

Two New Military Vessels Capable Of Carrying Helicopters Will Join The Fleet of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy, IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri Said

IRAN NEWS

Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade, Reza Fatemi Amin Said That the Government Is Working on Plans Aimed at Developing Economic Relations Between Provinces of Iran And Other Countries

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WB Sees Iranian Economy To Grow by 2.9% in 2022

TEHRAN (MNA) - World Bank, in its latest economic report on the MENA region, dubbed "A New State of Mind: Greater Transparency and Accountability in the Middle East and North Africa", sees the Iranian economy growing by 2.9 percent in 2022.

"Iran's GDP is forecast to grow 2.9 percent in 2022. In 2023, the average growth for developing oil exporter is expected to fall back to 2.7 percent," the bank said in the report.

The bank expects the Islamic Republic's Account Balance to improve in 2022 reaching 3.8 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The figure stood at 3.5 percent last year.

Iran's Fiscal Balance is also expected to improve this year, as it is seen to reach - 4.5 percent from - 5.3 percent in 2021.

Based on the report, despite the difficult global economic conditions, most of the countries in the MENA region are expected to experience some economic growth in the current year due to rising oil prices.

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Border Guards, IRGC, Army Holding Joint Naval Drill in PG

TEHRAN (MNA) - The commander of the border guards in Iran's southern province of Bushehr announced the start of the joint naval drill by border guards, Army, and IRGC in the Persian Gulf on Sunday.

Colonel Yadollah said that the 3-day naval drill entitled 'Muhammad Rasool Allah' started with the participation of the border guards of the southern coastal provinces of the country on the coast of the Persian Gulf.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Army and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navies also participate in the exercise, he added. Sharafi stated that the purpose of holding the exercise is to improve the ability of the border guard forces and synergy with the operating forces against foreign aggression and border confrontation on the sea coast.

Meanwhile the Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy says that Iran can ensure the security of the Persian Gulf with the contribution of neighboring countries in the region. "As we have said many times, we can maintain the security of the region," said Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, calling the presence of transregional forces in the region harmful.

"Today, the Persian Gulf is completely safe and we can ensure the security of this international waterway with the contribution of the people of the region and the neighboring countries of the Persian Gulf," he added.

Iran, Central Asian States Ink Transit Cooperation Statement



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Representatives from Iran and Central Asian countries plus Russia have signed a joint statement following the first transit cooperation conference.

Following two days of discussions, the representatives from Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Iran signed a statement on Sunday with the aim of developing transit cooperation.

Iran's Minister of Road and Urban Development Rostam Ghasemi said after the signing ceremony that the conference was proposed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, because transit is determining issue given the situation of the region.

The conference will be held every six months, he said, noting that ministers and other representatives of the participating countries have adopted constructive decisions in order to promote coordination and collaboration in terms of transit and transport.

According to the Iranian minister, the member states of the conference underlined the need for development of transit, unification of tariffs and issuance of one-year visas for drivers active in transit operation.

Answering a question, Ghasemi pointed to the time of the implementation of the joint statement and its details, saying that transit of commodities is of great importance for the Raisi administration.

He went on to say that Iran is determined to facilitate transit of goods with states, with whom we had not been connected with in recent years.

The goal will be pursued to be implemented from today, he said, adding that the transit capacity has already increased due to joint measures of regional states.

Rostam Ghasemi also told reporters: "This meeting was held at the initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

He added, "From now on, this meeting will be held every 6 months."

According to the Iranian minister, the member states participating in the meeting emphasized and reached an understanding on the development of the transit among themselves, the unification of transit customs duties, and the issuance of one-year visas for transit truck drivers as part of the signed communique.

He further underlined that the issue of transit is a very serious issue for the 13th government under President Raisi, adding that Iran's policy is to facilitate transit with the countries that Iran witnessed cutting ties with them over the past years under the previous Iranian administration.

"Accordingly, based on the communique, the promotion of transit in the region was put on the agenda," Ghasemi said. "In line with previous joint measures, the transit capacity in the region has increased by 60%," the minister added.

West Taking Revenge on Iranians With Genocide Campaign Against Patients

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's government has rebuked the US brutal sanctions against the Islamic Republic, saying the West is "taking revenge" on Iranians by waging a "campaign of genocide" against the country's patients.

Spokesman Ali Bahadori Jahromi made the remark in a Persian-language post on his twitter account while projecting that 220 Iranian thalassemia patients would be the victims of sanctions imposed by the United States against Iran by the end of the Iranian calendar year falling on March 2023.

"Seventy thalassemia patients lost their lives in the year 2018, 90 in 2019, 140 in 2020 and 180 died last year due to sanctions. According to the projections this year, 220 patients will be the victims of cruel sanctions. Add to this statistic, EB (epidermolysis bullosa) patients and all those [patients with rare and refractory diseases] in need of special medicinal products," Bahadori Jahromi wrote.

"The West is taking revenge on Iranians through a genocide campaign against the patients," he added.

Earlier in the day, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani censured the U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic, saying the bans were the "backbone" of the so-called American human rights regulations.

"The whole Iranian people, without any distinction and discrimination, have been struggling for many years with the brutal sanctions of the United States, which have targeted their livelihood, jobs, health and normal life," Kanaani said.

"Even EB children were not exempted from the unilateral, illegal and cruel US sanctions. Sanctions are the backbone of American human rights," he noted.

The United States, under the hawkish former president Donald Trump, unilaterally walked out of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in May 2018 and reinstated crippling sanctions under the so-called "maximum pressure" campaign.

ViewPoint

Misinformation Campaign Against Islamic Republic

In recent days the Islamic Republic of Iran has been witnessing some unrests over the death of a young girl which is claimed she has died when she was under arrest by the morality police and the Western and hostile media have used it as a good pretext for fanning the flame of anger among the people who have been misinformed about the death of young girl Mahsa Amini.

And now that the unrests are running out of steam and peace is being restored in the country, those hostile media have magnified the death of another teenage girl to incite unrests in the country.

Western media outlets, MKO-led news outlets and influencers have shown flubs and blunders in the coverage of the news related to the death of the 17-year-old Iranian girl Nika Shakarami who went missing on September 20.

Reports said Nika was found dead in the courtyard of a building. Media outlets did not wait until investigations take place, but rather jumped into anti-Iranian conclusions and disseminated misleading narratives on the death of the young lady, providing incorrect and even exaggerated information.

These outlets rushed to conclude that the Iranian government stands behind the death of the young lady not only without providing any concrete evidence, but also propagating different rumors.

In terms of social media, twitter users went too far in providing their versions of the story, publishing their tweets along with Western media articles including BBC News, VOA and others.

A CCTV video that went viral shows that Nika, who was walking alone calmly and did not seem to be being chased or have been running, entered a building at 12:02 at night while talking on her mobile phone. This was the last video of Nika whose lifeless body was discovered in the backyard of a house on Labafi Street, Tehran's Amirakaram intersection, which was released 7 hours before her body was discovered.

The next morning her body was reportedly found in the yard of the house overlooking the balcony of the building she had entered. Upon being informed, a specialized team was sent to the place and found out that the lady fell from the building into the courtyard of the adjacent house. Iranian security forces arrested all eight people who were in that building and investigations are underway.

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Iran Exports at 24% Growth in Five Months

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade put the country's exports value at 24 percent growth in the first five months of the current Iranian calendar year in 1401 (from March 21 to August 23).

Speaking on the sidelines of his visit to the northern province of Mazandaran, Seyyed Reza Fatemi Amin pointed to the production of goods in industrial units and economic enterprises and said that production of goods has registered considerable growth in the current year (started March 21, 2022).

For instance, the country's production of tractor and steel has witnessed a considerable 50 and 10 percent growth respectively in the current year, the industry minister added.

Fatemi Amin pointed out that the industrial sector has shown a 5.1 percent growth in the first three months of the current year (from March 21 to June 22) as compared to the same period of last year.

Turning to the export of non-oil products in the current year, he reiterated, "Statistics show that export of non-oil goods from March 21 to August 23 has registered a 24 percent growth as compared to the last year's corresponding period."

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Iran, Russia to Expand Cooperation in Holding Exhibitions

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A senior official at the Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) of Iran has announced expansion of cooperation in holding exhibition between Tehran and Moscow.

Rahmatollah Khormali, director of department of Central Asia, Russia and Caucasus at TPO, made the remarks in a meeting held in Moscow with the managing director of Russia's Expocentre.

Exchange of information about calendar of the events and exhibitions is necessary to develop the related cooperation, Khormali said.

36th Islamic Unity Conference Kicks Off in Tehran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The 36th International Islamic Unity Conference officially began to discuss Islamic unity, peace and avoidance of division and conflict in the Islamic world, exclusive solutions and operational measures.

Following the announcement of the week of unity by the founder of the Islamic Republic, Imam Khomeini (RA), and based on the strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to strengthen unity among Muslims, it was decided to hold the International Islamic Unity Conference.

Since 1990, Islamic Development Organization has been in charge of holding four rounds of the conference, but after the establishment of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought by the order of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, this forum became responsible for holding the important conference.

Creating unity and solidarity among Muslims, developing consensus among scholars to approximate their scientific and cultural viewpoints, presenting practical solutions in order to reach Islamic unity, and solving the problems of Muslims and



presenting solutions for them out of the elites and educated figures were among the purpose of the International Islamic Unity Conference.

The scholars and muftis, university professors and other academic and cultural communities inside and outside the country will participate in the event.

Hundreds of thinkers, scholars and reformers from around the world and thousands of Shia and Sunni scholars from different parts of Iran have so far participated in the conference and presented their lectures and comments.

Also, Islamic thinkers from different countries such as France, Syria, Lebanon, Australia, Egypt, Malaysia, Sudan, Pakistan, India, Azerbaijan, the UK, Jordan, Iraq, Indonesia, Gambia, Palestine, Afghanistan, Senegal, Libya, Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen, Greece, Turkey, Uganda, Kuwait, Qatar, the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates have participated in the International Islamic Unity Conferences.

United, Powerful Iran Poses Threat to Enemies' Interests



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The heads of the three branches of the Iranian government say enemies of the Islamic Republic regard a unified and powerful Iran as a threat to their interests.

President Ebrahim Raisi, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf held a meeting in Tehran on Saturday amid the ongoing riots in some cities following the death of a young Iranian woman at a police station late last month.

They stressed the importance of reinforcing national unity for the country's development and progress and commended prudence of the Iranian nation for contributing to efforts to foil enemies' hostile plots during the recent weeks.

The Islamic Republic currently needs unity among people from different walks of life irrespective of language, religion and ethnicity to counter the hostility and bids to sow division in Iran, they said, adding that all Iranian bodies must also make efforts in this regard.

The heads of the executive, legislative and judicial branches said maintaining the country's tranquility is essential for people's economic and business activities.

"The security and peace in the country forms the foundation of any kind of development and people's economic activities and businesses," they added.

Armed Forces Not to Let Enemies Interfere in Iran Affairs

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian army commander emphasized that the army will not allow any interference and aggression by any foreign powers in the country's affairs, adding that all the armed forces are united in maintaining national security.

Speaking in a gathering attended by the army commanders as well as IRGC generals on Sunday morning, the commander-in-chief of the Iranian army General Seyyed Abdolrahim Mousavi said that the enemies seek to take "security" and "hope" from this nation and break its "resistance", but the Iranian nation knows their plots very well.

The commander added that despite all the enemy's attempts, the nation has remained steadfast, hopeful, independent and resistant.

General Mousavi also said that the Iranian nation



has successfully left behind difficult times on different occasions.

In an apparent reference to the recent sporadic riots in the country, he blamed the United States and the child-killing Israeli regime for conspiring with Iran's security and declared that the enemies will see they will not get anywhere and will get disappointed by the Iranian nation.

Elsewhere, he stressed that all the Iranian armed forces, including the army, IRGC, and Law Enforcement (police) Basij are united and on one front against the enemies.

The army commander added that the enemies do not want to see the Iranian nation's progress toward development and seek to undermine the country's defensive power.

General Mousavi further congratulated the arrival of the Law Enforcement national week.

Over 18b Cubic Meters of Water Stored Behind Iranian Dams

TEHRAN (MNA) - Some 18.57 billion cubic meters of water is stored behind the dams across Iran since the beginning of the current water year (September 23), indicating no change compared to the previous year, a report by Iran Water Resources Management Company (IWRM) said.

Based on IWRM data, currently, the total capacity of the country's dam reservoirs stands at 50.5 billion cubic meters.

As reported, since the beginning of the current water year up to October 8, the total volume of water inflow to the reservoirs of the country's dams stood

at 370 million cubic meters

According to Firouz Ghasemzadeh, the director-general of the Energy Ministry's water information and data office, compared to the figures for the previous water year, the inflow to the country's dams has decreased by 27 percent.

Ghasemzadeh called on people and industries to manage their water consumption.

A report by Nature Scientific Journal on Iran's water crisis indicates that from 2002 to 2015, over 74 billion cubic meters have been extracted from aquifers, which is unprecedented and its revival takes thousands of years along with urgent action.

Speaker Terms Shia-Sunni Unity as Key to Iran's Victory

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, on the occasion of the Islamic Unity Week, congratulated the people over the birth anniversary of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), adding that the key to the Islamic Republic of Iran's victory in various fields is Shia-Sunni unity.

Qalibaf on Sunday on the occasion of the Islamic Unity Week congratulated Islamic countries around the world on the birth anniversary of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and said that Unity Week is a symbol of Shia-Sunni unity and solidarity in serving Iranians and the Islamic Revolution.

We witnessed this unity in the Holy Defense and other incidents in Iran, when the country needed presence and sacrifice, the Sunnis and the Shias were present in all

aspects and made Iran stronger than before, he added.

Qalibaf emphasized that the key to Iran's victory in all fields is Shia-Sunni unity.

The Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was born on the 17th of the lunar month Rabi' al-Awwal according to Shia tradition. The Sunni tradition, on the other hand, believes his birth to be on Rabi' al-Awwal 12th. The Muslim World celebrates the day between the two dates as Islamic Unity Week, as established by the late Imam Khomeini.

Iran to Support Businesses Migrating to Domestic Internet Platforms

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran will offer financial support to businesses who decide to use domestic internet platforms after restrictions were imposed on foreign social media services last month because of a flare-up of violence in various towns and cities across the country.

Iran's telecoms minister Issa Zarepour said that the government is considering a package of financial incentives for businesses migrating to domestic internet platforms.

Zarepour said the support will include tax exemptions and cheap loans that will be assigned to businesses identified by Iranian ministries of telecommunications and finance.

The announcement comes nearly three weeks after Iran blocked access to Instagram and WhatsApp, two social media platforms owned by American company Meta Platforms. The decision came after a bout of deadly violence on the Iranian streets that authorities blamed on rioters and thugs that had capitalized on public anger about the death on September 16 of a young woman in police custody.

Zarepour said Iran had no plan to block Instagram before the unrest but he insisted that relevant authorities decided to impose restrictions on the platform after it failed to comply with Iran's laws and regulations.

Estimates indicate some 10 million Iranian businesses were active on Instagram before the platform was banned last month.

A recent report by Iran's Etemad daily showed that business activity on the platform had created some four million jobs, including one million direct jobs, in Iran before the unrest began.

The report added the annual turnover of small Iranian businesses on Instagram was believed to be between \$600 million and \$1 billion.

Gov't to Auction 5,000 Small, Medium-Sized Mines

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran plans to auction thousands of small and medium-sized mines as part of its efforts to create more jobs and spur more activity in its booming metals and mining sector.

Iran's Minister of Industries, Mine and Trade Reza Fatemi Amin said on Saturday that the Iranian government will hold 5,000 auctions within the next three months to sell the mines to private investors.

"Some 5,000 government-owned mines will be put at the disposal of people for a first time with the purpose of using these resources to boost production and jobs in the country," Fatemi Amin was quoted as saying by the IRIB News.

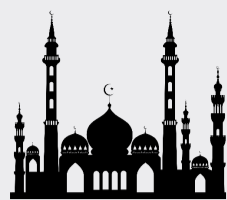
The minister made the remarks while visiting a coal mine in the northeastern province of Golestan. He said the move to privatize small and medium sized mines will be a unique project that would trigger a boom in the Iranian mining sector.

The Iranian government has already divested its shares in many large mines across the country although those shares have mostly been purchased by financial institutions and semi-government companies.

Selling mines to smaller investors will be first in Iran as the country moves to diversify its economy away from crude revenues.

That comes as Iran has increasingly relied on exports revenues from its metals and mining sector since 2018 when oil exports from the country came under American sanctions.

Mining output and exports have grown steadily in Iran in recent years while the government has been able to create tens of thousands of new jobs in the sector, especially for the youth living in the poorer regions of the country.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	11:51
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:54
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:44
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:07

78. And remember David and Solomon, when they gave judgment in the matter of the field into which the sheep of certain people had strayed by night: We did witness their judgment.

Surah 21. The Prophets (78)

Iran, Kazakhstan Increase Freight Transit up to 5m Tons

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran and Kazakhstan agreed on a unified tariff rate and 5 million tons of freight transit.

On the sidelines of the first ministerial meeting on transit cooperation in Tehran, Iran's minister of Roads and Urban Development, Rostam Ghasemi, and Kazakhstan's Minister of Industry and Infrastructural Development, Uskenbayev Kairbek Aitbayevich, met and discussed facilitation and development of freight transit.

The two sides agreed on the increase of commercial transactions up to 5 million tons for the upcoming year.

The transit will be from Kazakhstan through Iran's territory to various destinations including Europe, India, Africa, and other destinations.

The freight transit will be begun by cereals, coal, and ironware freights within the next two weeks when the finalization of the plan for the joint action is expected.

Iran guaranteed a three-day transit time through its territory.



Furthermore in the meeting, Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development promised the unification of tariff rates for transit which was welcomed by Kazakhstan.

This is part of the agreement for the activation of multimodal transit along the east of the Caspian Sea which is discussed simultaneously with eight countries present at the summit.

Iran is hosting the first ministerial summit on transit cooperation among eight states including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran for transit cooperation on October 8-9 in Tehran.

These regional countries are seeking regional convergence and transport synergy in the region which would make 20 million tons of freight transit possible among these countries.

Iran Bitumen Industry; Opportunities and Challenges



By: Masoud Esfandiari, University Teacher And Economic Analyst

The latest analyses and statistics show that bitumen product in Iran is around 6m tons annually which is valued at around \$1.5b. Four million tons of the total produced bitumen in Iran is exported and the remaining 2 million tons is for the domestic consumption.

A short review of the bitumen industry in Iran shows that despite cruel sanctions of enemies, the activists in producing black gold in Iran have not stopped creating trade and export opportunities and according to the statistics, they have exported around 4.346m tons of bitumen and it has earned the country some \$1.1b.

Experts believe that the effective strategy for confronting the sanctions is the shift in approach from selling crude to export-centered production. Reinforcing the network of export marketing, studying the regional markets for exports and avoiding concentration on crude oil sales are effective factors for presence in the new exporting markets especially in Africa and the Pacific Ocean which can help entrepreneurs and activists in the field of bitumen industry.

The study shows that licenses have been issued for production of 30m tons of bitumen in the factories in recent years which has had negative impact on bitumen industry and has led to false competition and rise in the price of feed.

Using the latest knowhow of the refining industry beside technical updating is of the advantages which can help Iran's bitumen industry and for example, using modern refinery will boost the co-efficient of converting crude oil into other oil products like bitumen but we should take into consideration this point that one of the factors for presence in the international markets is undoubtedly improving the knowhow of production in the refineries.

The Achilles' heel of Iran's bitumen industry in these days is a problem named low-quality bitumen of Iraq and early studies show that some producers use Iraq's VR instead of VB in order to reduce the price of product and this will undoubtedly overshadow the quality of bitumen and competitiveness.

One of the most important destructive effects of low-quality Iraqi product on the domestic market is to reduce the amount of competition among the producers and the real sign is the presence of Iraq's product in the neighboring states with prices even lower than in Iran.

The domestic producers should avoid fake competition for their economic revival as well as presence in the international markets and they should provide ways for the presence of high-quality bitumen of Iran in the neighboring states like Turkey through unity and solidarity.

It is necessary the view of the private sector in the seventh five-year development plan to be reviewed carefully and in this regard, and the expertise opinions of domestic producers as the pioneers of the private sector will be definitely facilitator. So it is necessary activists of the bitumen industry of Iran to table out their opinions in an interactive climate with an export-centered production approach.

If we have a glance at the exports in the field of bitumen industry, we will find that activists in this field despite problems have been successful in taking their products to other markets in the world but the outlook of bitumen exports should be thoroughly taken into consideration in the post-sanctions era.

Today the UAE, Oman and India are the most important customers of Iran's bitumen and we can strongly say that Asian countries are good destinations for high-quality Iranian product as the statistics show that 40 percent of the produced bitumen in the world is consumed in Asia.

Of course due to the existing capacities in Africa and needs of this continent to imports of bitumen, a serious plans should be devised for presence of Iranian producers in this continent which will be important especially in the post-sanction era.

Iran's Trade Membership in Eurasian Free Zone Finalized

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization says the trade membership of Iran in the Eurasian free zone has been finalized and the country will join the bloc very soon.



Speaking to ILNA, Alireza Payman-Pak said that from the Caspian Sea littoral states, Kazakhstan and Russia are members of this bloc and Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan can join the regional agreements.

He then pointed to the economic advantages of the Caspian free economic zone and said that the second meeting of the Caspian Economic Forum was held with presence of the First Vice President.

He said that during this forum, some B2B meetings were held on different raised issues and some good agreements were reached on cooperation in fields of energy, swap and joint investments.

He said that transportation is one of the most important issues for the Caspian Sea littoral states and due to the crisis in the world, the issue of transit and transportation of goods is one of the most important issues for the Caspian Sea states and it was discussed during the meeting.

He added that chambers of commerce of countries held some useful meetings and they reached some good agreements.

He noted that on the whole, in the second Caspian Economic Forum some good agreements were reached and he expressed hope that these agreements would reach final results and the economic interests would be felt.

Payman-Pak added that first vice-president proposed the launch of joint free zone between Iran and Russia, adding that other Caspian Sea countries can join Iran and Russia in this joint zone.

He admitted that during the forum the issue of using the joint money was not seriously raised, adding that the countries just talked about eliminating dollar and euro from their trades.

Bolivia Eager to Launch Iranian Tractor Assembly Line

TABRIZ (IRNA) - Bolivia's Ambassador to Tehran Romina Pérez said on Sunday that La Paz is willing to launch an Iranian tractor assembly line in the country.

Perez made the remarks during her visit to Iran Tractor Manufacturing Industrial Group in Tabriz, northwestern Iran.

Referring to 700 Iranian tractors being used in Bolivia's agricultural farms, the ambassador said that a huge part of her country's agriculture is dependent on those tractors.

She, then, appreciated Iran Tractor Manufacturing Industrial Group for its technology and achievements.

Political relations between La Paz and Tehran are historical and stable, she noted adding that the two should promote economic, agricultural, and scientific ties as well.

Lapaz seriously follows the launching of Iran's tractor assembly line in Bolivia.



Transit of Goods Via Iran Rises 22% in H1 on Year

TEHRAN (MNA) - Transit of commodities through Iran increased 22 percent in the first half of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-September 22), as compared to the same period of time in the past year, the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced.

Alireza Moghadasi said that 7.028 million tons of commodities have been transited via the country in the six-month period.

After seven years of reduction in the transit of goods from the country, the growth path of transit resumed in the past Iranian calendar year 1400 (ended on March 20) and with the passage of 12.65 million tons of goods through Iran, a growth of 68 percent was achieved, the spokesman of IRICA has previously noted.

The 68-percent growth in transit last year and the 39-percent rise in the first two months of this year promise to reach 15 million tons of goods passing through Iran in the current year, which has been unprecedented in the entire history of the country, Ruhollah Latifi added.

The policy of paying attention to neighbors and

developing political and economic relations with neighboring countries in the current government, increasing attention to road and rail routes in the world and the efforts and cooperation of transportation and trade-related organizations in establishing or activating corridors through the country has led to significant growth in transit of goods through Iran.

Iran is one of the countries that has a special status in trade and transit relations due to its strategic location and special geography, as the country is the passage of several important international corridors.

Considering its geographical location, Iran can play a significant role in the transit of goods in the region and benefit a lot from its status in this due.

Paying attention to upstream documents, especially the country's development plans, and the government's decision to develop transit, paying special attention to infrastructure development, reducing transit time, making it cheaper to cross Iran and making more advantages over competitors, due to the short path for customers, can lead to facilitating the development of transit so that the country can reach the desired growth in this due.

Iran Supports Peace on Azerbaijan-Armenia Shared Borders

TEHRAN (MNA) – Director of International Affairs at the Iranian parliament said Islamic Republic of Iran supports all the efforts made at various international levels in order to establish peace on Azerbaijan-Armenia shared borders.

Kazem Shafei, Director of International Affairs at the Iranian parliament made the remarks at a meeting with Armenia's Ambassador to Tehran Arsen Avakian.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran supports all the efforts that are being made at various international levels in order to establish peace and tranquility on the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan," Shafei said.

He pointed to the exchanges of visits between Iran and Armenia officials and their role in enhancing bilateral relations, stressing that "Continuous consultations between parliaments of two countries is an important factor in enhancing the level of relations." "Parliamentary visits can lead to the development of bilateral relations at different economic, cultural and political levels," he added.

The Armenian ambassador, for his part, attached great importance to his country's relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran as a powerful country in the region and said "Two countries can have good relations with each other in various fields, especially in the parliamentary area."

He considered exchanges of visits as an important factor in the development of bilateral relations and pointed out that Armenia is a parliamentary country and the more relations and meetings between the two countries, the higher the level of relations between the two countries will be.

Avakian also expressed his appreciation for the stances of the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially regarding respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of his country.

Bilateral issues were also discussed and the two sides attached bilateral cooperation as an important in the process of development and progress of the region.



Central Asia-Iranian Province Trade Up 40%

MASHHAD (IRNA) - The trade and transit of commodities between the Central Asian countries and Iranian northeastern province of Razavi Khorasan have increased by 40 percent as a result of positive steps taken by the Raisi administration.

Iranian Ambassador to Turkmenistan Gholam-Abbas Arabab-Khales told IRNA that official statistics indicate that trade exchanges between Iran and Turkmenistan, which stood at 227 million dollars in 2021 boosted to 233 million dollars only in the first six months of the current year, showing significant growth.

The ambassador expressed hope that the volume of trade exchanges between Turkmenistan and Iran is expected to double by the end of 2022 due to the active economic diplomacy of the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi.

At Least 10 Killed in Petrol Station Blast in Ireland

DUBLIN (Dispatches) - Ten people, including two teenagers and a younger girl, were killed in an explosion at a petrol station in the Irish county of Donegal, police said, adding that the incident appeared to be "a tragic accident".

The police said no more casualties were expected from the explosion which happened shortly after 3 p.m. local time (1400 GMT) on Friday at the Applegreen petrol station on the outskirts of the village of Creeslough.

The dead, who were all from the local area, also included four men and three women. Eight people are being treated in hospital, including one with critical injuries who was airlifted to Dublin.



Air France, Airbus Face Trial Over 2009 Rio-Paris Disaster

PARIS (Dispatches) - Air France and aircraft maker Airbus go on trial in Paris on Monday on charges of involuntary manslaughter in the 2009 crash of a flight from Brazil, killing all 228 people aboard.

The case focuses on alleged insufficient pilot training and a defective speed monitoring probe, which was quickly replaced on planes worldwide in the months after the accident.

Flight AF 447 from Rio de Janeiro to Paris plunged into the Atlantic Ocean during a storm in the early hours of June 1, 2009, when it stalled after entering a zone of strong turbulence.



Blast Damages Crimea Bridge Central to Russia War Effort



KYIV (Dispatches) - A powerful explosion seriously damaged Russia's road-and-rail bridge to Crimea, hitting a prestige symbol of Moscow's annexation of the peninsula and the key supply route to Russian forces battling to hold territory captured in southern Ukraine.

The blast on the bridge over the Kerch Strait, for which Russia did not immediately assign blame, prompted gleeful messages from Ukrainian officials but no direct claim of responsibility.

Russian officials said three people had been killed, probably the occupants of a car travelling near a truck that blew up. Despite the damage, limited road traffic resumed about 10 hours after the blast, and the Transport Ministry said it expected rail traffic to restart later in the day.

Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and the 19-km (12-mile) Crimean Bridge linking it to Russia's transport network was opened with great fanfare four years later by President Vladimir Putin.

It now represents a major artery for the Russian forces who have taken control of most of southern Ukraine's Kherson region, and for the naval port of Sevastopol, whose governor told locals: "Keep calm. Don't panic."

It was not yet clear if the blast was a deliberate attack, but the damage to such high-profile infrastructure came at a time when Russia has suffered several battlefield defeats and could further cloud the Kremlin's messages of reassurance to its public that the conflict is going to plan.

It also took place a day after Putin's 70th birthday, and coincided with the naming of Air Force General Sergei Surovikin, Russia's third senior military appointment in the space of a week, to take overall charge of the invasion effort.

The head of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov, posted a video of the burning bridge on social media alongside a video of Marilyn Monroe singing "Happy birthday, Mr President".

Since the start of the invasion on Feb. 24, Ukrainian officials have made regular allusions to their desire to destroy the bridge, seen in Ukraine as a symbol of Russia's occupation of Crimea. Ukraine's postal service said on Saturday it would print a special stamp to commemorate the blast.

Russia's Defense Ministry said in a statement that its forces in southern Ukraine could be "fully supplied" through existing land and sea routes.

The Transport Ministry said road traffic for light vehicles and buses had resumed in alternating directions on the intact half of the roadway. Goods vehicles were being referred to a ferry service.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Kyiv's reaction to the destruction of civilian infrastructure "testifies to its terrorist nature".

The Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee said a freight truck had blown up on the bridge's roadway at 6:07 a.m. (0307 GMT), causing seven fuel tanker wagons to catch fire on a train heading for the peninsula on the bridge's upper level.

Smoke rises from fire on the Kerch bridge in the Kerch Strait, Crimea, October 8, 2022. REUTERS/Stringer

It said two spans of road bridge had partially collapsed, but that the arch spanning the channel through which ships travel between the Black Sea and Azov Sea was not damaged.

Images posted by the Russian Investigative Committee showed one half of the roadway blown away, and the other half still attached. Others taken from a distance showed thick smoke pouring from part of the bridge.

An adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy posted a message on Twitter saying the incident was just "the beginning" but stopped short of saying Ukrainian forces were responsible for the blast.

N. Korea Defends Missile Launches as Defense Against U.S. Threats

PYONGYANG (Dispatches) - North Korea has defended its recent spate of ballistic missile launches as a legitimate defence against what it called a decades-old threat by United States military forces.

The missile launches had also not harmed the safety of civil aviation or posed a threat to neighboring countries, North Korea's State-run KCNA news agency said on Saturday, citing officials and a statement from the country's aviation authorities.

Pyeongyang's statement comes in response to recent criticism by the United Nations' civil aviation authority over North Korea's six missile launches in a 12-day period, including an intermediate-range ballistic missile that flew over Japan on Tuesday.

"(The missile tests) did not pose any threat or harm to the safety of civil aviation as well as the safety of neighbouring countries and regions," KCNA reported, citing an aviation administration spokesperson in the country.

"The missile test launch by the DPRK is a regular and planned self-defensive step for defending the country's security and the regional peace from the US direct military threats that have lasted for more than half a century," South Korea's Yonhap News Agency quoted the North Korea's national aviation as saying in a statement.

The DPRK is the acronym for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea — North Korea's official name.

Saturday's statement was a rebuke to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and its recent condemnation of the missile launches, which the UN body said had posed a serious safety risk to international aviation.

North Korea said it considers such criticism "a political provocation of the US and its vassal forces aimed to infringe upon the sovereignty of the DPRK," KCNA reported.

Seoul, Tokyo and Washington have ramped up joint military drills in recent weeks and carried out additional naval exercises involving the US Navy's USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier strike group.



Assange Supporters Form Human Chain at UK Parliament

LONDON (Dispatches) - Supporters of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange formed a human chain outside Britain's parliament to demand an end to an attempt by the United States to have him extradited to face criminal charges.

Hundreds of protesters, including Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of Britain's opposition Labour Party, gathered in a line which stretched from parliament's perimeter railings and snaked across nearby Westminster Bridge to the other side of the River Thames.

Stella Assange, who is married to the Australian-born activist, said the British government should speak to authorities in the United States to end the extradition bid which was launched in 2019.

"It's already gone on for three-and-a-half years. It is a stain on the United Kingdom and is a stain on the Biden administration," she said.

Supporters of Assange were also due to protest on Saturday outside the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington.

Assange, 51, is wanted by U.S. authorities on 18 counts, including a spying charge, relating to WikiLeaks' release of confidential U.S. military records and diplomatic cables.

Washington says he put lives in danger. His supporters say he has been victimized because he exposed U.S. wrongdoing in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Assange's legal team have lodged an appeal at Britain's High Court against London's decision to extradite him.



Rail Traffic in Northern Germany Disrupted by Sabotage

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Rail passengers wait for a train on a platform at the main train station in Berlin on October 8, 2022 following major disruption on the German railway network.

"Sabotage" targeting communications infrastructure was to blame for major disruption to the German railway network on Saturday, operator Deutsche Bahn said while the government said no motive had yet been identified.

"Cable sabotage" was the cause of the breakdown, which led to a three-hour suspension of train services throughout northern Germany, a spokesman for the company told AFP.

German Transport Minister Volker Wissing said essential cables "were deliberately and intentionally severed" in two places.

"It is clear that this was a targeted and deliberate action," he added, saying the motive was not "yet known".

He described the incident as "clearly premeditated". Specifically, there was damage to the GSM-R, a radio network used for communication on the railway, Der Spiegel reported, quoting security sources.

Any damage to the cable would require "certain knowledge" of the rail system, the Bild daily said, adding that federal police were investigating.

Traffic was completely interrupted for about three hours because of "a breakdown in the digital radio

system for the trains", before being restored, according to Deutsche Bahn.

Services were affected between Berlin and regions in the west and north of the country including Schleswig-Holstein, the cities of Hamburg and Bremen, as well as Lower Saxony and parts of North Rhine-Westphalia. The Berlin-Amsterdam route was also suspended, and thousands of travellers were stranded at stations across the affected regions.

Cancellations and delays were still expected on Saturday despite the restoration of rail services, Deutsche Bahn warned. The attack comes just over two weeks after sabotage attacks on the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines linking Russia and Germany.

The German government has also stepped up protection of its critical infrastructure. Deutsche Bahn is regularly criticised for delays on its services.

At the beginning of September, the company said it would carry out massive improvement works, including replacing 137,000 concrete sleepers.

An independent report pointed the finger at "production faults" in the sleepers.

The derailment of a train in the Bavarian Alps in early June, which killed five people and injured more than 40, highlighted the poor state of German rail infrastructure, linked to years of under-investment.



Burkina Faso to Pick a Transitional President Ahead of Elections

OUAGADOUGOU (Dispatches) - Burkina Faso said that a process to select a transitional president ahead of elections would begin next week following a coup by disaffected military officers against a ruling junta.

"In view of the adoption of the transition charter, a national meeting will be convened on October 14 and 15," said the decree signed by Burkina Faso's new strongman, Captain Ibrahim Traore, who took power a week ago.

Traore was declared president on Wednesday after a two-day standoff with Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, who seized power in January. Togo's government on Monday confirmed that Damiba had arrived in the country after fleeing the capital Ouagadougou.

Traore was at the head of a core of disgruntled junior officers — but there were rumours just a few days later of discussions among some other army generals on potentially replacing him.

Demonstrators gathered in the capital of Burkina Faso on Thursday to show their support for Traore amid rumours of internal divisions in the army. After an hour of protesting a soldier sought to calm the crowd, and the new government denied rumours of a split.

"Information which has been circulating since this morning on social networks about generals meeting ... is unfounded" according to a statement released by the communication ministry.

Calm has generally returned to the streets of Ouagadougou since last Friday's coup and the turbulent weekend that followed.

Traore graduated as an officer from Burkina Faso's Georges Namona Military School — a second-tier institution compared to the prestigious Kadiogo Military Academy of which Damiba and others in the elite are alumni.

Some of the protesters this week were waving Russian flags — prompting speculation that Burkina's new leader may follow other fragile regimes in French-speaking Africa in forging close ties with Moscow at the expense of relations with France.

But some analysts say the big winners of coups in the Sahel are the jihadists looking to seize power in the region.



Nigerians Decry Extortion, Delays at Passport Offices Home and Abroad



ILORIN (Dispatches) - In September 2021, when Akpos Malafakumo walked into the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) office in Yenagoa, Bayelsa, to apply for a new passport, she had no idea it would take 10 months to get it.

After filling the forms, an officer there told her to pay 70,000 naira (\$175) for an expedited passport or wait six weeks – like others. “Six weeks sounded like a reasonable time to me so I paid 45,000 naira [\$113] because I was not in a hurry to get the passport,” the 25-year-old told Al Jazeera.

It was not until mid-November that Malafakumo was called in for biometric capturing. Six weeks later, when she had still not been notified that the passport was ready, she went to the office to complain in December 2021.

“I was getting worried already ... because I was applying for a graduate school outside the country and most of the applications needed my passport number,” she said.

In 2017, the NIS banned cash payments ostensibly to make the process of getting or renewing passports nationwide as efficient as possible and phase out middlemen. Two years later, it introduced e-passports to curb forgery.

But citizens say these measures have instead worsened the situation at immigration offices within Nigeria and abroad and left a long line of people waiting for passports to be issued.

Nigeria does not produce its own passport booklets despite owning a minting and printing company. And immigration officials have been repeatedly accused of bribery and corruption – hoarding booklets and introducing arbitrary charges to line their pockets.

“Nigeria is this interesting test case where the application of technology to the delivery of government services often worsens the experience for citizens and taxpayers rather than enhancing or easing the process of accessing government services,” said Ikemesit Effiong, head of research at SBM Intelligence, a Lagos-based geopolitical risk advisory firm.

Last year, Nigerian media reported that about 1.5 million Nigerians in Italy needed passports.

A 2021 survey by SBM Intelligence indicated that the international passport is the least owned government identification in the country because it was too stressful to obtain. Less than a tenth of the 6,954 respondents had it.

Meanwhile, a declining socioeconomic situation and increasing insecurity in the country have spurred an immigration wave and further increased the demand for passports.

A 2021 report by the Africa Polling Institute found that seven in 10 Nigerians want to move abroad. Data from the UK government placed Nigeria third on a list of countries granted sponsored study visas in “the year ending June 2022” with an almost two-thirds increase from its 2019 figures and the largest recorded change all year.

The manufacturing and contracting issues have led to a racket within the system, according to analysts like Effiong.

“Not many Nigerians can afford to travel internationally,” he told Al Jazeera. “So the demands that underpin the passport issuance and renewal process is a unique market populated by certain kind of Nigerians who [believe] having the resources to be able to afford international travel means [people] can afford exorbitant charges.”

The lags have halted travelling plans for many looking to leave Nigeria. Overseas, it has delayed the plans of many looking to travel back home. In Rome, one man complained that immigration officers were issuing passports without appointments and demanding unofficial fees; his wife reportedly paid a 200 euros (\$195) bribe.

Malaysia’s Palm Planters Eye Robots, Drones to Combat Labor Crunch



YONG PENG (Dispatches) - Malaysian research student Haziq Ramli wore an outfit resembling a light jetpack, with poles strapped to his biceps, to wield a long pole that clipped the sharp fronds and heavy bunches of fruit from oil palm trees nearly twice his height.

Working on a three-acre (1.2-hectare) family estate, he was part of a team trying to perfect the gadget, called a wearable exoskeleton, that promises to reduce the need for laborers to manipulate the poles, which can weigh as much as 8 kg (18 lbs).

“My arms are supported when I’m holding the pole, I feel less strain and fatigue,” said Haziq, who wore sneakers and spectacles.

Plantation firms in the world’s second biggest producer of palm oil are stepping up mechanization to stem losses running into billions of dollars as fruit goes unharvested during their worst labor shortage yet. “To harvest 10 tons of palm fruits a month, we need two workers,” said estate owner Hamidon Salleh.

Hamidon, who is also an engineer, said he and his colleagues at Malaysia’s University of Technology (UTM) were working with top producer Sime Darby Plantation to test the gadget.

“With this exoskeleton, one harvester can achieve 10 tons on his own,” he added. “We can do the same amount of work with fewer workers.”

Peers of Sime Darby, such as IOI Corp (IOIB.KL), Boustead Plantations and FGV Holdings (FGVH.KL) are stepping up use of drones to spray crops with fertiliser and pesticide, map estate holdings and monitor the condition of trees.

Sime Darby said it was working with technology partners, but did not identify them. Boustead and FGV did not respond to requests for comment.

IOI said it had doubled its 2022 budget for automation and mechanization from last year, while greater use of machines such as drones, electric wheelbarrows and motorized palm cutters has helped slash labor needs by a quarter.

Malaysian producers are racing to mechanize as they face a third annual fall in output, along with losses estimated at 20 billion ringgit (\$4.4 billion), because of the labor crunch.

Yields plummeted to near 40-year lows in the 2020/21 marketing year, worsening a global shortage of edible oils triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Almost 80% of Malaysia’s plantation workers are migrants, many recruited from neighboring Indonesia to do the back-breaking work of harvesting, but pandemic curbs caused a shortfall of about 120,000 workers this year.

And supply is only expected to dry up further in coming years, making hiring more expensive.

“We’ve seen that the industry is starting to invest more in mechanization because of the labor shortage,” said Ahmad Parveez Ghulam Kadir, the chief of the state-run Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB). “The trend is rising.”

Efforts to automate had been slow while producers had easy access to cheap migrant labor able to navigate plantation terrain challenging to machines.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed that.

“COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation in plantations much faster,” said Razalee Ismail, director of drone services provider Meraque. “Companies are now much more willing to spend and experiment with technology.”



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Indonesia's Forex Reserves Drop to \$130.8b at End-September

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia's foreign exchange reserves fell by \$1.4b last month to \$130.8b due to payments of foreign debt and the central bank's effort to stabilize the rupiah currency, Bank Indonesia (BI) said.

BI said in a statement said the reserves were "affected by...the need for rupiah stabilization amid global financial market uncertainty."

The reserve level was equal to imports for 5.9 months, above an international standard of 3 months of imports, and was adequate to maintain Indonesia's external and financial system stability, BI said.



U.S. Job Growth Strong in September As Labor Market Forges Ahead

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. employers hired more workers than expected in September, while the unemployment rate dropped to 3.5%, pointing to a tight labor market which keeps the Federal Reserve on its aggressive monetary policy tightening campaign for a while.

Though the 0.2 point decline in the jobless rate from 3.7% in August was partly because of people leaving the workforce, the Labor Department's closely watched employment report on Friday also showed fewer Americans working part-time for economic reasons last month. The labor market continues to show resilience despite the Fed's stiff interest rate hikes.

"The labor market isn't just rolling along, it's a virtual steam-roller that does nothing to slow economic demand and help the Fed in its inflation fight," said Christopher Rupkey, chief economist at FWDBONDS in New York.

Nonfarm payrolls increased by 263,000 jobs last month after rising by an unrevised 315,000 in August, the survey of establishments showed. Job growth has averaged 420,000 per month this year, down from the monthly average of 562,000 in 2021.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast 250,000 job gains, with estimates ranging from as low as 127,000 to as high as 375,000. The unemployment rate was forecast unchanged at 3.7%.

The broad increase in employment was led by the leisure and hospitality industry, where payrolls increased by 83,000 jobs. The bulk of the gains were at restaurants and bars. Still, leisure and hospitality employment remains 1.1 million jobs below its pre-pandemic level.

Healthcare added 60,000 jobs in September, returning employment in the sector back to its pre-pandemic level. Employment in the professional and business services industry increased by 46,000 jobs. Manufacturing added 22,000 jobs, while construction created 19,000 positions, despite the housing market being hammered by the higher borrowing costs.

There were also gains in wholesale trade employment, but the financial activities industry shed 8,000 jobs. The transportation and warehousing sector also lost 8,000 jobs.

U.S. stocks opened lower. The dollar rose against a basket of currencies. U.S. Treasury prices fell. The labor market's resilience has been attributed to a reluctance by businesses to lay off workers following difficulties hiring in the past year as the COVID-19 pandemic forced some people out of the workforce, partly due to prolonged illness caused by the virus.

While government data this week showed job openings dropped by 1.1 million, the largest decline since April 2020, to 10.1 million on the last day of August, there are still 4 million more vacancies than there are unemployed Americans. An Institute for Supply Management survey on Wednesday also showed several services industries reporting labor shortages in September.

But with the headwinds from higher borrowing costs and slowing demand rising, economists expect companies will significantly pull back on hiring, with negative payrolls likely next year. Economists say businesses have been backfilling open positions as they struggled to expand headcount to match increased demand for their products, driving up job gains.

Malaysia Tightens 2023 Spending, Warns of Slower Growth

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Malaysia unveiled a smaller budget for 2023 and warned of an economic slowdown but, with a possible national election in the offing, also announced cash aid and tax cuts.

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's administration had been expected to present a moderately expansionary budget and offer incentives for voters after he raised the prospect of an early election that would be held this year.

But the drop in planned spending for 2023, including proposed reduced subsidies, underscores the fiscal pressure faced by Malaysia this year amid declining revenue and record-high subsidy costs.

In economic and fiscal outlook reports released ahead of the finance minister's budget speech in parliament, the government said it was taking a cautious approach to a "challenging" 2023 due to political tensions, rising global inflation, tightening financial conditions, and supply chain disruptions.

"The 2023 budget aims to provide favorable conditions and ensure a balance between economic needs and fiscal consolidation," Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz said in the fiscal outlook report.

Malaysia will develop appropriate policies to address any external shocks, he said.

In the two reports, the government revised up its 2022 gross domestic product (GDP) forecast to 6.5%-7% from a previous range of 5.3% to 6.3%, but expected growth to slow next year to 4%-5%. Strong domestic demand, new and ongoing infrastructure projects, and a vibrant services sector will offset some of the risks from the global slowdown, it said.

The government plans to spend 372.3 billion ringgit (\$80.08 billion) in 2023, down from an estimated 385.3 billion ringgit this year, according to the reports.

Revenue was seen declining 4.4% to 272.6 billion ringgit in 2023, while the fiscal deficit will likely narrow to 5.5% of GDP from a projected 5.8% this year, the reports said.

In his budget speech in parliament, Zafrul said the government will allocate 10.3 billion ringgit (\$2.22 billion) in cash and welfare aid to low-income households. He also said income tax rates will fall by 2 percentage points.

The government also vowed to consolidate the country's fiscal position by embarking on a review of public expenditure and a plan to reduce broad subsidy measures to one targeted towards vulnerable groups.



Pakistan Contests Moody's Ratings Downgrade

KARACHI (Dispatches) - Pakistan said it "strongly contests" a ratings downgrade by agency Moody's, adding that it had adequate liquidity and financing arrangements to meet its external liabilities despite being hit by catastrophic floods.

Moody's cut Pakistan's sovereign credit rating on Thursday by one notch further into junk territory to Caa1 from B3. It cited increased government liquidity and external vulnerability risks in the wake of floods in August that killed more than 1,600 people and caused billions of dollars in damage.

"The rating action by Moody's was carried out unilaterally without prior consultations and meetings with our teams from the Ministry of Finance and State Bank of Pakistan," Pakistan's finance ministry said in a statement posted on Twitter.

Concerns are rising over the health of Pakistan's economy as foreign exchange reserves run low, the local currency weakens and inflation stands at decades-high levels despite the resumption of an International Monetary Fund funding program in August.

The biggest worries center around its ability to pay for imports such as energy and food and to meet sovereign debt obligations abroad.

Data this week showed foreign exchange reserves at the central bank stood at \$7.9 billion. That covers imports for barely a month, despite IMF funding.

The central bank said the latest \$100 million drop in reserves over the week ended Sept. 30 was due to external debt repayments, including scheduled interest payments on Eurobonds.

Moody's said on Thursday its ratings decision was driven by external risks and concerns about Pakistan's ability to secure required financing to meet its needs in the next few years.

The government said on Friday that after Moody's had intimated that action was in the offing, the finance ministry had held two meetings with the agency's team to share data and information that it described as "clearly contradicting" the downgrade.

The ministry said factoring in the impact of the floods at this point was "premature" given that loss assessments were incomplete, and added that all financing requirements would be met.

Despite Pakistan's protestations, market watchers believe more downgrades could be coming.

"Other rating agencies may also think of downgrading Pakistan if they believe that getting dollar financing will be an issue at a time when Pakistan is suffering from after affects of floods," CEO Topline Securities Muhammad Sohail told Reuters.

Before the ratings action, Moody's had, in June, affirmed Pakistan's B3 rating but changed its outlook from stable to negative in June.

Credit Suisse Pays Down Debt To Calm Investors



ZURICH (Dispatches) - Credit Suisse will buy back up to 3 billion Swiss francs (\$3 billion) of debt, an attempt by the Swiss bank to show its financial muscle and reassure investors concerned about the lender's overhaul and how much it may cost.

Speculation about the bank's future gathered pace on social media in the past week amid anticipation it may need to raise billions of francs in fresh capital, sending its stock and some bonds to new lows.

The buyback trims the bank's debts and is an attempt to bolster confidence. But central questions about its restructuring - and whether or not it will need fresh capital to fund it - remain open.

One of the largest banks in Europe, Credit Suisse is trying to recover from a string of scandals, including losing more than \$5 billion from the collapse of investment firm Archegos last year, when it also had to suspend client funds linked to failed financier Greensill.

Bank executives spent last weekend reassuring large clients and investors about its financial strength. CEO Ulrich Koerner also told staff in a memo it had sufficient capital and liquidity.

Seeking to underscore this, the bank said the buyback would "allow us to take advantage of market conditions to repurchase debt at attractive prices".

Investors took heart. Credit Suisse shares gained as much as 3% in early Friday trading, while the price of its euro-denominated bonds rose.

"It's an opportunistic move to take advantage of market conditions that might be reassuring to some investors," said Vontobel analyst Andreas Venditti. "If bought below par, a gain results that will increase capital slightly."

Earlier this week, in an unusual move, the Swiss National Bank, which oversees the financial stability of systemically important banks in Switzerland, said it was monitoring the situation at Credit Suisse.

India's RBI to Soon Commence Pilot Project of Digital Rupee

MUMBAI (Dispatches) - The Reserve Bank of India will soon commence limited pilot launches of a central bank backed digital rupee for specific use cases, it said in a concept paper released on Friday.

The RBI has been exploring the pros and cons of a central bank digital currency for some time and is working towards a strategy to implement it in a phased manner, it said.

Use cases are being examined for an e-rupee in a way that there is minimal or no disruption to the financial system, the RBI added.

In February, the Indian government had said that a digital rupee will be launched during the course of this financial year.

The discussion around a central bank led digital currency has gained traction across a number of countries as cryptocurrencies became popular.

"It is the responsibility of central bank to provide its citizens with a risk free central bank digital money which will provide the users the same experience of dealing in currency in digital form, without any risks associated with private cryptocurrencies," the RBI said.

The bank also indicated that it may consider both retail and wholesale digital currency, saying there is merit in both.

In its wholesale form, a digital currency could make settlement systems more efficient and secure, said RBI, while a retail e-rupee would offer safer means of digital payment for citizens.

Taiwan Sept. Exports Drop for First Time in Two Years

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwan's exports fell in September for the first time in more than two years on weakness in demand in major market China and stagnant consumer spending even as chip demand held up, with the government predicting more turbulence ahead.

Exports fell 5.3% in September from a year earlier to \$37.53 billion, the Ministry of Finance said on Friday, logging a contraction for the first time since June 2020.

That was compared to the 2% rise recorded in August, and well below a forecast for a 1.5% increase in a Reuters poll.

Ministry official Beatrice Tsai said exports were coming off a high base last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic boosted demand for work-from-home gear like tablets, but the "root case" was the effect of high inflation, monetary policy tightening, and stagnant consumer demand from the cooling of China's economy.

Exports to China, Taiwan's largest trading partner, fell an annual 13.3% to \$15.17 billion in September, after a 9.9% contraction in August, in a sign of the continued economic problems there.

China will not release its trade data until Oct. 14, after the end of the weeklong National Day holiday which began on Oct. 1.

However, Taiwan's overall exports of electronics components in September rose 2.4% to \$16.99 billion, with semiconductor exports up 3.5% from a year earlier.

Many companies expect global chip shortages to last at least for the rest of the year, which will continue to bolster Taiwanese semiconductor firms' order books even as demand for some consumer electronics weakens.

Firms such as TSMC, the world's largest contract chipmaker, are major suppliers to Apple Inc and other global tech giants, as well as providers of chips for auto companies and lower-end consumer goods.

Earlier on Friday, TSMC reported September sales leapt an on-year 36.4%, though slipped 4.5% compared to August, while on Thursday smaller competitor United Microelectronics Corp said sales last month rose 34.5% year-on-year.

The finance ministry warned of trouble ahead from monetary policy tightening in the United States and Europe with manufacturing in various countries slowing significantly, saying there were "deepening doubts" about the outlook.

These problems may "highly impede our export performance in the fourth quarter", it added.

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Ricciardo to Sit Out 2023 Season

SUZUKA (Dispatches) - Daniel Ricciardo said he won't be racing in Formula One next season but was setting his sights on a return to the grid in 2024, after the latest spate of driver moves narrowed down the out-of-contract McLaren driver's options. French manufacturer Alpine earlier on Saturday said it had signed AlphaTauri's Pierre Gasly on a multi-year deal to replace Aston Martin-bound Fernando Alonso in an all French line-up with Esteban Ocon at the Renault-owned team from next season.

Afridi to Be Fit for World Cup Opener

LAHORE (Dispatches) - Pakistan fast bowler Shaheen Afridi has made rapid progress from a knee injury and will be "battle-ready" for their Twenty20 World Cup opener against arch-rivals India this month, the country's cricket board chief, Ramiz Raja, said. Afridi has been sidelined since sustaining a ligament injury to his right knee during a test match in Sri Lanka in July and missed the Asia Cup as well as the home series against England.

Haaland Strikes Again as Man City Go Top

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City swept to the top of the Premier League with a 4-0 rout of Southampton as Erling Haaland extended his incredible scoring run to 10 successive games, while resurgent Chelsea eased to a 3-0 victory against Wolves.

Joao Cancelo, Phil Foden and Riyad Mahrez all netted for Pep Guardiola's side before Haaland added his customary goal to seal yet another one-sided success at the Etihad Stadium. Haaland has scored an astonishing 20 goals in his first 12 competitive games since his \$51 million (\$56 million) move from Borussia Dortmund.

Fuelled by the Norway striker, City are the first club to score at least three goals in nine consecutive top-flight home matches since Wolves in 1959.

The champions are now two points clear of second placed Arsenal ahead of the north London club's clash with Liverpool.

Guardiola's remarkable team have only lost one of their last 37 league games as they chase a fifth English title in the last six seasons.

City have scored 24 goals in their last six games, winning eight of their last nine games across all competitions.

In stark contrast to City's blistering form, Southampton's fifth successive defeat added to the mounting pressure on boss Ralph Hasenhuttl.

City opened the scoring in the 20th minute as Joao Cancelo weaved through the Southampton defense, evaded James Ward-Prowse's challenge and fired through the legs of keeper Gavin Bazunu.

Phil Foden doubled City's lead as he ran onto Kevin De Bruyne's pass and clipped a deft lob over Bazunu into the far corner after 32 minutes.

Riyad Mahrez put the result beyond doubt in the 49th minute, the Algeria winger meeting Rodri's cross with a clinical volley from a tight angle.

Inevitably, Haaland wasn't to be denied and he finished off Cancelo's pass with a typically ruthless close-range effort in the 65th minute.

At Stamford Bridge, Chelsea racked up a third win in new boss Graham Potter's four games since replacing the sacked Thomas Tuchel.

Potter made seven changes after the midweek Champions League victory over AC Milan, with Reece James, Raheem Sterling and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang among those rested.



Showing the depth of their squad, Chelsea took the lead when Kai Havertz netted three minutes into first half stoppage-time with a looping header from Mason Mount's pin-point cross.

Christian Pulisic put Chelsea in complete control with a cute finish after exchanging passes with Mount in the 54th minute.

Armando Broja grabbed his first goal for Chelsea with a 20-yard drive in the 90th minute. After their spluttering form at the end of Tuchel's reign, Chelsea are up to fourth place, although Brighton would go back above them with a win against Tottenham in Saturday's late game.

Managerless Wolves, who sacked Bruno Lage earlier in the week, remain in the relegation zone after a third successive defeat.

Bournemouth put under-fire Leicester boss Brendan Rodgers back on the hot seat with a 2-1 win at Dean Court.

Second bottom Leicester took the lead in the 10th minute when Patson Daka slotted home. But Bournemouth equalised in the 67th minute through Philip Billing, who volleyed into the roof of the net following a mistake from Wout Faes.

And Ryan Christie completed Bournemouth's comeback in the 71st minute with a close-range finish after Dominic Solanke flicked on Billing's cross.

Having won for the first time this season on Monday, Leicester have lost seven of their last eight games.

Fifth placed Newcastle thrashed Brentford 5-1 at St James' Park. Eddie Howe's men went ahead after 22 minutes when Bruno Guimaraes headed in from Kieran Trippier's cross.

Six minutes later, Callum Wilson crossed for Jacob Murphy to tap into the empty net. Ivan Toney reduced the deficit with a 54th minute penalty awarded for a handball by Dan Burn, but Guimaraes' long-range blast restored Newcastle's two-goal advantage two minutes later.

Miguel Almiron struck in the 81st minute and Ethan Pinnock's 90th minute own goal completed Brentford's dismal day.

Rooney Urges Ronaldo To Stay Patient

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Former Manchester United forward Wayne Rooney urged Cristiano Ronaldo to remain patient and make the most of the opportunities that come his way as the Portugal international looks to work his way back into the Premier League club's first team.

Ronaldo, in his second spell at United, has started only one league game this season and was linked with a move away during the summer transfer window, though manager Erik ten Hag said he still featured in his plans for the season.

Rooney, who played with Ronaldo at United between 2004-2009, said the 37-year-old will be finding his lack of game time hard to swallow.

"The manager's obviously gone a different way in terms of how they're playing and been successful," Rooney, who now manages Major League Soccer side DC United, told reporters on Friday.

"Cristiano ... him and (Lionel) Messi are two of the greatest players to ever play the game, but ultimately time catches up with us all. He's obviously not the player he was when he was 22 or 23, for instance. It's a tough one for him.

"Knowing him, it'll be very difficult for him to sit on the bench ... I'm sure if he stays patient, his chance will come and, again, it's then obviously him taking those chances and trying to force his way back in."

Ribery Mulling Salernitana Managerial Role After Retirement

ROME (Dispatches) - Franck Ribery could take up a managerial position at Salernitana as a persistent knee injury pushes the former France star towards retirement, his coach Davide Nicola said Saturday.

Asked by reporters about Ribery potentially remaining at Salernitana after he finishes playing, Nicola said: "when you talk about Franck you're talking about someone with the ability to do anything."

"I don't know if anything has been worked out, but we have spoken with him about it," added Nicola in a press conference ahead of his team's match with Verona on Sunday.

On Friday, Ribery's agent Davide Lippi told AFP that the 39-year-old will "very likely" end his career, adding that "he is thinking about it".

Both the player and the club have remained tight-lipped on the subject but Italian media say that the announcement could come as early as next week.

Ribery hasn't featured for Salernitana, who he joined in 2021, since their opening day loss to Roma and both Il Mattino and L'Equipe report that injuries have led him to decide it's time to hang up his boots.

A World Cup runner-up with France in 2006, his greatest successes came at Bayern Munich, where over 12 seasons he won nine league titles and the 2013 Champions League.

Tiafoe Reaches Tokyo Final

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Admitting it wasn't "pretty", Frances Tiafoe added a little more sparkle to a glittering season by reaching the Japan Open final with a 6-2 0-6 6-4 victory over South Korea's Kwon Soon-woo in Tokyo.

The American, who reached his first Grand Slam semi-final at the US Open in September, flexed the same muscles that have carried him into the top 20 in the world to reach his second title-decider of the season despite a poor second set.

Tsitsipas Fights Back to Reach Astana Final



ASTANA (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas set up a final with a come-from-behind victory against Andrey Rublev in Astana.

The Greek third seed won 4-6, 6-4, 6-3 to reach his sixth final of the season.

"It was not easy, being a set down," said Tsitsipas. "To have to deal with a very good opponent on the other side of the net made it an extremely physical battle."

"I am pleased with myself for being so determined to make it work so well." A break in the opening game of the match proved enough to give fifth seed Rublev the first set.

But Tsitsipas, who saved five of six break points in the match, improved as the tie went on and he made his move in the 10th game of the second set to force a decider.

The 24-year-old was rock solid again in the third, wrapping up victory after two hours and 10 minutes to take his head-to-head record against Rublev to 6-4.

"My mentality kind of changed," Tsitsipas added. "I played with more of an aggressive game style and didn't have anything by luck."

UEFA President Ceferin to Stand for Re-Election in 2023

LYON (Dispatches) - Aleksander Ceferin will stand for a third term as president of UEFA when it holds its congress in Portugal next year, European soccer's governing body said.

The news came as UEFA met its member associations on Saturday in Frankfurt where the future of the men's and women's European Championships and their respective qualifiers was discussed.

"UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin took the opportunity to personally thank all 55 associations for their letters of support for the next elections received in recent weeks, confirming officially that he will run for another mandate at the upcoming UEFA Congress in Portugal in 2023," UEFA said.

Ceferin was elected UEFA's seventh president in 2016 to replace Michel Platini, who was banned from soccer administration in 2015 for ethics violations and forced to quit UEFA in 2016 after losing his appeal against his ban.

Ceferin, a Slovenian lawyer, was re-elected unopposed for a four-year term in 2019.

The 54-year-old faced his biggest challenge in April 2021 when some of Europe's top clubs attempted to form a European Super League. The competition was a direct threat to UEFA's continental club competition, the Champions League, and Ceferin called on fans, soccer federations and governments to oppose the "disgraceful, self-serving proposal".



Xavi Calls on Dembele to Give More

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez called on French winger Ousmane Dembele to believe in himself more and consistently help the team to win.

The forward had a disappointing game against Inter Milan as Barcelona fell to a 1-0 defeat in the Champions League on Tuesday.

However the coach, who previously said Dembele had the potential to be the world's best winger, could become more decisive for the club.

"We are very happy with his professionalism since we arrived, we gave him some love and confidence and he's given it back," Xavi told a press conference.

"He needs to make the difference in every match, he can do it, and he needs to believe in himself more. To score more, assist more, and in each game he should give us more."

"He's been making the difference but needs to do it even more so, in every game, in every moment."

Dembele has become a key player for Barcelona under Xavi and has enjoyed a good season, although struggled with his final ball in Milan.

