around 57-58% of the vote. Such estimates are normally accurate but may be fine-tuned as official results come in from around the country.

Cheers of joy erupted as the results appeared on a giant screen at the Champ de Mars park at the foot of the Eiffel tower, where Macron supporters waved French and EU flags. People hugged each other and chanted "Macron".

In contrast, a gathering of dejected Le Pen supporters erupted in boos and whistles as they heard the news at a sprawling reception hall on the outskirts of Paris.

Macron can expect little to no grace period after many, especially on the left only voted for him reluctantly to block the far-right from winning. Protests that marred part of his first mandate could erupt again quite quickly, as he tries to press on with pro-business reforms.

"There will be continuity in government policy because the president has been reelected. But we have also heard the French people's message," Health Minister Olivier Veran told BFM TV.

A first major challenge will be the parliamentary elections. They are just around the corner, in June, and opposition parties on the left and right will immediately start a major push to try to vote in a parliament and government opposed to Macron.

Philippe Lagrue, 63, technical director at a theatre in Paris, said earlier in the day that he had cast a ballot for Macron, after voting for the hard-left Jean-Luc Melenchon in the first round.

He said he will vote for Melenchon again in the legislative elections: "Melenchon Prime Minister. That would be fun. Macron would be upset, but that's the point." Ifop, Elabe, OpinionWay and Ipsos pollsters projected a 57.6-58.2% win for Macron.

Victory for the centrist, pro-European Union Macron would be hailed by allies as a reprieve for mainstream politics that have been rocked in recent years by Britain's exit from the European Union, the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the rise of a new generation of nationalist leaders.

Macron will join a small club - only two French presidents before him have managed to secure a second term. But his margin of victory looks to be tighter than when he first beat Le Pen in 2017, underlining how many French remain unimpressed with him and his domestic record.

That disillusion was reflected in turnout figures, with France's main polling institutes saying the abstention rate would likely settle around 28%, the highest since 1969.

Russia Investigates Report of British SAS Forces in Ukraine

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia is investigating whether sabotage experts from the United Kingdom's Special Air Service (SAS) special forces have been deployed to western Ukraine.

Russia's top state investigative body said it was looking into a Russian media report alleging that the SAS had been sent to the Lviv region in Western Ukraine.

Russia's RIA Novosti news agency quoted a Russian security source as saying that about 20 members of the SAS - an elite military force trained to conduct special operations, surveillance and counterterrorism - are operating in the country.

In a statement, Russia's Investigative Committee said it would follow up on the report that the SAS had been sent in "to assist the Ukrainian special services in organizing sabotage on the territory of Ukraine".



The British Ministry of Defense had no immediate comment on the Russian investigation.

The UK sent military trainers to Ukraine earlier this year to instruct local forces in using anti-tank weapons. On February 17, a week before Russia's invasion, the UK said it had pulled out all troops except those needed to protect its ambassador.

It was not clear what steps the Investigative Committee planned to take in response to any SAS involvement in Ukraine.

The possible presence of forces from a NATO country in Ukraine is significant given that Russia has issued warnings to the West not to get in the way of its invasion of Ukraine.

Since the start of the war, the UK has provided Ukraine with anti-ship, anti-aircraft and light anti-tank weapons, which have proved useful for mobile Ukrainian fighters to use against Russia's armored vehicles.

The British government confirmed this week that a small number of Ukrainian troops are being trained in the UK for the first time since the start of the Russian invasion.

India PM Holds First Public Event in Kashmir Since Clampdown

SRINAGAR (Dispatches) - India's prime minister promised peace and development for Jammu and Kashmir today, during his first public event in the disputed territory since it imposed a sweeping security clampdown nearly three years ago.

Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government has sought to quell a long-running insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir and strengthen its hold over the Muslim-majority region, which is also claimed by neighboring Pakistan. India nullified the area's limited autonomy in August 2019, when authorities arrested thousands and imposed the world's longest internet shutdown, seeking to forestall local opposition to the move.

Tight security was in place for Modi's appearance at Palli village in Jammu, the Hindu-majority southern part of the territory, which celebrated New Delhi's introduction of direct rule as a defence against Kashmir's separatist movement.

As he inaugurated new road and hydropower projects, Modi told the gathered crowd of thousands that his government had put the restive region on the path to prosperity. "I want to tell the youth of the valley that they will not have to face the difficulties and travails that their parents and grandparents had to deal with," Modi said.

The event marked Panchayati Raj, a day that commemorates grassroots democracy—although Kashmir has been without an elected regional government since 2018.

Its last chief minister was detained during the clampdown and only released more than a year later.

Modi's government has long said its decision to end Kashmir's limited autonomy was aimed at fostering a lasting peace and bringing investment into the troubled region, where tens of thousands of people have been killed over the years.

Today, it is the most militarized part of India, with more than half a million soldiers and paramilitaries deployed across the fractious territory.

Police say violence has declined since Kashmir's status was changed, but almost 1,000 people have been killed since 2019 -- among them soldiers, militants and civilians.

Sri Lanka Students Mob PM's Home Over Economic Crisis

COLOMBO (Dispatches) - Thousands of Sri Lankan university students mobbed Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's home demanding his resignation over the island nation's worsening economic crisis.

Months of lengthy blackouts, record inflation and acute food and fuel shortages have sparked increasing public discontent in Sri Lanka, which is dealing with its worst economic downturn since independence in 1948.

The protest saw student leaders scale the fence of Rajapaksa's compound in Colombo after police erected barricades on various roads around the capital to stop them from linking up with demonstrators elsewhere.

"You can block the road, but can't stop our struggle until the entire government goes home," one unidentified student leader said while standing on top of the walls.

Facing off against rows of police holding riot shields, protesters tried to pull down the barricades preventing them from entering the residence.

Some carried signs that said "Go Home Gota"—the nickname for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who is Mahinda's younger brother—while others wore the Guy Fawkes mask that have become synonymous with anti-establishment movements.

Police said Mahinda Rajapaksa, the head of Sri Lanka's ruling clan, was not on the premises at the

time and the crowd left peacefully.

For more than two weeks, thousands of protesters have been camped daily outside the seafront office of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, demanding for him and his brother to step down.

Nationwide demonstrations have seen crowds attempt to storm the homes and offices of government figures.

This week a man was shot dead when police fired on a road blockade in the central town of Rambukkana—the first fatality since protests last month.

Sri Lanka's economic collapse began to be felt after the coronavirus pandemic torpedoed vital revenue from tourism and remittances.

The country is unable to finance essential imports, which has left rice, milk powder, sugar, wheat flour, and pharmaceuticals in short supply, while runaway inflation has worsened hardships.

Utilities unable to pay for fuel have imposed long daily blackouts to ration power, while long lines snake around service stations each morning as people queue for scant supplies of petrol and kerosene.

Finance minister Ali Sabry, who is in Washington to negotiate an International Monetary Fund bailout, warned Friday that the economic situation in Sri Lanka will likely deteriorate even further. — AFP



15 Soldiers, 6 Civilians Killed in Attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso

PARIS (Dispatches) - Fifteen soldiers and six civilians have been killed in attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso, neighboring West African countries that are struggling against armed groups.

Vehicles packed with explosives were driven into three military camps in central Mali before dawn on Sunday, the military said in a statement. Six soldiers were killed and 15 wounded at the Sevare camp, and five were wounded at two other locations.

Across the border in northern Burkina Faso, simultaneous attacks early Sunday on military detachments in Gaskinde and Pobe-Mengao killed nine soldiers and six civilians, including two who were members of an armed self-defense group, the military said in a statement.

About 30 soldiers were also wounded in the three attacks in Mali that were claimed by Katiba Macina, a group linked to the firebrand preacher Amadou Koufa.

Katiba Macina is part of the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, an Al-Qaeda-linked alliance operating in the Sahel.

"On Sunday morning, the mujahideen of the Katiba Macina struck three camps of the (Malian armed forces)," a member of the group said in an audio message sent to AFP. "We hit these camps at the same time within five minutes of each other. [Apart from the] deaths, we caused material damage to them," the audio recording said.

Military sources said 11 attackers were killed during the raid on the Sevare military camp, where two AK-47 assault rifles, mobile phones and other military equipment was recovered from the deceased.

"The situation is under control. The FAMa (Malian armed forces) are combing through the target sectors and security measures are being reinforced," the military said in a statement.

A request has been sent to the UN Mission in Mali seeking deployment of a rapid intervention force to the Sevare camp, a mission member confirmed.

One of the poorest countries in the world, Mali is fighting rebels in a conflict that has killed thousands of people and driven hundreds of thousands from their homes.

Unrest, caused by groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS), has also spread into neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger.



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yard, pkg
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Japan, Russia Sign Fishing Deal Despite Ukraine Tensions

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan and Russia struck a deal on Tokyo's fishing quota to catch salmon and trout born in Russian rivers, Japan's fisheries agency said, despite worsening ties over the crisis in Ukraine. With Russo-Japanese relations unravelling, the fate of annual talks between the two governments this year overshadowed the livelihood of Japanese fishermen in northern regions around disputed islands. But the two countries agreed on Japan's quota of 2,050 tons in salmon and trout within its own exclusive economic zone for this year, the same level as last year, and that Japan would pay fees to Russia between 200 million yen (\$1.56 million) and 300 million yen, depending on the actual catch, according to Japan's fisheries agency.



World's Engines Are Spluttering

LONDON (Guardian) - The International Monetary Fund's revised World Economic Outlook is sobering. It is rare for the organisation to revise down sharply its projections for economic growth only one quarter into the calendar year. Yet in this case, it has done so for 86% of its 190 member countries, resulting in a decline of almost one percentage point in global growth for 2022 - from 4.4% to 3.6%. Moreover, this forecast is accompanied by a significant increase in projected inflation, and all this bad news is packaged in a wrapping of deeper uncertainty. There is a downward bias in the balance of risks, and inequality is expected to worsen within and across countries.

The WEO revision is attracting a great deal of media attention. The focus, understandably, is on the relatively large size of the revisions for the current year, most of which are associated with the detrimental economic effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war has disrupted the supply of corn, gas, metals, oil and wheat, as well as pushing up the price of critical inputs such as fertiliser (which is made from natural gas). These developments have prompted warnings of a looming global food crisis and a severe increase in world hunger. Given the scale of the disruptions, it would not surprise me if the IMF issued a further downward revision to its growth projections - particularly for Europe - later this year.

After a shopping mall lies in ruins after a missile strike of the Russian troops in the Podilskiy district of Kyiv of a missile strike in Kyiv's Podilskiy district - KYIV, UKRAINE - MARCH 23, 2022 - A shopping mall lies in ruins after a missile strike of the Russian troops in the Podilskiy district of Kyiv, capital of Ukraine. (Photo credit should read Yulia Ovsiannikova / Ukrinform/Future Publishing via Getty Images)

But as important as these 2022 effects are, especially when it comes to the impact on vulnerable segments of the population and fragile countries, we also must pay attention to the IMF's 2023 outlook. The projection for next year points to a medium-term problem that is no less important: the lost potency of growth models worldwide. The IMF does not expect its significant downward revision in global economic growth for 2022 to be offset in 2023. Instead, it has lowered its forecast for next year from 3.8% to 3.6%, with those revisions applying to advanced and developing economies.

The implication is that the world's economic engines are spluttering. This problem is especially worrisome in such a fluid operating environment because it means that the prevailing growth models are not up to the task of pulling economies through unanticipated negative shocks. Making matters worse, the same models have also failed to maintain a decent level of inclusive growth during periods of less stress.

Three big secular developments are to blame for the tepid outlook: the changing nature of globalisation; the prolonged reliance on artificial growth boosters; and the long-term failure to invest in the sources of sustained growth.

Economic and financial globalisation have been evolving in ways that make it more difficult for national economies to leverage international trade and foreign direct investment for domestic growth. While the pandemic raised questions about the proliferation and potential vulnerabilities of "just-in-time" cross-border supply chains, it is worth recalling that trade and investment restrictions were increasing well before Covid-19 emerged. The US-China trade war featured the return of high tariffs and other protectionist measures that have generated far-reaching knock-on effects throughout the global economy.

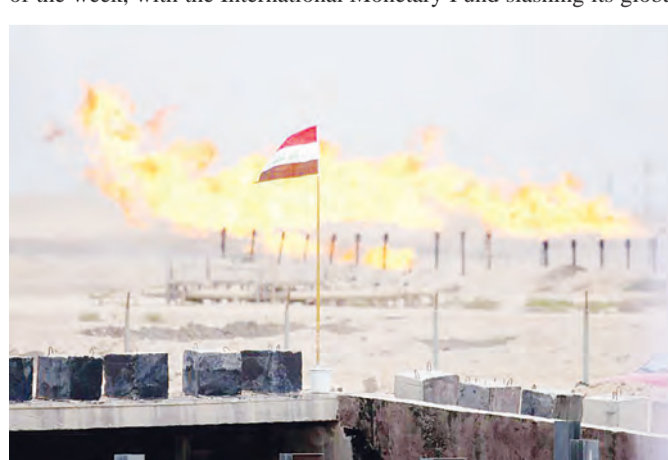
Iraq Expects \$25b in Revenues Due to Oil Price Rise

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq now expects to earn \$25 billion in oil export revenues in six months due to the rising price of oil, the state news agency reported, citing the country's finance minister.

The Iraqi federal government is yet to receive any revenues or funds from oil exports from the northern Kurdish region although it is obliged to pay them, Ali Abdul Ameer Allawi added.

Global oil prices have been on the rise since the war in Ukraine began on February 24 and the US has also repeatedly urged OPEC members to increase oil production in order to stabilise the market. Iraq is also part of the agreement on production levels.

Concerns about the Ukraine conflict stoking inflation and denting economic growth dominated trading in the second half of the week, with the International Monetary Fund slashing its global growth forecast by nearly a full percentage point.



Pakistan Passes Orders to Scrap China-Pak Economic Corridor Authority

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistan's new government has initiated a process to abolish the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Authority, with the planning minister saying it was a "redundant organization" that wasted resources and thwarted speedy implementation of the ambitious regional connectivity program.

Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal passed orders to the concerned officials to begin the process of abolition of the authority following reports that Chinese power producers have shut down 1,980 megawatts of production capacity due to non-clearance of their Rs300 billion dues, The Express Tribune newspaper reported.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Authority established through an ordinance in 2019 was aimed at accelerating the pace of CPEC-related activities, finding new drivers of growth, unlocking the potential of interlinked production networks and global value chains through regional and global connectivity.

According to the newly appointed planning minister, his officials "will move a summary seeking Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's approval to abolish the CPEC Authority".

Iqbal told the newspaper that the authority was a "redundant organization with a huge waste of resources which has thwarted speedy implementation of the CPEC".

The decision to wind up the CPEC Authority was in line with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's (PML-N) old policy against the establishment of a parallel setup.

Poland and Finland Deepen Industrial Ties

WARSAW (Dispatches) - Poland sees the involvement of its industry in the Finnish nuclear sector as a springboard for its own new-build aspirations, an international business forum in Warsaw has heard. The Polish-Finnish Nuclear Industry Forum saw companies from both countries discuss cooperation.

Opening the event, Poland's Deputy Minister for Climate and Environment, Adam Guibourgé-Czetwreński, reiterated his country's goal to bring in nuclear power and establish a generating capacity of 6-9 GWe by 2043.

The purpose of Poland's nuclear programme is "to reduce the national emission of greenhouse gases and air

pollutants from the energy sector, as well as ensure stability of supplies and energy security". However, the country is also keen to bank economic benefits from its nascent nuclear sector, said Nowacki, "through the large involvement of Polish enterprises in the very process of building nuclear power plants, as well as through, for example, technology transfer to domestic companies and research centres and the possibility of carrying out works on export markets."

In the process of reducing reliance on coal, Nowacki said, "We can build both a sector working for renewable energy and for nuclear energy".

"Few people know that 80 Polish companies have been involved in 40 nuclear projects in 24 countries on three continents in the last ten years, including in Canada, India and Japan," he noted.

Some 25 Polish companies worked on TVO's recently completed Olkiluoto 3 in Finland and "this bodes well for further Polish-Finnish cooperation on nuclear projects, and perhaps also joining forces in other European or global projects," said Nowacki.

Poland's national plans for nuclear focus on the construction of large reactors, with the first to be on the country's Baltic coast. An environmental impact assessment was submitted last month regarding potential siting at either Lubiatowo-Kopalino in the Choczewo commune or Żarnowiec in the territory of the Krokowa and Gniewino communes.

Separately, several Polish industrial majors are considering small nuclear power reactors as substitutes for coal they have been burning to provide heat and power to industrial processes.

The Polish-Finnish Nuclear Industry Forum was held in Warsaw from 20-21 April, organised by Poland's Ministry of Climate and Environment and Finland's Ministry of Economy and Employment. They were supported by the Finuclear Association and the Polish Chamber of Commerce for Energy and Environmental Protection.

S.Korea Q1 Growth Likely Slowed Sharply By COVID Curbs

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - South Korea's economic growth likely slowed significantly in the first quarter as restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 slammed the brakes on consumer spending, a Reuters poll found.

Asia's fourth-largest economy is expected to have expanded by a seasonally adjusted 0.6% in the January-March quarter from the previous three-month period, according to the median forecast, after growing 1.2% in October-December.

On a year-on-year basis, gross domestic product (GDP) expanded 2.8% in the first quarter, the median forecast of 18 economists showed, down sharply from the fourth quarter's 4.2% pace. The data will be released on April 25.

The Bank of Korea's new governor, Rhee Chang-yong, warned that economic growth was expected to weaken further, and in the long run, the economy may experience stagnation amid an aging population and decreased productivity.

"Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the first quarter, private consumption will be weaker than expected at the beginning of this year...high inflation due to the Ukraine war is also likely to limit growth," wrote Kyu-yeon Chun, an economist at Hana Financial Investment in Seoul.

"Growth momentum from the external sector is also likely to weaken as (the) trade surplus has been narrowed by rising raw material prices."

South Korea, a major importer of energy and raw materials for semiconductor chip production, was expected to experience a heightened risk of manufacturing disruptions from Russia's war on Ukraine.



That, along with decade-high inflation and a slowing Chinese economy - the country's biggest trading partner - meant the South Korean economy was expected to lose momentum this year and next amid waning pandemic-related stimulus.

Growth was forecast to average 2.8% this year and 2.6% in 2023, a separate Reuters poll found.

"The near-term growth outlook will remain challenging, as elevated commodity prices lift inflation and put downside pressure on domestic demand," wrote Lloyd Chan, senior economist at Oxford Economics.

Last week, the Bank of Korea (BOK) raised its benchmark interest rate in a surprise move to fight high inflation, which threatens its economic recovery.

South Korea's central bank said earlier this month the economy would grow slower than the 3.0% it projected for this year in February.

India Extends Additional \$500m Credit Line to Sri Lanka



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India has agreed to extend an additional USD 500 million credit line to help Sri Lanka import fuel, Finance Minister Ali Sabry said, amid delays in chalking out a bailout package with the IMF to mitigate the dire financial crisis facing the island nation.

Sri Lanka has been struggling to pay for imports after its foreign exchange reserves plummeted sharply in recent times, causing a devaluation of its currency and spiralling inflation.

India has agreed to provide an additional USD 500 million for our fuel imports, Sabry said on Friday, while adding that he was hopeful that New Delhi would consider handing out another USD 1 billion dollars as a credit line.

India has already agreed to defer USD 1.5 billion in import payments that Sri Lanka needs to make to the Asian Clearing Union.

On Friday, New Delhi has also extended the tenure of a USD 400 million swap given in January this year, the Indian High Commission said.

Sabry is currently in Washington to negotiate a program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The finance minister said that talks have begun on an Extended Fund Facility, but the finer details of the program are yet to be finalized.

Sri Lanka needs at least USD 4 billion to tide over its mounting economic woes, and Sabry has been holding talks with international institutions such as the World Bank as well as countries like China and Japan for financial assistance.

It will be a difficult period in the next nine months. During that time there is a need to bring in more investments in US dollars into the central bank. We are talking with several countries. If these efforts are successful, and if investment of about USD 2 billion comes to the central bank, it will help stop the depreciation and stabilise the rupee, Sabry said.

On April 12, Sri Lanka suspended its debt servicing for the first time in its history.

Rudiger to Leave Chelsea At End of Season

LONDON (Dispatches) - Thomas Tuchel has revealed Germany defender Antonio Rudiger will leave Chelsea when his contract expires at the end of this season. Tuchel had hoped to persuade Rudiger to stay at Stamford Bridge, but the center-back has opted to end his five-year spell with the Premier League club. Chelsea's attempts to keep Rudiger were hampered by the British government's sanctions on Russian owner Roman Abramovich, which included a rule that existing players could not sign new contracts.

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

Potapova Claims Maiden WTA Title

ISTANBUL (AFP) - Anastasia Potapova defeated fellow Russian Veronika Kudermetova to win her maiden WTA title in Istanbul on Sunday, shrugging off her country's controversial ban from this year's Wimbledon. The 21-year-old, ranked 122 and who came through qualifying, swept to a 6-3, 6-1 win over the third seed in one hour and 23 minutes. Potapova had lost both her previous two finals -- in Moscow and Tashkent in 2018.

Verstappen Wins Emilia Romagna GP

IMOLA (Dispatches) - World champion Max Verstappen rekindled his title defense with an accomplished victory ahead of team-mate Sergio Perez in a dominant one-two triumph for Red Bull at the Emilia Romagna Grand Prix.

In a rain-affected race, the pole-sitting 24-year-old Dutchman came home more than 16 seconds ahead of his team-mate as Charles Leclerc and Ferrari endured a disappointing day in front of passionate home support at the Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari.

Leclerc, who started second on the grid, finished sixth after making a poor start and spinning in the closing laps while running third, allowing Lando Norris to take the final podium place for McLaren.

George Russell produced a stirring drive for Mercedes to come home fourth after starting 11th, fending off Valtteri Bottas's Alfa Romeo at the finish, while team-mate and seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton finished a distant 14th.

It was Verstappen's second win this season after Saudi Arabia, which has also included two retirements, and the 22nd of his career.

He reeled off a grand slam weekend with pole position, victory and fastest lap as well as victory in Saturday's sprint race.

He moved up to second in the title race behind Leclerc, reducing his deficit from 45 points to 27 to set up the prospect of an intense duel this year.

"Today, you never know with the weather how competitive you are going to be but I think we did very well and this one-two is very deserved," said Verstappen.

"The start was very important but afterwards, judging the conditions and when to swap to the slick tyres, because in the lead you have to always dictate the pace."

AlphaTauri's Yuki Tsunoda finished seventh ahead of four-time champion Sebastian Vettel in an Aston Martin, Kevin Magnussen of Haas and Lance Stroll in the other Aston Martin.

A morning downpour eased shortly before the race, leaving the track in a treacherously wet condition and the teams faced with a difficult choice on tyres and strategy.

For the packed crowds of 'tifosi' huddled on open grandstands and grassy banks, it was a disappointing day. Verstappen surged into the lead from pole position.

Leclerc, starting second, was passed by the Dutchman, Perez and Norris before Daniel Ricciardo in a McLaren tangled with Sainz at the first chicane.



It was a second consecutive early exit for Sainz after his misery in Melbourne. The Spaniard was left beached in a gravel trap, prompting a first Safety Car intervention to recover the Ferrari while Ricciardo survived their impact to pit for fresh tyres.

After a fine start, Russell had risen from 11th to sixth behind Magnussen's Haas, while Hamilton made more cautious progress in 11th, having started 14th.

After several attempts, Russell passed the Dane at the Variante Alta. On lap eight, Leclerc passed Norris for third at Tamburello, but faced a six seconds deficit to Perez as, in the pits, Fernando Alonso retired his Alpine, damaged in an early collision with Mick Schumacher's Haas.

Hamilton, who had been reluctant to pit, was impeded by Estaban Ocon's Alpine, but avoided a collision while Perez, who stopped on lap 19, managed to retain second place ahead of a charging Leclerc.

Ocon was given a five seconds penalty for his unsafe release. By half-distance, Verstappen was cruising with a 10-second cushion ahead of Perez and Leclerc, frustrated in third.

On lap 41 came Hamilton's most humbling moment when he was lapped by Verstappen as he battled for 13th with Pierre Gasly's Alpha Tauri.

Leclerc pitted on lap 50 for softs, dropping to fourth behind Norris. Perez followed on 51, as Leclerc passed the McLaren and Verstappen one lap later, retaining a 13-second lead. The Monegasque charged hard to pass Perez on lap 53, but spun off at Variante Alfa, damaging a front wing. He pitted, re-joining eighth as Norris inherited third and Russell took fourth, resisting Bottas in the final laps.



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - World number one Novak Djokovic's barren title spell in 2022 continued as he went down 6-2 6-7(4) 6-0 to Russian Andrey Rublev in the Serbia Open final in Belgrade on Sunday.

Playing his second tournament on clay this season after being knocked out by Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in Monte Carlo earlier this month, Djokovic was off to a slow start as second seed Rublev broke him twice to clinch the opening set 6-2.

Djokovic had prevailed from a set down in his last three matches and the 20-times major winner, cheered on by a capacity home crowd, raised his game in the second set to take the tie-breaker despite earlier squandering five set points on the Rublev serve.

The Serbian missed a chunk of the early season, including the Australian Open as well as ATP Masters 1000 events in Miami and Indian Wells, due to his refusal to get vaccinated against Covid-19 — and his lack of match practice showed in the deciding set on Sunday.

Rublev galloped to an early lead and barely gave his opponent a chance as he closed out the match with a powerful forehand winner for his 11th career title.

Alcaraz Cruises past Carreno Busta to Take Barcelona Open

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz underlined his status as one of the most exciting young talents in men's tennis on Sunday by beating fellow Spaniard Pablo Carreno Busta to win the Barcelona Open.

Alcaraz defeated Carreno Busta 6-3, 6-2 to claim a fourth title of his career and third this year, with the 18-year-old emerging as a serious contender for the French Open, which begins at Roland Garros next month.

After already winning on hard court in Miami and clay in Rio de Janeiro this season, Alcaraz saw off Carreno Busta in a swift 65 minutes to complete an impressive week in Barcelona.

The youngster from Murcia had already knocked out world number five Stefanos Tsitsipas in the quarter-finals while rain on Saturday meant a gruelling semi-final victory over Alex De Minaur, lasting three sets and 223 minutes, came on Sunday morning, just three hours before the final.

Alcaraz saved two match points to beat De Minaur 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/4), 6-4.

Russia Blocks Chess Website Over Ukraine

MOSCOW (AFP) - The popular website Chess.com has been blocked in Russia after publishing two critical articles on the situation in Ukraine branded "false information" by the authorities.

The site, which boasts 50 million members worldwide, is now on a list of blocked sources drawn up by Russia's telecom watchdog Roskomnadzor.

The general prosecutor's office requested that access to just two pages of the Chess.com critical of Russia's "special operation" in Ukraine be restricted, domestic agencies and media reported.

But because Chess.com uses the HTTPS protocol, the whole site has become unavailable, the media said.

Chess.com could not be opened in Russia on Sunday afternoon.

The articles allegedly condemned the offensive Russia unleashed in Ukraine on February 24, according to Russian media reports.



Swiatek Overpowers Sabalenka to Win Stuttgart Title

facing her biggest test in the semi-finals, where she battled back from a set down to overcome Ludmilla Samsonova on Saturday.

STUTTGART (Dispatches) - World number one Iga Swiatek captured her fourth straight title of the 2022 season by beating Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka 6-2 6-2 in the Stuttgart Open final on Sunday, extending her winning streak to 23 matches.

Swiatek, a former French Open champion, had breezed through the opening rounds of the WTA 500 claycourt tournament before

overcome Ludmilla Samsonova on Saturday.

The Polish 20-year-old showed little signs of fatigue from that marathon clash as she saved an early breakpoint and raced to a 3-0 lead before holding firm and taking the opening set when third-seeded Sabalenka, last year's runner-up, double-faulted.

The pair had split their previous meetings - in last year's WTA Finals and the Qatar Open in February - but it was the in-form Swiatek who excelled in their first claycourt match, dealing effortlessly with her opponent's big hitting.

The error-prone Sabalenka looked to mount a comeback after a crucial hold of serve at the start of the second set but Swiatek switched gears to break for a 4-2 lead and completed the victory when the Belarusian sent a shot long.

Debutant Swiatek's success in Stuttgart follows her triumphs in Doha, Indian Wells and Miami, and makes her a firm favorite for Roland Garros starting on May 22.

Bayern Boss Rules Out Lewandowski Exit Before 2023

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich sports director Hasan Alihamidzic dismissed the possibility of Robert Lewandowski leaving the freshly-crowned Bundesliga champions this summer, amid rumours of a transfer to Barcelona.

When asked by Sky if he could "rule out" Lewandowski leaving Bayern this summer, Alihamidzic dismissed the possibility with an emphatic "yes".

Lewandowski has scored 48 goals in 41 club games this season, yet Alihamidzic admitted concrete extension talks with the player's agent are yet to take place.

Lewandowski netted in Saturday's 3-1 home win over Dortmund which confirmed Bayern as Bundesliga champions for the tenth consecutive season.

Salihamidzic insists he is "absolutely relaxed" about the subject, but Lewandowski looked uncomfortable discussing his future on Saturday in a post-match interview with Sky.

"Something will happen soon. The only thing I know is that there will be a meeting," Lewandowski said.

The back-to-back winner of the FIFA best male player title admitted: "It's not easy for me". In contrast, Thomas Mueller and Manuel Neuer, who like Lewandowski are also out of contract next year, have both made it clear they would be happy to extend with Bayern. Salihamidzic said there have "very good talks. 'Manu' (Neuer) belongs to FC Bayern just as much as Thomas".



Liverpool Overcome Everton Battle

LIVERPOOL (Dispatches) - Liverpool kept the pressure on Manchester City at the top of the Premier League table and pushed local rivals Everton towards relegation with a 2-0 win in the Merseyside derby on Sunday.

The Toffees' day got off a terrible start even before a ball was kicked at Anfield as Burnley's 1-0 win over Wolves dumped Everton into the relegation zone.

Second-half goals from Andy Robertson and Divoock Origi ensured they remained there despite a spirited display in a feisty encounter.

A 12th consecutive home league win for Liverpool cuts City's lead at the top of the table back to one point with five games remaining.

Everton have still not won away from home in the league since August, but they dispelled criticism of being a soft touch away from Goodison Park by showing the fight they will need in the remaining six games to maintain their 68-year stay in the top-flight.

In stark contrast to Manchester United's capitulation in losing 4-0 at Anfield in midweek, Frank Lampard's men at least managed to make the Reds earn the three points.

A Sadio Mane dipping effort from the edge of the box was the sum total of the threat to the Everton goal in a scrappy first 45 minutes littered with stoppages in play.



Mane was lucky just to see yellow from one melee involving almost all 22 players after Liverpool refused to put the ball out of play with Richarlison down injured.

Everton's 32 completed fewest passes in the first half was the fewest of any team in a Premier League game since 2006.