

Health Ministry Announced on Wednesday That the Number of Deaths From the COVID-19 Pandemic in Iran Stayed Unchanged At 144,677 With Another Zero Death Day Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

TEDPIX, the Main Index of Tehran Stock Exchange (TSE), Gained 70,917 Points to 1.647m on Wednesday, as Over 17.579b Securities Worth 103.724 Trillion Rials (About \$357.6b) Were Traded at the TSE

VOL. XXVIII, No. 7673 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

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FM Delivers President Raisi's Message to Oman's Sultan

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

MUSCAT - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian held a meeting with Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq in the Omani capital of Muscat on Wednesday.

During the meeting, Amirabdollahian presented to the Sultan an official message from Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

The top Iranian diplomat is also planned to hold meetings with other senior Omani officials later on Wednesday.

Amirabdollahian had told reporters upon arriving in Muscat on Tuesday that he will deliver a key message from Raisi to the Omani Sultan.

He said that Tehran and Muscat have always been engaged in discussions on international, regional and bilateral issues.

"Oman is a center of regional dialogue on a diversified range of issues and high-ranking Omani authorities have always played a considerable role in relation to regional crises," said the Iranian top diplomat. He said his Muscat visit will be an opportunity to review ties between Iran and Oman and to follow up on bilateral agreements that need to be speeded up.

Amirabdollahian said his discussions in Muscat will also cover crises in Yemen, Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Iran to Produce New Heavy Water-Based Radiopharmaceuticals

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran unveiled plans to develop new homegrown radiopharmaceuticals on the basis of heavy water.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet session on Wednesday, Mohammad Eslami said one of the plans on the agenda is to produce new medicinal radiocompounds on the basis of heavy water for the diagnosis and treatment of diseases.

He noted that one million patients receive treatment every year with the use of radiopharmaceuticals.

Eslami said the fact that the sole Iranian company producing radiopharmaceuticals has become subject to foreign sanctions indicates that those imposing sanctions do not place any value on the lives of people.

A few days ago, Eslami said Iran aims to become a global hub for manufacturing deuterium drugs.

"In a not too distant future we will turn into a hub for manufacturing drugs based on deuterium which are good alternatives to chemical drugs and have lower side effects in comparison (to those drugs)," he stated.

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Iran Among World Leading Agricultural Producers



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Latest statistics published by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) show that Iran stood among the world's top producers of many agricultural products in 2021, Tasnim news agency reported.

Based on the FAO data, the Islamic Republic was the world's second-biggest producer of pistachios and the third-largest producer of dates, honey, and walnuts in the world.

Iran's pistachio production stood at 135,000 tons in 2021, placing the country in second place after the United States with 523,000 tons of production. Turkey was the world's third-biggest pistachio producer in the said year.

Iranian farmers produce 1.3 million tons of dates last year, making the country the third-largest producer of this product in the world after Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Honey production in Iran is 77,000 tons in the year under review, which was the highest honey production in a country after China and Turkey.

The Islamic Republic was also ranked third in the world in the production of walnuts with 386,000 tons of annual output. China stood in the first place and the United States was second.

Iran was also ranked third in terms of peach production after Turkey and Uzbekistan. Over 323,000 tons of peaches were produced in Iran in 2021.

In terms of Kiwi output, the country was the world's fifth major producer of the product in 2021 with 294,000 tons. China, New Zealand, Italy, and Greece were the first to fourth-largest producers of kiwifruit in the world.

The country's almond production was reported to be 163,000 tons in the said year, ranking Iran in sixth place. The United States, Spain, Australia, Turkey, and Morocco were the top five almond producers.

Iran was also ranked sixth in eggplant production, seventh in cantaloupe production, and ninth in orange, peas, and spinach production.

According to the FAO, Iran is also the 12th largest producer of wheat in the world. The country's wheat production in 2020 amounted to 15 million tons.

Pakistan Lacks Infrastructure to Import Russian Gas

KARACHI (Dispatches) - The import of gas from Russia is still a distant dream for Pakistan despite the two countries' willingness to play ball.

Analysts say the renewed discussion around gas imports from Russia won't amount to much — at least in the short term — for two reasons. One, lack of infrastructure to handle gas imports; and two, inadequate capacity in the existing pipeline system to transport gas from one point to another.

"Gas wouldn't start flowing anytime soon even if we bought it today. The infrastructure isn't there. The issue has to be addressed on a long-term basis," said Tahir Abbas, head of research at brokerage Arif Habib Ltd, while speaking to Dawn on Tuesday.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak told the press on Monday Russia was willing to sell natural gas to Pakistan through the "infrastructure of Central Asia or in a swap from the territory of Iran".

Russia has been trying to diversify its energy buyers as it faces increasing global isolation following the invasion of Ukraine in February. One of the largest energy producers, Russia's share in the global gas export market is around one-fifth.

A Russian delegation headed by its energy minister is due in Islamabad next month. Minister of State for Petroleum Musadik Malik recently told journalists that Pakistan was already in talks with private and state-owned Russian firms for the import of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

But the current LNG import infrastructure has excess capacity to handle only a few odd cargoes carrying gas of "200-300 million cubic feet per day (mmcf)", said Mr Abbas.

Pakistan has made little progress to expedite the construction of two long-overdue LNG terminals — Qatar-backed Energas LNG and Mitsubishi-backed Tabeer LNG. Each of the two terminals will have capacities of 750-1,000mmcf.

Given the capacities of the two already operational terminals — Engro Elengy (690mmcf) and GasPort LNG (750mmcf) — the addition of the two "merchant" sites is supposed to more than double the country's LNG import capacity.

Despite vociferous protests by the two terminal sponsors, there's been little tangible progress from the state-owned gas utility companies on the allocation of 300mmcf of pipeline capacity to each of them.

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ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Looting Nations' Wealth in Cold Blood

While the nations and countries in recent days have been busy with different issues like cold, fuel shortage, high prices and inflation, the U.S. is comfortably busy with looting the wealth of Syrian nation by smuggling Syrian oil to Iraq and other countries and nobody dares to react to this crime and even the United Nations is silent and acts as a looker-on.

Syria is not in a good economic condition due to the interventionist policies of the West and terrorist groups inside its own land and at the same time the U.S. forces, which pretend their presence in Syria's land is aimed at keeping peace in Syria and defending the country, are busy with looting the wealth of this Arab country and everyday several tankers of oil are smuggled from Syria by the U.S. troops and no international body is willing to bother and at least take some stand against this crime.

A couple of days ago the Syrian government once again accused the United States of "stealing oil" from fields in the north-east of the country.

"The American forces brought this morning [Monday] to the Iraqi territory a convoy of vehicles, most of them were tanks loaded with oil they had stolen from the countryside of Hasaka, through illegal crossings in Hasaka's eastern countryside," the Syrian news agency SANA said.

Citing civilian sources, SANA said a convoy of 37 oil tanks and a number of other vehicles, protected by American military vehicles, arrived in Iraq through the Mahmoudiya crossing, north-east of Syria.

The accusation against Washington coincides with an unprecedented fuel crisis in the areas under its control.

Syria has repeatedly accused the U.S. of stealing its resources. In August, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed that the losses incurred by the oil and gas sector in the country amounted to \$107.1 billion since the outbreak of the revolution in 2011.

The ministry held Washington and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) responsible for these losses.

Prior to the 2011 war, Syria produced about 400,000 barrels of oil per day.

U.S. military trucks and tankers frequently carry tons of grain and crude oil from the northeastern Syrian province of Hasakah to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq as part of Washington's systematic smuggling of basic commodities out of Syria.

The U.S. military has for long stationed its forces and equipment in northeastern Syria, with the Pentagon claiming that the deployment is aimed at preventing the oilfields in the area from falling into the hands of the Daesh terrorists.

Damascus, however, maintains the deployment is meant to plunder the Arab country's natural resources.

Former U.S. president Donald Trump admitted on several occasions that American forces were in the Arab country for its oil wealth.

Damascus also complains that the U.S.'s thefts of Syrian oil, natural gas and other resources have led to energy shortages and have further deteriorated the economy and people's livelihoods.

According to data released by Syria's Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources, in the first half of 2022, U.S. forces stole more than 80 percent of Syria's oil resources every day while the country is suffering from its deteriorating economy.

The U.S. continues to make things worse in the conflict-torn and poverty-stricken Syria due to its blatant plundering of Syrian mineral resources, especially oil. As the US' stealing has led to losses to the Syrian government of up to \$107.1 billion, experts said this behavior exposes the U.S.' gangster nature.

The U.S. practices in Syria including its unlawful trafficking of Syrian oil have caused direct and indirect losses of about \$107.1 billion to Syria's oil and gas sectors since 2011 to June in 2022, read letters that Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates handed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the Security Council on August 29, Syria Times reported.

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Two Iranian Chess Players Refuse to Face Israeli Players

TEHRAN (IP) - In the 24th round of the world championship rapid chess competition, two Iranian chess players, Bardia Daneshvar and Pouya Idani, refused to compete with Israeli chess players.

World Rapid and Blitz Championships are being held from December 26 to 30 in the sports palace of Almaty, Kazakhstan.

In the fourth round, Pouya Idani withdrew from the game against the Israeli chess player. Bardia Daneshvar also did not play in the third round against the representative of the Israeli regime.

Iran, Iraq Agree to Boost Medical Cooperation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Health ministries of Iraq and Iran have reached an agreement to form a bilateral committee to review medical cooperation between the two countries.

Iraqi media outlets reported that Iraqi Minister of Health Salih Mahdi Motlab al-Hasnawi and his Iranian counterpart Bahram Einollahi had agreed in a meeting in Baghdad earlier in the day to boost healthcare collaboration between the two neighboring countries.

During the meeting, which was held in the presence of Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Mohammad-Kazem Al Sadegh, the two sides reviewed ways to expand bilateral collaboration on procurement of medicines and medical equipment.

They also discussed exchanging medical delegations between Iran and Iraq and other issues like holding joint medical conferences, treatment of patients and training of medical and healthcare staff.



The Iraqi and Iranian ministers declared in a press conference in Baghdad that the two countries will form a joint committee to cooperate on bilateral medical issues, including on treatment of patients, hiring medical teams to carry out complicated operations, and collaboration between medical universities of the two countries.

The joint committee will also be tasked with coordinating efforts between parliamentary health commissions of Iran and Iraq to pave the way for adoption of laws in support of healthcare systems in the countries.

It will also coordinate efforts for inauguration of branches of Iranian medical universities in the holy city of Karbala in Iraq.

Protection of Country Cyberspace Should Be On the Agenda

TEHRAN (IP) - Ali Mohammad Naeini, the head of the "Dey 9 Epic" commemoration headquarters, called for protecting the country's cyberspace and internet.

Tehrani took to the streets on '9th Dey' (30 December) to hold mass rallies in support of the Iranian Establishment to put an end to months of foreign-sponsored unrest after the 2009 elections. Since then, the demonstration has been referred to as the '9-Day Epic'.

Naeini, the head of the "Dey 9 Epic" commemoration headquarters, in his presser, on the eve of "Dey 9 Epic", while explaining the programs for this year's ceremony, said: "The protection of cyberspace, national power, the safety of people, especially the youth, against challenges, as much as the Western countries as do, should be seriously put on the agenda."

He also said: "Today, the Americans, with the help of Zionists, are leading a combined war in all political, cultural, and economic dimensions against the Islamic Republic."

He described the recent unrest in the country as a combined war and said: Considering the combined war that happened in recent months, the Clarification about the enemy's actions in this comprehensive battle will be part of this year's programs for the "Dey 9 Epic" ceremony.

On "Dey 9 Epic" has many capacities to deal with today's combined war.

Although the sedition after the 2009 Iran presidential election was contained by the Dey 9 epic, it did not mean the end of the sedition because one year after the failure to create sedition in Iran, the enemy approved the resolution of 1929 to intensify political and economic sanctions.

Ministries to Set Up Pharmaceutical Science, Technology Park

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy ministers of the Ministry of Science Research and Technology, and the Ministry of Health and Medical Education have held talks to cooperate in establishing a pharmaceutical science and technology park in Iran.

Ali Kheiroddin, deputy minister of Science Research and Technology for innovation and technology affairs, said on the sidelines of visiting the Chemistry & Chemical Engineering Research Center of Iran on Wednesday that the research center can be the first hub to obtain a license for setting up a science and technology park, because these parks can help meet requirements in healthcare sector.

There are 18 national research centers in Iran, he said, expecting that the centers can establish entrepreneurship and innovation centers, as well as science and technology parks.

The universities, as well as science and technology parks, can play key role in training entrepreneurs to provide graduates with job opportunities, the deputy minister noted.



Younes Panahi, deputy Minister of Health and Medical Education for research and technology affairs, said that the Health Ministry seeks to procure raw materials for medical substances via knowledge-based companies.

The Health Ministry is ready to cooperate with universities as well as science and technology parks in healthcare arena, he said, noting that technologies and processing should be in line with requirements of the ministry.

The ministry will provide knowledge-based firms with licenses; however, the science and technology centers should be pioneer in wealth-creating knowledges, he said, warning that they are not expected to rely on merely publishing articles and having scientific references.

The Chemistry & Chemical Engineering Research Center of Iran (CCERCI) was founded in 1989 as the national institute for chemical and chemical engineering research.

The CCERCI is located in west of Tehran spans about 15 acres, including main buildings and courtyards.

Azeri Foreign Minister Says Relations With Iran Good

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Republic Jeyhoun Bayramov has rejected claims that his country and Iran have extremely tense relations.

Bayramov said there have been some tensions in the Tehran-Baku ties but "I wouldn't portray the situation as being too dramatic".

He added that Iran and Azerbaijan are implementing their economic agreements. Bayramov also said ties between Tehran and Baku are actually good, although they can be better.

The top Azerbaijani diplomat noted that his country does not want tension with Iran.

Bayramov also said he held extensive talks with his Iranian counterpart and that Hossein Amirabdollahian also supported the notion of expanding bilateral relations between the two nations.

He added that it's Baku's policy to have relations with other countries including Iran based on mutual respect and non-interference in one another's internal affairs.

Iran and Azerbaijan Republic are divided over some issues including Baku's insistence that a corridor be created in Armenian soil to link Azerbaijan to the Nagorno Karabakh region, inside Azerbaijan territory.

The creation of the corridor would eliminate Iran's land border with Armenia.

TEHRAN strongly opposes the idea of carving out a corridor inside the Armenian territory, saying it will not tolerate any change in the geopolitical map of the region.

Armenia Police Delegation Visits Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - An Armenian Police delegation led by the chief of the Police Staff, Armen Mkrtchyan, was in Tehran, the capital of Iran.

The delegation met with the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Iran, Majid Mirahmadi, and the head of the General Security Department of Iran, Hossein Mahdavi, during which they discussed a number of matters of mutual interest.

Within the framework of the visit, meetings were also held at the Border Guard Command of the Iranian Law Enforcement Force, the Educational Complex, and the International Police of Iran.

During the meeting with Hadi Shirzad, Head of the International Police of the Command of the Law Enforcement Force of Iran, the parties agreed to develop cooperation in law enforcement.

And as a result of the visit, the minutes of the meeting between the Armenia police and Command of the Law Enforcement Force of Iran in the fight against crimes were signed.



Iran Crude Steel Output Rises 8.5% To 27.9m Tons

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran has maintained its global standing as the world's 10th biggest crude steelmaker. Steel mills produced a total of 27.9 million tons of crude steel during from the beginning of 2022 until November, registering an 8.5% rise

compared with the corresponding period of 2021, the latest data released by the World Steel Association show.

Its November output hit 2.9 million tons, registering a 3.9% year-on-year rise, Financial Tribune reported.

In terms of world ranking, Iran maintained its global standing as the world's 10th biggest crude steelmaker.

China was the world's largest producer during the 11-month

Iranian Experts Repairing Russian Vessel

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran Marine Industrial Company (SADRA) is repairing a Russian vessel that has hit large pieces of ice in the Volga River.

Supervisor of the Caspian Complex in SADRA Company Meysam Ra'yat Azad said on Wednesday that for the first time, a vessel from Russia entered the Iran Marine Industrial Company on December 25 for repair.

Specialists of the SADRA company are currently trying to fix some of the damages caused to this bulk ship, which hit large pieces of ice in the Volga River, he added.

Following the intensification of international sanctions against Russia after the start of the Ukraine war and the transit restrictions facing this country, Russia has increased its cooperation with Iran in order to use the capacities of the country to transport all kinds of goods. The Caspian Sea as a safe, cheap and suitable shipping route has attracted the attention of both countries.

Over 17.4m Tons of Basic Goods Unloaded in Ports in 9 Month

TEHRAN (MNA) - As reported by Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO), 17,449,670 tons of basic commodities were unloaded in the ports of the country during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21).

As previously announced by the deputy head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA), Iran has imported 30.9 million tons of basic goods in the past Iranian calendar year 1400 (ended on March 20).

Foroud Asgari, the deputy head of IRICA for customs affairs, said that the imported goods were in 25 commodity groups.

Putting the value of the imported basic commodities at \$19.6 billion in the past year, the official said that the imports show a 60-percent rise in worth and 32-percent growth in weight, as compared to the Iranian calendar year 1399.

Gov't Presents Budget Bill For Next Year to Majlis

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A member of the Iranian Parliament said on Wednesday that the country's budget bill for the next year was presented to the Majlis presiding board.

Hojjatolislam Mohammad-Reza Mir-Tajeddini, vice-chariman of the Majlis commission for reviewing the budget, made the remarks while speaking to IRNA.

Earlier, Iranian Minister of Education Yousef Nouri told reporters on the sidelines of the cabinet session this morning that the government presented outlines of the budget bill for the next Iranian year which will start on March 21, 2023, to the Majlis on Monday (December 26) and they include some proposals for fundamental reform document.

Iran Govt presents budget bill for next year to parliament: MP

According to the law, each member of the Parliament is provided with a copy of the budget bill after its presentation to Majlis.

The lawmakers have 10 days to offer their suggestions about the bill to the specialized commissions in Majlis.

The specialized commissions are tasked with giving due reports to Parliament within 15 days.

Majlis will finally approve outlines of the budget if there is no need to change or the changes are made.

Carmakers Capable of Manufacturing 10,000 Buses Annually

TEHRAN (MNA) - The secretary of the Iran Vehicle Manufacturers Association (IVMA) said the country's automakers have the capacity to manufacture 10,000 buses annually, however, this capacity has not been fully realized, IRIB reported.

Mentioning the benefits of domestic production of public vehicles, Ahmad Ne'mat-Bakhsh called on government authorities to sign long-term deals with domestic manufacturers to support the production of such vehicles inside the country.

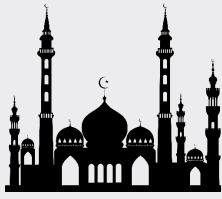
period with 935.1 million tons of steel output, down 1.4%. It was followed by India with 114.2 million tons (up 6%), Japan with 82.3 million tons (down 6.9%), the United States with 74.4 million tons (down 5.5%), Russia with 65.9 million tons (down 7%), South Korea with 60.6 million tons (down 6.1%), Germany with 34.2 million tons (down 7.9%) and Turkey with 32.5 million tons (down 12.3%).

ICOFC Testing Waters for Enhanced Crude Output

TEHRAN (Shana) - The project to maintain and enhance the oil output rate in the Iranian Central Oil Fields Company (ICOFC) in the Danan, Saadat Abad and Naftshahr oil fields is in the final stages of implementation.

According to Parviz Salehvand, the director of the oil field maintenance and enhanced production projects at ICOFC, implementation of these projects will come to fruition by the end of the current calendar year, which began on March 21. Therefore, it can be noted that with the completion of these projects in the mentioned fields, oil production in the fields will be raised by at least 13,000 barrels per day.

In December of the year 2017, the approval of plans to maintain and enhance oil production of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) under EPC-EPD contract terms was issued along with its financing, and it was put on the agenda with a credit of \$7.246 billion. Based on the initial plan, the philosophy behind implementing of these plans was to maintain and raise the average production capacity of crude oil by 281,000 barrels per day during the three years of 2018-2021 compared to the average production in the first half of the calendar year of 1396 (March-September 2017). The projects entail 34 investment packages in 29 fields or reservoirs with another package focused on corporate social responsibilities.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:06
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:19
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:43
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:13

94. (Aaron) replied: "O son of my mother! Seize (me) not by my beard nor by (the hair) of my head! Truly I feared lest thou shouldst say, 'Thou has caused a division among the children of Israel, and thou didst not respect my word!'"

95. (Moses) said: "What then is thy case, O Samiri?"

Surah 20. Ta-ha (94 - 95)

All Int'l Reports Confirming Iran's Inflation Rate Slowing Down

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Minister of Economic and Financial Affairs says all economic factors and international reports show that Iran's inflation rate is slowing down.

On Tuesday and answering questions of ILNA, Ehsan Khandouzi said that the inflation rate is gradually coming under control and current international reports and economic indicators bespeak of Iran's inflation is slowing down.

He reiterated that despite the rise in price of dollar all economic indicators are in favor of decrease in inflation rate.

He went on to say that according to the approval of Money and Credit Council, bank interest rate is to increase and the approval has been announced by the Central Bank. He added that there are different interest rates for the short and long term deposits which is to be implemented this year.

Khandouzi also pointed to the meetings of Anti-Money Laundering High Council in almost recent 16 months, and said the number of meetings in this period has been almost four times more than the number of meetings during the previous government



and today one sees developments in activities of this council.

He reiterated that the main goal of this council is to minimize money supply for smuggling and tax evasion.

He went on to say that Iran has reached good agreements with neighboring states especially EEU states for financial data and information and all activities of the council in the past 16 months will soon show its signs in the country for preventing financial crimes.

He reiterated that the move of the country and council is not for pleasing the foreigners and all decisions are regulated based on the domestic financing.

Khandouzi noted that these measures and actions should have been taken years ago, noting that joining the FATF is waiting for the Expediency Council decision.

He went on to say that some directives have been prepared for using bitcoins and exchange of goods and purchasing foreign goods with bitcoins.

600k People Die of Exposure to Tobacco Smoke in Iran Each Year

TEHRAN (IFP) - The head of the Secretariat of Iran's National Tobacco Control Headquarters says 600 thousand people die each year because of exposure to tobacco smoke also known as environmental tobacco smoke (ETS).

This means the people lose their lives not because of their own smoking, but due to being exposed to someone else's cigarette, cigar, or pipe smoke.

ETS can also be described as the material in indoor air that originates from tobacco smoke.

The official added that 1 million and 200 thousand out of 8 million deaths due to smoke-related causes in the world are blamed on ETC.

This means that half of the ETS fatalities happen in Iran. Scientists say smoking is the leading cause of preventable death.

Arya Sasol Petchem Plant Smashes Production Record

TEHRAN (Shana) -- This year, the 6-month all-time record of Arya Sasol Polymer Company was broken with the production of 987,000 tons of items in the first half of the current Iranian calendar year which began on March 21.

The company also has deposited \$550 million in the Nima system Iran's domestic Forex Management Integrated System, by December, being considered the most reliable exporter of petrochemical products in the country.

Iran Begins Export of Its Rice To Russia



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Rice Association of Babol (in Mazandaran Province) says export of rice to Russia have started but its amount is limited.

Speaking to ILNA, Hassan Taghizadeh said that some traders from the semi-private sector has exported some 3 containers of high quality rice of north of Iran to Russia in order to provoke the domestic market but this also could not help the domestic market to come out of current recession.

He noted that currently recession dominates the rice market in Iran, adding that the price of rice increased illogically last year and the prices should not have gone up this way and therefore the demands for Iranian rice decreased.

Taghizadeh admitted that rice planters do not like to sell their products to the rural cooperative organization because they are not certain over getting their money back on due time. He also said that the rice prices this year have increased around 3,000 toman per kilo, adding that although good quality packed rice is sold for around 90,000 toman per kilo, there are few people to buy.

He went on to say that because of the sanctions, even chain stores do not like to buy the rice and they just buy for a limited amount to meet the demands of their customers and they refrain from storing and it does not look the condition to get better in the upcoming days.

Taghizadeh reiterated that the amount of rice purchase by the people has become one-tenth of last year because of the decline in the purchasing power.

He acknowledged that most of chain stores sell foreign rice because it price is lower than Iranians despite a rice in the price of foreign rice this year.

He went on to say that the rice planters have increased the price of their rice to 100,000 toman per kilo and for this reason most store chains are unwilling to buy and sell Iranian rice because of its high prices.

Iranian Home Appliances Producers Ready to Expand Export Markets

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Secretary General of the Home Appliance Industry Association says Iranian home appliances producers despite all international restrictions have readiness to expand their interactions with other countries and export markets.

Abbas Hashemi said that although sanctions have existed against Iran for years and still continue, but move forward of the industry will not come to a halt.

Emphasizing that all companies and production and industrial units do their jobs, he said that they should try to keep open wisely all paths for interactions with other countries and all international channels.

Hashemi then pointed to the new markets of Eurasia and Russia for home appliances activists and said that production units have readiness for presence and penetration in this market and they should try not to miss the opportunity like what happened about Qatar and in this line, the government and officials should rush to help the private sector.

He said that providing raw materials of the production units especially required petrochemical materials as well as export incentives will give courage to the producers for long term exporting agreements and they can



penetrate those markets with more confidence.

Hashemi noted that condition of Russia and Eurasia is in a way that Iranian companies can have successful presence in those markets. He reiterated that this association along with Trade Promotion Organization, Foreign Ministry as well as Iran's embassies in those countries have readiness to do their best for materializing this goal.

He then talked about the achievements of the 21st International Home Appliances Exhibition and said that this exhibition was held in Grade A level and its difference is the participation of foreign delegations as well as holding scientific and technology events on its sidelines.

He noted that some good agreements in the last day of the exhibition between Iranian producers and foreign delegations especially in the field of gas stove industry.

Hashemi added that delegations from Iraq, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kurdistan of Iraq were present in the exhibition while five pavilions had been allocated to the Iran-France Chamber of Commerce, Iran-Africa Chamber of Commerce, Russia, Tajikistan and Armenia.

456 domestic companies plus 60 foreign counterparts displayed their achievements and products in this exhibition.

Gov't Intensifies Crackdown on Currency Speculation

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has intensified its crackdown on foreign currency speculation as authorities and official news outlets blame speculators for a historic drop in the value of national currency rial.

Iranian judiciary's provincial department in the capital Tehran said that the body will team up with Iranian finance ministry's financial intelligence unit to identify and arrest "disruptors" of the country's foreign currency market.

The Economic Security Police in Tehran province also announced that some 88 people had been arrested for illegal involvement in future trading of foreign currency and gold through launching channels and groups on social media platforms.

A Tuesday report by the official IRNA news agency said that hundreds of bank accounts used by individuals for illegal money changing activities had been blocked by the Iranian intelligence ministry.

"These individuals were engaged in illegal trading of foreign currency in the unofficial market or were involved in future trading and have caused a disruption in the country's foreign exchange system," said the report, citing an intelligence ministry statement published earlier this month.

Reports published by the IRNA and the semi-official Fars news agency rejected claims that Iran's rial had continued to drop against hard currencies on Tuesday which was an official holiday in Iran, as they insisted that speculators were overcharging the prices to be able to increase their profit margins in the upcoming days.

That comes as currency price monitoring websites and reports in local media showed that the price of dollar had reached an all-time high of 415,000 against the Iranian rial on the close of trade on Monday.



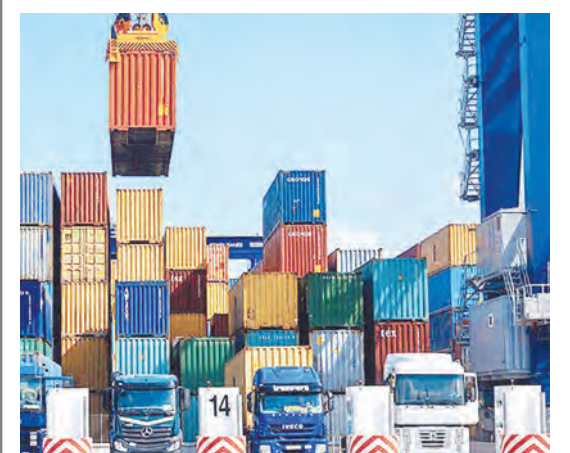
Iran Boosts Natural Gas Output by 10 mcm Per Day

TEHRAN (PressTV) - State oil company the NIOC says it has completed overhaul of a key natural gas liquids (NGL) project in southern Iran to allow the country to increase its overall natural gas output by some 10 million cubic meters (mcm) per day.

CEO of the National Iranian South Oil Company, an NIOC subsidiary, said on Tuesday that it had started injecting natural gas to Iran's national grid from its NGL 1000 project in Aghajari region in southwestern province of Khuzestan.

"This will allow for stability in production and distribution of natural gas with the purpose of meeting a part of the winter energy demand in the country," said Alireza Daneshi. The announcement comes amid growing demand for natural gas for heating in Iran as temperatures have dropped to below zero in many parts of the country.

Iran Exports to Iraq Via Khosravi Border Up 28% in March-December



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran exported more than \$621.761 million worth of non-oil commodities to Iraq via the Khosravi border crossing in the first nine months of the calendar year that started in late March, up 28% compared to the same period last year.

Mehdi Abbasi, director of the Khosravi Customs Office, said that the volume of goods and products exported via the crossing over the March-December period had stood at 1.598 million metric tons, a 43% increase against the same period last year.

Export shipments mainly consisted of vegetables, diaries, construction materials, tile, cakes and biscuits, Abbasi said.

He said that cargo transit via Khosravi to and from Iran rose to 129,117 tons worth more than \$114.151 million over March-December, showing increases of a 1,537% and 309% in volume and value terms, respectively.

Khosravi border crossing is located in Kermanshah, a province in western Iran which has 371 kilometers of borders with Iraq.

Khosravi and Parvizkhan are the two official border crossings in Ghasreshirin, a border city which is responsible for a bulk of Iran's economic and trade exchanges with both Iraq and its autonomous Kurdistan region.

Death Toll From Floods In Philippines Now at 13

MANILA (Dispatches) - The death toll from Christmas day rains and flooding in the southern Philippines has risen to 13, according to the country's disaster management council, with a further 23 people still missing.

Most of the deaths were caused by flash floods after two days of heavy rains over Christmas, which affected more than 166,000 people and forced more than 45,000 to take shelter in evacuation centers, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council said on Tuesday.



Turkey Summons French Ambassador After Paris Shooting

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey summoned France's ambassador over what it called "black propaganda" by Kurdish activists during a march to mourn three people killed in a shooting at a Kurdish cultural center in Paris.

French Ambassador Herve Magro was summoned so Ankara could relay unease after some marched in Paris with flags of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or suggested that Turkey was linked to the shooting, the Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency reported.

Turkey "expects France to act prudently over the incident and not to allow the [banned PKK] terrorist organization to advance its sneaky agenda," Anadolu reported.



Fighting Rages in East Ukraine as Russia Demands for Ending War



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian forces shelled and bombed towns and cities in eastern and southern Ukraine, a day after Russia's foreign minister said Kyiv must accept Moscow's demands for ending the war or else suffer defeat on the battlefield.

Those demands include Ukraine recognizing Russia's conquest of a fifth of its territory. Kyiv, armed and supported by the United States and its NATO allies, has vowed to recover all occupied territory and to drive out all Russian soldiers.

Britain's defense ministry said in its latest update of the military situation in Ukraine that fighting was particularly intense around the strategic eastern city of Bakhmut in Donetsk province and Svatove, further north in Luhansk province. Donetsk and Luhansk, which make up the industrial Donbas, are both claimed, along with two southern Ukrainian regions, by Russia.

"Russia continues to initiate frequent small-scale assaults in these areas (of Bakhmut and Svatove), although little territory has changed hands," the British ministry tweeted.

Reuters footage showed fires burning in a large residential building in Bakhmut, while debris littered the streets and most buildings had had their windows blown out.

"Our proposals for the demilitarization and denazification of the territories controlled by the regime, the elimination of threats to Russia's security emanating from there, including our new lands, are well known to the enemy," TASS news agency quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying late on Monday.

"The point is simple: Fulfil them for your own good. Otherwise, the issue will be decided by the Russian army." In his nightly video message on Monday, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the situation along the frontline in Donbas "difficult and painful".

After suffering a series of defeats in its "special military operation," Russia is now seeking a battlefield victory by capturing Bakhmut, an industrial city with a pre-war population of 70,000, now reduced to about 10,000 mostly elderly residents.

Gaining control of the city could give Russia a stepping stone to advance on two bigger cities, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk.

"Our building is destroyed. There was a shop in our building, now it's not there anymore," said Oleksandr, 85, adding he was the only remaining resident there.

Nearby, 73-year-old Pilaheia said she had long got used to the "constant explosions".

"Now you just scratch yourself, and don't even look or listen carefully to what is happening and where. That's how we are now. But still, I want to live a normal life," she said, while feeding the chickens of neighbors who had fled.

Over the past 24 hours, Ukrainian forces have repelled Russian attacks in the areas of two settlements in Luhansk province and six in Donetsk, the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces said on Tuesday.

It also reported more Russian shelling of Kherson city, in the Zaporizhzhia region and of settlements in the Kharkiv region of northeast Ukraine near the border with Russia.

Oleh Zhdanov, a military analyst based in Kyiv, also cited heavy fighting around elevated areas near Kreminna in Luhansk region as well as around Bakhmut and Avdiivka in Donetsk.

"The arc of fire in Donetsk region continues to burn," Zhdanov said in a social media video post.

Zelenskyy said as a result of attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure nearly nine million people were currently without power - equal to about a quarter of Ukraine's population.

Sergey Kovalenko, head of YASNO, which supplies electricity to Kyiv, said late on Monday that while the power situation has been improving in the capital, blackouts will continue.

Serbia Troops on Highest Level of Alert Over Latest Kosovo Tensions

BELGRADE (AFP) - Serbian armed forces were on "the highest level" of alert, Defence Minister Milos Vucevic said, highlighting the Balkan country's increasingly strained relations with neighboring Kosovo over recent shootings and blockades.

Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, but Belgrade has refused to recognise it and encouraged Kosovo's 120,000 ethnic Serbs to defy Pristina's authority -- especially in the north where ethnic Serbs make up the majority.

The Serbian army has been put on a heightened state of alert over tensions with Kosovo multiple times in recent years -- the last time in November after claiming that several drones entered Serbian airspace from Kosovo.

On December 10, Serbs in northern Kosovo set up barricades to protest against the arrest of an ex-policeman suspected of being involved in attacks against ethnic Albanian police officers.

The blockades have coincided with a rise in reported shootings, the latest on Sunday, according to NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR.

"Serbia's president... ordered the Serbian army to be on the highest level of combat readiness, that is to the

level of the use of armed force," Defence Minister Milos Vucevic said in a statement.

He added that President Aleksandar Vucic also ordered the special armed forces to be beefed up from the existing 1,500 to 5,000.

Serbia's interior ministry also announced that "all units (will) immediately come under the command of the chief of general staff".

These orders from Vucic come after army chief General Milan Mojsilovic was dispatched to the border with Kosovo on Sunday.

"The situation there is complicated and complex," Mojsilovic said Sunday.

Northern Kosovo has been especially on edge since November when hundreds of ethnic Serb workers in the Kosovo police as well as the judicial branch, such as judges and prosecutors, walked off the job.

They were protesting a controversial decision to ban Serbs living in Kosovo from using Belgrade-issued licence plates -- a policy that was eventually scrapped by Pristina.

But the mass walkouts created a security vacuum in Kosovo.



S. Korea's President Calls for Stealth Drones to Monitor North

SEOUL (AP) - South Korea's president called for stronger air defenses and high-tech stealth drones while the military apologized for failing to shoot down North Korean drones that crossed the border for the first time in five years.

South Korea's military scrambled warplanes and attack helicopters on Monday, but they failed to bring down any of the North Korean drones that flew back home or disappeared from South Korean radars. It raised serious questions about South Korea's air defense network at a time when tensions remain high over North Korea's torrid run of missile tests this year.

"We have a plan to create a military drone unit tasked with monitoring key military facilities in North Korea. But we'll advance the establishment of the drone unit as soon as possible because of yesterday's incident," President Yoon Suk Yeol said during a regular Cabinet Council meeting. "We'll also introduce state-of-the-art stealth drones and bolster our surveillance capability." He said that South Korea's military needs more intensive readiness and exercises to cope with threats posed by North Korean drones.

Lt. Gen. Kang Shin Chul, chief director of operation at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in a televised statement the military feels sorry because of its failure to shoot down the North Korean drones and for causing big public concerns.

Kang acknowledged South Korea lacks capacities to detect and strike small surveillance drones with a wingspan of less than 3 meters (9.8 feet) though it has assets to spot and bring down bigger combat drones. Kang said South Korea will establish drone units with various capacities and aggressively deploy military assets to shoot down enemy drones.

A front-line county office in South Korea on Tuesday sent emergency text messages notifying residents of a new batch of North Korean drones. But the military later said it was a flock of birds.

On Monday, South Korea sent its own surveillance assets, apparently unmanned drones, across the border as corresponding steps against the North Korean drone flights. South Korea's public confirmation of reconnaissance activities inside North Korea is highly unusual and likely reflects a resolve by Yoon's government to get tough on North Korean provocations.

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U.N. Urges Countries To Help Rohingya at Sea

PIDIE (Dispatches) - The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) urged countries to help Rohingya Muslims stranded at sea as at least 20 reportedly died and hundreds more landed in Indonesia after weeks adrift in the Indian Ocean.

Nearly 500 Rohingya have reached Indonesia in the past six weeks while "many others did not act despite numerous pleas and appeals for help", the UNHCR said in a statement.

It said on Monday said 2022 could be one of the deadliest years at sea in almost a decade for the Rohingya with a growing number of them fleeing desperate conditions in refugee camps in Bangladesh. One boat carrying 180 people is believed to have sunk in early December, with all on board presumed dead, according to rights groups.

The Rohingya have long been persecuted in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, which borders Bangladesh. For years many have fled to neighbouring states like Thailand and Bangladesh, and to Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia between November and April when seas are calmer.

Nearly 1 million live in crowded conditions in Bangladesh, including many of the hundreds of thousands who fled a deadly crackdown in 2017 by Myanmar's military, which denies committing crimes against humanity.

Rights groups have recorded a significant increase in the number leaving the camps, from about 500 last year to an estimated 2,400 this year. It is not clear what is driving the larger exodus. Some activists believe the lifting of COVID restrictions around Southeast Asia, a favoured destination for the Rohingya, could be a factor.

A boat washed ashore in Aceh province on the Indonesian island of Sumatra on Monday carrying 174 Rohingya, most of them dehydrated, fatigued and in need of urgent medical care after weeks at sea, local disaster agency officials said.

Some survivors recounted stories of hunger and desperation, saying more than 20 of the passengers died on the way.

"We came here from the largest Bangladesh refugee camp with the hope that the Indonesian people would give us the opportunity of education," said Umar Farukh, who spoke in a shelter crowded with Rohingya men, women and children receiving care from Indonesian medics.



Long COVID: Could Mono Virus or Fat Cells Be Playing Roles?

LONDON (Dispatches) - A British historian, an Italian archaeologist and an American preschool teacher have never met in person, but they share a prominent pandemic bond.

Plagued by eerily similar symptoms, the three women are credited with describing, naming and helping bring long COVID into the public's consciousness in early 2020.

Rachel Pope, of Liverpool, took to Twitter in late March 2020 to describe her bedeviling symptoms, then unnamed, after a coronavirus infection. Elisa Perego in Italy first used the term "long COVID," in a May tweet that year. Amy Watson in Portland, Oregon, got inspiration in naming her Facebook support group from the trucker cap she'd been wearing, and "long hauler" soon became part of the pandemic lexicon.

Nearly three years into the pandemic, scientists are still trying to figure out why some people get long COVID and why a small portion — including the three women — have lasting symptoms.

Millions of people worldwide have had long COVID, reporting various symptoms including fatigue, lung problems, and brain fog and other neurological symptoms. Evidence suggests most recover substantially within a year, but recent data show that it has contributed to more than 3,500 U.S. deaths.

WOMEN MORE AT RISK?

Many studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that women are more likely than men to develop long COVID.

There could be biological reasons.

Women's immune systems generally mount stronger reactions to viruses, bacteria, parasites and other germs, noted Sabra Klein, a Johns Hopkins professor who studies immunity.

Women are also much more likely than men to have autoimmune diseases, where the body mistakenly attacks its own healthy cells. Some scientists believe long COVID could result from an autoimmune response triggered by the virus.

Women's bodies also tend to have more fat tissue and emerging research suggests the coronavirus may hide in fat after infection. Scientists also are studying whether women's fluctuating hormone levels may increase the risks.

Another possible factor: Women are more likely than men to seek health care and often more attuned to changes in their bodies, Klein noted.

"I don't think we should ignore that," she said. Biology and behavior are probably both at play, Klein said.

It may thus be no coincidence that it was three women who helped shine the first light on long COVID.

Pope, 46, started chronicling what she was experiencing in March 2020: flu-like symptoms, then her lungs, heart and joints were



affected. After a month she started having some "OK" days, but symptoms persisted.

She and some similarly ill colleagues connected with Perego on Twitter. "We started sort of coming together because it was literally the only place where we could do that," Pope said. "In 2020, we would joke that we'd get together for Christmas and have a party," Pope said. "Then obviously it went on, and I think we stopped joking."

Watson started her virtual long haulers group that April. The others soon learned of that nickname and embraced it.

MONO VIRUS

Several studies suggest the ubiquitous Epstein-Barr virus could play a role in some cases of long COVID.

Inflammation caused by coronavirus infection can activate herpes viruses, which remain in the body after causing an acute infection, said Dr. Timothy Henrich, a virus expert at the University of California, San Francisco.

Epstein-Barr virus is among the most common of these herpes viruses: An estimated 90% of the U.S. population has been infected with it. The virus can cause mononucleosis or symptoms that may be dismissed as a cold.

Henrich is among researchers who have found immune markers signaling Epstein-Barr reactivation in the blood of long COVID patients, particularly those with fatigue.

Not all long COVID patients have these markers. But it's possible that Epstein-Barr is causing symptoms in those who do, although scientists say more study is needed.

Some scientists also believe that Epstein-Barr triggers chronic fatigue syndrome, a condition that bears many similarities to long COVID, but that also is unproven.

OBESITY

Obesity is a risk factor for severe COVID-19 infections and scientists are trying to understand why.

Stanford University researchers are among those who have found evidence that the coronavirus can infect fat cells. In a recent study, they found the virus and signs of inflammation in fat tissue taken from people who had died from COVID.

Lab tests showed that the virus can reproduce in fat tissue. That raises the possibility that fat tissue could serve as a "reservoir," potentially fueling long COVID.

Could removing fat tissue treat or prevent some cases of long COVID? It's a tantalizing question, but the research is preliminary, said Dr. Catherine Blish, a Stanford infectious diseases professor and a senior author of the study.

Scientists at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center are studying leptin, a hormone produced by fat cells that can influence the body's immune response and promote inflammation.

They plan to study whether injections of a manufactured antibody could reduce leptin levels — and in turn inflammation from coronavirus infections or long COVID.

"We have a good scientific basis together with some preliminary data to argue that we might be on the right track," said Dr. Philipp Scherer.

DURATION

It has been estimated that about 30% of people infected with the coronavirus will develop long COVID, based on data from earlier in the pandemic.

Most people who have lingering, recurrent or new symptoms after infection will recover after about three months. Among those with symptoms at three months, about 15% will continue to have symptoms for at least nine more months, according to a recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Figuring out who's at risk for years-long symptoms "is such a complicated question," said Dr. Lawrence Purpura, an infectious disease expert at Columbia University.

Those with severe infections seem to be more at risk for long COVID, although it can also affect people with mild infections. Those whose infections cause severe lung damage including scarring may experience breathlessness, coughing or fatigue for more than a year. And a smaller group of patients with mild initial COVID-19 infections may develop neurologic symptoms for more than a year, including chronic fatigue and brain fog, Purpura said.

"The majority of patients will eventually recover," he said. "It's important for people to know that."

It's small consolation for the three women who helped the world recognize long COVID.



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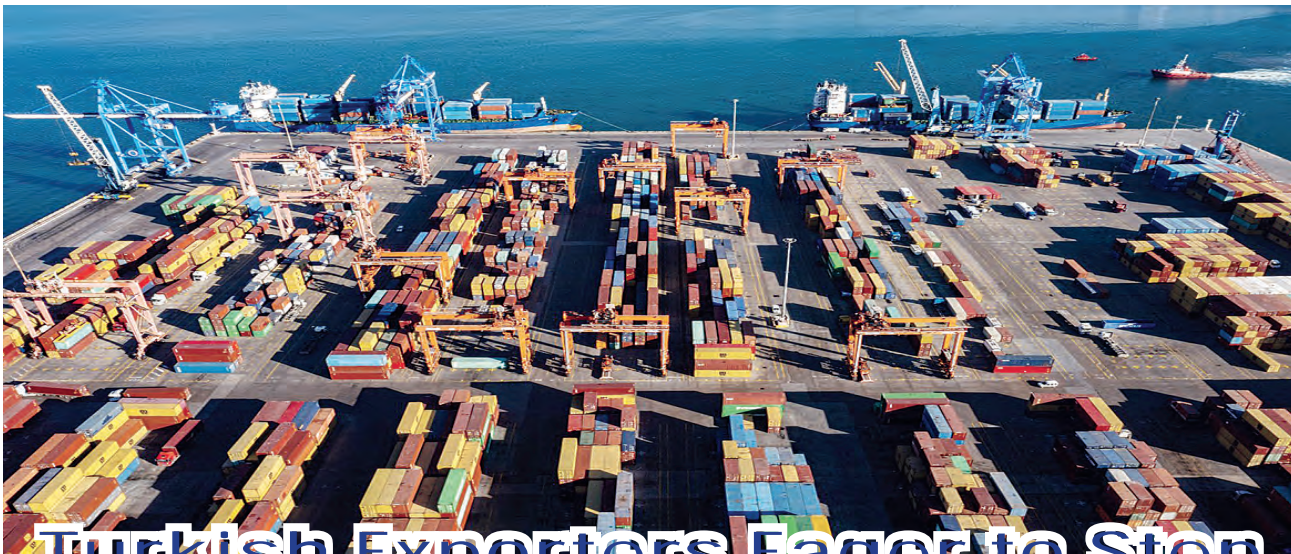


Algeria Sets Reference Price for Oil at \$60 Barrel Through 2023/2025

ALGIERS (Dispatches) - Algeria has set the reference price for crude oil at \$60 a barrel through 2023-2025, state news agency (APS) said, citing the 2023 budget approved earlier in the day by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

The budget set the market price for crude oil at \$70 a barrel during the same period. The North African country expects inflation to reach 5.1% and sees economic growth at 4.1% in 2023, APS said.

The president stressed the importance of raising gas output in order to boost exports, APS added.



Turkish Exporters Eager to Step Up Pace for \$300b Sales in 2 Years

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Heading into the New Year, Turkey looks to pick up from what is all but a guaranteed record in outbound shipments in 2022, a year marked by unprecedented challenges, according to a head of the country's exporters association.

Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM) Chair Mustafa Gültepe says they look to add further momentum that will help the country achieve \$300 billion in sales in as soon as two years, before eventually placing Turkey among the top 10 countries in exports.

"In order for us to achieve our goals, we need to increase our exports by at least 10% every year. We will start 2023 with this goal," Gültepe told an interview with Anadolu Agency (AA).

"We aim to increase our exports to at least \$300 billion within two years and to put Turkey among the top 10 countries in exports in the long term."

Exports have been one of the main drivers of Turkey's economic growth this year and have hit record-high volumes throughout the first 11 months of this year.

Yet, a global slowdown has put a drag on foreign demand, notably among Turkey's largest trade partners, spearheaded by Europe.

Outbound shipments from January through November jumped 14% from a year ago to \$231 billion, while imports were up 36.6% to nearly \$331.1 billion, according to official data, driven mainly by steep rises in energy and commodity prices after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Exports had ended 2021 at a record \$225.4 billion, a figure that government and economists expected to reach \$250 billion this year.

The fresh all-time high seems all but sure as the 12-month rolling exports reached \$253.5 billion as of November.

Yet, Gültepe said uncertainties in global trade make it hard to shape expectations, particularly for the first quarter of 2023.

"It is not easy to draw a clear picture due to uncertainties in global trade, especially in Europe, our main market. Therefore, the size of the slowdown in global markets will be decisive in the performance we will show in the coming year," he noted.

The record in 2021 was mainly driven by a high foreign demand and orders that stemmed from supply bottlenecks and soaring freight costs during the coronavirus pandemic.

Gültepe said the momentum maintained pace, particularly into the first half of 2022, stressing that exporters managed to achieve double-digit growth despite the negative effects of the foreign exchange parity.

Yet, he said the energy crisis in Europe and recession risks drove orders downward in the second half of the year.

"Due to the problems experienced in price fixing in sectors such as ready-made and textiles, a significant part of the orders received during the pandemic period shifted to countries such as India and Pakistan," Gültepe said.

"Although there were some negativities, we spent 11 months with a performance above our targets. We reached the annual export volume of 2021 before even entering the last week of November," he noted.

Oil Price Cap May Widen Russia's 2023 Budget Deficit

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's budget deficit could be wider than the planned 2 per cent of GDP in 2023 as an oil price cap squeezes Russia's export income, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said, an extra fiscal hurdle for Moscow as it spends heavily on its military campaign in Ukraine.

Russia last week said price caps on its crude and refined products could see it cut oil output by 5 per cent - 7 per cent early next year, but regardless of how deep the cuts are, Siluanov promised that spending commitments would be met, tapping borrowing markets and the country's rainy day fund as needed.

"Is a bigger budget deficit possible? It is possible, if revenues are lower than planned. What are the risks next year? Price risks and restrictions," Siluanov told reporters in comments cleared for publication on Tuesday.

He said a reduction in the volume of energy exports was possible, as some countries shun Russia and Moscow looks to develop new markets, a process that will dictate Russia's export returns.

"(The price ceiling) is significant to the extent that to those countries that have set the ceiling, there will be no supplies," Siluanov said. "This means there will be other countries. Yes, logistics (costs) will increase. Discounts may change as a result."

Should volumes shrink, Siluanov said Russia has two sources of additional funding: the National Wealth Fund (NWF), which accumulates state reserves, and loans.

The government has borrowed heavily this quarter after several barren months following Moscow's decision to send tens of thousands of troops into Ukraine, for what it calls a "special operation". Russia now expects to use just over 2 trillion roubles (RM129 billion) from the NWF in 2022 as total spending exceeds 30 trillion roubles, more than the year's initial plan.

"Since the start of the special military operation, the macroeconomic conditions have changed, inflation has risen and a large volume of resources has been required to support families," Siluanov said.

NWF spending in December could amount to 1.5 trillion roubles. As of Dec. 1, liquid assets in the NWF totalled 7.6 trillion roubles, or 5.7 per cent of Russia's GDP.



China to Step Up Financial Support to COVID-Hit Catering, Tourism Sectors

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China will step up financial support to small and private businesses in the catering and tourism sectors that were hit hard by the COVID-19 epidemic, the country's banking and insurance regulator said in a statement.

Contact-intensive services sector suffered the most amid China's anti-virus curbs which shut many restaurants down and restricted tourists' travels.

After the National Health Commission on Monday announced China would end quarantine requirements for inbound travellers from Jan. 8, some people flocked to travel sites on Tuesday ahead of borders reopening.

"The recovery and expansion of consumption will be a priority," China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission (CBIRC) said in the statement.

The purchase of big-ticket items such as new energy vehicles and green home appliances will be encouraged, CBIRC said.

China will also step up financial support for private investment and private enterprises, the regulator added. Retail sales, a key gauge of consumption, fell 5.9% in November amid broad-based weakness in the services sector, which was the biggest contraction since May when commercial hub Shanghai was under lockdown.

Policymakers have set out plans to expand domestic consumption and investment following the relaxation of stringent COVID-related restrictions and subsequent surge of infections.

Amid protracted weakness in the property sector, the CBIRC pledged to satisfy reasonable financing needs and to improve leading developers' balance sheets.

8.1m People in Thailand Poor, 4.4m Below Poverty Line

BANGKOK (Dispatches) - The report on Thailand's poverty situation in 2021, which was released this year, said that the number of people living below the poverty line had dropped from 4.7 million in 2020 to 4.4 million last year.

"This is all thanks to the government's economic stimulus measures to ease the financial burden on poor people, such as measures to increase purchasing power and utility bill cuts," NESDC said.

However, NESDC found that poverty from other dimensions other than just income in Thailand is far more severe.

Citing its Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) which identifies four dimensions of poverty, namely education, health, quality of living and financial stability, it said 8.1 million Thais are suffering from poverty.

"As many as 36.9% of them are the elderly, while 51.5% are those who do not contribute to the economy, like children, the mentally ill, the ill or the unemployed," NESDC said.

In the education sector, it said, more children have dropped out of school, especially those who are not living with their parents.

More than 280,000 students have been recorded as having dropped out of school last year due to poverty, the report said.

In terms of health, it said poor people suffer from the lack of access to clean water and nutrition, adding that people's access to basic utilities is still limited, especially in remote areas.

When it comes to quality of living, it said 2.8 million people do not have access to the internet as signals do not reach all locations and many people are not able to pay internet fees.

When it comes to financial security, the report said many workers do not have access to social security and their earnings are not enough to make ends meet.

This has resulted in rising debts and problems with saving money, it said.

To solve these issues, NESDC has advised the government to improve information systems and launch policies to boost people's quality of life.

"Government agencies should come up with policy packages that solve multidimensional poverty, such as improving financial literacy among people," it added.

German Businesses Expect Only Mild Recession for 2023

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German companies expect only a mild recession next year despite headwinds from the energy crisis, raw material shortages, and a tepid global economy, a survey of significant associations published by Reuters showed.

"The last quarter of 2022 and the start of 2023 are likely to be accompanied by a decline in economic activity," said Siegfried Russwurm, president of the Federation of German Industries (BDI). "However, we expect only a slight slump."

There have been growing signs that the German economy could stave off the worst of an economic downturn triggered by a plunge in energy supply from Russia after the Ukraine invasion.

Inflation slowed slightly to 11.3% in November from a high of 11.6% as energy prices eased. The German government has predicted the economy will grow by 1.4% this year and contract by 0.4% next year.

Russwurm warned that growth would remain subdued until 2024 as weak demand globally hits Germany's export-dependent economy.

The Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) said there were many indications that supply chain disruptions were gradually easing.

"Freight rates for container prices are approaching long-term normal values again, and the congestion outside international ports is slowly easing," said DIHK President Peter Adrian.

"If the announced relaxations of China's zero-COVID policy are implemented, it would also be a positive signal for global supply chains," he added.

However, the DIHK warned that soaring energy prices and easing consumer sentiment were still clouding the outlook for 2023.

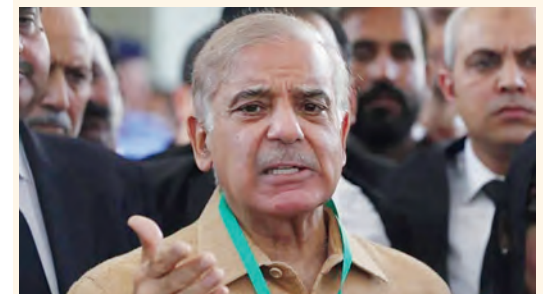
The ZDH association of craftsmen echoed the DIHK, saying noticeably fewer orders were coming in for next year.

"The order backlog will still carry us until the beginning of spring, but there are many question marks for the time after that," ZDH Secretary General Holger Schwannecke said.

The German Wholesale, Foreign Trade and Services Association (BGA) said the situation was still robust in many sectors of the economy. "But we are carrying over negative expectations from month to month, the depth and breadth of which have not yet been realized," said BGA President Dirk Jandura.

He said he was confident that companies would come onto a more encouraging path again during the spring.

Pakistan Resorts to Desperate Cost-Cutting Measures



ISLAMABAD 9Dispatches) - Pakistan is on verge of mounting foreign debt of \$130 billion and \$73 billion in three years and a minimum of \$20 to \$30 billion deficit.

As the Shehbaz Sharif government braced for the 'financial emergency' with the depreciation of the Pakistani rupee to a new low and the existing economic crisis, Pakistan resorted to desperate cost-cutting measures such as rationing of fuel for the vehicles used by the government officials, restrictions on their travel, scrapping leave encashments, and other benefits such as the medical bill payments and allowances.

"Pakistan's economy continues to slump despite a resumption of the much-awaited International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Program. Country's Finance Minister Ishaq Dar must announce a clear policy on the rupee to ease the pain of traders and to save the industries," Pakistan Business Forum (PBF) CEO Ahmad Jawad had said, expressing concerns last week.

The country, said its Finance Minister Dar, is on verge of mounting foreign debt of \$130 billion and \$73 billion in three years and a minimum of \$20 to \$30 billion deficit.

As the economic turmoil worsened, Pakistan's government took drastic measures against its employees to slash the costs. Pakistani cabinet Secretariat said in a notification seen by the ANI news agency, "In view of the principal approval by the Prime Minister of Pakistan and present financial calamity of the state and the severe shortage of funds, it has become imperative to issue the following instructions, otherwise further financial catastrophe may lead to a situation of stoppage of salaries in public/autonomous organizations." In accordance with new rules, government employees with previous entitlement benefits will no longer be getting 120 liters of fuel per month. A ban would be imposed on bonuses to government employees, as per the new measures. Government employees will now be required to turn in detailed reports on the utilization of funds and an eight-hour workload policy would be implemented for all employees.

Iran REC 2023 Slated for Late January 2023

TEHRAN (MNA) - The seventh edition of Iran's International Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition (Iran REC 2023) is scheduled to be held during January 28-29, 2023 in Tehran, the portal of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) reported.

The international conference and exhibition will be held by Iran

Renewable Energy Association in collaboration with Iran's Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Organization (SATBA) and the Energy Ministry.

The event is going to be held with the aim of examining the challenges facing the development of renewable energies in Iran and providing solutions to improve the business environment in this sector.



Commercial Nuclear Fusion May Still Be Decades Away

LONDON (Dispatches) - U.S. scientists at the National Ignition Facility, part of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), announced a major breakthrough in nuclear fusion last week.

For the first time ever, scientists successfully produced more energy from a nuclear fusion experiment than the laser energy used to power it.

In the infographic below, Visual Capitalist's Mark Belan and Bruno Venditti describe nuclear fusion and illustrate how this discovery may pave the future for a new form of clean and sustainable energy.

What is Nuclear Fusion?

Nuclear fusion powers the Sun and the stars, where immense forces compress and heat hydrogen plasma to about 100 million degrees Celsius. At this temperature, the lighter particles fuse into helium, releasing enormous amounts of energy.

Nuclear fusion is a fairly clean energy source as it does not produce harmful atmospheric emissions and only produces a small amount of short-lived radioactive waste.

Scientists have been trying to replicate it on Earth for almost 70 years, using isotopes of hydrogen—deuterium and tritium—to power fusion plants.

Since deuterium is found in seawater and tritium is attained through irradiating lithium (a common element used in batteries), the accessibility of these isotopes means that fusion could become a major source of energy in the future.

The amount of deuterium present in one liter of water, for example, could produce as much fusion energy as the combustion of 300 liters of oil.

However, the real challenge is ensuring fusion power plants generate more energy than they consume.

The Challenge of Fusion Ignition

Fusion ignition is the term for a fusion reaction that becomes self-sustaining, in which the reaction creates more energy than it uses up. Up until now, scientists were only able to break even.

The National Ignition Facility used a special setup called inertial confinement fusion that involves bombarding a tiny pellet of hydrogen plasma



with lasers to achieve fusion ignition.

LLNL's experiment surpassed the fusion threshold by delivering 2.05 megajoules (MJ) of energy to the target, resulting in 3.15 MJ of fusion energy output, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Can Nuclear Fusion Energy Be Commercialized Soon?

In recent years, fusion technology has been attracting the attention of governments as well as private companies such as Chevron and Google. Bloomberg Intelligence estimates that the fusion market will eventually be worth \$40 trillion.

Besides energy generation, fusion is expected to be used in other markets like space propulsion, marine propulsion, and medical and industrial heat.

However, according to the director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Kim Budil, it will take "probably decades" before nuclear fusion energy is commercialized.

During the breakthrough announcement, she noted that it was necessary to produce "many many fusion ignition events per minute" as well as have a "robust system of drivers" before fusion can be commercialized successfully.

NASA Formally Retires Mars InSight Lander After 4-Year Mission



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - NASA has formally retired its Mars InSight lander, the first robotic probe specially designed to study the deep interior of a distant world, four years after it arrived on the surface of the red planet, the U.S. space agency announced.

Mission controllers at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) near Los Angeles determined the mission was over when two consecutive attempts to re-establish radio contact with the lander failed, a sign that InSight's solar-powered batteries had run out of energy.

NASA predicted in late October that the spacecraft would reach the end of its operational life in a matter of weeks due to increasingly heavy accumulations of dust on its solar panels, depleting the ability of its batteries to recharge.

JPL engineers will continue to listen for a signal from the lander, just in case, but hearing from InSight again is unlikely, NASA said. The three-legged stationary probe last communicated with Earth on Dec. 15.

InSight landed on Mars in late November 2018 with instruments designed to detect planetary seismic rumblings never before measured anywhere but Earth, and its original two-year mission was later extended to four.

From its perch in a vast and relatively flat plain called Elysium Planitia just north of the planet's equator, the lander has helped scientists gain new understanding of Mars' internal structure.

Researchers said InSight's data revealed the thickness of the planet's outer crust, the size and density of its inner core and the structure of the mantle that lies in between.

One of InSight's chief accomplishments was establishing that the red planet is, indeed, seismically active, recording more than 1,300 marsquakes. It also measured seismic waves generated by meteorite impacts.

"The seismic data alone from this discovery program mission offers tremendous insights not just into Mars but other rocky bodies, including Earth," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator of NASA's science mission directorate.

One such impact a year ago was found to have gouged boulder-sized chunks of water ice surprisingly close to Mars' equator.

Even as InSight retires, a more recent robotic visitor to the red planet, NASA's science rover Perseverance, continues to prepare a collection of Martian mineral samples for future analysis on Earth.

This week, Perseverance deposited the first of 10 sample tubes it was directed to leave at a surface collection site on Mars as a backup cache, in case the primary supply stored in the rover's belly cannot for some reason be transferred as planned to a retrieval spacecraft in the future, NASA said.

Greek Woodcutters Give Energy Crisis the Chop

GREVENA (Dispatches) - Huddled around a campfire sipping hot tea, a group of Greek lumberjacks take a badly needed break in an oak forest not far from the Albanian border.

With petrol and gas bills increasing, loggers in northern Greece say they are doing their best to keep up with rising demand for wood, considered a more affordable option for people to heat their homes.

Many Greeks, still reeling from their country's decade-long economic crisis, are desperate to counteract energy prices soaring on the back of Russia's war in Ukraine and national inflation running at over eight percent.

"We have had an increase in demand," said timber transporter Yannis Paligiannis, 44.

"People are thinking of turning their heating to wood, but next year what will happen? Nobody is sure that next year wood won't be more expensive than petrol. Everyone is wary," he added.

For now, an abundant local supply makes firewood the best option in the north of Greece where temperatures dip well below zero Celsius (32 Fahrenheit) in deep winter.

"People here can get through winter by spending €300-400 (RM1,410-1,880) on firewood, perhaps even cheaper if they transport it and chop it themselves," Zisis Giakopoulos, a pensioner in his late 60s from the village of Aimilianos in the northwestern region of Grevena, told AFP.

"Many of them also use the firewood in stoves on which they also heat their food," Giakopoulos added.

In comparison, figures recently compiled by Greek



insurance website Pricefox showed a 80-square-metre flat needing to spend some €650 on petrol fees, nearly €1,000 on air-conditioning and nearly €1,300 for gas heating to get through winter.

Paligiannis says 70 per cent of the firewood sold in Greece comes from Grevena, this mountainous region not far from the border with Albania.

"There is a higher demand for wood compared to last year because of the energy crisis, but we shouldn't abuse the forest," cautioned lumberjack Dimitris Basnas, 34.

"If the trees are old and tall, it's slow work. You don't get a lot of quantity. If it's a younger forest you get more."

Greece has nearly 270 cooperatives with some 8,500 forestry workers registered at the environment ministry.

But despite heightened demand this year, the future of the profession is by no means guaranteed.

Numbers are dwindling, with younger people opting for less back-breaking work. Most of the wood is still transported by mule through thick foliage.

"We learnt this trade from our grandparents and we carry on the same way," says Thanassis Papanikolaou, president of a forestry cooperative that produces about 10,000 tonnes of firewood every year.

Opening access roads to vehicles through the forest is forbidden, he adds. "My father managed to raise five children doing this job," says 62-year-old Yiorgos Koutoulas, the group's eldest member, who is near retirement.

"When I leave there is no young person to replace me," he added.

Iran Not to Withdraw From Its Interests in Vienna Talks

TEHRAN (MNA) - The Spokesman for Iran Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Commission says that the Islamic Republic of Iran would not step back from its interests in JCPOA implementation negotiations.

Blaming the U.S. for slowing down the process of JCPOA negotiations, Abolfazl Amouei said: "It was the American side that withdrew from the JCPOA agreement and then announced its readiness to return to the JCPOA again, and the conditions for the US' return have been the focus of our negotiations for the past year and a half. It was the American side that, due to its own internal developments, including the elections, distanced itself from the process of advancing the negotiations more quickly, and since then, due to their incorrect political analysis, the progress of the negotiations has been slowed down."

"The JCPOA, as an agreement that was formed in 2015 between Iran and the 5+1 group, still exists between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 4+1 group," he cited.

Perhaps the Westerners hoped that the recent unrest in Iran would provide them with political benefits or weaken Iran's position in the negotiations, Amouei said, adding that now the public security conditions in Iran have improved, Westerners can understand that Iran does not intend to step back from its own interests in the negotiations.

He went on to say that if the US can admit that Iran would not cross its redlines and step back from its demands in the negotiations, reaching an agreement would be near.

Saying that concluding the agreement depends on the political will of the US, Amouei stressed that if the other side is ready to return to its previous obligations and effectively remove the sanctions, Iran is also ready to take compensatory measures too.

The negotiations have never been stopped and have been followed through mediation and sending messages and informal draft texts, the Iranian lawmaker added.

Saying that the Europeans' analysis of Iran's internal developments is not accurate, Amouei cited, "The excessive influence of anti-Iranian opposition currents in the decision-making of influential European countries has led to the creation of a false image that Iran is ready to make concessions, and that this image needs to be changed and Westerners must be realistic. Under normal conditions, it is surely possible to talk again and strengthen communication."

Looting Nations'...

FROM PAGE 1

According to the letters, the U.S.' exploiting, destroying, wasting, and exhausting of Syrian natural resources are depriving the Syrian people of their resources "at a time when Syria is already suffering from an acute shortage of energy materials", Syria Times reported.



Data released by Syria's Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources showed that in the first half of 2022, U.S. forces allegedly stole more than 80 percent of Syria's oil resources every day as the country's average daily oil production can reach 80,000 barrels and 66,000 barrels were taken by the US and US-backed opposition armed groups.

Such barefaced robbery in Syria is not much different from colonial plunder, which is quite rare to see as the U.S.' attaining oil from other oil-producing countries is at least legal on the surface.

This is because Syria is still far from completely independent with violated sovereignty and the Syrian government's limited capacity.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian has recently said that it is appalling to see the sheer scale of U.S. plundering in Syria which faces a grave humanitarian crisis.

Now it has been reported that Syrian government troops have confronted a U.S. military convoy in northeastern province of Hasakah as the occupation forces were attempting to pass through a community in the energy-rich region.

Amid an increasing public anger over the presence of American occupation forces, Syrian army troops stationed at a checkpoint at the entrance to the village of Tell Dahab, which lies south of the city of Qamishli, blocked and expelled the convoy of several armored vehicles, according to SANA news agency.

The convoy was forced to turn around and return in the direction it had come from.

The development came days after U.S. occupation forces in northeastern Syria sent 95 tankers of stolen Syrian oil to Iraq in two separate convoys.

Syrian government and people should take serious action against the U.S. troops who are looting their wealth if they want prosperity and peace to return to their country otherwise the Yankees under different pretext will continue their presence in oil-rich areas of Syria and will continue looting their wealth, and international bodies will also support the Americans by remaining silent.

So the Islamic Republic of Iran has always been right to stand against excessive-demand and arrogance of the U.S. and Tehran is right to distrust the Americans and to stay away from this country which is rightly deserved to be named Great Satan because one cannot see any goodness from the Satan as Satan always seeks vicious and evil things especially against the honest, sincere and independent people and nations.

Iran to Produce...

FROM PAGE 1

The AEOI launched a second phase of its deuterium production unit in Arak Heavy Water Reactor Facility in central Iran in April 2021.

Meanwhile Esلمي said that preparations are underway for a visit by officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to the Islamic Republic in the near future upon a demand by the UN nuclear watchdog.

Esلمي, who heads the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), was asked by reporters about a possible visit by IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi and other officials of the agency.

He said the IAEA has "shown willingness" for such a visit, which is slated to take place following New Year holidays.

Iran and the IAEA have been locked in a dispute over what the latter claims to be nuclear activities at "undeclared sites" in Iran.

Tehran rejects the claims, which it says are made under the influence of Israel and its allies.

The row has been a major stumbling block in talks on the revival of the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and world powers.

Pakistan Lacks Infrastructure...

FROM PAGE 1

As for gas imports through Central Asian infrastructure (i.e. pipelines) that the Russian deputy prime minister referred to a day ago, analysts believe the proposal can only be pursued once Pakistan shows seriousness in developing the long-pending 683-mile pipeline from Karachi to Lahore with Russian help.

"The government should offer the Russians an attractive equity stake in the proposed pipeline and expedite its construction to realise sufficient gas imports from Russia," he said.

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Warner Retires in Pain After Making 200 in 100th Test

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - David Warner battled through searing heat to hit an epic unbeaten 200 in his 100th Test before retiring in pain as Australia consolidated their advantage against South Africa at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.
On a scorching day, the hosts were 386-3 at stumps on day two of the second Test, leading by 197 after the Proteas were dismissed in their first innings for 189. Travis Head was not out 48 with Alex Carey on nine.

Liverpool to Sign Dutch Striker Gakpo From PSV Eindhoven

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool have agreed to sign the Netherlands forward Cody Gakpo from PSV Eindhoven, the Eredivisie club said.
The 23-year-old Gakpo scored three goals for the Netherlands in the World Cup in Qatar, where the team were beaten by eventual champions Argentina in the quarter-finals. The clubs did not disclose a transfer fee but British media reported it was around 40 to 50 million euros (\$43 to \$53 million). PSV general manager Marcel Brands said the transfer fee would be a record for the club.

Djokovic, Nadal to Kickstart Bid for 2023 Supremacy in Australia

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal kickstart their 2023 campaigns this week in Adelaide and Sydney respectively, with the superstar veterans and great rivals eyeing up yet more Australian Open glory.
With the pair sharing 43 Grand Slam titles between them -- Djokovic has 21 and Nadal 22 -- the scene is set for an epic showdown at Melbourne Park in January.
Nadal is the defending Australian Open champion and Djokovic is a nine-time winner. Djokovic returns Down Under for the first time since being sensationally detained and then deported ahead of the 2022 Australian Open because of his refusal to get vaccinated for Covid-19. He starts his bid for an incredible 10th Australian Open title at the Adelaide International from Sunday, following a troubled and truncated year in which he missed two majors because of his vaccine status.

Djokovic was initially barred from entering Australia before 2025, but a new government in Canberra reversed the ruling and he is now gunning for more silverware at his most successful Grand Slam venue.

"Over the years I've been really fortunate to start very strong in Australia and I love playing there," said the world number five in Dubai last week, after ending 2022 with a record-equalling sixth ATP Tour Finals crown.

"After obviously what happened earlier this year, hopefully I can have a decent reception there and hopefully that can help me play some good tennis."

He will face a top-notch field in Adelaide, including Felix Auger-Aliassime, Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev, ranked six, seven and eight respectively.

In Djokovic's absence this year, Spanish great Nadal swept past Medvedev to win the Australian Open in an epic five-setter -- then backed it up with a 14th French Open.

Nadal will begin his preparations in Sydney at the United Cup, a new mixed-teams event, where a blockbuster showdown with Australian showman Nick Kyrgios will test his credentials.



Eighteen countries will compete in the event across 11 days from Thursday, with Brisbane, Perth and Sydney hosting group games in a round-robin format.

Ties comprise two men's and two women's singles matches and one mixed doubles. The finals series will be played in Sydney.

World number three Casper Ruud and Germany's Alexander Zverev, who is returning from a serious ankle injury, will participate.

Top-ranked Carlos Alcaraz will warm up at the Kooyong Classic exhibition in Melbourne from January 10-12 as he battles back from the abdominal injury that shortened his pre-season training block.

The 19-year-old Spaniard, a major threat to Djokovic and Nadal, missed the season-ending ATP Finals and Davis Cup Finals with a muscle tear, but is confident he will be ready.

"I would say the key is to practise a lot, spend a lot of hours on court," he said this month. "I will be ready and 100 percent heading into Australia."

Italy's Jannik Sinner and world number nine Taylor Fritz, among others, will also use Kooyong to fine-tune.

Women's world number one Iga Swiatek will acclimatise in Perth with her Polish teammates at the United Cup on the back of winning the French Open and US Open in 2022.

The three-time Grand Slam champion is targeting a first Australian Open title after losing in the semis this year to Danielle Collins, who then crashed to Ashleigh Barty in the final. Swiatek inherited the top ranking following the shock retirement of Barty in March, and has been dominant ever since.

American world number three Jessica Pegula and resurgent French world number four Caroline Garcia, fresh from beating Aryna Sabalenka to win the WTA Finals, also feature at the United Cup.

Four of the other top 10 women begin the year in Adelaide, with second-ranked Ons Jabeur, world number five Sabalenka, world number eight Daria Kasatkina and world number nine Veronika Kudermetova all entered.

Quitting Juventus Top Job Wasn't Easy

TURIN (Dispatches) - Outgoing Juventus Chairman Andrea Agnelli said his decision to stand down from the top job at the Serie A club was not an easy one to take, and he remained convinced he had acted correctly.

"On top of loving Juventus, in recent years I have given my best to achieving results on and off the pitch," Agnelli told shareholders gathered in Turin to approve the team's results for the fiscal year ended in June which showed a 238 million euro (\$255 million) loss.

Juventus, Italy's most successful team, is under scrutiny by Italy's prosecutors and market watchdog for alleged false accounting, leading its board to resign last month. Prosecutors have requested Agnelli, 11 other people and the club itself stand trial.

Agnelli said that by stepping down he had wanted to avoid any risk that people might think his personal situation could affect the club's decisions.

"Juventus comes before everything and everyone," he said, adding: "I am strongly convinced I have acted properly in recent years, and that accusations raised against us were not founded."

On Monday Exor, the holding company of the Agnelli family and the controlling shareholder of Juventus, presented its slate for the club's new board, which will be appointed at a shareholder meeting scheduled for Jan. 18.

Belarus Sentences in Absentia Former Olympian Herasimenia To 12 Years in Prison

MINSK (Dispatches) - A Minsk court sentenced in absentia former Olympic swimmer Aliaksandra Herasimenia and political activist Alexander Opeykin to 12 years in prison for calling for sanctions and actions aimed at harming the national security of Belarus.

"They were found guilty of public calls to commit actions aimed at causing harm to the national security of Belarus, including the use of restrictive measures (sanctions) against Belarus, individuals and legal entities of the republic," the state news BelTA agency reported on Monday. "Such actions entailed grave consequences."

Herasimenia, a three-time Olympic medallist, was among the elite athletes who fled Belarus in the wake of a crackdown against those who protested what they said was the fraudulent re-election of Alexander Lukashenko in August 2020.

Lukashenko, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has denied any wrongdoing. Although

Aleksander Opeykin is the chairman of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation aimed at supporting athletes who have been detained and faced repressions under Lukashenko's authoritarian rule.

"From August, 2020 to May 20, 2022, through the media and the Internet, they disseminated deliberately false information and fabrications about the events that took place on the territory of Belarus, about the course and results of the election campaign 2020," BelTA reported.

Klopp Hails Unstoppable Nunez

LONDON (Dispatches) - Darwin Nunez was not on the scoresheet in Liverpool's 3-1 win over Aston Villa but manager Juergen Klopp said he was delighted with the Uruguayan's all-round play and is confident the goals will come.
Nunez missed several chances against Villa but his tireless running and chance creation saw him named Man of the Match, with his late cutback allowing teenager Stefan Bajcetic to score his first senior goal.

Arsenal Comeback Opens Up Seven-Point Premier League Lead



LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal opened up a seven-point lead at the top of the Premier League after coming from behind to beat West Ham 3-1 at the Emirates.

Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli turned the game around in the space of five second half minutes before Eddie Nketiah stepped up in the absence of Gabriel Jesus to seal all three points.

Said Benrahma's first half penalty had given the Hammers the lead, but David Moyes' men remain just one point above the relegation zone in 16th.

Arsenal's momentum towards a first league title since 2004 could have been halted by a six-week break for the World Cup.

Mikel Arteta made no allowances for his stars that have been away in Qatar as William Saliba started just eight days after being part of the French squad that lost the final on penalties to Argentina.

However, that decision backfired when Saliba hesitated to allow Michail Antonio latch onto a ball over the top and then dived in on Jarrod Bowen.

Despite Bowen not going to ground immediately, referee Michael Oliver pointed to the spot and Benrahma confidently dispatched the penalty.

Arsenal thought they had a spot-kick of their own in first half stoppage time but Oliver reversed his initial decision after seeing a replay of Martin Odegaard's shot come off Aaron Cresswell's head rather than the left-back's arm.

The Gunners got the break they needed to turn the tide eight minutes after the break when Odegaard's mishit shot fell perfectly into the path of Saka to sidefoot home.

Martinelli added the second goal moments later with the help of West Ham goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski, who was far too easily beaten at his near post. A prolonged injury layoff for Jesus had raised doubts over Arsenal's ability to maintain their title challenge in the coming months with games against Newcastle, Tottenham and Manchester United to come in January alone.

But Nketiah grabbed his opportunity on his first Premier League start of the season with a brilliant spin and low finish into the far corner from Odegaard's pass 21 minutes from time.

Manchester City can reduce the gap at the top to five points and move back above Newcastle into second place with victory when they travel to Leeds.

However, another show of resilience from Arsenal showed the fight that lies ahead of the defending champions if they are to retain the title once more in the second half of the season.

Nets Hold Off Cavs for Ninth Straight NBA Win

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving scored 32 points apiece as the Brooklyn Nets pushed their NBA winning streak to nine games with a 125-117 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Brooklyn edged ahead of the Cavs for third place in the Eastern Conference, withstanding a late Cleveland surge even after Durant fouled out with 1:54 left to play.

The Nets were up by 10 when Durant departed after he was whistled for an offensive foul while driving to the basket.

Irving, who played a key role alongside LeBron James in Cleveland's 2016 championship run, had the last word against his former team.

Darius Garland's floater cut the deficit to four points with 44 seconds remaining, but Irving made a pair of free throws and Brooklyn's Nic Claxton came up with a big block and the Nets held on.



Chargers Beat Colts to Clinch NFL Playoff Berth

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Los Angeles Chargers are headed back to the NFL playoffs for the first time since 2018 after a 20-3 victory over the Indianapolis Colts.

The Chargers clinched an AFC wild card berth, aided by defeats for the New York Jets, New England Patriots and Las Vegas Raiders earlier in the week.

It will be their first post-season appearance under head coach Brandon Staley and with star quarterback Justin Herbert, who was drafted sixth overall in 2020.

"It means a lot for our team," Herbert said of a Chargers side that lost a string of key contributors to injury this season.

"We've been through so much this year and for the guys to battle and keep fighting the way they have, it's been great to see," he added in a post-game interview with ESPN.

Herbert completed 25 of 31 passes for 235 yards, with one interception.

Austin Ekeler ran for two touchdowns and Cameron Dicker kicked two field goals for the Chargers, with Herbert admitting that offensively there is "a lot of room for improvement."

