

Health Ministry Announced on Thursday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to **144,672** With **Five** More Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

# IRAN NEWS

On the Sidelines of the FIFA World Deaf Futsal U-21 Championship in Malaysia, the Islamic Republic of Iran Was Chosen to Host the Asia-Pacific Deaf Futsal Tournament 2023

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## Tehran Slams France's Unacceptable Meddling in Its Domestic Affairs

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian strongly criticized France's intervention in Iran's internal affairs, saying the approach of Paris to the recent developments in the country is "unacceptable."

Amirabdollahian made the remarks in a post on his Twitter account on Wednesday, following a meeting with his French counterpart Catherine Colonna on the sidelines of the Baghdad II Conference in Jordan.

The top Iranian diplomat said the reconsideration of France's position was discussed during the talks.

"Agreed that the path of dialog and diplomacy is preferable," he wrote. "The Islamic Republic of Iran stands strong and firm."

Iran and France have been engaged in a diplomatic row over Paris' meddlesome stance on a series of violent riots in the Islamic Republic.

The French National Assembly passed a resolution on November 28, condemning what it termed a "crackdown on non-violent demonstrators." *See Page 7*

## Iranian Delegation To Visit India for Final Talks on Chabahar

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) says it will send a delegation to India within the next week for final talks on India's long-term presence in Iran's port of Chabahar.

PMO's CEO Ali Akbar Safayi said on Tuesday that a new deal on India's port activity in Chabahar will consider key issues like investment and increased transit of cargo via the port, which is located on the Sea of Oman in southeast Iran.

"The Iranian team will travel to India next week (starting Saturday) for a final decision on the long-term deal," said Safayi, adding that Iran is serious in its intentions to work out a long-term agreement with India on Chabahar.

He said disputes between Iran and India about activity in Chabahar have been discussed and resolved during eight months of negotiations that were held as part of a joint working group.

India is currently contributing to Iran's development plans for Chabahar under an agreement signed in 2016. However, Iranian authorities have not been satisfied with the pace of work carried out by Indian companies in Shahid Beheshti Terminal in Chabahar. *See Page 7*

# Zionists Warned That Era of Hit-and-Run Has Ended



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Quds Force says the Palestinian people will eventually rid their land from Israelis, warning the regime that the era of hit-and-run has come to an end.

Brigadier Gen. Esmail Qa'ani made the warning at a ceremony on Tuesday which was held on the occasion of the first martyrdom anniversary of former Iranian ambassador to Yemen Hassan Irloo, who passed away of COVID-19 complications amid a siege imposed by the Saudi regime and its allies on the Arabian Peninsula state.

Qa'ani noted that about 50 operations are carried out against Israel in the occupied West Bank alone every day, adding that the occupying regime is today desperate and under intense pressure.

He went on to say that it won't be long before the Palestinians expel the Israelis from their land.

The IRGC commander further said the day his predecessor Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani was assassinated by a U.S. drone strike in Iraq, we warned Israelis to sell their houses and leave Palestine.

"Today, we see that in the occupied territories, old Jewish figures have created organizations to [promote] leaving the occupied territories," he said.

He further pointed to the Western states and the Israeli regime's increased pressure on Iran and said "they think that if they put pressure on the Islamic Republic, it will give in to their pressures and will not pursue its path [of resistance] anymore."

The IRGC Quds Force commander went on to say, "The day they assassinated Martyr Soleimani, we told them to sell their houses and leave Palestine. Today, we see in the occupied territories that old Jewish figures have created organizations for the exit of Jews from Israel."

He also warned anyone who acts against the Islamic Republic and said that hostile action against the Islamic Republic will get due response in a due time.

The latest development came a day after a prominent Israeli regime general said that occupied Palestine is witnessing the formation of a communication network among Palestinians, a matter that worries Israeli officials and elites who think the regime faces an existential threat.

Palestinian officials have also reiterated that the Palestinian resistance front will not quit fighting Israel until the occupied territories are fully liberated.

The Israeli regime came into existence in 1948 after occupying huge swathes of Palestinian territories during a Western-backed war. It occupied more land, namely the West Bank, which includes East al-Quds, and the Gaza Strip where Hamas is headquartered, in another war in 1967.

## Russia Seeking Cooperation With Iran on Gas Turbines

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Russia wants to cooperate with Iran on manufacturing of gas turbines needed in its power plants, says the Russian Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov as the two countries keep expanding joint efforts against foreign sanctions targeting their economies.

Shulginov said in a statement on Tuesday that Russian companies are interested in cooperating with Iranian counterparts on gas turbine technology and joint production.

"There is large potential for cooperation in this," he told visiting Iranian Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian. Under an agreement signed in October, Iran has committed to supply 40 turbines to Russia to help the country with its plans to build modern gas power plants.

However, the Russians have expedited plans to start their own turbine production after the United States and allies imposed sanctions on the country over the war in Ukraine earlier this year.

That comes as major international turbine manufacturers, including Siemens Energy, are planning to withdraw from the Russian market because of the Western sanctions.

The war in Ukraine has brought Russia and Iran closer in their efforts to counter the sanctions. The two countries have signed major deals to engage in joint energy projects.

Iranian authorities announced in May that Iran could supply car parts and gas turbines to Russia under a barter arrangement that would allow the import of Russian steel to Iran.

Some Iranian companies have also signed deals to supply or repair gas turbines in Russian power plants.

## ViewPoint U.S. Is Not Utopia Any Longer

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

For many people and especially young and dissident ones, the U.S. was once and still a dream land to live and this arrogant country has been considered for them as a Utopian land but it seems this notion about the U.S. is gradually waning and the U.S. is becoming no Utopia for the dreamer people any longer.

In recent years and because of many problems and crises, the U.S. has lost its attraction for the people around the world to migrate to this land but of course some people are still living in dream of migration to this country because of the U.S. propagation machine.

Recent inflation and hike in prices plus social unrests and racial discrimination have made the Americans unhappy about their future and for this reason the U.S. is no more the dreamy land for people around the world to migrate there.

A new survey has shown the amount of dissatisfaction among the Americans about their future. The survey has found that two-thirds of Americans have no hope in either political party to address the challenges facing the United States, believing the country is moving in the wrong direction ahead of the New Year.

A new USA TODAY/Suffolk University poll said on Monday that there were few signs of a burst of optimism among people as the New Year nears.

By 65%-26%, people say the US has gotten off on the wrong track, not headed in the right direction.

"I'm hopeful, but I'm also doubtful," said Janet Brown, a Republican respondent.

Another respondent, Peter Grant, a Democrat, said, "We're in for some tumultuous times."

"Things are not good in this country right now in a lot of ways," Grant said.

Asked what one word described their mood about the new year, 39% of respondents chose "hopeful" and 5% chose "enthusiastic," percentages that had dropped a bit from last year.

Twenty-four percent chose "worried" and 11% "fearful," both higher than last year. And 18% said their mood was "exhausted."

From a list of 11 issues, 35% of the respondents chose inflation/the economy as their top priority that President Joe Biden and Congress must address next year.

A Gallup poll showed Thursday that over half of US households say inflation is causing them hardship.

According to the poll, which was conducted among more than 1,800 American adults during November, found that 77% of lower-income respondents were financially suffering from price increases, compared to 60% of middle-income adults, and 42% of upper-income adults. *See Page 7*

## Iran Calls for Unconditional Release of Frozen Afghan Funds

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) has called for the removal of curbs and "unconditional" release of billions of dollars of frozen Afghan central bank funds to enable the war-ravaged country to deal with its deepening economic and humanitarian crises.

Amir Saeed Irvani made the remark while addressing a Tuesday session of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the situation in Afghanistan, describing the current situation in Afghanistan as volatile and precarious in spite of the UN's stabilization efforts.

He pointed to the report of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security, stating that the report shows that 28.3 million Afghans will need humanitarian assistance and support in the next year. This is while the figure stood at 24.4 million in 2022, and was estimated at 24.4 million at the beginning of the previous year. *See Page 7*

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# Iranian Deputy FM to Visit Dhaka

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Deputy foreign minister for political affairs of Iran Ali Bagheri Kani is scheduled to reach Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, today to discuss bilateral and other issues of mutual interest with Bangladesh.

Apart from his bilateral meeting with foreign secretary Masud Bin Momen, the Iranian deputy foreign minister is likely to meet foreign minister AK Abdul Momen and state minister for foreign affairs Md Shahrar Alam during his brief stay in Dhaka.

In November, the Iranian authorities said that foreign office consultation and meeting of Joint Economic Commission should be held at mutually convenient time to further strengthen relations in the field of trade, investment, economy, energy, chemical fertilizer and food security.

## Riyadh Ready To Continue Dialog With Iran

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

**TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has held a meeting with his Saudi counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, with the latter expressing Riyadh's readiness to continue dialog with Tehran, amid efforts by the two neighbors to fix their troubled ties.**

Hossein Amirabdollahian announced in a tweet, posted in Arabic language, that the meeting took place on the sidelines of the Baghdad II Conference in Jordan.

"I attended the Baghdad-2 conference in Jordan to reaffirm our support for Iraq, and on the sidelines of the meeting I also had the opportunity to meet with some of my counterparts, including the foreign ministers of Oman, Qatar, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi minister assured me of his country's readiness to continue dialog with Iran," the top Iranian diplomat wrote in his tweet.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are among the countries attending the conference in Jordan, which was organized by France and Iraq with the aim of providing a forum for



discussing the region's problems.

Prince Faisal has already said his country will continue to extend its hand to Iran for a "positive relationship" that serves the stability of the region.

Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016 after Iranian protesters, enraged by the execution of prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr by the Saudi regime, stormed its embassy in Tehran.

The kingdom then pursued a confrontational foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic, especially during the administration of former US president Donald Trump, with whom the Saudi rulers shared close ties.

Saudi Arabia appears to have recently changed its antagonistic course, showing willingness through diplomatic channels and third parties to mend fences with Tehran and resume bilateral relations.

The two sides have already held several rounds of tension-easing negotiations in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad since last April.

## Regional Dialogue for Mutual Understanding Is a Must

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister said dialogue among regional countries to reach a mutual understanding for the establishment of peace and stability is not an option but a necessity.

Hossein Amirabdollahian made the remarks in an address to the second edition of a conference on the Iraqi developments in Amman, Jordan.

Heading a delegation, Amirabdollahian arrived in the Jordanian capital of Amman on Monday to join the second edition of the Baghdad-2 Conference.

He was welcomed by the Jordanian Foreign Ministry's regional director generals, the director general for ceremonies, and some of the country's military officials.

During the trip, Iran's foreign minister delivered the speech at the official meeting of the second Baghdad Conference. He also met with some of the participating officials on the sidelines of the event, including Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

In his speech, he expressed hope that the region will witness stability and prosperity in the light of holding such conferences.

The foreign minister said that the new Iranian government under President Ebrahim Raisi is expanding ties with Iraq's neighbors and attaches special significance to providing support for the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.

Iran's top diplomat noted that Iran sees its peace, stability in peace, and security in the entire region, reiterating that Iran's stable policy in support of refraining from war and helping restore security and stability to the region has not changed.

The top Iranian diplomat further pointed to the anti-terror icons, generals Qassem Soleimani of Iran and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis of Iraq, saying that they will be remembered by nations of the region.

"I declare Iran's readiness to cooperate with all countries in the region," Amir-Abdollahian further said.

## Iran-Russia Relations Are Expanding

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - "Iran-Russia relations are expanding in various fields based on common interests," the Foreign Ministry spokesman said in an exclusive interview with the RT.

Referring to the developments in Ukraine, Nasser Kanaani added that the crisis in Ukraine was caused by the wrong policies of the West in this country.

"The parties accused of escalating tensions in Ukraine are the same ones who accuse Iran of sending drones to Russia. This accusation against Iran is rooted in political motives," he stated.

Regarding the developments in Syria, Kanaani said, "Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria is an example of successful and constructive cooperation to resolve a complex regional crisis."

"Our presence in Syria is of an advisory nature and was carried out at the request of the Syrian government. We welcome any positive development in relations between Ankara and Damascus and encourage both sides to close relations," said Kanaani.

"The presence of armed and separatist groups in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq violates the sovereignty of the country. Baghdad has pledged that the territory of Iraq will not pose any threats to the neighboring countries and no place will be given to terrorist groups on the Iraqi territory," Kanaani said.

Regarding the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, he said: "Iran and Saudi Arabia are two important countries in the region, and the resumption of relations between them preserves the common interests of the two countries and strengthens the security of the region."

## Iran Envoy to Venezuela Rejects News About Soccer Player

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iranian Ambassador to Venezuela Hojat Soltani described as lies and slanders from Western media the news about first division soccer player Amir Nazr-Azadani.

No judicial sentence has been issued against him so far, much less the execution,' the diplomat said in statements to the newspaper Ultimas Noticias.

Referring to the publications that disclose an alleged death sentence against the 26-year-old player, the Iranian diplomat stressed that as always, Western media with lies and slander 'have tried to distort the facts and spread Iranophobia.'

He explained that Nazr-Azadani along with other people were accused of committing illegal acts of violence, which resulted in the martyrdom of three police officers, whose evidence is collected in the open file that contains the confession of the accused and images recorded by police cameras.

The Iranian ambassador noted that the fact is being investigated by the competent courts of the Islamic Republic, in accordance with the fulfillment of all legal norms and citizens' rights.

He remarked that there is no sentence issued against the athlete and other defendants in the case and stressed that the information disclosed is 'a dirty lie' based on unprofessional actions by some media outlets. Those news organs, he added, fail to comply with the professional rules and regulations in the publication and promulgation of 'reliable and correct news.'

## FM Spokesman Blasts U.S. Approach to Human Rights

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Ministry has strongly condemned the United States for lionizing the ringleader of the anti-Iran terrorist cult of the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO), and for reiterating its alliance with terrorists and murderers of thousands of Iranians.

"The American regime's alliance with the terrorists and killers of more than 17,000 Iranian citizens became [just] clearer," ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani wrote in a tweet.

Kanaani said, "The recent move of some politically-bankrupt American figures to try to 'whitewash terrorism' and reprehensibly sanctify the terrorist MKO ringleader and criminal mercenary of [former Iraqi dictator] Saddam, have further shown the bogus image of American human rights."

On Saturday, Washington hosted, what American officials have defined as, a so-called "gathering of Iranian opposition groups." The summit was joined by the MKO's infamous ringleader Maryam Rajavi as well as several former American officials, including former secretary of state Mike Pompeo, all of whom advocated "regime change" in Iran and glorified the foreign-backed riots that have been taking place across Iran over the past weeks.

Kanaani also asserted that, "The American regime's recourse to bankrupts and criminals in order to apply more pressure on the Iranian government and people, bespeaks its empty-handedness."

"However, this does not diminish the fact that the US is legally accountable for its violation of Iranian people's rights and its support for a known terrorist organization," Foreign Ministry spokesman concluded.

## UNESCO Registers Yalda Night as Longest Iranian Night

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Yalda is the last night of fall in the Persian calendar and the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere. To celebrate the occasion, Iranians get together in groups of relatives or friends to cheer and chatter, eat fruits and nuts and recite poems until dawn.

Yalda means birth in Persian. In ancient mythology, it is believed that the Persian god of light and truth was born the morning after the longest night of the year to rid the world of darkness and wash away unpleasant experiences.

This tradition is marked in Iran and across the Persian-speaking communities in several other countries, including Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Iranians have been celebrating Yalda Night for centuries as a reminder that every minute counts to share their moments with their loved ones. And this beautiful message is one reason why the ancient tradition has now been added to the UNESCO list of cultural heritage.

Iranians have for three millennia stayed up on the longest, darkest and coldest night of the year, marking the occasion with beautiful long-held traditions; and now Yalda Night is officially registered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a cultural heritage shared by Iran and Afghanistan.

As a multicultural nomination file, Yalda/Chella was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, during the 17th

Session of Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The session was held in Rabat, the capital of Morocco, between November 28 and December 3, 2022. Accordingly, the number of Iran's cultural elements inscribed on lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage reached 19.

Yaldā/Chella is an extremely popular traditional celebration of the sun and the warmth of life among Iranians. During the Yaldā/Chella night, people in Iran and Afghanistan typically gather around a table at the houses of their elders, which is deliberately adorned with some symbolic foods and objects. It consists of a lamp symbolizing the light, water to indicate cleanliness, and fruits like pomegranates, watermelons, beetroots, jujube and grapes, which are usually red, in order to symbolize warmth. In addition, they set some broth, sweets, dried fruits and nuts on the table to be used by the families during their gathering. Storytelling, playing games and traditional musical instruments, reciting poetry and presenting gifts are among the most significant activities for the occasion.

Celebrating Yalda Night represents Iranians' respect for their cultural identity, nature, women, friendship, cultural diversity, hospitality and living in peace against all differences. The culture of celebrating Yaldā and its deep meaning for Iran and Afghanistan's people are transmitted within families, while the media has played a main role in recent years in its recognition. Yalda Night was previously inscribed on the National Heritage List in 2008.

The night of the 21st of December is considered as the longest night on the Iranian calendar and is called Yalda Night.

## Turkmenistan Says No Limits To Expand Ties With Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Turkmenistan's foreign minister said in a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart Amirabdollahian that his country has no limits in developing relations with Iran.

Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian discussed bilateral cooperation and regional developments during a telephone conversation last night (Monday) with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov.

The Iranian foreign minister congratulated the anniversary of Turkmenistan's neutrality and pointed to the cooperation between the two countries in areas of mutual interest.

He attached great importance to the issue of Turkmen gas swap and transit through the Islamic Republic of Iran's territory as important.

Referring to the agreement between the two countries regarding holding a joint economic commission early next year, Turkmenistan's foreign minister, for his part emphasized that his country has no limits in developing relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Meredov also attached importance to the cooperation of the two countries in international bodies including ECO and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

He once again condemned the recent terror attack in Iran's Shahe Cheragh Mosque in Shiraz and announced his country's readiness to cooperate with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the fight against terrorism within the framework of international rules.

## Iran, Pakistan Stress Stepped-Up Defense Cooperation

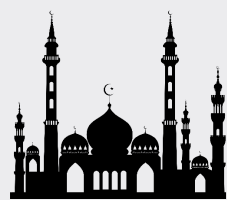
TEHRAN (MNA) - The chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces spoke on phone with general Asim Munir, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff on Tuesday to stress the broadening of bilateral defense cooperation.

On the phone call on Tuesday with general Asim Munir, Iran's Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri pointed to the trend of developing defense and security cooperation between the two countries, especially its impact on the promotion and consolidation of the security at the shared borders and said, "The continuation of this trend and the development of cooperation should be increased as far as possible."

The two senior commanders also emphasized the continuation of past cooperation in the field of border security and confronting terrorists, the future directions of cooperation for the development of economic activities on the border and the implementation of the idea of turning the shared border into a border of friendship and brotherhood.

Major General Bagheri further invited the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff to visit Tehran and in return, general Asim Munir invited the Iranian commander for a visit to Pakistan.





## PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:02
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:15
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:41
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:11

86. So Moses returned to his people in a state of indignation and sorrow. He said: "O my people! did not your Lord make a handsome promise to you? Did then the promise seem to you long (in coming)? Or did ye desire that Wrath should descend from your Lord on you, and so ye broke your promise to me?"

Surah 20. Ta-ha ( 86 )

## Ban on Imports of Home Appliances Not to Be Lifted for Now

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN – The Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade Spokesman says the ministry is not to lift ban on imports of home appliances for now.**

Omid Qalibaf said that currently imports of home appliances are forbidden but exports of Iranian home appliance are in good and promising condition. He noted that currently 470 licenses have been issued for producing home appliances and the number for producing gas stove may be more and for TV may less but in the field of home appliances there are 200 producers on average and 15 of them are brands which account for 80% of the market.

He noted entering and exiting the market should be free, adding that the ministry cannot stop issuing production license due to claims of saturation in the market and it is against the competitive market because one may get license and produce a product much cheaper with higher quality through using better technology and management.

Qalibaf went on to say that some part of home appliances includes refrigerator, freezer, washing machine and TV which are widely used and there are more demands for them and their pricing is under supervision and their prices are fixed by the



Headquarters for Regulating the Market.

He added that some part of the home appliance products are whose prices are fixed by the producers and the headquarters.

He noted that the ministry has controlled the factory inflation rate and it tries to lower it. He went on to say that although inflation weakens the competition in the domestic, the most important advantage of the domestic production is their after sales services which can distinguish domestic products from the smuggled ones and with the devaluation of national currency, the price of smuggled home appliances increase but it does not happen for the domestic products.

He once again reiterated that the government does not intend to lift ban on imports of home appliances for now and by the way exports of home-made home appliance products are in good condition.

## Iran Oil Output Reaches Nearly 3m bpd

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Oil Minister Javad Owji says that the country's oil production has reached nearly 3 million barrels per day (bpd).

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a Cabinet session in Tehran on Wednesday, Owji said Iran's capacity for producing light crude oil had increased by 200,000 bpd, allowing the country to boost its total output to around 3 million bpd.

He also noted the Petroleum Ministry is pursuing projects to improve the quality of fuel produced in the country's refineries.

Owji said one such project had come on line in Isfahan Refinery in central Iran with some 15 million liters per day in Euro 5 diesel fuel production capacity.

He added two other fuel production units with Euro 5 standard will soon be launched in refineries in Abadan in southwest and in Tabriz in northwest Iran.



## Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia Urged To Intensify Energy Cooperation

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia should intensify work on unifying the energy systems of the three countries, Minister of Energy of Iran Ali Akbar Mehrabian.

"One of the priority issues that must be taken into account in the implementation of the project is ensuring the reliability of the energy systems of Russia and Iran and the stability of their parallel operation," Russian minister said.

Moreover, during the meeting, the parties discussed the current status of the Sirik thermal power plant (TPP) project in Iran, as well as interaction in the field of electric grid economy. At the same time, the Iranian side stressed the interest in cooperation in the construction of TPPs and renewable generation, as well as in joint projects in Iran using Russian energy equipment, including gas turbines.

"Russian companies are interested in cooperation with Iranian partners on gas turbine technologies and the establishment of their joint production. There is a lot of potential for cooperation here," Shulginov said.



## Iran Calls for Opening of Lachin Corridor

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran made its first statement since the more than week-long Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin Corridor, calling for a quick resolution and urging the sides to engage in dialogue.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has always emphasized that the full implementation of the terms of the trilateral statement on ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan can put an end to the disputes between the two countries," said Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani.

He said that establishing peace and stability in the region requires not allowing any unnecessary tensions, and expressed hope that the unblocking of the Lachin Corridor will be solved through dialogue and peaceful talks between the sides.

Official Baku and Tehran have seen their relations complicated especially after Azerbaijan and Turkey staged military exercises on Iran's border last month. More visible strains, however, have appeared when Iran's leadership, including its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warned about changing of borders in the region, voicing its opposition to Baku's overt attempts to carve out a road through Armenia to Nakhichevan, the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" scheme.

## Gas Supply to Power Plants Increased in Autumn

TEHRAN (MNA) - Head of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) Dispatching Department Mohammadreza Joulaei said despite the surge in domestic consumption, gas supply to major industries and power plants has increased in the first two months of autumn (September 23-November 21) compared to the previous year's same period.

According to Joulaei, NIGC supplied 243.3 million cubic meters per day (mcm/d) of natural gas to the country's power plants in the first month of autumn (September 23-October 22), 11 percent more than the average daily supply in the same month of the previous Iranian calendar year.

As Shana reported, the average daily gas supply to power plants in the second month of autumn (October 23-November 21) stood at 193.3 mcm, 35 percent more than the figure for the same month in the previous year, the official said.

NIGC had supplied 220 mcm/d and 142.7 mcm/d of

natural gas to power plants in the previous year's same two months, respectively.

As for major industries, the average daily gas supply in the said two months increased by eight percent and 11 percent, respectively, according to Joulaei.

Stating that NIGC's priority is to maintain a stable flow of gas for the domestic and commercial sectors, he said: "Although in the cold season, the largest share of gas production and processing is allocated to the domestic and commercial sectors, the National Iranian Gas Company has taken appropriate measures to ensure the sustained supply of gas to major industries and power plants in the fall."

In early November, Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji said that during the period from September 23 to November 6, over 236 mcm/d of natural gas has been supplied to power plants on average, which is 13 percent more than the figure for the previous year's same period.

## Loading, Unloading of Goods in Ports Up 5.7%

TEHRAN (MNA) - The loading and unloading of goods in the ports of Iran increased by 5.7 percent in the first nine months of the present Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21), as compared to the same period of time in the past year, head of the country's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) announced.

Speaking in a press conference on the sidelines of the sixth Exhibition of Transportation, Logistics, and Related Industries, Ali-Akbar Safaei said during the mentioned period 156.714 million tons of goods have been loaded and unloaded at ports.

As reported by the PMO portal, in the said nine months, loading and unloading operations in the container sector reached 1.835 million TEUs, of which 995,000 TEUs was the share of loading and 845,000 TEUs was related to unloading.

The loading and unloading of container cargo increased by six percent and 8.4 percent, respectively, compared to the figure for the previous year's same period, the official said.

According to Safaei, in the three quarters of the current year, 11,976 passengers were also transported from the country's ports, registering a 42.7 percent rise, year on year.

Mentioning development and infrastructure projects underway in the country's ports, Safaei said numerous projects with a total investment of 32.542 trillion rials (about \$85.07 million) are currently underway at the country's ports.

He also noted that projects worth 32.888 trillion rials (about \$85.9 million) are going to begin in the near future. While Iran is combating the U.S. unilateral sanctions on its economy, the country's ports as the major gates of exports and imports play a significant role in this battle. This role makes all-out support to ports and more development of them serious and vital.

Such necessity has led the government to define projects for more development of the ports and also take some measures to encourage investment making in ports, in addition to facilitating the loading and unloading of goods, especially basic commodities, there.

## FTZs High Council Seeking to Modify FTZ Comprehensive Law

TEHRAN (MNA) - The secretary of the Free Zones High Council said that this council is seeking to modify the country's free trade zones (FTZ) comprehensive law.



Speaking in a TV program, Hojatollah Abdolmaleki said, "The good news for the entrepreneurs of the regions, both the current ones and those who, God willing, will soon join us, is that we are looking for the modification of the so-called comprehensive law."

"The free zones have been relatively successful, although they also had failures; What is our main goal is to guide the free zones to that main path and those goals that are considered in the resistance economy that are the increase of exports and foreign investment and the transfer of technology and also meeting the country's needs", the official stated.

"We follow two approaches or two general strategies in the new period of management in the free zones. Our first approach is to popularize the free zones and our second approach is to globalize these zones", he added.

In mid-August, the previous secretary of the Free Zones High Council announced that the trade balance of the country's free trade zones has become \$35 million positive for the first time in 30 years.

According to Saeid Mohammad, there are currently 15 free trade zones and 33 special economic zones active in the country and the necessary licenses have also been obtained for the establishment of 79 new special economic zones. The official noted that although the overall trade balance of the free trade and special economic zones together has always been positive, this is the first time that the foreign trade balance of the free trade zones becomes positive separately.

## 45% Rise in Drilling Efficiency of Oil, Gas Wells

TEHRAN (Shana) -- The efficiency of horizontal and directional drilling operations of the National Iranian Drilling Company (NIDC) grew by at least 45% in the first 8 months of the current Iranian calendar year which began on March 21 compared to the same period last year.

According to NIDC, Peyman Shoushtarizadeh, the deputy director of NIDC for special services, said on Sunday that the company's drilling reached 8,328 meters during the period from 4,546 meters in the first 8 months of last calendar year. He added: "Horizontal and directional drilling operations were carried out on 23 wells in onshore oil-rich areas, and in this year's plan, drilling of several more wells is on the agenda."

The NIDC official stated: "During this period, 76 meters of core drilling was carried out to identify the formations in the well structure of the fields, and in connection with the completion of the well drilling and technical and engineering survey, 85 cases of logging, 320 cases of surface logging and 170 cases of well surveying were also done by the experts of this company, which shows a noticeable increase in surface logging and well surveying."

## Azar Oilfield Ready To Be Operated by Client

TEHRAN (Shana) - The CEO of the Iranian Central Oil Fields Company (ICOFC) said Azar Oil Field is ready to be delivered to West Oil and Gas Production Company for operation.

During a visit to the Azar oil field and reviewing the progress of the project in the facilities of the central processing unit and the wellhead facility of the project, Mehdi Heydari announced the project's delivery to the West Oil and Gas Production Company in the near future.

According to ICOFC, the official said the project would be handed over to the operating company within the next few days, adding: "More than 50% of the process of its delivery to the ICOFC has been completed and in the coming days, we will witness its complete delivery."

Stating that the production of this field has high-quality oil, he clarified: "With the efforts made, more than 33,000 barrels per day will be produced from this field."

Referring to the role of this field in creating jobs in Ilam Province, the ICOFC CEO stated: "This field and its development plan that will begin in the future will play a significant role in attracting local and national capable and expert forces, as well as the forces working in this region."

The joint Azar oil field located in Ilam province, western Iran, has been put into operation with investment from domestic resources and using the specialized power of oil industry companies.



## Norway Harald Very Well in Hospital

OSLO (Dispatches) - Norway's Queen Sonja said King Harald V was doing "very, very well", a day after her 85-year-old husband was admitted to hospital following an infection.

Harald, who has reigned over the Scandinavian nation for more than 30 years, was admitted to an Oslo hospital on Monday for treatment with intravenous antibiotics, the latest in a series of recent health issues.

"Fortunately, he's doing very, very well. The king will probably return home in a few days," Sonja said during a visit to another hospital. Harald, who now uses crutches to move around, has recently had Covid, knee surgery and respiratory problems and was in hospital with another infection in August.



## Palestinians Protest Death of Prisoner in Israel

RAMALLAH (Dispatches) - Palestinians held a general strike and demonstrations across the occupied West Bank following the death of a militant jailed by Israel and later diagnosed with cancer.

Israel's prison service announced early Tuesday the death of Nasser Abu Hamid in a Tel Aviv-area hospital, 20 years into his life sentence for murder and attempted murder.

Abu Hamid, 50, a prominent figure in president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah movement, had been treated in Israel since he was diagnosed with lung cancer last year, but Palestinian officials have accused Israeli authorities of "negligence" in his care.



## Zelenskiy Shows Up Stuttering Russian Offensive by Visiting Frontline City



KYIV (Dispatches) - President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that conditions in Russian-held areas of Ukraine were "extremely difficult" and Ukraine's leader showed up Russia's faltering war by visiting a shattered frontline town that has long eluded capture by Moscow.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he made the surprise trip to rally Kyiv's "superhuman" troops in Bakhmut, so blasted by continuous Russian shelling and brutal fighting nearby it has been nicknamed "the meat grinder".

Zelenskyy arrived in the eastern town shortly after Putin told Russia's security services they needed to significantly improve their work, one of his clearest public admissions yet that the invasion he launched almost 10 months ago is not going to plan.

Putin's address followed a visit to close ally Belarus that stoked fears, dismissed by the Kremlin, that Russia's fellow former Soviet republic could help it open a new invasion front against Ukraine, where fighting has been concentrated hundreds of miles (km) away in the east and south of the country.

The most destructive fighting in recent weeks has taken place around Bakhmut, where Zelenskyy, dressed in combat khaki, handed out medals to soldiers in a tumbledown industrial complex to loud applause, video released by his office showed.

With the boom of artillery audible in the distance, he urged them to keep up their spirits as the battle for Bakhmut, one that has come to symbolise the grinding brutality of the war, enters its fifth month.

"The East is holding out because Bakhmut is fighting. In fierce battles and at the cost of many lives, freedom is being defended here for all of us," Zelenskyy wrote on Telegram.

"That's why I am with them today. They are superhumans. They are our strength and our heroes."

Earlier, he repeated calls to the West for more weaponry including air defence systems after Russian drones hit energy targets in a third air strike on power facilities in six days.

In a break with the official line that the invasion is going smoothly, Putin conceded serious problems in regions of Ukraine that Moscow unilaterally claimed to annex in September, and he ordered the Federal Security Services (FSB) to ensure the "safety" of residents there.

"The situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions is extremely difficult," he said in a video address to security workers translated by Reuters.

He was later shown awarding medals to the Russian-appointed leaders of the four regions in a televised Kremlin ceremony.

In another move on the 300th day of his invasion, Putin ordered the FSB to step up surveillance of Russian society and borders to combat the "emergence of new threats" from abroad and traitors at home.

Western countries have imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and the rouble slumped to a more than seven-month low against the dollar on Tuesday after the European Union agreed to cap prices of natural gas, a major Russian export.

In Washington, a senior U.S. State Department official told reporters there were conflicting views in Russia on what the next steps in Ukraine should be, with some seeking new offensives and others doubting Russia's capacity to wage them.

Putin's proclaimed annexations, condemned as illegal by Ukraine and its Western allies, were an attempt to turn the tide after a series of battlefield losses to a Ukrainian counter-offensive since the summer.

## Turkey Fumes at Sweden in NATO Membership Dispute

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkey lashed out at Sweden's refusal to extradite a top reporter that Ankara has demanded in exchange for its ratification of Stockholm's NATO membership bid.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants Sweden to return dozens of people that he suspects either of involvement in a failed 2016 coup or of membership of a banned Kurdish militia that Washington and the European Union designate as "terrorists".

But the now-closed Today's Zaman newspaper's editor-in-chief Bulent Kenes was the only person Erdogan has singled out by name.

Sweden's Supreme Court cited the risk of Turkey's "persecution based on this person's political beliefs" when it blocked the request on Monday.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the ruling threatened to derail hard-fought progress that the sides have made through months of delicate talks.

"The rejection of our request for the extradition of Bulent Kenes is a very negative development," Cavusoglu told reporters.

Cavusoglu stressed that Sweden's extradition earlier this month of one man suspected of membership of a banned Kurdish insurgency group was insufficient to win Turkey's approval.

"If they expect that they can return one person and then close this affair, this is not realistic," Cavusoglu said.

"We no longer want to hear good words from Sweden and Finland, we want to see concrete steps." Sweden and Finland broke with decades of military non-alignment and decided to apply for NATO membership in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Turkey and Hungary remain the only NATO member states to have failed to ratify the Nordic neighbours' applications. Cavusoglu said he would have more discussions about the dispute during a visit to Ankara on Thursday by Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom.



## Peru's Congress to Consider Moving Elections Forward Again

LIMA (Dispatches) - Peru's Congress will reconsider a proposal to move elections forward, one of the key demands of protesters who have taken to the streets for nearly two weeks since lawmakers voted to remove former President Pedro Castillo.

The legislature, which has an overwhelming disapproval rating in the Andean nation, took up the proposal to push forward the vote for president and Congress to next year, though elections were originally planned for 2026.

The country's embattled new president, Dina Boluarte, has urged lawmakers to authorise her plan to hold the elections in December 2023.

"Don't be blind," Boluarte said in a national address on Saturday. Peru's Congress had previously taken up the issue on December 16, but it failed to gather enough votes in favour of rescheduling the elections.

In her address, Boluarte asked legislators to reconsider their position, citing opinion polls that showed more than 80 percent of Peruvians want general elections to stabilise the country.

"Look at the people and take action in line with what they are asking. I demand that the vote to bring elections up be reconsidered," said the 60-year-old former vice president, who assumed the presidency on December 7 after Congress voted to impeach Castillo.

The legislature removed Castillo from office after the left-wing, former teacher and union leader announced plans to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

His removal - and subsequent arrest and detention on allegations of "conspiracy" and "rebellion" - have sparked widespread protests and spurred Boluarte's administration to declare a nationwide state of emergency for 30 days.

Despite the measure, along with a nighttime curfew imposed in certain provinces, protesters have continued to take to the streets, particularly in rural parts of the country that make up Castillo's stronghold. While many of the protesters are angry over Castillo's removal and arrest and have demanded his release, others are calling for Boluarte to step down and for Congress to be dissolved, in addition to early elections.

## North Korea Slams Japan's Military Buildup, U.S. Flies Stealth Jets

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea condemned a Japanese military buildup outlined in a new security strategy, calling it dangerous and vowing counteractions, while also warning of another imminent test of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Japan last week announced its biggest military build-up since World War Two as tension with China and a hostile North Korea, and Russia's Ukraine invasion, stoke fears of war.

North Korea's foreign ministry said Japan had effectively formalized "the capability for preemptive attack" with its new strategy that would bring a "radical" change to East Asia's security environment.

The ministry also criticized the United States for "conniving and instigating Japan's rearmament and reinvasion scheme" saying the United States had no right to question North Korea's defenses.

"The foolish act of Japan seeking to gratify its black-hearted intention, arms buildup for reinvasion, under the pretext of the DPRK's legitimate exercise of the right to self-defense can never be justified and tolerated," the official said in a statement carried by the North's KCNA news agency.

The spokesman referred to North Korea by the initials of its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

North Korea will express its displeasure with action to highlight Japan's "wrong and very dangerous"

decision, the spokesperson said, warning of a "shuddering shiver to be felt soon".

North Korea has tested an unprecedented number of missiles this year, including an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) designed to reach the U.S. mainland, in defiance of international sanctions.

Several of the North Korean missiles have flown over Japan, or landed in waters near it, drawing condemnation from the staunch U.S. ally.

In a separate statement, Kim Yo Jong, the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, hinted at a technological advance in its ICBM system, and denounced questions over what North Korea said was its bid to develop a spy satellite.

North Korea fired two medium-range ballistic missiles off its east coast on Sunday, calling it an "important" test for the development of a reconnaissance satellite that it hopes to complete by April.

Experts have raised doubts over the level of North Korea's satellite technology but Kim Yo Jong derided them and suggested advances in her country's missile programs, including ICBM developments.

North Korea has test-fired its ICBMs at a steep angle and analysts say a normal launch angle requires more sophisticated technology to resist heat generated during re-entry into the atmosphere.



## Taliban Bans University Education for Afghan Girls



KABUL (Dispatches) - The Taliban authorities ordered a nationwide ban on university education for females, as the hardline Islamists continue to crush Afghan women's right to education and freedom.

Despite promising a softer rule when they seized power last year, the Taliban have ratcheted up restrictions on all aspects of women's lives, ignoring international outrage.

"You all are informed to immediately implement the mentioned order of suspending education of females until further notice," said a letter issued to all government and private universities, signed by the Minister for Higher Education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem.

The spokesman for the ministry, Ziaullah Hashimi, who tweeted the letter, confirmed the order in a text message to AFP.

The ban on higher education comes less than three months after thousands of girls and women sat university entrance exams across the country, with many aspiring to choose teaching and medicine as future careers.

After the takeover of the country by the Taliban, universities were forced to implement new rules including gender segregated classrooms and entrances, while women were only permitted to be taught by women professors or old men.

Most teenage girls across the country have already been banned from secondary school education, severely limiting university intake.

The Taliban adheres to an austere version of Islam, with the movement's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada and his inner circle of Afghan clerics against modern education, particularly for girls and women.

But they are at odds with many officials in Kabul and among their rank and file who had hoped girls would be allied to continue learning following the takeover.

Women have been pushed out of many government jobs -- or are being paid a slashed salary to stay at home. They are also barred from travelling without a male relative, and must cover up outside of the home, ideally with a burqa.

In November they were also prohibited from going to parks, funfairs, gyms and public baths.

In a cruel U-turn, the Taliban in March blocked girls from returning to secondary schools on the morning they were supposed to reopen.



# Crimea Showers Syria With Wheat, Ukraine Cries Foul

LONDON (Dispatches) - Using a low-profile fleet of ships under U.S. sanctions, Syria has this year sharply increased wheat imports from the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea that Russia annexed from Ukraine, a sign of tightening economic ties between two allies shunned by the West.

Wheat sent to Syria from the Black Sea port of Sevastopol in Crimea increased 17-fold this year to just over 500,000 tons, previously unreported Refinitiv shipping data shows, to make up nearly a third of the country's total imports of the grain.

With sanctions making it more complicated for Syria and Russia to trade using mainstream sea transport and marine insurance, the two countries are increasingly relying on their own ships to move the grain, including three Syrian vessels that are subject to sanctions imposed by Washington, the data shows.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Russian forces invaded more of Ukraine on Feb. 24 and despite military setbacks they still control a swathe of the country's agricultural heartlands of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

Both Ukraine and the Russia-installed authorities agree that some grain has been exported from occupied Zaporizhzhia via Crimea. Ukraine though says grain was stolen by the occupiers, a charge Russia denies.

Ukraine says at least a part of the grain that passed through Sevastopol was taken from Ukrainian territories after Russia invaded. Ukraine's embassy in Beirut, which has been tracking shipments coming to Syria, estimates that 500,000 tonnes of what it calls plundered Ukrainian grain has arrived in Syria since the invasion, shipped from several ports.

The embassy said these calculations and Ukrainian authorities' allegation that grain was stolen was based on information from field and silo owners in occupied territories, satellite data of truck movements to ports and the tracking of ships.

Russia's agriculture and foreign ministries did not immediately respond to requests for comment for this story. In May, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described as "fake" the allegations Russia has stolen grain during what it calls its special military operation in Ukraine.

Reuters could not independently verify the origin of the wheat being shipped from Crimea or whether the farmers and traders who handled it were paid.

Yevgeny Balitsky, the Moscow-appointed governor of the Russian-occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region said in June that Crimean ports had been used to export grain from Zaporizhzhia. However, he said farmers would be paid via a company set up by his administration, Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

Additionally, Crimea's Russia-installed administration said 1.4 million tonnes of wheat by bunker weight were harvested from Crimea's own fields, in comments on social media in August.



Ukraine disputes these figures, saying Crimea does not produce nearly that much.

"The so-called 'Crimean harvest' includes grain exported from the territory of mainland Ukraine," the Ukrainian agriculture ministry said in a statement in response to Reuters' questions.

Prior to the current war, Syria had imported grain from Crimea on previous occasions since Russia took control of the peninsula, Reuters reported.

According to the Refinitiv data, Syria imported about 501,800 tons of wheat from Sevastopol this year until the end of November, up from about 28,200 tons in the whole of 2021.

Shipments picked up from May onwards with the largest monthly consignment of 78,600 tons in October, according to the data, which is collated from port inspection reports provided by port operators.

Increasingly, Syria is relying on a fleet of its own cargo ships or Russian-flagged ships to bring in food via government-to-government deals that eschew the usual tender and charter process for moving commodities by sea.

Analysis from maritime and commodities data platform Shipfix showed the number of cargo orders – global requests for available ships to transport grains - to Syria fell by two thirds to 54 in the year to Nov. 30 versus the whole of 2021.

Instead, the wheat cargoes are typically moving to Syria's Latakia and Tartus ports on three Syrian ships, according to two grain trade sources familiar with the journey, the Ukrainian embassy in Beirut, other Ukrainian diplomats, and an analysis from Shipfix.

The ships - the Laodicea, the Finikia and the Souria - are owned by the state-owned Syrian General Authority for Maritime Transport, according to Equasis and the U.S. Treasury. All three

have been sanctioned since 2015 by the United States for their alleged role in the conflict in Syria over the last decade.

Ships that have been designated are typically less well maintained and older due to prohibitions on accessing top tier insurance and certification services. They are able to operate more easily between countries also under sanctions, a possible explanation for the rising trade between the two allies.

Russia has repeatedly complained that the sanctions imposed on it this year have limited its ability to ship grains to countries across Africa and the Arab world that rely on its produce to feed their people.

The thicket of Western sanctions on Syria and Russia don't formally target food but can in practice complicate such trade, in part because they make it difficult for some grain-trading houses to do business with them, especially due to financing constraints.

Syrian maritime authorities did not respond to Reuters requests for comment about the vessels.

Some shipments also arrived on Russian-flagged vessels, including the Mikhail Nenashev, Matros Pozynich and Matros Koshka, which Equasis, a shipping database, shows are owned by a subsidiary of a Russian state-owned company called United Shipbuilding Corporation.

Washington, the European Union and Britain imposed sanctions on the United Shipbuilding Corporation in April after the Russian invasion. United Shipbuilding Corporation did not respond to a request for comment.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government began to rely on grain imports when the country's civil war dealt a blow to domestic harvests that once produced enough for the country's staple of subsidised flat bread as well as surpluses for export. More recently, drought has made the crop even smaller.

Russia has backed Syria's government for decades and since 2015 helped Assad's troops recapture most of the country from opposition fighters.

The sanctions and more than a decade of conflict mean Syria is also short of cash, potentially making Russia's relatively cheaper wheat attractive.

During a visit to Crimea in January, Syria's economy minister said his country needed 1.5 million tons of wheat imports, with Russia providing the majority.

Actual imports will be close to that, according to one trade source familiar with Syria's grain purchases who said the harvest this year was the worst in Syria's history.

Refinitiv data shows all but a fraction of the imports were from Russia and territory it controls, unlike previous years, when Syria augmented supplies with purchases from other countries including Romania.



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## Thailand Approves Tax Break to Boost Public Consumption

BANGKOK (Dispatches) - Thailand's cabinet approved a tax measure to help boost public consumption starting in January to support the economy as it recovers, a government spokesperson said on Tuesday.

The government will offer a tax deduction of 40,000 baht (\$1,149.4) for shoppers on goods purchases from Jan. 1, deputy government spokeswoman Traisree Traisoranakul told reporters.

Finance Minister Arkhom Termpitayapaisith will hold a briefing on the approved measure later on Tuesday.

The tax break follows earlier stimulus measures aimed at supporting Southeast Asia's second-largest economy whose growth has lagged behind others in the region, with the crucial tourism sector only starting to rebound this year. Last year's economic growth of 1.5% was among the slowest in the region.



## EU Countries Agree Gas Price Cap to Contain Energy Crisis

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - European Union energy ministers agreed a gas price cap, after weeks of talks on the emergency measure that has split opinion across the bloc as it seeks to tame the energy crisis.

The cap is the 27-country EU's latest attempt to lower gas prices that have pushed energy bills higher and driven record-high inflation this year after Russia cut off most of its gas deliveries to Europe.

Ministers agreed to trigger a cap if prices exceed 180 euros (\$191.11) per megawatt hour for three days on the Dutch Title Transfer Facility (TTF) gas hub's front-month contract, which serves as the European benchmark.

The TTF price must also be 35 eur/MWh higher than a reference price based on existing liquefied natural gas (LNG) price assessments for three days.

"We have succeeded in finding an important agreement that will shield citizens from skyrocketing energy prices," said Jozef Sikela, industry minister for the Czech Republic, which holds the rotating EU presidency.

The cap can be triggered starting from Feb. 15, 2023. The deal will be formally approved by countries in writing, after which it can enter into force.

Once triggered, trades would not be permitted on the front-month, three-month and front-year TTF contracts at a price more than 35 euros/MWh above the reference LNG price.

This effectively caps the price at which gas can be traded, while allowing the capped level to fluctuate alongside global LNG prices - a system designed to ensure EU countries can still bid at competitive prices for gas in from global markets.

Germany voted to support the deal, despite having raised concerns about the policy's impact on Europe's ability to attract gas supplies in price-competitive global markets, three EU officials said.

An EU official told Reuters Germany agreed to the price cap after countries agreed changes to another regulation on speeding up renewable energy permits, and stronger safeguards were added to the cap. Those safeguards include that the cap will be suspended if the EU faces a gas supply shortage, or if the cap causes a drop in TTF trading, a jump in gas use or a significant increase in gas market participants' margin calls.

Soaring power and gas prices have rocked energy companies across Europe, forcing utilities and traders to secure extra funds from governments and banks to cover margin call requirements.

Germany's Uniper has booked billions of euros of losses on derivatives, exacerbating a crisis as it rushed to fill the gap left after Russia cut supplies.

Jacob Mandel, senior associate at Aurora Energy Research, said the TTF front-month contract has rarely closed above 180 eur/MWh, noting this has occurred on 64 days in its history. All of those were in 2022.

Two EU officials said only Hungary voted against the price cap.

The Netherlands and Austria abstained. Both had resisted the cap during negotiations, fearing it could disrupt Europe's energy markets and compromise Europe's energy security.

Dutch energy minister Rob Jetten said: "Despite progress the last couple of weeks, the market correction mechanism remains potentially unsafe."

## U.S. Poised to Become Net Exporter of Crude Oil in 2023

HOUSTON (Dispatches) - The United States has become a global crude oil exporting power over the last few years, but exports have not exceeded its imports since World War II. That could change next year.

Sales of U.S. crude to other nations are now a record 3.4 million barrels per day (bpd), with exports of about 3 million bpd of refined products like gasoline and diesel fuel. The United States is also the leading liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter, where growth is expected to soar in coming years.

But the United States consumes 20 million barrels of crude a day, the most in the world, and its output has never exceeded 13 million bpd. Until recently, the idea that it would be anything but a big crude importer was folly.

Last month, U.S. government data showed net U.S. crude oil imports fell to 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd), the lowest since record keeping began in 2001. That is down sharply from five years ago, when the United States imported more than 7 million barrels per day.

Factors changing that equation this year include sanctions hurting Russia's exports of oil and natural gas following its invasion of Ukraine, and Washington's massive release of oil from emergency reserves to combat spiking gasoline prices.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine has spurred new demand for U.S. energy and should push oil exports above imports late next year assuming shale output accelerates," said Rohit Rathod, market analyst at energy researcher Vortexa.

To become a net exporter of crude, the United States needs either to boost production or curtail consumption. U.S. petroleum demand is expected to rise 0.7% to 20.51 million bpd next year, so that means production would have to rise.

The United States already produces more oil than any other country in the world including Saudi Arabia and Russia. U.S. shale fields are aging and production growth this year has been sluggish. Overall output should reach a record 12.34 million bpd next year - but only if prices are lucrative enough to encourage oil drillers to pump more.

European refiners have snapped up U.S. grades to offset the loss of Russian oil, and with U.S. crude's deeper discounts to global benchmarks, Asian refiners have stepped up purchases to 1.75 million barrels per day, data analytics firm Kpler said.

Export terminal operators are rushing to boost their capacity to better service the giant tankers that can carry more than 2 million barrels of oil.



## China Holds Benchmark Lending Rates for 4th Consecutive Month

SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - China kept benchmark lending interest rates unchanged for the fourth consecutive month on Tuesday, matching the forecasts of most market watchers who nevertheless expect further monetary easing to prop up a slowing economy.

The one-year loan prime rate (LPR) was left at 3.65%, while the five-year LPR was held at 4.30%.

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) last week increased cash injections into the banking system and said it would keep its one-year medium-term lending facility rate (MLF) unchanged for a fourth month. Market watchers regard MLF announcements as guides to any LPR changes.

In a subsequent Reuters poll, 17 of 27 market watchers predicted no change to either LPR but said more easing measures were likely already underway after senior leaders last week vowed to focus on stabilising the \$17 trillion economy in 2023 and step up policy adjustment to ensure targets are hit.

"The PBOC will probably guide LPRs lower in the coming months, especially the five-year LPR to support real estate and longer-term business loans," Commerzbank economists said in a client note.

A number of officials in recent weeks have pledged to ensure sufficient financial market liquidity and implement proactive fiscal policies to underpin the economy next year.

Xing Zhaopeng, senior China strategist at ANZ, said with rates unchanged, household spending would continue without any increase in disposable income.

## Bank Indonesia Seen Reducing Rate Hikes to Modest 25bps

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - Cooling inflation and a more resilient rupiah currency is expected to give Bank Indonesia enough comfort to opt for a more modest quarter-point interest rate hike on Thursday, a Reuters poll found.

Last week, major global central banks including the U.S. Federal Reserve slowed the pace of interest rate hikes as inflation showed signs of peaking, while stressing that the fight was not over yet.

Bank Indonesia (BI), which has increased interest rates by 175 basis points so far during

the current raising cycle, and was rewarded with lower than expected annual inflation for 5.42% in November, making a smaller interest rate hike more likely at the next central bank policy review.

Over 90% of economists, 27 of 29, in the Dec. 13-19 poll expected BI to hike its benchmark seven-day reverse repurchase rate by 25 basis points to 5.50% at the Dec. 22 meeting.

The remaining two forecast a 50 basis point rise. "We did see a bit of a surprise on the downside for inflation, so that may give Bank Indonesia some space to just do the 25 (bps) instead of 50," said Nicholas Mapa, senior economist at ING who also expects a smaller hike to provide more support to the rupiah currency.

"Given their mandate to provide FX stability, they're likely to tighten further, but not as aggressively as previously because of the Fed's downsizing of its own pace of tightening."

Over 85% of respondents, 19 of 22, who had a long-term view expected Indonesia's policy rate to reach 5.75% or higher by end-March 2023, a quarter point higher than November's poll.

Median forecasts showed rates rising to 6.00% in the second quarter but then falling back to 5.75% by end-2023. One-third of respondents, 7 of 21, said rates would end next year at 5.75%, nine said it would be higher than that and five said it would be lower.

With a slower pace of rate hikes predicted from the Fed, the pressure on the rupiah, which has lost around 9% against the U.S. dollar this year is expected to subside, providing room for BI to scale down its pace of tightening.

"We don't think domestic inflation dynamics warrant further outsized rate hikes; a more benign external environment should give the central bank some scope to slow the pace of tightening," noted Krystal Tan, economist at ANZ.

"We forecast its rate hiking cycle to end in Q1 2023, at a terminal rate of either 5.75% or 6.00%, depending on the amount of pressure on the IDR."

## BOJ Jolts Markets In Surprise Change To Yield Curve Policy

TOKYO (Dispatches) - The Bank of Japan shocked markets with a surprise tweak to its bond yield controls that allows long-term interest rates to rise more, a move aimed at easing some of the costs of prolonged monetary stimulus.

Shares tanked, while the yen and bond yields spiked following the decision, which caught offguard investors who had expected the BOJ to make no changes to its yield curve control (YCC) until Governor Haruhiko Kuroda steps down in April.

In a move explained as aimed at breathing life back into a dormant bond market, the BOJ decided to allow the 10-year bond yield to move 50 basis points either side of its 0% target, wider than the previous 25 basis point band.

But the central bank kept its yield target unchanged and said it will sharply increase bond buying, a sign the move was a fine-tuning of existing ultra-loose monetary policy rather than a withdrawal of stimulus.

"Maybe this is a baby step to test out the strategy and see what the market reaction is, and how much it's reacting," said Bart Wakabayashi, branch manager at State Street in Tokyo. "I think we're seeing the first toe in the water."

As widely expected, the BOJ kept unchanged its YCC targets, set at -0.1% for short-term interest rates and around zero for the 10-year bond yield, at a two-day policy meeting that ended on Tuesday.

The BOJ also said it would increase monthly purchases of Japanese government bonds (JGBs) to 9 trillion yen (\$67.5 billion) per month from the previous 7.3 trillion yen.

"Through these steps, the BOJ will aim to achieve its price target by enhancing the sustainability of monetary easing under this framework," the BOJ said in a statement, signalling that the move was aimed at prolonging YCC rather than phasing it out.

The benchmark Nikkei share average slumped 2.5% after the decision, while the dollar fell 2.7% to a four-month low of 133.11 yen. The 10-year Japanese government bond (JGB) yield briefly spiked to 0.460%, close to the BOJ's newly set implicit cap.

Already, markets are guessing what the BOJ's next move could be as Kuroda's term draws to an end and with inflation expected to remain above its 2% target well into next year.

"They've widened the band, and I guess that came earlier than expected. It raises questions as to whether this is a precursor of more to come, in terms of policy normalisation," said Moh Siong Sim, currency strategist at Bank of Singapore.

## Ghana to Default on Most External Debt



ACCRA (Dispatches) - Ghana suspended payments on most of its external debt, effectively defaulting as the country struggles to plug its cavernous balance of payments deficit.

Its finance ministry said it will not service debts including its Eurobonds, commercial loans and most bilateral loans, calling the decision an "interim emergency measure", while some bondholders criticized a lack of clarity in the decision.

The government "stands ready to engage in discussions with all of its external creditors to make Ghana's debt sustainable", the finance ministry said.

The suspension of debt payments reflects the parlous state of the economy, which had led the government last week to reach a \$3-billion staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Ghana had already announced a domestic debt exchange program and said that an external restructuring was being negotiated with creditors. The IMF has said a comprehensive debt restructuring is a condition of its support.

The country has been struggling to refinance its debt since the start of the year after downgrades by multiple credit ratings agencies on concerns it would not be able to issue new Eurobonds.

That has sent Ghana's debt further into the distressed territory. Its public debt stood at 467.4 billion Ghanaian cedis (\$55 billion as per Refinitiv Eikon data) in September, of which 42% was domestic.

It had a balance of payments deficit of more than \$3.4 billion in September, down from a surplus of \$1.6 billion at the same time last year.

While 70% to 100% of the government revenue currently goes toward servicing the debt, the country's inflation has shot up to as much as 50% in November.

Ghana has been experiencing what some say is its worst economic crisis in a generation. Last month, more than 1,000 protesters marched through the capital Accra, calling for the resignation of the president and denouncing deals with the IMF as fuel and food costs spiraled.



## Pistachio No Longer Top Non-Oil Export Commodity

TEHRAN (MNA) – Official data on Iran's pistachio exports indicate a considerable decline in the value of shipments this year.

According to Daryoush Salempour, an Agriculture Ministry official, exports reached \$915 million in the last Iranian year (March 2021-22).

"The figure accounted for half of Iran's horticultural exports' value over the period," he said.

"Pistachio orchards account for 20% of Iran's total orchards and are mainly located in the provinces of Kerman, Khorasan Razavi, South Khorasan, Yazd, Fars, Semnan, Markazi, Qom, Qazvin, Sistan-Baluchestan, Tehran and Isfahan," he added.



# Historic Biodiversity Agreement Reached at UN Conference

MONTREAL (AP) - Negotiators reached a historic deal at a U.N. biodiversity conference early Monday that would represent the most significant effort to protect the world's lands and oceans and provide critical financing to save biodiversity in the developing world.

The global framework comes on the day the United Nations Biodiversity Conference, or COP15, is set to end in Montreal. China, which holds the presidency at this conference, released a new draft on Sunday that gave the sometimes contentious talks much-needed momentum.

"We have in our hands a package which I think can guide us as we all work together to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and put biodiversity on the path to recovery for the benefit of all people in the world," Chinese Environment Minister Huang Runqiu told delegates before the package was adopted to rapturous applause just before dawn. "We can be truly proud."

The most significant part of the agreement is a commitment to protect 30% of land and water considered important for biodiversity by 2030, known as 30 by 30. Currently, 17% of terrestrial and 10% of marine areas are protected.

The deal also calls for raising \$200 billion by 2030 for biodiversity from a range of sources and working to phase out or reform subsidies that could provide another \$500 billion for nature. As part of the financing package, the framework asks for increasing to at least \$20 billion annually by 2025 the money that goes to poor countries. That number would increase to \$30 billion each year by 2030.

Financing emerged late in the talks and risked derailing an agreement. Several African countries held up the final deal for almost nine hours. They wanted the creation of a new fund for biodiversity but agreed to the creation of one under the pre-existing Global Environmental Facility.

"Creating a fund under the GEF is the best way to obtain something immediate and efficient," said Christophe Béchu, France's minister for ecological transition who headed its delegation, adding that a completely new fund would have taken several years to establish and deprived developing countries of immediate cash for biodiversity.

Then as the agreement was about to be adopted, Congo stood up and said it opposed the deal because it didn't set up that special biodiversity fund to provide developing countries with \$100 billion by 2030.

Huang swept aside the opposition and the documents that make up the framework were adopted. The convention's legal expert ruled Congo never formally objected to the document. Several other African countries, including Cameroon and Uganda, sided to no avail with Congo and said they would lodge a complaint.

"Many of us wanted more things in the text and more ambition but we got an ambitious package," Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change Steven Guilbeault said. "We have 30 by 30. Six months ago, who would have thought we could 30 by 30 in Montreal? We have an agreement to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, to work on restoration, to reduce the use of pesticides. This is tremendous progress."

France's Béchu called it a "historical deal."

"It's not a small deal. It's a deal with very precise and quantified objectives on pesticides, on reduction of loss of species, on eliminating bad subsidies," he said. "We double until 2025 and triple 2030 the finance for biodiversity."

The ministers and government officials from about 190 countries have mostly



agreed that protecting biodiversity has to be a priority, with many comparing those efforts to climate talks that wrapped up last month in Egypt.

Climate change coupled with habitat loss, pollution and development have hammered the world's biodiversity, with one estimate in 2019 warning that a million plant and animal species face extinction within decades — a rate of loss 1,000 times greater than expected. Humans use about 50,000 wild species routinely, and 1 out of 5 people of the world's 8 billion population depend on those species for food and income, the report said.

But they struggled for nearly two weeks to agree on what that protection looks like and who will pay for it. The financing has been among the most contentious issues, with delegates from 70 African, South American and Asian countries walking out of negotiations Wednesday. They returned several hours later.

Brazil, speaking for developing countries during the week, said in a statement that a new funding mechanism dedicated to biodiversity should be established and that developed countries provide \$100 billion annually in financial grants to emerging economies until 2030.

"All the elements are in there for a balance of unhappiness which is the secret to achieving agreement in U.N. bodies," Pierre du Plessis, a negotiator from Namibia who is helping coordinate the African group, told The Associated Press before the vote. "Everyone got a bit of what they wanted, not necessarily everything they wanted."

There were supporters of the framework who said it fell short in several areas. The Wildlife Conservation Society and other environmental groups were concerned that the deal puts off until 2050 a goal of preventing the extinction of species, preserving the integrity of ecosystems and maintaining the genetic diversity within populations. They fear that timeline is not ambitious enough.

Some advocates also wanted tougher language around subsidies that make food and fuel so cheap in many parts of the world. The document only calls for identifying subsidies by 2025 that can be reformed or phased out and working to reduce them by 2030.

"The new text is a mixed bag," Andrew Deutz, director of global policy, institutions and conservation finance for The Nature Conservancy, said. "It contains some strong signals on finance and biodiversity but it fails to advance beyond the targets of 10 years ago in terms of addressing drivers of biodiversity loss in productive sectors like agriculture, fisheries, and infrastructure and thus still risks being fully transformational."

## Russia May Expedite Launch of Next Space Capsule After Leak

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's space corporation Roscosmos said that a coolant leak from a Russian space capsule attached to the International Space Station doesn't require evacuation of its crew, but the agency kept open the possibility of launching a replacement capsule, if needed.



Roscosmos said a panel of experts would determine later this month whether the Soyuz MS-22 capsule could be safely used by the crew for its planned return to Earth or if it should be discarded and replaced.

It said the next scheduled launch of a Soyuz was in March but could be expedited, if necessary.

The leak from the Soyuz MS-22 was spotted last week as a pair of Russian cosmonauts were about to venture outside the station on a planned spacewalk. Russian Mission Control aborted the spacewalk when ground specialists saw a stream of fluid and particles emanating from the Soyuz on a live video feed from space.

Roscosmos and NASA both have said the incident hasn't posed any danger to the station's crew.

Roscosmos said the leak might have been caused by a micrometeorite or a piece of space junk striking one of the capsule's external radiators.

The corporation said Monday that the leak caused the temperature in the crew section of the capsule to rise to 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit). The temperature in the equipment section initially soared to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) but dropped to 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit) after ground experts switched some of the capsule's systems, Roscosmos said.

Roscosmos said the crew used ventilators in the Russian segment to blow cold air into the capsule to reduce temperature in the cockpit to comfortable levels.

"The increase in temperature on the Soyuz MS-22 spacecraft is admissible and isn't critical for the functioning of the equipment or health of the crew in case they need to be in the spacecraft," Roscosmos said, adding that tests of the ship's control system determined it wasn't affected by the incident.

## Baghdad Conference Urges Increased Efforts to Fight Regional Challenges

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - The Baghdad Conference in the Jordanian capital Amman wraps up its second meeting with a final communiqué in which participants call for boosting efforts to tackle regional challenges.

Their communiqué then urged efforts to implement the agreements they reached in the first session of the conference to support Iraq's security, stability and democratic process.

The participants in the conference also reaffirmed their support for Iraq in its fight against terrorism and condemned terrorism and extremism in all their forms.

The communiqué supported Iraq's efforts to achieve comprehensive development and its efforts to create economic integration. It underlined the resolve of the participants to work with Iraq across its many sectors, including energy, water, electricity, food security and health, transportation and infrastructure projects.

They discussed the consequences of regional and international crises on Iraq and the region and stressed that overcoming these crises requires comprehensive regional cooperation as well as serious and effective economic and political solutions. The communiqué said the conference shows the desire among participating countries to support Iraq's central role in boosting regional economic cooperation and promoting regional dialogue and that all this helps end tensions and establish constructive regional relations.

It noted that achieving economic development requires constructive regional relations based on the principles of good neighborliness, non-interference in internal affairs of regional countries and respect for international law.

## Iran Calls for...

FROM PAGE 1

The report also reveals that Afghanistan's ruling authorities have also failed to honor their commitments, especially as regards creation of an inclusive and elected government, Iravani said.

The senior Iranian diplomat added that the Secretary-General's report states that the Taliban have already taken certain positive steps, including measures aimed at fighting corruption, which can form the basis for a stable economic situation and its revival in the coming years.

Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the UN went on to note that while humanitarian aid is vital for Afghanistan, it is not a long-term solution and the country's economy should be given urgent priority.

Iravani said the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan should not be overlooked in light of other crises and conflicts.

"As we have emphasized many times, frozen [Afghan] assets belong to the nation and must be released unconditionally in order to help Afghanistan's economy," he said. "Instead of acknowledging responsibility for its irresponsible withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States unfortunately resorts to bogus and baseless reasons to justify its illegal actions, including continued freeze of Afghan funds, which is vital for the revival of the country's economy. Sanctions regimes should not hinder efforts to rebuild the economy," Iravani said.

He said Iran supports the efforts of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and its

contacts and interactions with the Taliban to help Afghan nation, especially in the field of increasing humanitarian responses and efforts to end economic problems.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has used its expertise and capacities to help the Afghan people overcome their problems, and has hosted millions of Afghans as a neighboring country," Iravani pointed out.

"We have stated time and again that Iran and other neighboring states should not take on the full responsibility of taking in Afghan refugees. Based on the principle of shared responsibility, other countries, especially countries that claim to be advocates of Afghans' human rights, especially women and girls, should accept refugees," the Iranian ambassador to UN said.

Iravani then warned against the presence of the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group and al-Qaeda-affiliated terror outfits in Afghanistan, stating that their activities pose serious threats to the peace and security of Afghanistan, its neighbors and the entire region.

He described the Afghan opium trade as another major problem, stressing that the current situation in Afghanistan will create a dangerous environment in which extremists, terrorists and drug traffickers will be able to either attack vulnerable people, or recruit them to advance terrorist goals.

The Taliban came to power shortly after the US-led allied forces made a chaotic and humiliating retreat from Afghanistan following two decades of military adventure in the country.

## U.S. Is Not Utopia...

FROM PAGE 1

The USA TODAY poll, meanwhile, found that "threats to democracy" ranked second at 12%, and immigration third at 10% on the list of issues that Americans are concerned about.

Five percent, including 8% of Republicans, put investigating the Biden administration as their biggest issue.



A group of House Republicans vowed to launch a series of investigations-- into Biden's withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, his administration's policies to control the southern border, alleged conflicts in the business interests of the president's son, Hunter, and more -- when they take control of the House of Representatives in January.

Their probe will begin to unfold next year, as the U.S. political calendar heads toward the 2024 presidential election, in which Biden said he currently intends to seek re-election.

A White House statement accused House Republicans of planning to go after Biden "with politically motivated attacks chock full of long-debunked conspiracy theories."

Of course the amount of dissatisfaction is more than what the survey has shown and there is a massive rift among Americans and this rift may lead to a big collapse of the country as many political analysts expect the decline of the arrogant U.S. and this will happen sooner or later.

There are many of such surveys in the U.S. that all of them show people are unhappy and the country is not any longer a dreamy land for the youth in the world to migrate to this struggling state.

Of course this condition is dominant in major Western countries as they are struggling with the high prices and high inflations and people in those countries live tough lives and they are no dreamy destinations for migration, either. Although some people mostly from African, South American and Asian countries seek better life in the Western countries and risk their lives to migrate to the U.S. and Western states like the UK and even sometimes they lose their lives, this condition will soon end after awakening of people in the world that the U.S. and the West are not Utopian lands to live and they are better to stay in their countries and build their own lands than migrating to the lands where they may have no better future than their own lands.

The U.S. will not be any longer the dream land for anyone in the world as the countdown for the full collapse of this arrogant country has begun and only time matters.

## Tehran Slams...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran's Foreign Ministry conveyed its strong protest to the French ambassador in Tehran over the adoption of the "interventionist" anti-Iran resolution at the time, saying the Islamic Republic of Iran regrets that France and some European countries are using the issue of human rights as a tool to pressure the Islamic Republic.

French President Emmanuel Macron even hosted an Iranian-American journalist being paid in Washington on a mission to fuel violence in Iran.

The European Union and some Western countries imposed sanctions on Iran over its approach toward the riots. Iran, in turn, announced retaliatory sanctions against institutions and individuals in the European Union due to their deliberate actions in support of terrorism and terrorist groups during the riots.

## Iranian Delegation...

FROM PAGE 1

The Indians have blamed the US sanctions imposed on Iran in 2018 for the slow pace of work in the port. That comes as India has secured a waiver from the sanctions for its specific activity in Chabahar.

The two countries are now in search of a broader agreement on Chabahar that could lead to a major increase in cargo transit via the port.

Experts say increased activity in Chabahar will facilitate trade between the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan, landlocked countries in Central Asia and with Russia.



## Barcelona to Host Opening Stages of 2023 Vuelta a Espana

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - The Vuelta a Espana will get underway in Barcelona for the first time in 60 years in 2023 with the first two stages raced in the Catalan capital, organizers announced.

The opening stage on August 26 will be a 14.6km team time-trial through the streets of the port city, and the following day, the peloton will cover 181.3km between Mataro and Barcelona, marked by two category climbs including the iconic Montjuic.

LICENCE HOLDER: SOKHAN GOSTAR INSTITUTE

**Switchboard:**  
(+98) (21) 44253448  
**Public Relations Tel:**  
(+98)(21) 44253450  
Editorial Board: 44253449  
**Public Relations Fax:**  
(+98)(21) 44253395  
**Advertising Department:**  
Tel/Fax:(+98) (21) 44253335-9/44253234  
**Website:**  
http://www.irannewsdaily.com

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## Serie A to Have Semi-Automatic Offside Detection

ROME (Dispatches) - Italy's football federation (FIGC) has authorized the introduction of SAOT technology, the semi-automatic offside detection system, from Jan. 27, it announced.

Serie A president Lorenzo Casini had said it would be launched on the first matchday after the World Cup break on Jan. 4 but the new date has been set after testing.

Serie A will be the first league to implement the offside system, the same one used at the World Cup in Qatar, starting from the 20th championship round.

# Antetokounmpo's 42 Points Propel Bucks Past Pelicans

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) -Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 42 points and grabbed 10 rebounds to power the Milwaukee Bucks to a 128-119 NBA victory over Zion Williamson and the New Orleans Pelicans.

Two-time Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo dominated in the paint, making 12 of his 17 shots from the floor and 17 of his 22 free throws.

The Bucks effectively limited Williamson, the New Orleans star forward who finished with 18 points, seven rebounds and seven assists.

Milwaukee's attention to Williamson opened the door for the Pelicans outside. Center Jonas Valanciunas drained seven three-pointers on the way to 37 points and CJ McCollum had six three-pointers and 31 points.

They helped New Orleans keep it close but it wasn't enough against a Bucks team that also had 30 points from Brook Lopez and 18 from Jrue Holiday.

Milwaukee led by as many as 18 in the fourth quarter. New Orleans cut the deficit to three on McCollum's basket with 1:32 remaining, but Holiday answered with a three-pointer and Lopez drove for a layup as Milwaukee pulled away again.

The East-leading Bucks improved to 22-8. The Pelicans, who were briefly atop the West earlier this month with a seven-game winning streak, suffered a fourth straight defeat.

Elsewhere, the Philadelphia 76ers squandered a 14-point lead early in the third quarter but held on to eke out a 104-101 overtime victory over the Toronto Raptors.

## Soccer Argentines Dance, Cry and Cheer In Streets

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Hundreds of thousands - millions by some estimates - of ecstatic Argentines flooded onto the streets of Buenos Aires on Tuesday to cheer the country's World Cup-winning soccer squad led by Lionel Messi after their plane landed in the pre-dawn hours.

The team arrived in the early hours at Ezeiza airport where despite it being around 3am (0600 GMT) thousands were waiting with banners, flags and flares, and howling in joy after 36 years since the country's last World Cup victory.

By around midday hundreds of thousands had congregated in downtown Buenos Aires, with major roads shut down for the parade. People held up banners of Messi and late icon Diego Maradona, played instruments or climbed lampposts or bus stops.

"It's crazy, it's incredible, it's the best thing that can happen to you in life," said Matias Gomez, 25, a metalworker.

"It is an enormous joy to see all these happy people, all together, one with the other, holding hands, giving each other hugs, kisses. We are all one today."

The Argentine capital has been in party mode since the dramatic victory over France in Sunday's final in Qatar, which has helped mask economic woes in the South American nation battling one of the world's highest inflation rates.

The victory, in a penalty shootout after a whipsaw game, made the country world champions for the first time since Diego Maradona hoisted the trophy in 1986 and the third in total. The government made Tuesday a national holiday to allow fans to celebrate the win.

The players, after spending a few hours at the Argentine Football Association (AFA) facilities near the airport, left on an open-top bus with signs saying "World Champions" and three stars to mark the country's trio of trophies.

The players danced and cheered with fans who circled the bus. Police were having to hold people back to allow the vehicle to move forward on its slow journey towards the center of town.



Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks shoots a shot during a game against the New Orleans Pelicans.



Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said he plans to stay at the Spanish club until his contract expires in June 2024 following reports of a possible move to the Brazilian national team.

MADRID (Dispatches) - Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said he plans to stay at the Spanish club until his contract expires in June 2024 following reports of a possible move to the Brazilian national team.

The Italian boss said he remains focused on his current role at Madrid as the team looks to defend their LaLiga, Spanish Super Cup and Champions League titles and prepare for the Club World Cup in February.

"I don't know what the future holds for me, I live day-by-day," Ancelotti told Italian Rai Radio 1 show.

"At the moment, I'm happy in Madrid, we have a lot of objectives for this season. I have a contract until June 30, 2024, and, if Real Madrid don't sack me before then, I'm not going to move."

The 63-year-old also praised the work of Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni after his side were crowned World Cup champions following their victory over France in the final.

"(Scaloni) did an extraordinary job and did not invent anything new: he put the players in place and gave them a good defensive organisation," Ancelotti added.

Ancelotti's Real Madrid will resume their season on Dec. 30, as they look to regain the LaLiga top spot, where Barcelona sit two points ahead.

the Sixers up for good on their way to a fifth straight win.

In Atlanta, the Hawks survived a late push from the Orlando Magic with Dejounte Murray delivering the game-winning free throws with 1.5 seconds remaining in a 126-125 victory.

Trae Young scored 37 points and handed out 13 assists, AJ Griffin added 19 points off the bench and Murray scored 17 as the Hawks ended the Magic's six-game winning streak.

Atlanta outscored Orlando 62-48 in the paint and led 124-112 with 3:05 to play.

Orlando put together an 11-0 scoring run and took a one-point lead with 3.8 seconds remaining, but Murray came through at the foul line.

In Cleveland, Donovan Mitchell scored 23 points to lead the Cavaliers to a 122-99 victory over Utah in his first game against his former team since the Jazz traded him in the off-season.

Cedi Osman scored 22 points off the bench and Jarrett Allen added 20 as seven Cleveland players scored in double figures on the way to their fourth straight win.

In Oklahoma City, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander drained a pull-up jump shot as time expired to lift the Thunder to a 123-121 victory over the Portland Trail Blazers, spoiling a milestone night for Damian Lillard.

Gilgeous-Alexander led all scorers with 35 points. Lillard led Portland with 28 and overtook Hall of Famer Clyde Drexler as the leading scorer in Trail Blazers history.

Drexler scored 18,040 points for the Blazers from 1983-95. Lillard came into the contest needing 21 to surpass him.

In Minneapolis, the Minnesota Timberwolves beat the disjointed Dallas Mavericks 116-106, with frustrated Mavs star Luka Doncic and coach Jason Kidd both ejected in the third quarter after arguing over calls.

# Bach Faces Dilemma Over Russian Athletes



Thomas Bach faces "the toughest decision of his presidency" as he weighs whether Russian and Belarus athletes should be allowed to compete in the 2024 Games, a senior former IOC executive has told AFP.

PARIS (Dispatches) - Olympics chief Thomas Bach faces "the toughest decision of his presidency" as he weighs whether Russian and Belarus athletes should be allowed to compete in the 2024 Games, a senior former IOC executive has told AFP.

The signs coming from bodies such as the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) and the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) in the past fortnight suggest athletes from Russia and its ally Belarus should be permitted to try and qualify for the Games in Paris.

The International Olympic Committee has agreed to "explore" a proposal allowing athletes from those countries to compete in international events in Asia.

Olympic authorities had banned them following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and those federations who have allowed athletes from those countries to take part have insisted that they do not display national emblems.

The argument given was that the events' integrity would be damaged by the athletes competing.

However, the IOC said this month that both the OCA and some International Federations (IFs) "on the Asian continent" believe "the reasons for the protective measures no longer exist".

The softening of their attitude enraged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who called Bach.

Zelensky claimed 184 Ukrainian athletes have died since the Russian invasion and called for the "total isolation" of Russia and its ally Belarus.

The IOC's former marketing chief Michael Payne — who was credited with overhauling the movement's brand and finances — said Bach faces a conundrum.

"It is probably the toughest decision that Bach is facing in his presidency," Payne told AFP. "He and the IOC are caught between a rock and a hard place."

Another former IOC marketing executive, Terrence Burns, an American who has since played a role in five successful Olympic bid campaigns, said one problem was that the Ukraine war had gone on for much longer than expected.

Burns said the change in the IOC's stance was not a "retreat or softening".

## F1 Drivers Barred From Political Statements Unless Approved

LONDON (Dispatches) - Formula One drivers will need prior written permission from the sport's governing body to make "political statements" from next season following an update of the International Sporting Code.

The 2023 version of the code, which applies to all series sanctioned by the International Automobile Federation (FIA), was published on the governing body's website with changes highlighted.

The FIA added a new clause regarding "the general making and display of political, religious and personal statements or comments notably in violation of the general principle of neutrality promoted by the FIA under its statutes."

Drivers who make such statements will now be in breach of the rules unless the FIA has granted previous approval in writing.

Mercedes' seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton, and now-retired four-times champion Sebastian Vettel, have been among those making political statements at races in recent seasons.

Hamilton, who has been an outspoken campaigner for human rights and diversity, wore a black T-shirt at the 2020 Tuscan Grand Prix with the words "Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor" on the front.

The shirt also had a photograph of the Black medical worker, who was shot dead in her Louisville, Kentucky, apartment by police officers, with "Say her name".

The FIA set out new pre- and post-race rules for driver attire after that incident.



Mercedes' seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton, and now-retired four-times champion Sebastian Vettel, have been among those making political statements at races in recent seasons.

## Federation Slams Hateful Racist Abuse of French Footballers

PARIS (Dispatches) - Several members of the France team that lost to Argentina in the World Cup final were subjected to "hateful" racist abuse on social media, the French Football Federation (FFF) said, adding it intended to file a legal complaint.

The abuse aimed at Kingsley Coman and Aurelien Tchouameni, who missed their penalties in the penalty shootout, echoed that received by three England players following the Euro 2020 final loss to Italy last year.

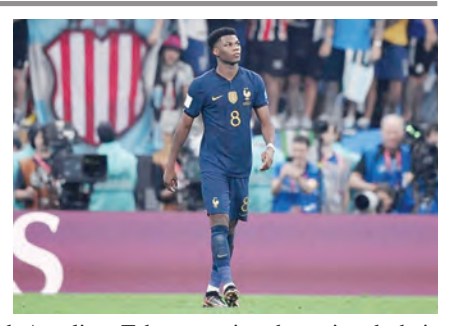
French football chiefs issued a strongly worded statement today castigating the abusers, who took to social media after a pulsating final which saw France come back from 2-0 and 3-2 down to take it to a penalty shootout.

The team gained much credit with the majority of French people during the tournament and around 50,000 greeted them in Place de la Concorde yesterday on their return from Qatar.

"At the end of the World Cup final several players from the France team were subjected to racist and unacceptably hateful remarks on social media," the FFF tweeted on the France football team Twitter account.

"The FFF condemns them and will lodge a complaint against the authors of those remarks." Coman — whose introduction in the second-half by coach Didier Deschamps sparked a French revival — has already had his club German champions Bayern Munich leap to his defence.

"FC Bayern strongly condemn the racist comments made towards Kingsley Coman," they tweeted.



The abuse aimed at Kingsley Coman and Aurelien Tchouameni, who missed their penalties in the penalty shootout, echoed that received by three England players following the Euro 2020 final loss to Italy last year.