

**IRAN NEWS Extends Its Condolences Over the Martyrdom Anniversary of Hazrat Fatemeh (AS), Daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Next Issue Will Hit the News-Stands on Wednesday**

# IRAN NEWS

**Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani on Sunday Voiced Iran's Condolences to the South African Government and Nation Over A Deadly Gas Tanker Explosion in The Suburbs of Johannesburg**

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## Top General Rebuts Claim On Iranian Drones In Ukraine War

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran's highest-ranking military commander dismissed allegations that Iranian drones have been used in the war in Ukraine as part of the enemy's "psychological warfare".

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cultural exhibition in Tehran on Sunday, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri said all the fuss made by the "world of arrogance" about the employment of Iranian drones in the Ukraine war is "part of the enemy's psychological warfare".

Apart from the fact that many of those reports might be false, they indicate the Islamic Republic of Iran's great influence, significance and high rating in the drone industry, the general stated.

Describing Iran as one of the world's top five powers in the drone industry, Major General Baqeri said the Iranian UAVs can carry out a broad range of missions with high accuracy and flight endurance.

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## Iran Urged to Improve Position in Global Transit

TEHRAN (MNA) - The head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) has stressed the need to increase efforts for improving the country's transit infrastructure in order to benefit from the recent developments in the region, the ICCIMA portal reported.

Speaking at a meeting of the Mashhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Transport Committee on Sunday, Gholam-Hossein Shafei mentioned the competitiveness of the transit market in the region, saying: "Competitors are creating alternative routes by spending huge amounts of money to replace Iran in the transit market."

Stating that Turkey has made several efforts to strengthen the Trans-Caspian Corridor for transiting goods between East and West, he added: "With the integration of the Trans-Caspian Corridor in the Silk Road Project, this corridor will be connected with the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor that passes through Iran."

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## Currency Rate to Be Stabilized Soon



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In his speech at Majlis open session, Minister of Economy said the currency market will be stabilized in the coming weeks.

The open session was held before Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Ali Saleh Abadi presented a report on foreign currencies in a closed session.

In his speech, Minister of Economy Ehsan Khandouzi pointed out the instability in the currency and dollar prices in the country in the past one or two months and said: "Until the beginning of the unrest in the country, the Central Bank had stabilized its policies regarding bank drafts and the integrated foreign exchange market, but as the riots started, the enemies tried to encourage the markets and businesses to strike and shut down."

He said: "When the enemy saw that its policy of shutting down and striking businesses failed, they did not sit idly by and tried to direct the instability to the banks, but with the approaches taken by the CBI, the currency market will stabilize in the coming weeks."

He noted that the ministry is not officially tasked in interfering the demand-and-supply for forex but he as a member of economic team of the government explains the reasons behind volatility in the forex market.

Khandouzi then pointed to the performance of his ministry since he took office and reiterated that the ministry is aimed to boost the value of the national currency and it has been successful because recent riots broke out in the country. He reiterated that enemies have tried to cause chaos in the forex market and banking system but with measures taken by the Central Bank everything is gradually coming to normality.

He once again reiterated that country has no problem in providing forex for its market needs and urged Majlis for finding a controlling tool for monitoring the market and fighting with speculators in the market and levying tax for capital gain will help to control forex market and any speculation, and the government is ready to implement the law.

Later the Governor of Central Bank Salehabadi addressing the Majlis said that the bank has plans for controlling the prices in the market and increasing the banking interest rate is one of them.

He urged all related bodies to cooperate with the bank for stability in the monetary market.

## Protests Held Across Morocco Against Normalization With Tel Aviv Regime

RABAT (Dispatches) - Moroccans have staged demonstrations across the North African country to reiterate their unwavering support for the Palestinian cause and voice outrage at the U.S.-sponsored normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel on its second anniversary.

People from all strata of society heeded a call by the "Moroccan Front in Support of Palestine and Against Normalization," took part in nationwide rallies in almost 30 cities, including in Casablanca, Oujda, Meknes, Tangier, Larache, Khemisset, Agadir, and Khouribga, to show solidarity with Palestinians and censure Morocco's normalization of ties with the Tel Aviv regime.

Protesters converged outside the Parliament of Morocco premises in the capital Rabat, where they chanted slogans in condemnation of the normalization, and demanded the reversal of the agreement.

The demonstrators waved national Palestinian flags, and held up placards that read "Normalization is treacherous" and "The struggle will carry on until the normalization agreement is revoked" in Arabic.

The participants also set fire to the Israeli flag in front of the legislature's building.

Tayeb Midhmadh, coordinator for the Moroccan Front in Support of Palestine and Against Normalization movement, which reportedly includes 15 political, union and human rights organizations, said the nationwide protests convey the message that the entire nation is fiercely opposed to normalization with Israel.

Israel and Morocco agreed on December 10, 2020 to normalize relations in a deal brokered with the help of former US President Donald Trump's administration, making the North African country the fourth Arab state to strike a normalization deal with the regime. The others were the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

Trump sealed the agreement in a phone call with Morocco's King Mohammed VI. As part of the agreement, the U.S. president agreed to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara region, which has been at the center of a dispute with neighboring Algeria.

Algeria cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in August 2021, citing "hostile actions."

The Algerian Foreign Ministry later rejected Trump's stance, saying the US decision "has no legal effect because it contradicts UN resolutions, especially UN Security Council resolutions on Western Sahara."

The Algeria-backed and pro-independence Polisario Front also rejected "in the strongest terms" Trump's stance on the disputed Western Sahara Desert region, stating that the former US president attempted to give Morocco the region "which does not belong to it."

## ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

## How Far Will Zionists' Crimes Continue?

For decades most freedom-loving people and nations, above them the Islamic Republic of Iran, have echoed the brutality and crimes of the Zionist regime but the world and mostly developed one has remained silent and passive to take any action against this regime and it has emboldened the Zionists and the question is how far this fake regime will continue its atrocities without getting any due punishment and response.

Crimes of this fake regime continue in a way that even Israelis themselves have admitted but the international bodies and world powers have chosen silence and ignorance regarding these crimes.

On Friday an Israeli rights group revealed that the Israeli regime is involved in whitewashing its crimes against Palestinians as only less than one percent of its forces, who are accused of harming Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip, are charged and put on trial.

In a report published on Friday, the Yesh Din rights group said the occupying regime has a "complete disregard for Palestinians' lives and encourages the continued use of the deadly trigger-happy policy that has claimed so many Palestinian lives."

The 13-page document said the Israeli military received 1,260 cases of offenses by its soldiers against Palestinians between 2017 and 2021, which included 409 cases of Palestinians killed by the regime's forces in that period.

Israel's military law enforcement authorities "systematically avoid investigating and prosecuting soldiers who harm Palestinians," the Yesh Din rights group said.

"In so doing, the military is failing to uphold its duty to provide Palestinian residents with protection against offenses committed by Israeli soldiers and commanders under the auspices of Israel's ongoing occupation and as an inevitable outcome of it," it added.

The Israeli military opened only 248 criminal investigations into offenses committed by Israeli soldiers, representing just over 20 percent of total cases. Of the investigations opened, 117 involved the killing of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers.

"The number of indictments filed against the implicated soldiers is minuscule," the report said. Only 11 cases over five years resulted in an indictment, and only three involved incidents where Palestinians were killed.

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## CBI Allows Banks to Issue 23% Deposit Certificate

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) has allowed domestic lenders to issue high-yield certificates of deposit (CD), a move that experts say is a prelude to increasing interest rates with the purpose of controlling inflation in the country.

A spokesman said in a tweet on Saturday that CBI's board of directors had authorized banks in Iran to issue CDs with a yield rate of 23%, adding that more details of the decision will be published on CBI's website later in the day.

The announcement came a day after figures by the Iranian government's statistics agency (SCI) showed that the country's annual inflation rate had risen by one percentage point to 45% in the calendar month to late December.

Foreign currency and gold prices have also risen to all-time highs in Iran, prompting criticism of the CBI and other financial departments of the government.

Economic news website Eghtesadnews said in a report that allowing the issuance of high-yield CDs by banks would be a prelude to increasing interest rates in Iran, a policy which could tame inflation.

Iran has some of the highest interest rates in the world with current rates being between 18% and 20%.

The EcoIran economic website had reported earlier this month about CBI plans to increase interest rate by up to five percentage points.

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## Iranian Fishermen Held Captive in Somalia Freed After 8 Years

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Fourteen Iranian fishermen who had been held captive by al-Shabab terrorist group in Somalia were freed. The fishermen were released following negotiations and measures by the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

All of them are from the southern port city of Chabahar. They were taken captive by al-Shabab terrorists in international waters near Somalia eight years ago.

The fishermen were set to land in Tehran on a flight from Mogadishu on Saturday night.

## Qeshm Island to Facilitate Investment by Chinese Firms

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Managing Director of Qeshm Free Zone Organization Afshar Fathollahi said on Saturday that plans are underway to facilitate investment by Chinese companies on the Persian Gulf Island of Qeshm, southern Iran.

He made the comment in a meeting with Chinese Ambassador to Iran Chang Hua in Qeshm.

Fathollahi said that Qeshm Island has a special geopolitical position and possesses various economic capabilities, which make it a good place for investment by foreign companies including Chinese firms.

The official referred to the opening of the Chinese consulate general in Bandar Abbas, the capital of Hormuzgan Province where Qeshm Island is located.

He said that the opening of the diplomatic mission helps bring economic benefits for Hormuzgan as well as Qeshm, with the island being capable of hosting an independent office to offer services to Chinese investors as it can apply regulations exclusive to free zones.

He noted that currently China is the only country which has signed a 25-year agreement for cooperation and this shows the special view of the system to this country which has been emphasized by the Supreme Leader.

The ambassador, on his part, said that the Chinese Embassy will put on its agenda plans to increase economic cooperation between the two countries.

He also said that China condemns Western sanctions against Iran, stressing that



Tehran-Beijing relations will continue regardless of the fate of the negotiations aimed at reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

He then pointed to the 25-year agreement on cooperation between Iran and China as well as sisterhood MoU which has been signed between Qeshm Island and Guangzhou of China which is aimed at broadening economic cooperation between the two states.

Chang reiterated that China is determined to pursue this seriously and China's Embassy in Tehran pursues implementation of agreements and it is expected after the COVID pandemic in China slows down, the condition is provided for the meeting of manager of Qeshm Free Zone Organization with his Chinese counterpart.

He also reiterated that China condemns the U.S. and West's sanctions against Iran and emphasized that the ties between Iran and China will continue regardless of the fate of the JCPOA talks and expressed hope the condition is facilitated for the presence of Chinese investors and companies on Qeshm Island.

## Health Official Warns of New Surge in Covid Cases

TEHRAN (IFP) - The head of the Iranian parliament's health commission has warned of a new surge in Covid cases in Iran.

In a letter to President Ebrahim Raisi, Hosseinali Shahriari called on officials to take precautionary measures to prevent a resurgence of the deadly virus.

He noted that the threat is real given the huge rise in the number of Covid cases in East Asia.

Reports coming out of China say half a million people a day are being infected with Covid-19 in a single Chinese city.

A news outlet operated by the ruling Communist Party in Qingdao cited the municipal health chief as saying that the eastern city was seeing "between 490,000 and 530,000" new Covid cases a day.

The coastal city of about 10 million people was "in a period of rapid transmission ahead of an approaching peak", Bo Tao reportedly said on Friday.

This month, China rapidly dismantled key pillars of its zero-Covid strategy, doing away with snap lockdowns, lengthy quarantines and travel curbs in a quick reversal of its hallmark containment strategy.

The Covid pandemic has killed over 7.5mn people worldwide since it started in 2019. The death toll in Iran stands at 145k.

## FM Welcomed Iraqi PM Offer For Talks With Egypt

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian says that at the Baghdad II Conference in Jordan, the Iraqi prime minister offered him talks between Iran and Egypt at political and security levels.

Amirabdollahian added that he welcomed the offer. The Iranian foreign minister also said Mohammed Al Sudani is supposed to take some actions within the next few weeks to that end.

Amirabdollahian maintained that this offer is in line with Iraq's regional role to strengthen dialog and cooperation.

The Baghdad II Conference in Amman happened several days ago.

At the meeting, the Iranian foreign minister outlined Iran's views about regional issues specially those pertaining to Iraq.

Iran and Egypt cut diplomatic ties in 1980 after Cairo admitted the former Shah of Iran and recognized Israel.

## Iran Seeking Expansion of Health Cooperation With Iraq

TEHRAN (IP) - The Director Gnarl of the Foreign Affairs Department of Iran's Ministry of Health says there are no limitations to the expansion of cooperation with Iraq in the health area.

Meeting with the Iraqi Deputy Health Minister for Technical Affairs, Hani Mousa al-Akabi, on Saturday, Iran's Mohammad Hossein Niknam stressed that the health issue was of significant importance for the two countries.

Al-Akabi said for his part: "Efforts are being made to provide better ways to expand bilateral cooperation with the Iranian officials regarding medicine, medical equipment and medical education."

He said that he traveled to Tehran to open new fields of health cooperation between the two countries.

Still, the Iranian Deputy Minister of Health for Healthcare Affairs, Hossein Farshidi, told Al-Akabi that workplaces' health, air pollution, and dust were among the issues that Iran was ready to cooperate over them with Iraq.

## Iranians to Mark 3rd Martyrdom Anniversary of Martyr Soleimani

TEHRAN (IP) - The ceremony to commemorate the third martyrdom anniversary of Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani will be held on on January 3rd at 4:00 pm local time in Tehran's Grand Mosalla with the presence of a large number of people and a speech is going to be delivered by one of the senior officials of the country.

Announcing the details of the event on Sunday, the Head of the Popular Headquarters of the commemoration of the third anniversary of the martyrdom of Lt. General Hajj Qassem Soleimani, Hamid-Reza Moghaddam-Far called Iran's top general as the symbol of Iranian and Islamic identity.

Moghaddam-Far further explained that Martyr Soleimani was seeking to elevate and promote the revolution to a higher level and that he considered the whole of Iran as the haram or shrine whose damage could have an impact on all holy shrines.

Iran's top anti-terror commander, Lieutenant General Soleimani, was martyred in a US drone strike directly ordered by Former US president Donald Trump near the Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020. The attack also martyred the deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis among others.

## French Police Urged to Show Self-Restraint In Dealing With Peaceful Protests

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Foreign Ministry has criticized the French police's heavy-handed crackdown on peaceful protests across the capital Paris, which followed an earlier armed attack in the city.

The ministry's spokesman, Nasser Kanaani, made the remark in a late Saturday statement in which he condemned the violent and racist attack that left a number of people dead in the French capital.

"There are three dead, one person in intensive care and two people with serious injuries, and the suspect, who was arrested, has also been injured, notably to the face," a French prosecutor told reporters in Paris at the scene of the incident on Friday.

The attacker, a 69-year-old man, who has admitted to be a racist and who has carried out previous attacks on migrants in France, also carried out the shooting attack on a Kurdish cultural center in the French capital. He opened indiscriminate fire at a restaurant facing the Kurdish center and the adjacent hair salon as well.

According to the authorities, he had recently been freed from detention while awaiting trial for a saber attack on a migrant camp in Paris a year ago.



"The Islamic Republic is greatly concerned about the risk to lives of people, especially Muslims, minorities, and migrants," Kanaani said.

The Iranian diplomat then urged the French law enforcement forces to exercise self-restraint while dealing with peaceful protesters. He also condoled with the families of the attack's victims.

Kanaani emphasized that the French government has a political background

of adopting discriminatory policies towards minorities and migrants, and its track records are marred with many cases of violent treatment of protesters.

Between November 2018 and January 2019, at least 12 people died during the French security forces' crackdown on the Yellow Vest protests against living and economic conditions across the European country.

The Iranian spokesman then noted that "impartial investigations into the Paris incident could shed light on its various aspects."

On Saturday, Clashes broke out for a second day between the French police and Kurdish protesters angry at the killing of three members of their community by the gunman.

## Tehran, Doha Discuss Transportation Cooperation

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian and Qatari officials held a meeting on expansion of transportation cooperation.

Qatari Ministry of Transport officials, headed by Acting Assistant Undersecretary for Land Transport Affairs Hamad Essa Abdulla, met with a visiting delegation from Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development led by Deputy Minister Dariush Amani.

The two sides discussed enhancing bilateral cooperation in the fields of transportation, especially issues related to bilateral land transportation activities and services in the meeting, Financial Tribune reported.

## Implementing Biggest Conservation Reservoir With Wastewater Treatment at KSC

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The land operation of the project for construction of conservation reservoir and recycling with wastewater with capacity of 350,000 cubic meters and with goal of managing efficient water consumption at Khorasan Steel Complex Company (KSC) ends.

According to the public relations of Khorasan Steel Complex Company, with implementing the first phase of this 350,000-cubic meter reservoir, the insulation and completion of the project started in order to both create possibility for industrial wastewater treatment and recycling and provide one of the complementary links of wastewater treatment project of the town of Neishabour.

Head of monitoring the green space of the company announced the news and said that with implementing this project of pond for conserving water which has been unprecedented in the industries of the province the possibility for conserving, treatment and recycle of over 3000 cubic meters of wastewater per day inside the industrial site will be provided without considering the amount of wastewater resulted by the Neishabour urban wastewater system.



## VLCC "Nasha" to Be Overhauled at ISOICO

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - One of the biggest oil tankers of the world with capacity over 2m barrels of oil entered the dry dock of Iran Shipbuilding and Offshore Industries Complex Company (ISOICO) for overhaul.

According to reports, Nasha VLCC (a very large crude carrier) is a vessel with the size of 332 meters of length, 58 meters of width and 31 meters of height belonging to National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC) and it can be loaded with 300,000 tons and it was guided to the dry dock of ISOICO for the overhaul.

Repair of electromotor, input, output and main pipes of the vessel, painting the ship hull and sandblasting are of the major repairs of Nasha which are to be conducted at the ISOICO

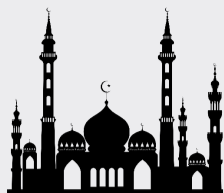
The caretaker of the big vessels group of the company said that all required actions for the repair of the VLCC will be based on the domestic technical and scientific capabilities with using home-made equipment.

Ali Azizi noted that 350 people directly and over 1,000 people indirectly will be involved in the process of this overhaul.

He also praised NITC for its trust and handing over the overhaul of the super tanker to ISOICO and reiterated that the cost of overhaul in the company will be 35% less than in its foreign rivals.







PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:04
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:17
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:42
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:12

90. Aaron had already, before this said to them:  
 "O my people! ye are being tested in this:  
 for verily your Lord is ((Allah)) Most Gracious; so follow me and obey my command."  
 91. They had said: "We will not abandon this cult,  
 but we will devote ourselves to it until Moses returns to us." Surah 20. Ta-ha (90 - 91)

## Gov't Halts Gasoline Exports Amid Rising Domestic Demand

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - An Iranian Oil Ministry official says the country has halted taking new orders for exports of gasoline as domestic demand for the fuel rises to all-time highs.**

Jalil Salari, who serves as deputy oil minister for fuel production and distribution, said on Saturday that a domestic gasoline consumption of more than 100 million liters per day is not consistent with Iran's demographic patterns of demand.

"Considering the current circumstances our policy is to respond to the demand (for gasoline) in the country," Salari said in response to a question by the ILNA news agency about Oil Ministry's future gasoline exports plans.

The statement is the first admission by Iranian officials in recent months about a halt to the country's fuel exports.

Authorities had warned over the past months that rising demand for gasoline and



diesel fuel would force Iran to resume imports more than decade after it declared self-sufficiency in motor fuel production.

Salari said Iran is trying to boost the technical aspects of its fuel distribution systems so that fuel is delivered to motorists in the country only based on the mileage they drive.

The senior Oil Ministry official had said on Thursday that more than 10 million liters of fuel are being smuggled out of the country every day mainly because there is a massive gap in prices between Iran and its neighboring countries.

## 10m Tons of Commodities Traded in a Month on IME

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) in last Iranian calendar month of Azar witnessed trade of 10,931,107 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$3b on its physical market.



According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on both domestic and export pits of its oil and petrochemical trading floor, trade of 1,791,743 tons of commodities valued at nearly \$991m.

The IME's customers purchased on this floor 526,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 491,023 tons of bitumen, 419,853 tons of polymeric products, 157,696 tons of chemicals, 120,500 tons of lube cut, 41,000 tons of sulfur, 23,788 tons of oil, 9,632 tons of petroleum products, 1,200 tons of insulation and 1,050 tons of feedstocks.

Furthermore, the exchange saw trade of 9,133,701 tons of commodities worth more than \$2b on its metals and minerals trading floor.

Items traded on this floor included 4,592,219 tons of cement, 2,199,000 tons of iron ore, 1,784,395 tons of steel, 340,000 tons of sponge iron, 131,650 tons of zinc, 31,175 tons of aluminum, 24,731 tons of copper, 2,000 tons of cast iron, 750 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 100 tons of lead, 36 tons of precious metals concentrate and 272 kg of gold bars.

It's worth noting that the IME also traded 13,686 vehicles on its automobile trading floor.

Last was the IME's side market on which the exchange traded 5,649 tons of commodities

## Cooperative Co. Innovates a Strong Natural Antibiotic

IRAN MEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The invention of the "product and production process of natural medicinal supplement formulation of honey with propolis extract" was registered in the name of a cooperative company.

According to the Iran Chamber of Cooperatives, Iman Mahdavian, CEO of Nik Andishan Gharb Karon Cooperative Company, said: "Propolis is the most potent antibiotic in its nature and one of the best natural medicines in the world, which plays an essential role in increasing body's immune system against all kinds of microbes."

He continued: "Propolis is one of the bee products, which the bee prepares from the combination of the gum of birch trees, Tabrizi, and coniferous fruit trees, as well as from its own secreted substances such as saliva, pollen, wax, and digestive enzymes, it is used for sterilization and disinfection of the hive, as well as protection against the entry of cold and pathogens."



About the nutritional and vitamin value of this product, he said: "Propolis is rich in vitamins, bioflavonoids, enzymes, and low amounts of elements (14 elements, especially zinc and iron), and the main active ingredients found in propolis are flavonoids, phenolics and are terpenes."

Pointing out that this cooperative company has made a lot of effort to produce this product, he said: "Bee propolis is considered a unique natural medicine due to its wide range of functions."

Mahdavian added: In 1996, Greenway at the University of Oxford identified 150 distinct compounds in propolis, and more recent investigations have led to the identification of 30 other compounds.

He noted: "This substance is anti-bacterial, anti-viral, anti-fungal, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer and has immune-modulating effects that can be used to treat asthma, allergies, arthritis, and joint abnormalities, eczema, and dermatitis, ME (viral fatigue syndrome), viral infections including HIV and even cancer."

## National Knowledge-Based Companies Involved in "Mes Inno" in Shahr Babak

The Conference on Innovation and Technology in Shahr Babak Copper Complex was held with the conclusion of six cooperation agreements between Shahr Babak Copper Complex and the country's knowledge-based companies, as well as appreciation of the creative employees of Shahr Babak Copper Complex. According to the public relations office of Shahr Babak Copper Complex, the Mes Inno (Copper Innovation) Conference was held on December 18-20 in six fields, including technological needs and technology trends, education and culture, reforming the structure and determining the strategy of the organization, communication with the knowledge base network, business development of the town of Shahr Babak and development of the copper value chain. Many knowledge-based companies from Tehran, Isfahan, Yazd and Kerman provinces were present in this conference. The closing ceremony of the conference was accompanied by appreciation of the creative and innovative employees of the Shahr Babak Copper Complex in different departments and signing a memorandum of understanding and the signing of a covenant. At the end of this great event on innovation and technology ecosystem, our six cooperation agreements were signed between Shahr Babak Copper Complex and Pardis Technology Park, Mostafa Science and Technology Foundation, Patent Center, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Vice-Chancellor of Science, Technology and Economy of Knowledge Foundation and research funds which were present in the conference and the covenant of efforts to develop innovation and technology was signed by the ecosystem actors. Holding specialized panels in the field of industry and mining, an exhibition on the capabilities of knowledge-based companies related to the field of copper, signing a memorandum of understanding and linking Shahr Babak Copper Complex to the research council of IMDRO, meeting of the chairman of the board of directors and the CEO of the National Iranian Copper Industries Company (NICICO) with knowledge companies as well as holding of B2B meetings were of the important programs and items of this event in Shahr Babak.





# Twenty-Two Killed in Fire At Nursing Home in Russia



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - A fire erupted overnight in a private illegal nursing home in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, killing 22 people, Russia's investigative committee said.

In a video released by the emergency services, a long row of emergency vehicles lined up outside the burning building, as firefighters tackled flames which sent plumes of smoke into the night sky.

Images released by emergency services showed the building later completely burned out.

Russia's investigative committee -- which investigates major crimes -- said it opened a probe into causing death by negligence.

# Eastern Libyan Leader Announces Final Chance for Elections



BENGAZI (Dispatches) - The Libyan National Army of eastern commander Khalifa Haftar announced "a final opportunity" to draw up a road map for elections, Libyan al-Hadath TV reported, a year to the day after rival factions agreed to hold the polls.

Many Libyans believe their political leaders are unwilling to find a way out of the endless political logjam because elections could push them all from power.

"The General Command (of LNA) announces a final opportunity through which it will draw a road map and hold elections," Haftar was quoted by the TV channel as saying.

# Zelensky Blasts Russian "Terror" After Kherson City Shelled



KHERSON (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky blasted Russian "terror" after shelling on Christmas Eve left at least eight dead and 17 injured in Kherson city, which Kyiv's forces recaptured in November.

Despite Russia's retreat from the southern port city, Kherson remains within reach of Moscow's weaponry and under constant threat.

"Kherson. In the morning, on Saturday, on the eve of Christmas, in the central part of the city," Zelensky said on Telegram, publishing images of the attack and calling it "killing for the sake of intimidation and pleasure."

"It is the real life of Ukraine... The world must see and understand what absolute evil we are fighting against," Zelensky said.

On the day marking 10 months since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a string of shelling rained down around a busy market, where a fire erupted.

AFP journalists at the scene saw several bodies lying on the ground in the street, including a man killed in his car. Another man, whose car had been blown up, had severe head injuries.

"At least eight civilians were killed and 17 were injured," the Kherson region's prosecutor's office said on social media. "Several people were hospitalised with serious injuries," it added.

Cars also caught fire in a residential area of the city after shelling, the emergency services said. The fires were put out after 40 minutes but the number of dead and injured was still being "established", they said on Telegram.

Russian President Vladimir Putin in September announced the annexation of four regions in the east and south of Ukraine, including Kherson, after Moscow proxies held referendums there -- denounced as a sham by Kyiv and the West. His troops never fully controlled any of the territories and last month were forced to retreat from the Kherson region after a months-long Ukrainian counteroffensive.

But Kherson has been regularly bombarded ever since, with a heavy toll on civilians and the power supply to the city.

On Friday alone the Kherson region was targeted by 74 Russian strikes, leaving five dead and 17 injured, according to regional authorities.

Meanwhile Russian President Putin told Russia's defense industry chiefs to up their game to ensure that the Russian army quickly got all the weapons, equipment and military hardware it needed to fight in Ukraine.

Putin, who has cast Russia's war in Ukraine as part of an historic effort to push back against what he says is excessive Western influence over global affairs, made the comments during a visit to Tula, a center for arms manufacturing.

"The most important key task of our military-industrial complex is to provide our units and frontline forces with everything they need: weapons, equipment, ammunition, and gear in the necessary quantities and of the right quality in the shortest possible timeframes," said Putin.

"It's also important to perfect and significantly improve the technical characteristics of weapons and equipment for our fighters based on the combat experience we have gained."

Putin said this week that the Russian army had to learn from and fix the problems it had suffered from in Ukraine, promising to give it whatever it needed to prosecute a war nearing the end of its 10th month.

Since tens of thousands of Russian troops swept into Ukraine on Feb. 24 in what Putin called "a special military operation", Moscow has ceded around half of the territory it initially seized.

# Kurds Clash With Police in Paris



PARIS (Dispatches) - Clashes broke out for a second day in Paris between police and members of the Kurdish community angry at the killing on Friday of three members of their community.

Cars were overturned, at least one vehicle was burned and small fires set alight near Republic Square, the traditional venue for demonstrations in the city where Kurds earlier held a peaceful protest.

Clashes broke out as some demonstrators left the square, throwing projectiles at police who responded with tear gas. Skirmishes continued for around two hours before the protesters dispersed.

A gunman carried out the killings at a Kurdish cultural centre and nearby cafe on Friday in a busy part of Paris' 10th district, stunning a community preparing to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the unresolved murder of three activists.

Police arrested a 69-year-old man who the authorities said had recently been freed from detention while awaiting trial for a sabre attack on a migrant camp in Paris a year ago.

Following questioning of the suspect, investigators had added a suspected racist motive to initial accusations of murder and violence with weapons, the prosecutor's office said on Saturday.

After an angry crowd clashed with police on Friday afternoon, the Kurdish democratic council in France (CDK-F) organised a gathering on Saturday at Republic Square.

Hundreds of Kurdish protesters, joined by politicians including the mayor of Paris' 10th district, waved flags and listened to tributes to the victims.

"We are not being protected at all. In 10 years, six Kurdish activists have been killed in the heart of Paris in broad daylight," Berivan Firat, a spokesperson for the CDK-F, told BFM TV at the demonstration. She said the event turned violent after some protesters were provoked by people in a passing vehicle who displayed a Turkish flag and made a nationalistic gesture.

# Argentina President Rejects Supreme Court Ruling

Buenos Aires (Dispatches) - Argentina's leftist President Alberto Fernandez has sparked a battle with the country's top court and something of a legal crisis after he said he would reject a ruling it made to give a larger proportion of state funds to the city of Buenos Aires.

The South American country has a system to regulate how state funds are distributed between the country's regions, including the capital city area, which is controlled by a conservative mayor and had been pushing for a larger slice.

In a ruling on Wednesday the Supreme Court said the level should be raised from 1.4% of the total pool of funds to 2.95% after it was cut by government decree during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The city is the wealthiest and most populous area of the country.

Fernandez, in a statement late on Thursday, said the ruling was unjustified and pledged to ignore it.

"It is an unprecedented, incongruous, and impossible-to-enforce ruling," he said, calling the decision politically motivated ahead of general elections next year and adding that it would hurt the other provinces.

Fernandez, who has seen his popularity slide and whose ruling coalition was badly defeated in midterm congressional elections last year, said that the state would "challenge the members of the Supreme Court" and seek to have the ruling revoked.

His remarks sparked off a backlash on both sides, some agreeing with the president that the ruling was unjustified and others saying the rejection of a Supreme Court decision set a dangerous precedent and undermined the justice system.

"The president decided to break the constitutional order, completely violate the rule of law and attack democracy," said Buenos Aires city mayor Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, who is seen as a potential 2023 presidential candidate.

# Taliban Ban Women From Working for Domestic, Foreign NGOs

KABUL (Dispatches) - The Taliban government ordered all foreign and domestic non-governmental groups in Afghanistan to suspend employing women, allegedly because some female employees didn't wear the Islamic headscarf correctly. The ban was the latest restrictive move by Afghanistan's new rulers against women's rights and freedoms.

The order came in a letter from Economy Minister Qari Din Mohammed Hanif, which said that any NGO found not complying with the order will have their operating license revoked in Afghanistan. The letter's content was confirmed to The Associated Press by the ministry's spokesman, Abdul Rahman Habib.

The ministry said it had received "serious complaints" about female staff working for NGOs not wearing the "correct" headscarf, or hijab. It was not immediately clear if the order applies to all women or only Afghan women working at the NGOs.

More details were not immediately available on the latest Taliban ban amid concerns that it could be a stepping-stone to more restrictive measures against women in Afghanistan.

Also Saturday, Taliban security forces used a water cannon to disperse women protesting the ban on university education for women in the western city of Herat, eyewitnesses said. The Taliban rulers on Tuesday banned female students from attending universities effective immediately.

Afghan women have since demonstrated in major cities against the ban, a rare sign of domestic protest since the Taliban seized power last year. The decision has also caused outrage and opposition in Afghanistan and beyond.

According to eyewitnesses in Herat, about two dozen women were heading to the provincial governor's house Saturday to protest the ban, chanting: "Education is our right," when they were pushed back by security forces firing the water cannon.

Video shared with the AP shows the women screaming and hiding in a side street to escape the water cannon. They then resume their protest, with chants of "Disgraceful!"

One of the protest organizers, Maryam, said between 100 and 150 women took part in the protest, moving in small groups from different parts of the city toward a central meeting point. She did not give her last name for fear of reprisals.

"There was security on every street, every square, armored vehicles and armed men," she said. "When we started our protest, in Tariqi Park, the Taliban took branches from the trees and beat us. But we continued our protest. They increased their security presence. Around 11 a.m. they brought out the water cannon."

A spokesman for the provincial governor, Hamidullah Mutawakil, claimed there were only four-five protesters.



# India Opposition's Unity March Against Hate Enters Capital



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Members of India's main opposition Congress party and thousands of supporters walked into the capital as part of a 5-month-long cross-country "unity march" seeking to challenge what they say is a "hate-filled" version of the country under the Hindu nationalist government.

Joined by thousands of party workers and senior leaders, the march led by Rahul Gandhi, an opposition leader of the Congress party and scion of the influential Gandhi family, entered New Delhi after passing through eight states. Flanked by his mother, Sonia Gandhi, and sister, Priyanka Gandhi, the 52-year-old leader said that the motive of his long walk across the length of the country is to revive the once-mighty Congress party and showcase the "real India" unlike the "hate-filled version" offered by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"They will spread hate. We will spread love," Gandhi said, referring to Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

Gandhi set off for the "Bharat Jodo Yatra," or "Unite India March," in Kanyakumari, a coastal town that is the southernmost tip of India, on Sept. 7. The march, which is broadcast live on a website, is expected to traverse 3,570 kilometers (2,218 miles) and cross 12 states before finishing in Indian-controlled Kashmir by February.

Passing through hundreds of villages and towns, the march has attracted farmers worried about rising debt, students complaining about increasing unemployment, civil society members and rights activists who say India's democratic health is in decline. Along the way, Gandhi has also shed his formerly clean-shaven look for a thick beard and slept in shipping container cabins during night halts.

In multiple impassioned speeches during the march, Gandhi has often targeted Modi and his government for doing very little to address the growing economic inequality in India, the rising religious polarization, and the threat posed by China. The armies of India and China are locked in a bitter standoff in the mountainous Ladakh region since 2020. Despite over a dozen rounds of talks at military, political and diplomatic levels, the standoff has protracted.

Modi's party has dismissed Gandhi's march and speeches as a political gimmick to regain his "lost credibility."



## Kyrgyz Villages struggle To rebuild after fighting

AK-SAY (Dispatches) - Combing through the charred ruins of a primary school in the village of Ak-Say in Kyrgyzstan, teacher Nasipa Nishanbekova picks up dusty exercise books filled with children's handwriting.



For the past three months, the school has lain abandoned after it was almost completely destroyed during border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September which killed more than 100 people.

"We fled on the morning of September 15. By the time we came back a few days later our school was burnt out," Nishanbekova told AFP in the village in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region, which lies just a few dozen metres from the Tajik border.

The fighting between the two impoverished former Soviet republics, which have been locked in border disputes since gaining independence in 1991, was the worst in decades.

Tensions have risen recently as Russia, which has traditionally been the mediator between the two, is preoccupied with its campaign in Ukraine.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share hundreds of kilometres of disputed border and -- to make things more complicated -- there are also various Tajik and Uzbek enclaves within Kyrgyz territory.

The result has been constant tension over access to transport routes and resources, particularly over water in farming regions.

During the clashes in September, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan accused each other of attacks and incursions in dozens of border areas.

A ceasefire is now in place and the two countries say they are holding negotiations over the border, with few tangible results so far.

Reconstruction has been slow in the destroyed villages, where there are fears of a new flare-up.

At the Ak-Say school, the sounds of hammers, cement mixers and pneumatic drills are everywhere. In the rubble, where children still come to play, lies a pile of chairs, a broken vase and a history book about the Soviet Union.

Through the school's broken windows, the cold seeps into the corridors as winter takes hold in a village surrounded by 3,000-metre (9,840-foot) mountain peaks.

In the nearby settlement of Kapchygai, which has been almost entirely destroyed, the main road leads to a field in Tajikistan.

Abdimalip Masaliev says he "lost everything" after fleeing his home in September.

"When I came back (the Tajiks) had stolen everything," the former veterinarian says, standing in the ruins of what was once his bedroom.

Masaliev brings plov -- a traditional rice-based dish with vegetables and meat -- to the workers rebuilding his house.

The bright brick structure contrasts with the charred foundations of his garage. Bullet holes still mark the walls of a shed which miraculously stayed standing.

Kyrgyz authorities admit that reconstruction has been slow, but teams of workers are now coming to the area from across the country to try to finish the work as soon as possible.

"I came in solidarity," says Kuvatbek Yuldashiev, standing by a cement mixer and chewing on naswar -- a type of tobacco popular in Central Asia.

The emergencies ministry in Batken region said 140,000 people were evacuated in September. Four thousand people had still not been able to return to their homes by the beginning of December.

## "Big Challenges": Choosing a Nuclear Career in Japan

KORIYAMA (Dispatches) - The 2011 Fukushima disaster made working in the nuclear industry unappealing for many Japanese students, but a new government push to revive the sector could start to shift the narrative.



It's a welcome development for some young professionals, who have experienced the stigma sometimes associated with their job.

Chisato, who declined to give her family name, studied chemistry and radiation biology as a student, looking for a deeper understanding of the Fukushima disaster than what she read in anxiety-inducing media reports.

"I just wanted to know the facts, in a neutral way -- especially about the effects of nuclear radiation on the human body," the 28-year-old told AFP at a recent international conference for young nuclear professionals.

Still, when she applied for a job in 2017 at the operator of the stricken Fukushima plant, she was "surprised" when the interviewers asked what her parents thought of the role.

She later learned that other candidates had pulled out of the recruitment process because of family disapproval. She took the job, despite the concerns of her parents.

"They asked me if I would work at Fukushima Daiichi, and I explained to them that it wouldn't affect my health," she said.

The 2011 disaster was triggered by a massive tsunami that overwhelmed generators at the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

The resulting radiation released forced the evacuation of people in a 20-kilometre radius (12-mile radius), and while no-go zones now account for around 2.4 percent of Fukushima prefecture, many people chose not to return to their former homes.

In the decade after the disaster -- the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl -- the number of atomic science students in Japan fell by more than a quarter, according to the education ministry.

But now the government is hoping to revitalise the sector, aiming to reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels, and move towards carbon neutrality.

After working in Japan for three years, Chisato moved to Europe for a new job in the nuclear industry.

She returned home for the International Youth Nuclear Congress, a biennial forum for students and early-career professionals in the sector.

The November event, the first held in Japan, convened in a symbolic location, Koriyama in northeastern Fukushima region. Several hundred Japanese and foreign attendees gathered to network and hear speeches on the industry's future.

"We must be motivated," enthused Kota Kawai, president of a Japanese youth network for the nuclear energy industry, and a co-chair of the congress.

"We have to express what we think, what we do, to others," he told AFP at the event.

"After the Fukushima accident, students got interested in how we can overcome big challenges. Many students got interested in the decommissioning field."

He insists the drop in students entering the field shouldn't be overinterpreted, as numbers vary each year, but acknowledges there are some gaps.

"The problem is there are very few people who know how to construct nuclear power plants," he said.

Japan took all its nuclear reactors offline immediately after the 2011 disaster, and the majority remain out of action. But with the nation facing sky-high costs for imported energy because of the war in Ukraine, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has called for more plants to be restarted.



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## Indonesia, BP Sign 20-Yr Contract Extension for LNG Operations

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia has extended by 20 years a production sharing contract (PSC) with BP and its partners for Berau, Muturi, and Wiriagar working areas in West Papua, government officials and the company said. The extension would allow BP and its partners to operate on the fields until 2055, BP said in a statement. The working areas supply to Tangguh liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant. BP is trying to increase Tangguh's production capacity from the current 7.6 million tons per annum (MTPA) to around 11.4 MTPA by adding a new, Train-3 plant which is expected to come on stream in March 2023, SKK Migas said earlier this year.



## Sanctions Could Cut Russia's Baltic Oil Exports by 20%

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Exports of Russia's flagship Urals crude blend from Baltic Sea ports may fall by up to a fifth in December, after a Western price cap and an EU embargo on Russian oil took effect, according to traders and Reuters calculations.

Traders said Russia has been unable to fully redirect Urals exports from Europe to other markets, notably India and China, and it had struggled to find enough suitable vessels.

According to traders' data and calculations made by Reuters, Urals exports from the Baltic Sea ports will probably fall to around 5 million tons this month from 6 million tons in November. Some estimates are as low as 4.7 million tons.

The European Union, G7 nations and Australia introduced a \$60 per barrel price cap on Russian oil, effective from Dec. 5, on top of the European Union's embargo on imports of Russian crude by sea and similar pledges by the United States, Canada, Japan and Britain.

The cap allows non-EU countries to import seaborne Russian crude oil, but prohibits shipping, insurance and re-insurance companies from handling cargoes of Russian crude around the globe, unless it is sold for under \$60.

In December, Urals crude has been sold at deeper discounts, and dominant buyer India has bought barrels at well below the \$60 price cap.

The impact of the sanctions on Urals loadings from Russia's Baltic ports has been aggravated by a shortage of non-western tonnage, a weak export economy and moderate demand for the grade in Asia, especially in China.

Pipeline monopoly Transneft failed to fill some of the available loading slots because of a lack of bids from producers, traders said. Some other slots were postponed or cancelled.

When U.S. officials first discussed the idea of capping Russian oil export prices, the aim was to squeeze Russia's oil revenues, which have so far remained high.

Achieving that is complex as the retreat of buyers lowered the price of Russian crude, but added to price volatility on international markets because of possible supply disruption.

Russia has said it will not abide by the cap even if it has to cut production.

As Russia minimized the use of services provided by Western shipping and insurance companies, oil exports outside Western countries continued after Dec. 5 with no respect to the price cap.

But the number of countries willing to buy Urals in December fell to four - Bulgaria, China, India and Turkey - and in some cases, Urals has been sold to export markets at below overall production cost including local levies, industry sources said in December.

Global oil prices are around \$40 a barrel below this year's peak, and Russia's market participants are increasingly talking about a need for significant production cuts to support prices and boost the efficiency of the oil industry.

## U.S. Economy Grows 3.2% in Q3

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Shrugging off rampant inflation and rising interest rates, the U.S. economy grew at an unexpectedly strong 3.2% annual pace from July through September, the government reported Thursday in a healthy upgrade from its earlier estimate of third-quarter growth.

The rise in gross domestic product — the economy's output in goods and services — marked a return to growth after consecutive drops in the January-March and April-June periods.

Still, many economists expect the economy to slow and probably slip into recession next year under the pressure of higher interest rates being engineered by the Federal Reserve to combat inflation that earlier this year reached heights not seen since the early 1980s.

Driving the third-quarter growth were strong exports and healthy consumer spending.

Investment in housing plunged at an annual rate of 27.1%, hammered by higher mortgage rates arising from the Fed's decision to raise its own benchmark rate seven times this year.

Thursday's GDP report was the Commerce Department's third and final look at the July-September quarter. The first look at the fourth quarter comes out Jan. 26. Forecasters surveyed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia expect the economy to grow again the last three months of the year — but at a slower, 1% annual rate.

In its previous estimate of third-quarter growth, issued Nov. 30, the Commerce Department had pegged July-September growth at an annual rate of 2.9%. Behind the upgrade to Thursday's 3.2% was stronger growth in consumer spending, revised up to a 2.3% annual rate from 1.7% in the November estimate.



## Egypt's Economic Growth to Decline to 4.5% in FY 2022-23

RIYADH (Dispatches) - Egypt's economic growth is expected to decline to 4.5 percent in the fiscal year 2022-23 from 6.6 percent in 2021-22, affected by the Russia-Ukraine war overlapped with persisting COVID19-related disruptions, according to the World Bank's Egypt Economic Monitor report.

However, the growth is forecast to inch up after that as the country continues to push ahead with macroeconomic stabilization and structural reforms, the report stated.

While critical sectors continue to thrive, especially gas extractives, benefiting from the higher global prices and the resilient communications, agriculture and construction sectors, other activities are expected to continue performing below potential, including manufacturing.

During the fiscal year 2022-23, inflation is projected to surpass the Central Bank of Egypt's target range between 5 and 9 percent and remain in double digits, following the impact of depreciation, imported inflation, supply bottlenecks, and the potential continuation of adjustments to fuel prices.

Fiscal consolidation is also expected to decelerate in 2022-23 due to higher inflation rates alongside the government social mitigation package.

While the social measures announced by the government in 2022 will offer mitigation to an extent, poverty rates are still forecast to rise as inflation gets reflected in real incomes.

Moreover, the state's spending on health and education is expected to drop to 1.3 percent and 2 percent of the gross domestic product, respectively, disclosed the World Bank report.

## S. Korea Growth Outlook Revised Down to 1.6% in 2023

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea has revised down its 2023 economic growth outlook amid rising worries about a global economic downturn.

Real gross domestic product, adjusted for inflation, was forecast to expand by 1.6% in 2023, according to the Economy and Finance Ministry.

It was down 0.9 percentage points compared to the estimate unveiled six months earlier and lower than the outlooks of 1.8% from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and 1.7% from the Bank of Korea.

This year's growth outlook was slightly lowered to 2.5% from the previous 2.6%.

The ministry said the global economic growth would weaken sharply next year on rapid interest rate hikes in major economies that may crimp global demand and trade as well as the manufacturing industry.

It noted that South Korea's export and investment would face difficulty next year on the back of the global economic slump, lower semiconductor demand, worsened funding market conditions and weaker housing demand.

Private consumption was expected to recover in 2023 on higher demand for face-to-face services.

However, the recovering pace would be modest due to larger debt-servicing burden for households, the faltering job market and lower asset prices.

Export, which accounts for about half of the South Korean economy, was predicted to decline 4.5% next year after increasing 6.6% this year. Import was forecast to shrink 6.4% in 2023 on energy prices fall and soft demand for intermediary and capital goods.

Outlook for Dubai crude, South Korea's benchmark, was set at US\$88 (RM390) per barrel in 2023, lower than the estimate of US\$96 (RM426) in 2022.

The current account surplus was expected to fall from US\$22bil (RM98bil) in 2022 to US\$21bil (RM93bil) in 2023.

Private consumption, another growth engine of the economy, was projected to gain 2.5% in 2023 after soaring 4.6% in 2022 on the pent-up demand amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Facility investment was forecast to diminish 1.8% in 2022 and 2.8% in 2023, owing to growing economic uncertainties at home and abroad.

Investment in the construction sector was predicted to slump 3% in 2022 and 0.4% in 2023 amid the sluggish real estate market and higher borrowing costs.

Headline inflation was expected to slow down from 5.1% in 2022 to 3.5% in 2023 due to lower energy prices and weaker global demand.

## Bulgaria in Talks With Turkey On Long-Term Gas Deal

SOFIA (Dispatches) - Bulgaria's interim energy minister is in Istanbul on Friday for talks he hopes will lead to a deal this month on long-term access to liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in neighboring Turkey and the transit of the gas to its border.

The chief executives of Bulgaria's state gas company Bulgargaz and gas network operator Bulgartransgaz are also taking part in the talks as Bulgaria seeks new sources of gas.

Russia, which covered over 95% of the Balkan country's gas needs, cut off deliveries to Bulgaria in April after Sofia refused to pay for them in roubles.

An energy ministry spokesman said interim minister Rossen Hristov and the chief executives flew to Istanbul late on Thursday.

Hristov told reporters before leaving that talks between Bulgaria's Bulgargaz and Turkey's Botas were advancing fast and he hoped a deal could be reached this year.

"We are holding talks to reserve capacity of one billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas per year on Turkish LNG terminals and for the transit of the gas through Botas network to our border," Hristov said.

"This is very important, because we have enough offers for LNG cargo shipments. What we do not have is somewhere to off-load them," he said.

"We are firmly committed to cutting our dependence on Russia," he added.

Bulgaria wants to book capacity at Turkish terminals through 2036 to import 1 bcm of LNG gas a year. The capacity for 2023 will be smaller, as Bulgargaz has already booked slots for several months at a Greek LNG terminal.

A capacity and transit deal with Botas would allow Bulgargaz to seal its own gas import contracts with U.S. or European LNG producers and cut reliance on Russian gas, Hristov said.

To try to obtain better prices, he said Bulgargaz may also join Botas' already advanced talks with major U.S. and European LNG producers.

At present, the European Union country imports 1 bcm of gas a year from Azerbaijan and covers the rest of its needs, about 3 bcm per year, through LNG imports from neighbouring Greece.

Under the energy ministry plans, Bulgaria will cover a third of its gas needs with LNG gas imports through Turkey, one third through the LNG terminal near the Greek city of Alexandroupolis which should become operational in 2024 and one third with Azeri supplies.

## Malaysian Economy to Start Moderating Going Into 2023



KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - The Malaysian economy is expected to start moderating in the months ahead in 2023 impacted by global economic uncertainty, said the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM).

Looking at the smoothed long-term trend in October 2022, the Leading Index (LI) started trending below the 100.0 point mark, the department said in a statement today.

Chief statistician Datuk Seri Mohd Uzir Mahidin said that Malaysia's LI rose 0.4 per cent to 109.6 points in October 2022 versus 109.2 points in the same month last year, a rise of 0.4 index points.

"This increase was supported by the number of housing units approved and real imports of other basic precious and other non-ferrous metals," the statement said.

However, on a monthly basis, the LI recorded a negative 0.3 per cent in October 2022 against a negative 1.3 per cent in September 2022, the statement said.

This trend was driven by the Bursa Malaysia Industrial Index (0.6 per cent), real imports of semiconductors (0.3 per cent), real money supply M1 (0.1 per cent) and expected sales value for manufacturing (0.1 per cent).

LI is a predictive tool to anticipate economic upturns and downturns in an average of four to six months ahead.

"As for the current economic position, the Coincident Index (CI) recorded an increase of 6.5 per cent year-on-year to 120.5 points in October 2022 (October 2021: 113.1 points).

"On the other hand, the monthly change in CI recorded a decrease of 0.6 caused by the decrease in the Industrial Production Index (-0.4 per cent), capacity utilisation for manufacturing (-0.3 per cent) and real contributions of the Employees Provident Fund (-0.1 per cent)," the statement said.

The CI measures current economic activities and is often analysed with leading and lagging indexes.



## Tehran to Host Int'l Water, Wastewater Industry Expo

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's 18th International Water and Wastewater Exhibition is scheduled to be held from December 30 to January 2, 2023, at Tehran Permeant International Fairgrounds.

As reported, 164 domestic and foreign companies are going to participate in this year's exhibition which is going to be opened by Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian.

The U.S., China, Italy, and Canada are among the countries whose representatives are

going to showcase their latest products and services in this exhibition.

The event covers a variety of areas and commodity groups including metal pipes and fittings, industrial valves, pumps, and rotary machines, industrial water treatment, dams, and hydroelectric power plants, education, irrigation and drainage, water transmission lines, polymer pipes, and fittings, chemical materials, paint and coatings, household water treatment, household faucets, leak detectors, blowers and vacuums and measuring systems.



## Russia Explores Buying Stranded Jets From Western Leasing Firms

DUBLIN (Dispatches) - Russian airlines have held exploratory talks with at least one major Western leasing firm about using state funds to buy some of the more than 400 aircraft stranded in Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, according to documents and sources.

The proposal, which would need EU approval and test the scope for compromise in an economic war between Moscow and the West, could lower a multibillion-dollar bill facing lessors and insurers and allow Russian airlines to secure formal ownership of planes at a potentially steep discount.

A Russian aviation source said the proposal was still being discussed, but that some Russian officials were pessimistic about it getting European Union approval.

An EU official familiar with discussions on the issue declined to comment.

Before what Moscow calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine, Russia was a major market for aircraft lessors, who bought jets from Boeing (BA.N) and Airbus (AIR.PA) and leased them to Russian airlines who wanted to avoid the up-front cost and inflexibility of buying planes themselves.

But after Western sanctions forced lessors to cancel these contracts, Moscow refused to allow the planes to leave, stranding almost \$10 billion worth of aircraft in Russia and triggering claims by lessors against their own insurers.

Russian airlines continue to operate many of the jets, but some have struggled to secure replacement parts.

Details of talks between Russian airlines and one lessor emerged in an Irish court case where major lessors are suing insurers, including Lloyd's of London, to ensure payment of their claims.

AerCap, SMBC Aviation Capital and Avolon, the world's largest lessors, declined to comment on whether they were involved in talks on payment for jets from Russian airlines or their insurers.

EU sanctions, which cover Ireland where the majority of leased aircraft are registered, banned the supply of aviation technology to Russian entities and set a deadline of March 28 to terminate contracts.

There has been no suggestion that any of the lessors, who operate in a highly regulated sector, have infringed sanctions in any way, with industry figures saying they were exploring all options in an unprecedented situation.

Russian state backing for the talks was demonstrated in an Aug. 30 letter from its Transport Ministry to 23 airlines.

"On the purchase of aircraft of foreign lessors, please submit information ... on each aircraft that it is proposed be bought out using the resources of the National Wealth Fund," the letter said.

It also asked for "information on the ... existence of agreement with lessors and insurance companies on a plan for the repurchase of the aircraft".

The ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

World No. 2 lessor SMBC said in a Sept. 15 letter released to the Irish High Court that it had spoken to Aeroflot and Aeroflot's insurer AlfaStrakhovanie.

"AlfaStrakhovanie advised that it had been approached by Aeroflot to explore the possibility of making ex-gratia payments ... to SMBC AC in settlement of the insurance claims," said the letter, a copy of which was made available to Reuters and other media by the court.



The payment would be "in return for the transfer of ownership of the aircraft to the Russian insurer or its nominee," the letter, which was first reported by Irish publication The Currency, added.

SMBC, which took an impairment of \$1.6 billion for 34 jets, said in the letter that on Sept. 2 AlfaStrakhovanie offered it \$644.2 million for 17 aircraft leased to Aeroflot, minus \$82 million already paid in deposits and reserves.

That was "considerably less than the aggregate Agreed Values" for the aircraft, SMBC said in the letter.

SMBC also said in the letter that it had been approached by Elbrus Insurance Brokers LLC on behalf of Russian airline NordStar and, separately, by airline S7 to discuss "potential claim solutions."

Aeroflot, AlfaStrakhovanie, Elbrus, NordStar and S7 did not respond to requests for comment.

SMBC in its letter said it was involved in lobbying the EU to facilitate a deal, specifically a derogation from Article 3C of Regulation 833/2014.

Such a derogation "would enable EU operating lessors to seek authorisation to transfer ownership of aircraft formerly leased to Russian lessees or their Russian insurers," it said.

Lessors could argue agreement would boost safety by allowing access to spare parts, said Ross Denton, head of international trade at law firm Ashurst.

But one Western finance official said any deal would face major legal and diplomatic hurdles and talks may be premature.

"Right now, it would be such a flagrant contravention of sanctions - why would governments all of a sudden agree to this?" the senior official said on condition of anonymity.

### How Far Will...

FROM PAGE 1

"Even in the rare cases in which soldiers are convicted of offenses against Palestinians, the military courts hand down extremely lenient sentences," Yesh Din said, adding that soldiers prosecuted for killing Palestinians were too often sentenced to military community service only, and for short periods of time.



The indictments that were filed were not in the interest of justice, but rather to "whitewash crimes" committed by the Israeli army and to "allow the military to maintain the illusion that it is a law-abiding system," the report underlined.

Elsewhere in the report, the Yesh Din rights group said the figures, however, fail to represent the true scale of instances of violence towards Palestinians as many Palestinian victims have little interest or confidence in filing complaints with the Israeli military.

Palestinians were also said to fear retribution from the Israeli military if they file complaints, which could include having their work permits denied or attracting further violence.

According to the report, if Palestinians do end up filing a complaint, the system is often "inaccessible," and complaints can be transferred with great delay.

The "system is flawed, the numbers don't lie," the Israeli right group said. "The military isn't doing its job regarding enforcing the law when soldiers are involved."

The report stressed that the Israeli forces' increasing immunity against trials and investigations could prompt Palestinians to turn to the International Criminal Court for justice.

Israeli forces have recently been conducting overnight raids and killings in the northern occupied West Bank, mainly in the cities of Jenin and Nablus, where new groups of Palestinian resistance fighters have been formed.

Since the start of 2022, Israeli forces have killed at least 199 Palestinians, including 47 children, in the West Bank, occupied East al-Quds and the Gaza Strip.

According to the United Nations, the number of Palestinians killed by Israel in the occupied West Bank this year is the highest it has been in 16 years.

Local and international rights groups have condemned Israel's excessive use of force and "shoot-to-kill policy" against Palestinians.

Suppose such crimes even in a lower scale had been committed by countries like the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Syria, Iraq or Russia. The Westerners would have definitely cried foul and they would have resorted to any condemnation or even sanctions to punish but when it comes to the criminal regime of Israel, they all become dumb and forget their responsibilities as the so-called human-rights supporters.

But the question is how far this crime of the Zionist will continue and the answer is just in hands of Palestinians themselves and Muslim nations who support Palestinians. As long as Palestinians and Muslim nations remain indifferent and passive, the Zionists will continue their crimes and the only way to stop this atrocity is unity among Palestinians and Muslims in confronting with this fake regime which is fully supported by the big powers and the West.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been the main and true supporter of the Palestinians and it has proved it both in words and actions and now it needs Palestinians and other Muslim nations to show some courage to stop the Zionists from its atrocities of killing innocent people and occupying the lands.

### Top General...

FROM PAGE 1

He referred to the admission made by a former commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) that US superiority in air power has ended for the first time after the Second World War because Americans are not able to project aerial power where there are Iranian drones, adding, "In fact, this is a big and humiliating confession by the Americans. It is true that they have lost such aerial superiority."

The general emphasized that Iran will proceed with plans to promote its drone capabilities, saying, "In accordance with the Islamic Republic's issues and guidelines, we will cooperate with other countries in the drone industry."

In comments earlier this month, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said Ukrainian experts have failed to produce any evidence for Kiev's claim that Russia has employed Iranian military drones in the war in Ukraine. "In the technical meeting, the Ukrainian side did not present any document about Russia's employment of Iranian drones in the war with that country (Ukraine) and shelved it for the next sessions," the general said.

Dismissing the accusation that Iran has supplied UAVs for use in the Ukraine war, the minister said such rumors are based on unfounded claims. He added that Iran and Russia have been involved in military cooperation since long ago and have not begun to form such interaction for the utilization of Iranian drones in the Ukraine war.

## Iran-Oman Marine Tourism Line to Resume Work

TEHRAN (IP) - The Director General of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Department of Hormozgan Province, Southern Iran, reported that the Iran-Oman marine tourism passenger line would resume its activity.

Mohammad Mohseni said that the development of the marine tourism line between Oman and Iran is to go forward with regard to cultural and social affinities, with a focus on Hormozgan province and Musandam province of Oman.

Mohseni said that the development of the Iran-Oman marine tourism passenger line would pave the way for further investments of the two countries' businessmen.

Iran-Oman relations in the last few decades have always been based on mutual respect and interests, despite the tensions in the Persian Gulf and the US efforts to intensify Iranophobia in the region.

Omani officials believe that close relations with Iran are based on realism and consider Iran a great neighbor to the country.

The two countries have no dispute over territorial and border issues.

## Iran, Taliban Discuss Immigrants Issues

TEHRAN (MNA) - Taliban's acting deputy minister of refugees Abdul Rahman Rashid and Iran's deputy envoy to Kabul Gholamreza Najjari discussed the situation and issues of Afghan immigrants.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the progress and results of the quadrilateral meeting regarding Afghan immigrants that was recently held in Tehran, the situation of immigrants, and future measures to provide more facilities for them.

Thanking Iran for hosting the Afghan refugees, Abdul Rahman Rashid called on Tehran to continue to assist and pay attention to resolving the existing problems of immigrants in different fields.

Bilateral technical committees are supposed to be formed in this regard for prioritizing the major problems of the Afghan immigrants and solving them in the next step, according to the Taliban official.

Gholamreza Najjari, for his part, also considered the formation of the mentioned committees effective. He assured that Tehran will try to provide better conditions for the immigrants.

Iran has generously hosted and provided the necessary assistance to the Afghan people for more than 40 years, despite the little support of the international community and the inhuman sanctions of the United States.

## Japanese Homeowners Face an Unfamiliar Headache: Higher Mortgages

TOKYO (Dispatches) - When salaryman Takayuki Nakamura bought his Tokyo home last year, he got a floating-rate mortgage at a rock-bottom 0.35% and an assurance from the real estate agent that rates weren't going anywhere. After this week, he's not sure.

"On Tuesday, all of a sudden I'm hearing the interest rates are going up," said the 48-year-old father of two. "It's kind of obvious that I'm going to end up paying more."

The Bank of Japan whipsawed global financial markets when it said on Tuesday it would allow rates to rise a little more, signalling a potential end to ultra-low rates and easy money after decades of trying to revive the world's No.3 economy.

Like Nakamura, many Japanese fear they may

eventually start paying more for mortgages. While any increase is likely to be modest, it would be a further injury to households worn down by years of flat wages.

"Even a small increase would have a big impact on consumer incomes," said Masaaki Kanno, chief economist at Sony Financial Group and a former central bank official.

Fixed-rates are seen rising first, because the central bank allowed 10-year yields to creep up. That means new borrowers could start paying more than they might have a year or two ago.

The government-backed Japan Housing Finance Agency offers 35-year, fixed-rate mortgages as low as 1.65%. That compares with 1.33% in December last year and is more than four times as high as some variable mortgage loans.

## Iran, Syria Review Prospect for Trade Cooperation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Prospect for Tehran-Damascus trade relations was reviewed in a meeting in Syria, according to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA).

The meeting was held with participation of members of the Iran-Syria friendship group and Syrian Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection Amro Salem, SANA reported on Saturday.

The two sides discussed possibilities for having joint cooperation and implementing investment projects. Also, the two officials reviewed ways to remove obstacles to cooperation.

The two countries' officials, further, agreed to hold intensive meetings at the beginning of the New Year in order to work on a mechanism for developing programs in line with widening commercial, investment, and economic relations.

Earlier, Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous held a meeting with the chairman of the Iran-Syria friendship group Hassan Akhtari, stressing the importance of developing cooperation in line with serving mutual interests.

### Iran Urged to...

FROM PAGE 1

Shafei further referred to the recent changes in the world including the war between Russia and Ukraine, saying: "In this period, due to the change in the global transport routes, new opportunities have been provided for Iran and we should take full advantage of such opportunities."

The Islamic Republic has been taking serious measures for the development of its railway network as well as its ports and shipping infrastructure in order to encourage more countries to join the project.

Using the capacities of the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), Iran will be able not only to expand the volume of trade with Russia and the countries of the region, it can also gain a huge share of the mentioned countries' annual transit.

Currently, Russia has proposed to take part in some railway projects in Iran in order to accelerate the development of the Islamic Republic's railway network along the mentioned route.

The row between Europe and Russia over the Ukraine war, which resulted in harsh sanctions being imposed on the country made Russia look for new ways for distributing its goods across the world, especially in Asia and mainly through the INSTC.

According to official data, one of the major advantages of INSTC is that the cost of transporting goods through this corridor is cheaper by 30 percent. It also halves the time it takes to transport Indian goods to Russia via the Suez Canal.

Iran can use this transit route to distribute European commodities in the shortest possible time and at a lower cost than other routes to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.



## Shahid Afridi to Head New Pakistan Selection Committee

KARACHI (Dispatches) - Former captain Shahid Afridi will head the new interim selectors committee for the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), officials said Saturday, the latest change since the team was thrashed by England. The PCB underwent a major overhaul on Thursday when a 14-member management committee took over after Ramiz Raja was sacked as chairman. The main committee, headed by former chairman Najam Sethi, also dismissed chief selector Mohammad Wasim before appointing Afridi.

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## England 1966 World Cup Winner Cohen Dies Aged 83

LONDON (Dispatches) - England's 1966 World Cup-winning right back George Cohen, has died aged 83, his former club Fulham announced. Cohen made his international debut in 1964 and went on to represent his country 37 times, playing a key role in England's only World Cup triumph when they beat West Germany 4-2 after extra time at Wembley in the final. He was one of only three surviving members of that World Cup-winning squad, along with Bobby Charlton and Geoff Hurst.

## Nets Ties Brooklyn-Era Mark With 8th Straight Win

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Kyrie Irving came alive in the fourth quarter when he scored 14 of his 18 points as the Brooklyn Nets fended off a comeback attempt by the Milwaukee Bucks and extended the NBA's longest active winning streak to eight games with a 118-100 victory in New York.

The eight-game run matches the longest for the Nets since they moved to Brooklyn ahead of the 2012-13 season. Facing the NBA's best team, the Nets won for the 12th time in 13 games and improved to 10-1 in their past 11 home games. Brooklyn led for the final 42:56, by as many as 23 in the third quarter and made enough plays down the stretch.

Kevin Durant led the Nets with 24 points and ended Friday at 26,484 points -- 12 behind Tim Duncan for 15th on the NBA's all-time scoring list. Nic Claxton made his first nine shots and added 19 points for the Nets, who shot 49.5 percent and earned their third double-digit win of the streak.

Giannis Antetokounmpo led all scorers with 26 points but Milwaukee lost consecutive games for the second time this season. Lopez added 23 for the Bucks, who shot 44 percent. Jrue Holiday contributed 18 on a night when Milwaukee missed 28 of 37 3-point tries.

### Mavericks 112, Rockets 106

Luka Doncic scored a season-high 50 points and sank a clinching 3-pointer with 19 seconds remaining to carry visiting Dallas to a win over Houston.

Doncic added eight rebounds, 10 assists and three steals while shooting 17 of 30 overall and 6 of 12 from behind the arc. He scored 32 points in the second half while finishing one point shy of his career high. The Mavericks won their second game in a row while the Rockets closed a seven-game homestand with five consecutive losses.

### Hornets 134, Lakers 130

P.J. Washington scored 24 points and LaMelo Ball and Terry Rozier added 23 apiece as visiting Charlotte shot a season-best 55.3 percent from the field and held on for a victory over Los Angeles.

Kelly Oubre Jr. contributed 19 points for the Hornets, who won for just the second time in their past 11 games, with both wins coming in the first four games of the current six-game road trip.

LeBron James scored 34 points and



Austin Reaves put up 20 as the Lakers lost their third consecutive game and fell to 1-3 since star forward Anthony Davis sustained a right foot injury. The team announced Friday that Davis would be out indefinitely. James scored at least 30 points for the sixth consecutive game.

### Hawks 130, Pistons 105

Trae Young and Dejounte Murray combined for 52 points and Atlanta defeated visiting Detroit, handing the Pistons their fifth straight loss.

Young scored 26 points and had 13 assists for his 16th double-double of the season. Murray also scored 26 points, his best outburst since his return from missing five games with a sprained ankle. Clint Capela returned after missing three games and recorded his 17th double-double of the season with 10 points and 10 rebounds. Bogdan Bogdanovic came off the bench to score 19 points.

The Pistons got 23 points from Bojan Bogdanovic, 17 from Killian Hayes, 15 from Jaden Ivey and 13 points and eight rebounds from Jalen Duren.

### Celtics 121, Timberwolves 109

Jaylen Brown scored 36 points and Jayson Tatum added 30 as Boston snapped a three-game skid with a win over visiting Minnesota.

Brown scored 23 of Boston's 33 fourth-quarter points, the most in a single period in his NBA career. Al Horford produced 17 points (largely due to five 3-pointers) and 11 rebounds for the Celtics. Derrick White scored 18 points, and Marcus Smart added 10 assists.

Anthony Edwards led the Timberwolves with 30 points. D'Angelo Russell reached 8,000 career points during his 21-point, 10-assist performance for Minnesota. Jaden McDaniels added 17 points, Naz Reid had 14 and Jaylen Nowell finished with 13.



## Rashford Signs New Man United Deal

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United attacker Marcus Rashford has signed a contract extension keeping him at the club until 2024, the English outfit announced.

The new contract on a reported £250,000-a-week plus bonuses, makes him the highest-paid English player in the Premier League, according to the Independent newspaper.

The 25-year-old agreed a new deal alongside Diogo Dalot, Fred and Luke Shaw with the four players' current contract up at the end of the season.

The England forward came through United's academy and was part of his country's squad that reached this month's World Cup quarter-finals.

"We want to develop, we want to support those players and we want them to keep in our process," United coach Erik Ten Hag said.

"We want to construct a team for the future, so for longer years, and those players have to be part of it," he added.

Portugal right-back Dalot, 25, joined the 20-time league champions in 2018, 27-year-old England left-back Shaw arrived four years earlier and Brazil midfielder Fred, who turns 30 in March, moved from Shakhtar Donetsk four seasons ago.

Ten Hag's side, fifth in the table, return to Premier League action following the World Cup break on Tuesday as they host Nottingham Forest.

## Kroos Says Messi Award Not Deserved

LONDON (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema were more deserving of winning the 2021 Ballon d'Or award than Lionel Messi, according to Real Madrid midfielder Toni Kroos.

Messi won football's top individual accolade for a record-extending seventh time on Monday largely thanks to his success at international level with Argentina.

The 34-year-old played a key part in Argentina's Copa America success, contributing to nine of the 13 goals his side scored as he ended his long wait for an international trophy.

He has had a rather more mixed year at club level, having scored 28 goals in 29 games for Barcelona before completing a shock transfer to Paris Saint-Germain in August.

Messi has netted just four times in his first 11 games for PSG, but he did enough to finish ahead of favourite Robert Lewandowski for his latest Ballon d'Or triumph.

Lewandowski finished second despite scoring 53 times in 42 games this year so far - 15 more than any other player in Europe's top five leagues across all competitions.

Chelsea and Italy midfielder Jorginho was third, followed by Benzema - who has 34 goals this year - in fourth and N'Golo Kante placed fifth.

Five-time winner Ronaldo finished sixth - the first time he has failed to make the top three in 11 years - but Kroos insists his former team-mate, as well as current colleague Benzema, have impressed more this year than Messi.

"[Messi's] award is absolutely not deserved," Kroos said on his Einfach mal Luppen podcast. "There is no doubt that Messi, with Cristiano, has been the player of the last decade, but this year there should've been others ahead of him."

"For me, Karim would have been the number one if you were really looking for the best individual player of the last year. I can see from close quarters what an outstanding footballer he is."

"When I see how many decisive goals Cristiano has scored lately - Manchester United are still in the Champions League thanks to him alone - then, in my eyes, Cristiano would have also come before Messi."



## Ranieri Returns to Coach Cagliari After 31 Years



manager with Cagliari from 1988 to 1991, leading the team from Serie C to Serie A in successive seasons before joining Napoli.

"I'm going back to Cagliari. I've always known it, I declared it even then, at the time of my departure," the 71-year-old said on the club's website.

ROME (Dispatches) - Cagliari have appointed the much-travelled Claudio Ranieri as head coach on a contract until June 2025, the Serie B club announced 31 years after he left the role.

The Italian came to prominence as a manager with Cagliari from 1988 to 1991, leading the team from Serie C to Serie A in successive seasons before joining Napoli.

"I'm going back to Cagliari. I've always known it, I declared it even then, at the time of my departure," the 71-year-old said on the club's website.

"Cagliari made me understand that maybe I could make it in my job, I had found all the elements that helped me in those three years: fans, players, managers, we were all one."

"In these days you have helped me make this decision, which was not easy for various reasons. We are bound by mutual respect and love, many beautiful memories."

Ranieri is best known in England for guiding Leicester City to a fairytale Premier League title in 2016, but he failed to work his magic at Watford as they earned only seven points in three months before he left the job in January.

Ranieri, who has also managed several clubs in Italy including Juventus, AS Roma and Inter Milan as well as teams in Spain and France, takes over a Cagliari side who are in 14th place in the second tier after being relegated last season.

## Nadal Confident He Will Be Competitive In Australia

LONDON (Dispatches) - Rafa Nadal is aiming to successfully defend his Australian Open title at the first Grand Slam of the year in January after an injury-plagued 2022 despite arriving a bit short of his peak level, the Spaniard said.

The 36-year-old has been training in the last few days after a Latin American exhibition tour alongside Norwegian third-ranked Casper Ruud.

"I arrived on the 3rd (of December). I spent almost a week doing nothing, which was the right thing to do," Nadal told Spanish newspaper AS.

"I did a bit of physical training, I think I'll need a few days in Australia. I'm aware that I'm a little bit short, but I'm confident that I'll be able to pick up the level I need to be competitive in Australia."

Nadal, who has won a record 22 Grand Slam titles, announced earlier this week the addition of Argentine Gustavo Marcaccio to his staff, an unexpected but necessary move after the departure of veteran coach Francis Roig after 18 years in his team.

"I turn to Gustavo because Francis decided to take a different path. I'm not very much in favour of making big changes. Francis made a decision, and above all I love him as a friend, practically family," Nadal said.

Nadal will travel to Sydney on Monday to play in the United Cup mixed tournament in preparation for the Australian Open.



## Viera Slams Martinez's Stupid World Cup Celebrations

LONDON (Dispatches) - Crystal Palace manager Patrick Vieira believes Aston Villa goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez's "stupid" celebrations have tarnished Argentina's World Cup final win.

Martinez was a key figure in Argentina's victory over France.

He made a fine save to deny Randal Kolo Muani in extra-time and then denied Kingsley Coman in the shoot-out in Qatar as Argentina won a thrilling final. But the keeper was then seen making a crude gesture after winning the golden glove trophy for the best goalkeeper at the tournament.

Then, during Argentina's victory parade in Buenos Aires, he was seen holding a baby doll with its face covered by a photograph of France star striker Kylian Mbappe, who scored a hat-trick in the final but still finished on the losing side.

Vieira, a World Cup winner with France in 1998, was unimpressed by Martinez's antics.

"Some of the pictures I saw from the Argentinian goalkeeper. I think, take away a little bit what Argentina achieved at the World Cup," said Vieira a pre-match press conference ahead of Palace's Premier League match against London rivals Fulham.

"I don't think they really needed that."

"You can't control sometimes people's emotional decisions. But that was a stupid decision, I think, from Martinez to do that," he added. Martinez will return to Birmingham next week, with Villa manager Unai Emery intending to talk to the 30-year-old about his controversial behaviour.

"When you have big emotion, sometimes it is difficult to control it," Emery said.

