

General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Warned Enemies, Especially The U.S. and Israel, Against Making Any Mistake in Dealing With the Islamic Republic, Saying Any Attack Against the Country Will Be Responded Firmly at Its Origin

IRAN NEWS

Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mehdi Esmaili Says Enemies Have Put on Their Agenda Media Terrorism and Try to Create Distrust, Suspicion and Disappointment in the Society But Iranians Have Foiled Their Plots

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Army Launches Massive War Game Southeast of Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Iranian Army staged large-scale military exercises in an area stretching from the eastern part of the Strait of Hormuz to the northern tip of the Indian Ocean.

The joint drills -codenamed Zolfaqar 1401- kicked off on Thursday night with the key motto of "self-confidence, power, sustainable security" to promote the combat capability of the Armed Forces.

The Zolfaqar 1401 joint exercise aims to show that the arms embargoes against Iran are ineffective as the country possesses domestically-manufactured equipment.

On Thursday and before the start of the drill, speaking to reporters, Deputy Chief of the Iranian Army for Coordination Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari added that the joint drills — codenamed Zolfaqar 1401 — will begin later tonight with the key motto of "self-confidence, power, sustainable security" to promote the combat capability of the Armed Forces.

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13th Anniversary of Pro-Islamic Republic Rallies Marked in Tehran



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Thousands of people have demonstrated in the Iranian capital of Tehran to commemorate the 13th anniversary of the 2009 nationwide rallies that put an end to post-election unrest back then and renewed the nation's allegiance to the Islamic establishment.

The demonstrators, in their thousands, gathered at the Imam Hossein Square of Tehran on Thursday to denounce any acts of violence and sabotage by domestic rioters and foreign-backed rabble-rousers against the Islamic Republic.

The occasion, known as Dey 9 epic, refers to the huge demonstrations held in Tehran and other cities on the ninth day of the Persian calendar month of Dey, which falls on December 30, in support of the Islamic Republic. The million-strong rallies restored tranquility to the country after months of political wrangling and foreign-sponsored riots, and ended what the Iranian authorities described as sedition ensuing the presidential election in June 2009.

During the riots, a group of demonstrators offended the Iranian people's sanctities on the day of Ashura, which marks the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Hussein (AS), the third Shia Imam and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The unrest was orchestrated by Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Musavi, two of the candidates who had lost the election and claimed that the results had been rigged. Both remain under house arrest on charges of provoking the public and harming national security.

Each year, Iranians mark the occasion with rallies but the demonstrations in the past two years were held by cars and vehicles due to the coronavirus outbreak.

This year's demonstrations coincided with the third martyrdom anniversary of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, former commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and his comrades in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.

On January 3, 2020, the United States assassinated General Soleimani, as well as the deputy commander of Iraq's popular mobilization units, Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis, in a drone strike near Baghdad International Airport.

Both commanders were admired by Muslim nations for eliminating the US-sponsored Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

The riots also set the scene for terrorist attacks across the country.

In a communique issued at the end of Thursday's rallies, the demonstrators said the street riots are now over in Iran but the enemies have embarked on taking revenge on the nation through sanctions, and disruption of the monetary system and the foreign exchange market with the aim of creating economic problems for the people.

The communique said the enemies, by instilling intensified mistrust into the market, are trying to create a sense of insecurity and cause despair, impose a new wave of inflation on Iran's economy, ramp up grievances and marginalize the achievements of the Islamic Revolution.

The demonstrators also expressed gratitude to the Iranian Armed Forces and appreciated the efforts and measures by the country's security and intelligence apparatus in defending national security.

"We will not tolerate any malicious intent against the security and territorial integrity of our country, and in case of any possible threat, we, are fully ready along with the Armed Forces to confront the enemies and to give a response to the aggressor country to make it regret" its measures, the communique noted.

The demonstrators also called for a "decisive and strict" approach towards rioters and perpetrators of violent acts in the country.

Record Number of Israeli Settlers Stormed al-Aqsa Mosque Compound in 2022

GAZA (Dispatches) - The Islamic organization running the al-Aqsa Mosque compound's affairs says a record number of Israeli settlers stormed the Muslim holy site in 2022.

So far this year, as many as 48,238 settlers have violated the compound, which is Islam's third-holiest site, Azzam Khatib, director of the Islamic Waqf Department was quoted by the official Palestinian Wafa news agency as saying.

The official described the number of violations as unprecedented. Ever since occupying the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, including East al-Quds which houses the compound, in 1967, the Israeli regime has been enforcing restrictions on the Palestinians' right to worship at the site.

The regime's military, however, regularly provides protection for the illegal settlers' tours of the holy site as means of hurting the religious sentiments of the Palestinians and their fellow Muslims around the world.

According to the official, the Israeli extremists have been resorting to provocative conduct while storming the compound, including performing Jewish rituals at the site and raising the occupying regime's flag there.

Khatib stressed that "al-Aqsa Mosque is an Islamic holy place with...all its features and facilities [both] above and below the ground."

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Five Planes Join Iran Fleet To Boost Domestic Airlines

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has taken delivery of five second-hand planes to boost the fleet size of its domestic airlines amid sanctions that have effectively barred the country from purchasing brand new aircraft.

Head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization (CAOIRI) Mohammad Mohammadi Bakhsh said on Thursday that the five Airbus and Boeing planes that had arrived in the country in recent days had an average age of 15 years.

Mohammadi Bakhsh said the planes will be supplied to three domestic airlines without identifying their names.

He hailed the arrival of the planes as a success for Iran amid US sanctions that seek to paralyze the civil aviation system in the country.

"Despite the sanctions, the country's aviation fleet is being renovated and rejuvenated," the official told the IRIB News.

CAOIRI spokesman Hassan Khoshkho indicated in a statement late on Wednesday that four of the newly-arrived planes were Airbus A340s that had been manufactured in France. The official would not elaborate on more details.

Iran's flag carrier Iran Air had announced in mid-November that it had plans to increase its active fleet size by five planes until March.

No Reasonable Alternatives For Iran Nuclear Deal

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stressed that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal has no viable alternatives and that any speculation on a "Plan B" or other options is irresponsible.

Asked in an interview with RIA Novosti whether the "point of no return" has been passed in the work of reinstating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Lavrov replied that those who keep saying that everything is lost are Westerners.

He added that the Westerners "are trying to scare the world from the 'Iranian threat' and they don't like to remember that the JCPOA was working perfectly until the US decided overnight to break the nuclear deal.

"Let me remind you that it was May 2018, in breach of its own obligations," the top Russian diplomat stated.

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Iran Outdoes Europe's Largest Supplier in Steel Output in Nov.

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's steel output outdid that of Europe's largest steel supplier Germany in November, according to figures by the World Steel Association (worldsteel).

Worldsteel figures covered in a Friday report by the IRNA showed that Iran had produced 2.9 million metric tons (mt) of steel in November, up 3.9% from November 2021.

The figures showed that Iran's November steel production had exceeded outputs reported by traditional rivals Turkey, Germany and Brazil, allowing the country to move up three places to the seventh position in the Worldsteel's ranking of largest steel producers.

China remained the world's top steel producer in November with 74.5 million mt of output, up 7.3% from same month last year while India's output rose 5.7% year on year in November to 10.4 million mt, showed the figures.

The Worldsteel data showed that November steel output in Japan and United States had reached 7.2 million mt and 6.4 million mt, respectively, down 10.7% and 10.5% from November 2021.

Other major steel producers in November were Russia with 5.6 million mt of output, South Korea with 4.8 million mt, Germany with 2.8 million mt, Türkiye with 2.4 million mt and Brazil with 2.6 million mt, all of them reporting declines of between 9% and 30% in monthly output compared with November last year.

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Leader to Receive People of Qom on Uprising Anniversary

TEHRAN (MNA) – On the occasion of the 1978 Qom uprising anniversary, the people of Qom are scheduled to meet with the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei.

The January 9, 1978 uprising in Qom is seen as a very important historical juncture because it acted as a precursor to more mass demonstrations in other cities across Iran, shaking the foundations of the despotic Pahlavi regime before finally toppling it in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

On the uprising anniversary, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei will receive a group of Qom people.

It Was U.S. That Set New Conditions In JCPOA Talks

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Mohammad Eslami said on Thursday that the party that set new conditions in JCPOA negotiations was not Iran, but it was the United States, IRNA reported.

Eslami also said that the U.S. is now sending different messages expressing readiness for continuation of talks.

He said it is not acceptable to finalize the talks on the one hand and leave new doors open for pressuring the Iranian nation and re-imposing sanctions on them on the other hand.

The main issue in the JCPOA negotiations is political and based on “the engine of maximum pressure”, so that the Americans are deceived every now and then and fall into the trap of Zionists and extremists, and these ups and downs are always theirs, Eslami said.

He believed that it is necessary for the other side to give up making plots, destruction and sanctions so that both sides would benefit from the continuation of talks.

The official said that the IAEA inspectors are regularly in Iran and all the nuclear activities of the country are being carried out under their inspection. He added that the IAEA officials visited Iran and held negotiations last week.

The IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi has also voiced readiness for a visit to Iran which will possibly be discussed and scheduled after January holidays, he said.



Eslami also said that nuclear centers and industries are assumed to be highly guarded, and high security places, as Iran pursues open innovations in that field.

While speaking for a large group of faculty members of Isfahan University, he added that he enemy tries to intimidate the Islamic Republic of Iran and convince us to lose hope in entering the prohibited zone of becoming a world power.

He said that the advanced technologies are considered power creators, reiterating, “Now there is a kind of encountering of the world powers in the field of modern technologies and achieving advancement in them.”

The AEOI chief added that under such conditions “we favor open innovations which everyone will know about them, and the ground, too, is quite paved for them”.

“Research and innovation in this field, must be target-oriented, based on precise planning, and with clear strategies, so that we can proceed with it evolutionarily,” said Eslami.

He said that the AEOI’s strategies are pursued seriously and not merely based on slogans.

“Making the nuclear energy a security issue is the biggest threat against it, while in this field we can achieve practical and useful results based on good thoughts and innovations,” added Eslami.

Omani Sultan Paid Special Attention to JCPOA Talks

TEHRAN (MNA) –Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said that Oman’s Sultan paid special attention to different dimensions of the Vienna talks.

Writing on his official Twitter account shortly after a visit to Oman where he visited that country’s Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, Amirabdollahian noted that apart from making efforts to help reaching an agreement in Vienna talks, Oman has been one of the main centers for transfer of Iranian forex assets from other banks.

The foreign minister said that in his meeting with the Omani Sultan, they have stressed that bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries are exemplary.

The two sides have also discussed issues related to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, and Ukraine, Amirabdollahian said.

Hossein Amirabdollahian met and held talks with Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday.

700,000 Foreign Nationals Studying in Iranian Schools

ILAM (IRNA) – An Iranian education ministry official says the number of foreign nationals studying in Iranian schools has topped 700,000.

“From a total of 16.182 million school pupils in the country, some 700,000 are studying in the schools as foreign nationals,” Majid Abdollahi, a deputy head of the Organization for Development, Renovation and Equipping Schools (DRES) of Iran, said.

Abdollahi made the announcement while speaking on the IRNA on the sidelines of a ceremony to open a special school for foreigners in the western province of Ilam on the border with Iraq.

He said Afghans account for a majority of foreign students in Iranian schools, adding that most of those students are concentrated in provinces of Razavi Khorasan, Qom, Semnan, Fars and Sistan and Baluchestan in northeast, center, south and southeast of Iran.

The official went on to say that DRES will continue to use its resources to build special schools for foreign nationals in accordance with guidelines of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).

The UNHCR and DRES have jointly funded the construction of the school for foreign students that was opened on Wednesday in the provincial capital of Ilam.

Iran Moves to 7th Place in Global Steel Producers Ranking

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran moved up three places in the global ranking of top steel producers to seventh position in November with a total output of 2.9 million metric tons (mt), according to a report published in the local media.

The report by Fars news agency cited figures by an industry source which showed that Iran’s November steel production had exceeded outputs reported by traditional rivals Turkey, Germany and Brazil.

Mohammad Saeidi said that Iran’s steel output had increased by 8.5% year on year in November, despite a 3.7% average decline reported in the global steel production.

He said European countries had started to place major orders for Iranian steel shipments amid the global crunch for the metal.

Iran was the 10th largest steel producer in the world before mid-summer when the country started to post historic rises in output. Government figures released at the end of August showed Iran’s steel production had risen by 65% compared with August 2021.

Major steel producers in Europe have reported steep declines in output in November mainly because of a shortage in natural gas supplies that has been caused by the war in Ukraine.

Steel production by European Union countries dropped by an average of 10.1% year on year in November as top supplier Germany reported a fall of 7.9% in output over the period.

Non-EU steel producers also reported an 11.2% drop in output in November compared to the same month last year while US production fell 5.5% over the same period.

Tehran Reacts to Anti-Iran Provisions of U.S. 2023 NDAA

TEHRAN (MNA) – Condemning the anti-Iranian provisions of the U.S.’ 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson called it an attempt to create propaganda against Tehran.

Nasser Kanaani in a statement on Friday said that the anti-Iranian provisions in the US’s 2023 National Defense Authorization Act reflect the hostile, provocative, and interventionist beliefs and policies of the United States.

Bilateral cooperation between Iran and other governments in various fields, including conventional defense cooperation, is in line with international laws and obligations and is not against any third country, he said, adding that the US has threatened regional peace and stability by establishing numerous military bases in the region.

Asserting the fact that the construction of nuclear weapons has no place in Iran’s military doctrine, he added that Iran, as a member state of the IAEA and the Safeguard Agreement, is familiar with its rights and obligations.

Making baseless claims about the peaceful nuclear activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not help the efforts to legitimize the illegal and unilateral actions and sanctions of the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran, he also said, stressing that Iran has proven that it will not surrender to force.

Americans’ full support for the occupying Zionist regime, as the only possessor of nuclear weapons in the West Asian region, is the most serious threat to regional and international peace and security, the Iranian diplomat criticized.

Italian Envoy Summoned Over Rome’s Meddlesome Remarks

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Foreign Ministry has summoned Italy’s ambassador to Tehran over meddlesome comments made by some of the European country’s officials about Iran’s domestic affairs.

Giuseppe Perrone was summoned by the Iranian Foreign Ministry on Thursday to receive Iran’s “strong protest” to anti-Tehran measures and remarks by some Italian officials.

In the meeting, Iran’s strong protest was conveyed to the Italian ambassador over the continuation of statements and interventionist measures by some Italian officials about Iran’s internal affairs.

It was emphasized during the meeting that “selective and double standards” regarding human rights are rejected and considered unacceptable from the perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



The Foreign Ministry told the Italian envoy that it was not Iran but the other side that has harmed the interests of the Iranian nation and violated the country’s rights by the imposition of illegal sanctions.

“The negative and irrational positions of some Italian officials do not correspond with the historical record of relations between the two countries,” the Ministry added.

The Italian ambassador promised to convey Iran’s protest to his respective government at the earliest.

Over the past weeks, Italian officials have accused Iranian authorities of what they claim to be “crackdown on anti-government protests” across the country.

The Italian government has also denounced as “unacceptable and intolerable” the Islamic Republic’s approach towards violent riots sparked after the mid-September’s death of a young woman of Kurdish descent in Tehran.

FM Calls for Lifting of Saudi-Led Coalition’s Blockade of Yemen

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran’s foreign minister, during his meeting with the chief negotiator of Yemen’s National Salvation Government in the Omani capital on Wednesday, called for the lifting of the Saudi-led coalition’s blockade of the country.

Hossein Amirabdollahian, who is currently visiting Oman, held the meeting with Mohammed Abdul-Salam, who is also the spokesperson of the Ansarullah resistance movement, at the Iranian embassy in Muscat, according to a statement issued by the foreign ministry.

During the meeting, Iran’s top diplomat “appreciated the steadfastness of the Yemeni people in asserting their rights” and reaffirmed the Islamic Republic of Iran’s support to them.

Referring to it as a “humanitarian matter”, Amirabdollahian said the blockade of Yemen should be lifted and the people of the country should be able to lead normal lives.

Iran’s foreign minister further emphasized the need for a peaceful solution to the crisis engulfing Yemen and described the political dialogue between Yemeni groups as an “internal matter” of the country.

He also paid tribute to Hassan Irloo, the former ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Yemen. His first death anniversary was observed last week.

Amirabdollahian hailed him as “a martyr of Yemen” and reaffirmed the determination of the Islamic Republic of Iran in supporting the people of Yemen.

Yemen has been reeling under the Saudi-led coalition’s devastating war since March 2015, which has spawned the world’s worst humanitarian disaster in the Persian Gulf country.

In October, the United Nations announced the end of a truce in the country between the Ansarullah resistance movement and the Saudi-led coalition, paving way for no-holds-barred aggression from the occupying coalition supported by the Western powers.

The Yemeni Army blames Riyadh and its Arab and Western allies for breaching the terms of the UN-brokered ceasefire.

“Lopeto” Awarded at Indian Children Film Festival

TEHRAN (MNA) – Directed by Abbas Askari and produced by Mohammad Hossein Sadeghi, the Iranian animation “Lopeto” won the award of best animation at Ahmedabad International Children Film Festival.

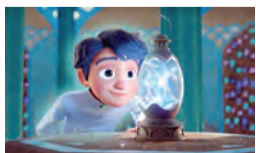
Lopeto is directed by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Askari and produced by Mohammad Hossein Sadeghi.

The name of the animation is inspired by the word the Kermani people of Iran use to refer to handmade toys that mothers used to make for their children in the past.

“Ali’s father treats his patients by teaching them how to make toys in the workshop of Lopeto. Lopeto is a creative toy workshop, which is very popular among Iranian children is closed due to vandalism by an unknown person. Ali tries to save his father, who is disappointed, from this predicament...” the synopsis of the animation read.

Ahmedabad International Children Film Festival was held from Dec. 24th to Dec. 29th, 2022.

The festival hosted a competition amongst the children’s filmmakers, which can inspire them and give them a platform to showcase their work and skills as filmmakers.



Iran Pursuing Border Diplomacy With Pakistan, Afghanistan

TEHRAN (IFP) - The interior minister highlights the strategic significance of the country’s southeastern frontiers, saying the Tehran administration is pursuing an agenda to promote border diplomacy with neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Addressing a ceremony in Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Ahmad Vahidi said the country’s southeastern borders provide a “golden opportunity” to enhance export and, at the same time, import much-needed goods. He said both mines and water resources near the borders in the province are “valuable” assets.

Vahidi said the Iranian administration should encourage investors to come to the province and benefit from the border region’s great capacities. “Sistan and Baluchestan has a capacity for investments worth tens of billions of toman, especially in the field of mines,” he said.

The minister also referred to a long-running dispute with Afghanistan over Iran’s share of water from the Helmand River. “We face water issues in Sistan and Baluchestan, over which we have issued numerous warnings to the neighboring country and the [ruling] Taliban administration,” he said. “While we are pursuing the water rights issue, we should look for other ways to resolve the water issues in Sistan and Baluchestan,” he added.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:07
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:21
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:44
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14

96. He replied: "I saw what they saw not: so I took a handful (of dust) from the footprint of the Messenger, and threw it (into the calf): thus did my soul suggest to me."

Surah 20, Ta-ha (96)

Iran to Turn Into Gasoline Importer If Consumption Is Not Controlled

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Head of the Iranian Union of Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Exporters Mr Seyed Hamid Hosseini says if the gasoline consumption in the country continues with the current pace, the country will once again turn into a gasoline importing state.

Speaking to ILNA, Hosseini said that the overhaul process of some refineries have prolonged and they have faced with problems in providing required parts and some of the refineries are under reconstruction and renovation, and for these reasons they have problem in production, and the rise in consumption because of the rise in the number of cars rolling in the streets has led to the rise in gasoline consumption. He reiterated that one should add gasoline smuggling to these problems as the other reasons for gasoline supply problem. He noted that today the amount of gasoline production equals with consumption but in the summer when the consumption will be more than production, the country will definitely turn into a gasoline importing country.

He went on to say that the capacity for gasoline production in the country is currently 110m liters per day and last year some 105m liters per day of gasoline was produced,



reiterating that the real gasoline production capacity is around 103m liters per day but currently some 98m liters per day of gasoline is produced for the mentioned reasons.

Hosseini also said that the distributed gasoline in the big cities of the country is Euro 4 and 5, adding that 45m liters is Euro 4 which is produced at Shazand Refinery of Arak, adding that some refineries are still unable to produce Euro 4 and 5 gasoline but one should not blame this for the air pollution in big cities because one of the main factors behind air pollution is the old public transportation like taxi and bus and also the fuel which is used by the power plants.

He also said that major distributed gasoline is high quality one but most of vehicles are not standard, adding that if the country maintains daily production of gasoline at 104m liters per day, there will be no need to import gasoline or use gasoline of petro-refineries by the yearend.

He went on to say that the considerable difference between the price of gasoline in Iran with neighboring states has encouraged smuggling of gasoline to those countries and adjusting the price of gasoline in the country will help gasoline consumption in the country and decrease the amount of smuggling of gasoline to the neighboring states.

New CBI Governor Appointed

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The government appointed a new governor for the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) in an apparent effort to contain rising prices in the country's unofficial foreign currency market.

Mohammad Reza Farzin was named CBI governor by the Iranian Cabinet on Thursday, according to a report by the official IRNA news agency.

Farzin has served as CEO of Bank Melli, Iran's largest lender, for the past 16 months. He holds a PhD in economics from Tehran's Allameh Tabataba'i University and has a history of serving in top government jobs in a former administration that left office in 2013.

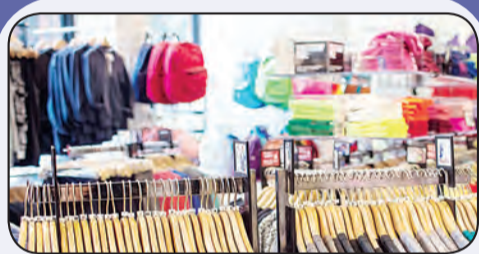
He replaces Ali Salehabadi, CBI's youngest-ever governor. The government has given no clear reason for Salehabadi's resignation although reports over the past weeks have suggested that President Ebrahim Raisi was dissatisfied with his performance in the job. Salehabadi had been criticized in domestic economic circles for his failure to control rising hard currency prices.

The price of the US dollar rose to an all-time high of 430,000 Iranian rials on Thursday, up 10,000 rials from a day earlier.

Experts welcomed Farzin's appointment as CBI governor and said it could help ease the crisis in the foreign exchange market.



Iran Clothing Industry Struggling Because of Rise in Final Cost



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Vice President of the Textile and Clothing Production and Export Union says the final cost of production in clothing industry is on the rise and it affects this industry and its future.

Speaking to ILNA, Majid Nami said that with the decline in the purchasing power of the people and rise in the price of first hand apparels, the number of people purchasing the second hand clothes is on the rise and it may be a threat to users' health.

He pointed to the decline in the share of apparel in the households' consumer basket and said that according to the reports of the Statistical Center of Iran, after the decline in the purchasing power, people have lost their appetite for purchasing new and first hand clothes.

Stating that smuggling of clothes saw upward trend in the 1390s (Iranian calendar year) (almost 2000s), he said that the government slapped ban on imports of over 2,000 items of goods like apparel aimed at supporting the domestic production and controlling the forex market after imposition of sanctions against Iran.

He noted that after the decline in the share of smuggling in the apparel market, the price of apparel did not increase so much because of competition in the apparel industry of the country despite inflation and rise in the price of raw materials.

Nami went on to say that after the pandemic and decline in trade exchange, they witnessed excessive arrival of goods into the country and therefore there is a competition between domestic product and smuggled goods and Iranian brands have to fix their prices in a way to compete with their foreign rivals while the final cost of their products is increasing daily because of the rise in the price of the raw materials, and this rise in the price is the biggest danger which threatens domestic production.

He admitted that the rise in the final cost of apparel in Iran affects exports of the apparel while economic, trade and industrial infrastructures are also required to increase exports. He pointed to the progress of Asian countries in the apparel industry and their final costs are very lower than Iran, noting that they have better infrastructures.

Nami reiterated that with the decline in the purchasing power of the people and the hike in the price of new apparel, people have turned into second hand clothes and it can have dangerous consequences on the health of consumers.

He admitted that this decline in sales has forced many apparel producers to close their businesses and even some producers used to sell low price products were forced to shut down because people prefer to buy high quality apparel to use it for longer time than buying low price products with lower quality.

Natural Gas Output at 1.04 bcm Per Day

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's daily natural gas output has reached over 1 billion cubic meters (bcm), according to a senior official in the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC).

NIOC's director of production control Hormoz Qalavand said that rich gas output from 23 Iranian gas fields had reached a total of 1.04 bcm per day.

Qalavand said some 980 million cubic meters (mcm) per day of sweet gas are currently supplied to the Iranian natural gas pipeline network which is controlled by the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC).

The figures come a day after NIOC officials said they had managed to complete the overhaul of a key natural gas liquids (NGL) project in southwestern Iran to allow the country to increase its natural gas output by some 10 mcm per day.

It also 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 is the third largest natural gas producer in the world after the United States and Russia. A bulk of Iran's gas output, around 600 mcm per day, is consumed by households and businesses while some 200 mcm per day of gas is supplied to power plants and industries in the country.

Iran also supplies large volumes of natural gas through pipelines to Iraq and Turkey while it is also part of a swap agreement with Turkmenistan under which the NIGC receives gas from the country's northeastern borders and delivers the same amount to Azerbaijan via borders in northwest.

Iran's TMU, Russia's SPbPU Sign Scientific MoU

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's Tarbiat Modares University (TMU) and Russia's Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU) signed a MoU on scientific cooperation.

The MoU was signed by the parties on November 25, 2022, with the aim of developing cooperation in the fields of science, education, research and technology.

Holding joint research projects, exchanging faculty members and students, and holding international



conferences and meetings are among the provisions of the document.

Tarbiat Modares University is an exclusively graduate university with its main campus in Tehran, Iran. It was founded in 1982 and is among the top universities in Iran. It was founded to train university professors.

Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University is a Russian technical university located in Saint Petersburg.

Iran Conditionally Welcomes Foreign Satellite Internet Providers

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran said that it welcomes services by satellite internet providers, such as U.S. private company SpaceX, provided they observe Iran's laws and regulations, official news agency IRNA reported.

Iran currently has two or three operators that are using satellite internet to provide online services to people in the rural areas, Iranian Minister of Information and Communications Technology Issa Zarepour told reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting.

About 3,000 villages in Iran are not yet connected to the internet and they can be given satellite internet access, Zarepour said. In late September, the U.S. Treasury Department suggested that it had eased some restrictions on the supply of internet software and hardware to Iran to provide the country's people with uncontrolled access to the internet through SpaceX's Starlink satellite service, according to media reports.

PGSOC Supporting Citizens of Underprivileged Areas of Hormozgan Prov.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The CEO of Persian Gulf Star Oil Company (PGSOC) announced purchase and donation of 80 home-made refrigerators to the dwellers of the underprivileged areas in east of Hormozgan Province.

According to the public relations of PGSOC, the CEO of the company Mr. Alireza Jaafarpoor said that PGSOC in line with observing its main task of fuel supply basket has been busy with fulfilling its social responsibilities and support of the local communities in line with reaching its intended sustainable development.

He went on to say that in this regard, PGSOC implemented the purchase of 80 home-made refrigerators and their donation to the dwellers of the underprivileged areas of east of Hormozgan Province in collaboration with Imam Khomeini Relief Committee.



He expressed hope that the outlook of the company beside sustainable production, provision of raw materials for domestic producers, constant exports, job occupation for the youth and profitability, is the special consideration to the field of social responsibilities and serving the people of the underprivileged areas.

Jaafarpoor noted that the company intends to move in direction of improving the life of the local communities and expressed hope that these actions would lead to the public consent and rise in the social capital and accelerating and improving the services to the brave people of Hormozgan.

Caretaker of KFZO Appointed

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Vice President and Secretary of the High Council of Free and Special Economic Zones Hojjatollah Abdolmaleki in a decree appointed Saeed Pourzadi as the caretaker of Kish Free Zone Organization (KFZO).



In his decree, Abdolmaleki pointed to brilliant records of Pourzadi in his previous jobs and expressed hope he would become successful in his new post. He went on to say that he expects Pourzadi to do his best for development and progress of the zone in collaboration with officials and economic activists and wished him success.

Meeting Held for Finding Fast Solutions For Development in LSEZ



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - To review and discuss solutions for accelerating the progress of projects in the Lamerd Special Economic Zone (LSEZ), the CEO of the zone Eng. Fattahi held a meeting with Deputy Governor General on Economic Affairs of Fars Province Eng. Rabbani, director general of the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade office of the province Mr. Izadi and Head of Management and Planning Organization of the province Mr. Afkari.

In the meeting Mr. Fattahi expressed the importance of activities of LSEZ in the national economic growth and termed very important resolving problems and removing hurdles in way of projects of this mineral and industrial center. Meanwhile provincial officials in the meeting evaluated the economic activities in the zone very important and discussed practical solutions for coming out of the problems ahead.

It is worth noting that before the meeting, senior officials of Fars Province visited capacities and some of active projects in Lamerd Special Economic Zone.

Erdogan Drops Retirement Age Requirement for Millions of Turks

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan eliminated a retirement age requirement on Wednesday in a move that allows more than 2 million workers to retire immediately, less than six months before an election.

The presidential announcement came during a Wednesday news conference on the popular policy move. Erdogan's ruling AK Party delivered a hefty hike to the minimum wage last week as part of a campaign to win back support eroded by inflation, a fall in the lira, and a sharp drop in living standards.



Former Pope Benedict's Condition Remains Grave But Stable

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) - Former Pope Benedict's condition remains "grave" but stable, the Vatican said, adding in a statement that he had rested well during the night and was lucid and aware.

"The Pope Emeritus managed to rest well during the night, he is absolutely lucid and aware, and today, even though his condition remains grave, the situation is at the moment stable," Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said. "Pope Francis renews his request to pray for him and to accompany him in these difficult hours," Bruni said of the 95-year-old former pontiff. The statement, the second since Francis disclosed on Wednesday that his predecessor was "very sick", did not provide any specifics about Benedict's condition.



Global Alarm Grows Over China's Covid Surge



BEIJING (Dispatches) - The United States is the latest in a growing number of countries to impose restrictions on visitors from China after Beijing abruptly removed a major impediment to overseas travel despite surging Covid cases at home.

Hospitals across China have been overwhelmed by an explosion of Covid cases following Beijing's decision to lift strict rules that had largely kept the virus at bay but tanked its economy and sparked widespread protests.

On Monday, the country said it would bring an end to mandatory quarantine on arrival -- prompting many jubilant Chinese citizens to make plans to travel abroad.

In response, the United States and a number of other countries announced they would require negative Covid tests for all travellers from mainland China.

"The recent rapid increase in Covid-19 transmission in China increases the potential for new variants emerging," a senior US health official told reporters in a phone briefing.

Beijing has provided only limited data about circulating variants in China to global databases, the official said, and its testing and reporting on new cases has also diminished.

The US move came after Italy, Japan, India and Malaysia announced their own measures in a bid to protect against importing new Covid variants from China.

Beijing has hit out against "hying, smearing and political manipulation" by the Western media concerning its Covid response.

"Currently China's epidemic situation is all predictable and under control," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a briefing Wednesday.

China still does not allow foreign visitors, however, with the issuance of visas for overseas tourists and students still suspended.

But the lifting of mandatory quarantines sparked a surge in interest in overseas travel by Chinese citizens, who have been largely confined to their country since Beijing pulled down the drawbridge in March 2020.

Italy Wednesday said it would make coronavirus tests for all visitors from China mandatory.

The measure was "essential to ensure the surveillance and identification of any variants of the virus in order to protect the Italian population", health minister Orazio Schillaci said.

France's president, too, said it had "requested appropriate measures to protect" its citizens, with Paris noting it was closely monitoring "the evolution of the situation in China".

The European Commission is set to meet Thursday to discuss "possible measures for a coordinated approach" by EU states to the explosion of Covid cases in China.

On the frontlines of China's Covid wave, hospitals are battling surging cases that have hit the elderly and vulnerable hardest.

In Tianjin, around 140 kilometres (90 miles) southeast of the capital Beijing, AFP visited two hospital wards overwhelmed by patients sick with the virus.

Doctors are being asked to work even if they are infected, one said.

AFP saw more than two dozen mostly elderly patients lying on gurneys in public areas of the emergency department, and at least one dead person being wheeled out of a ward.

Russia Unleashes Barrage of Missiles on Ukraine's Major Cities

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia fired scores of missiles into Ukraine, targeting the capital Kyiv, Lviv and Odesa in the west and other cities in one of its largest aerial bombardments that sent people rushing to shelters and knocked out power.

"Senseless barbarism. These are the only words that come to mind seeing Russia launch another missile barrage at peaceful Ukrainian cities ahead of New Year," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted.

Ukraine's military said it had shot down 54 missiles out of 69 launched by Russia in an assault that began at 7am local time. Air raid sirens rang out across Ukraine and in Kyiv sounded for five hours - one of the longest alarms of the war.

Officials had earlier said more than 120 missiles were fired into Ukraine during the attack.

In Kyiv, Reuters footage showed a team of emergency workers poring through the smouldering wreckage of residential houses destroyed by a blast and smoke trails of missiles lingering in the sky over the capital.

In Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, fire fighters worked to extinguish a large blaze at an electricity station.

In the southern central city of Zaporizhzhia, houses were damaged and a missile left a huge crater.

"I woke up to everything shaking, crumbling. I got up and screamed, 'Vitia, Vitia (my husband), where are you?' I ran barefoot on glass. He appeared and glass was falling off him," said 60-year-old local resident Halyna.

Ukraine's military said Russia had launched air and sea-based cruise missiles, anti-aircraft guided missiles and S-300 ADMS at energy infrastructure facilities in eastern, central, western and southern regions. The attacks followed an overnight assault by "kamikaze" drones.

Waves of Russian air strikes in recent months targeting energy infrastructure have left millions without power and heating in often freezing temperatures.

"The enemy placed a high stake on this attack, preparing for it for two weeks. Ukrainian air defense forces demonstrated an incredible level of skill and efficiency," said Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal on the Telegram messaging app.



S. Korea to Boost Military Readiness After Drone Incursion

SEOUL (Dispatches) - President Yoon Suk-yeol said that South Korea must boost its preparedness to respond to airspace intrusions after the military failed to shoot down five North Korean drones that crossed the border.

The Monday intrusion by the drones -- one of which flew close to the capital Seoul -- prompted the South's military to deploy fighter jets and attack helicopters.

But despite a five-hour operation, the military failed to shoot down the North Korean drones, prompting widespread criticism over the response and an apology from the country's defence minister.

Yoon said the incident was "intolerable" and added that the South should ensure that Pyongyang "realise that provocations are always met with harsh consequences".

"In order for us to achieve peace, we need to make overwhelmingly superior war preparations," he said during a visit to the state-run Agency for Defence Development.

"The overall response system against all flying objects invading our airspace, on top of drones, must be re-examined to quickly make up for deficiencies."

Yoon earlier this week slammed the military's handling of the incident, and ordered the acceleration of a plan to launch a drone unit, which would include advanced stealth models, to carry out surveillance on Pyongyang's key military facilities.

South Korea's military has said it was not able to shoot down Pyongyang's drones on Monday because they were too small.

Seoul's military staged drills Thursday, including responding to small drones, that its Joint Chiefs of Staff said would improve its defenses against any future North Korean drone provocations. Taking place in Yangju, around 25 kilometers northeast of Seoul, the drills involved about 20 manned and unmanned assets, including KA-1 light attack aircraft and Cobra and Apache attack helicopters, it said.

The North's incursion on Monday was the first time in five years that Pyongyang's drones had flown into the South's airspace and followed a recent flurry of sanctions-busting weapons tests by the North.

Serbs Start Removing Barricades in Easing of Tensions in Kosovo

MITROVICA (Dispatches) - The roadblock near the main border crossing between Kosovo and Serbia was removed, state-run TV said, announcing a move that paves the way to easing of tensions in the volatile region.

Cars and trucks were queuing in front of the border point from the Serbian side where the roadblock was set up, the report said, while Kosovo police confirmed the crossing was officially re-opened.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic announced removal of the barricades following calls by Washington and Brussels to de-escalate tensions, one of the worst in years in northern Kosovo.

"Barricades will be removed, but the mistrust remains," Vucic was quoted as saying by the state-run RTS television late Wednesday during his meeting with Kosovo Serb representatives near the border.

Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, after a bitter war in late 1990s.

But Belgrade still refuses to recognise it and encourages Kosovo's 120,000 ethnic Serbs to defy Pristina's authority -- especially in the north where they make up the majority.

The latest trouble erupted on December 10, when ethnic Serbs put up barricades to protest the arrest of an ex-policeman suspected of being involved in attacks against ethnic Albanian police officers --

effectively sealing off traffic on two border crossings.

After the roadblocks were erected, Kosovar police and international peacekeepers were attacked in several shooting incidents, while the Serbian armed forces were put on heightened alert this week.

The European Union and the United States voiced concern over the situation, urged immediate de-escalation and said they are working with both Serbia and Kosovo leaders to seek a political solution to the crisis.

On Thursday morning, the situation in northern Kosovo was calm while patrols of NATO-led peacekeepers and the EU's rule of law mission EULEX were visible, according to an AFP correspondent.

Two trucks used as a roadblock on a bridge in the flashpoint town of Mitrovica were burned overnight, according to an AFP reporter. The cause of the fire was still unknown.

Around a dozen protesters who were still at a barricade in Rudare, near Mitrovica, voiced dissatisfaction with the decision to remove the roadblocks.

"It makes no sense, we fought for rights that were not fulfilled, we feel cheated, abused," a 25-year-old man, who refused to give his name, told AFP.

"Why did we come to the barricades, if everything ended this way?" asked a 38-year-old protester, who also spoke on condition of anonymity.



Bolivian Police Detain Prominent Opposition Leader



LA PAZ (Dispatches) - Bolivian police detained prominent opposition leader Luis Fernando Camacho on charges of "terrorism", significantly escalating tensions between the national government and Camacho's base in the Santa Cruz region.

Bolivia's state attorney's office confirmed the detention of 43-year-old Camacho, a lawyer and right-wing civic leader who unsuccessfully ran for president in 2020 and is now governor of the affluent farming hub of Santa Cruz.

The office said the arrest was connected to the toppling of former leftist president Evo Morales in 2019. An October arrest warrant accused Camacho of "terrorism" without giving more details.

Camacho's communications team posted a statement released by the La Paz prosecutor's office in which he said the accusations against him lacked truth and credibility.

He said he had been "brutally kidnapped" by police and that he was proud of his part in the fight for "freedom and democracy" in Bolivia, according to the statement, which his team posted on his Twitter account.

Evo Morales said on Twitter he hoped Camacho's detention would bring justice after three years.

"Finally, after three years, Luis Fernando Camacho will answer for the coup d'etat that led to robberies, persecutions, arrests and massacres of the de facto government. We trust that this decision will be sustained with the firmness demanded by the people's cry for justice," he said.

Camacho, who was transferred from the city of Santa Cruz to a police station in La Paz, is the second high-profile political figure linked to Morales' ouster to be detained. Ex-president Jeanine Anez was jailed last year after being found guilty of orchestrating a "coup."

Constitutional lawyer Israel Quino told state TV that Camacho could face 15 to 20 years in jail if convicted.

The arrest follows week of unrest in Santa Cruz, led by Camacho, during which protesters blocked streets and halted trade over the government's delay in carrying out a new census that would likely result in Santa Cruz securing more tax revenues and seats in Congress.

Dressing Revolution Seeks Artificial Skin For Burn Victims

CHENOVE (Dispatches) - Far from the humble sticking plaster, medical firms and researchers are seeking to create the "ultimate dressing" -- artificial skin they hope will revolutionize the treatment of severe burns.

For the last 18 months, researchers from the French firm Urgo have been working towards achieving this Holy Grail of wound treatment, which would save serious burn victims from the painful and repeated skin grafts they currently endure.

The 100-million-euro (\$106,000-million) "Genesis" project hopes to have a product ready by 2030.

Guirec Le Lous, the president of Urgo's medical arm, told AFP that it is a "crazy" project.

"Are we capable of designing artificial skin in a laboratory? No one in the world has succeeded," he said.

Inside Urgo's laboratory in Chenove, near the eastern French city of Dijon, living cells are being chilled before they can be cultivated.

"You have to be able to recreate all the functions of skin," including protecting against external threats and regulating the temperature, Le Lous said.

It must also be relatively easy to make, because artificial skin must be "available for all and at the right price," he said, without revealing the exact technology or type of cells Urgo is using.

Urgo, a family-owned business since 1880, has long made dressings for chronic wounds such as diabetic foot ulcers and venous leg ulcers.

"Since the 2000s, we have worked on materials that will correct healing problems: dressings have become intelligent, interactive with wounds, allowing them to perform better," Urgo's research director Laurent Apert said.

He called the change "a revolution".

Urgo is far from alone in pushing the boundaries of what dressings can do.

Researchers at the University of South Australia have developed a new kind of dressing that knows when to release nanoparticles of silver, which can break down antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

"Our treatment is unique in that it capitalises on the anti-bacterial properties of silver, but avoids over-exposure, by only activating when infection is present," lead researcher Zlatko Kopecki said in a statement.

This makes the dressing "a much safer and effective treatment for children," he added.

Children suffer almost half of burn injuries worldwide, most of them aged between one to five years old, according to research using the World Health Organization's Global Burn Registry.

Another new technique does away with the idea of dressing altogether.

For a product from French startup VistaCare Medical, patients put their affected leg into a large device which never touches their wound.

Instead the chamber controls the humidity, temperature and other aspects important to healing.

"There is no more dressing. The idea is to put the wound in an enclosure, in a sterile air, VistaCare Medical president Francois Dufay said.

"With this system, we provide the wound with what it needs, at the right time."

VistaCare Medical's device is currently used in around 20 French hospitals, but next year the firm plans to apply for approval in the United States for a product to be used in the home.

The new developments have shaken up the world of wound healing, long a neglected area of medical research. Isabelle Fromantin, who heads the wounds and healing research unit at the Curie Institute in Paris, said that "compared to 20 years ago, it's night and day in terms of wound care".



India Plans \$2b Incentive for Green Hydrogen Industry

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India is planning a \$2 billion incentive program for the green hydrogen industry, three sources told Reuters, in a bid to cut emissions and become a major export player in the field.

The 180-billion-rupee (\$2.2 billion) incentive aims to reduce the production cost of green hydrogen by a fifth over the next five years, said a senior government official and an industry manager working in renewable energy. It would do this in part by increasing the scale of the industry, they said.

The current cost in India is 300 rupees to 400 rupees per kg, said the manager.

The United States and the European Union have already approved incentives worth billions of dollars for green hydrogen projects.

Hydrogen can be used as a fuel. It is made by splitting water with an electrical process, electrolysis. If the devices that do that, electrolyzers, are powered by renewable energy, the product is called green hydrogen, a fuel free of greenhouse emissions.

The Indian aid could be announced in the Feb. 1 budget for the fiscal year beginning April 1, said the government official. All sources declined to be named discussing a budget proposal.

The ministries of renewable energy and finance did not respond to queries sent by Reuters.

Indian companies such as Reliance Industries, Indian Oil, NTPC, Adani Enterprises, JSW Energy and Acme Solar have big plans on green hydrogen.

Adani, led by the world's third-richest person, Gautam Adani, said in June that it and France's TotalEnergies would jointly create the "world's largest green hydrogen ecosystem".

The Indian government expects industry to invest 8 trillion rupees in green hydrogen and its derivative green ammonia by 2030, said the industry manager and another government official. Green ammonia is made by combining nitrogen with hydrogen using renewable energy sources; it can be used by the fertilizer industry or as a fuel or convenient means of transporting hydrogen.

The green hydrogen proposal is likely to be called "Strategic Intervention for Green Hydrogen Transition" and will be split into 45 billion rupees for electrolyser manufacturing for five years and the 135 billion rupees for green hydrogen and green ammonia production for three years, the manager and second official said.

The incentive for making green hydrogen is likely to be 50 rupees per kg for three years, they said.

India aims to sell 70% of the production to countries such as South Korea, Japan and in the European Union, an industry official said, adding that derivatives, including green ammonia, had an equally strong demand.

The government is estimating global demand for green hydrogen will exceed 100 million tons by 2030, from just under 75 million tons now, according to other industry sources.

In February the government announced plans for India to make 5 million tons of green hydrogen annually by 2030, a figure that the first government official said could be doubled, depending on international demand.

The government also plans for the country to achieve electrolyser manufacturing capacity of 15 gigawatts in phases by 2030. That would be almost 10 times current global capacity.

U.S.-based Ohmium International has commissioned India's first green-hydrogen factory in Bengaluru. Reliance Industries, Larsen & Toubro, Greenko and H2e Power last year announced plans to build gigawatt-scale factories.

Indian oil refineries and fertilizer and steel plants annually use 5 million tons of hydrogen made from natural gas, called grey hydrogen. The process produces carbon dioxide.



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France to Sell 2 Observation Satellites to Poland

PARIS (Dispatches) - France and Poland have signed a deal for the sale of two French observation satellites to Poland, French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu said on Twitter. "This major contract reflects Poland's trust in our technology and industry," Lecornu said after meeting with his Polish counterpart in Warsaw.

The Polish Armament Agency said the net value of the deal is around 575 million euros (\$611.69 million) and that the launch into space of the Polish satellites produced by Airbus Defence & Space is to be completed by 2027.



Japanese Firms Sign Multi-Year Agreements to Buy LNG From Oman, U.S.

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japanese companies inked several deals on Tuesday to receive liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies, with a preliminary agreement lasting up to 10 years with Oman LNG and a 20-year deal with U.S.-based Venture Global.

LNG supply has been tight since Russia invaded Ukraine and cut gas supply flows to Europe, leading European nations to import record amounts of LNG cargoes, straining global supplies and elevating prices.

Top Japanese electricity generator JERA and trading houses Mitsui & Co and Itochu Corp signed binding term sheet agreements with Oman LNG for a total of 2.35 million tons per year starting in 2025, Oman LNG said on Twitter on Tuesday night.

Oman LNG gave the supply breakdown as 800,000 tons per year to JERA and Itochu, while Mitsui will take 750,000 tons per year.

Those figures backed up a statement earlier on Tuesday from JERA, Japan's LNG biggest importer of LNG, that said it signed a key term sheet with Oman LNG to buy up to 12 cargoes, or about 800,000 tons per year for 10 years, beginning from 2025.

The contract, signed on a free-on-board basis, offered "high flexibility" and was expected to help Japan better respond to uncertainties with domestic LNG supply and demand, the power company said.

"LNG procurement competition has been intensifying and thus, stable procurement of fuel in a timely manner in line with the domestic electricity supply-demand situation is needed to secure a stable supply of energy in Japan," JERA said.

Mitsui and Itochu confirmed signing the agreements with Oman LNG, but declined to give details.

Itochu, which has a 20-year contract with Oman LNG to buy 700,000 tons per year of LNG that will expire in 2025, will continue discussions with the seller to set details, a company spokesperson said.

The statements followed a report by Japanese broadcaster NHK that all three companies would secure a total of about 2 million tons of LNG annually from Oman over 10 years beginning in 2025.

Other Japanese companies were also in talks with Oman LNG about term contracts, a government official told Reuters without naming the firms. If successful, they could take Japan's LNG imports from Oman to above 3 million tons a year, he added.

The agreements with Oman LNG were signed during a visit to Oman by Japanese industry minister Yasutoshi Nishimura.

Separately, Japan's top oil and gas explorer Inpex Corp announced on Tuesday a 20-year deal with U.S.-based Venture Global LNG to import 1 million tons per year from the firm's Louisiana project due to begin construction in 2023.

The new supplies could help Japan diversify from Russia's Sakhalin project which accounts for 9% of Japan's total LNG imports of 74.3 million tonnes per year.

Last year, Japan imported 1.9 million tons of LNG from Oman, 2.6% of its total imports, and 7.1 million tons from the United States, accounting for 9.5% of its total imports.

China's Economy Has Survived Worst Moment

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's economy has survived the most difficult phase and the country's optimized COVID-19 response measures will have a positive effect on the economic recovery, according to officials and experts.

They said that China will gradually shake off the impact of COVID-19 and post a notable economic rebound in 2023, given the further implementation of optimized measures and the more pro-growth focus of policymakers.

However, they warned of troubles in the real estate sector, as well as strong external headwinds being a drag on the economy, and underlined that improving expectations and boosting market confidence will hold the key to economic recovery next year.

Yin Yanlin, deputy director of the office of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs, said the optimization of the COVID-19 containment measures will create favorable conditions for economic recovery.

"The worst moment is over," Yin said on Saturday at an annual meeting on China's high-quality development held by the China Wealth Management 50 Forum. "With the implementation of the optimized COVID-19 containment measures, (China will see) smoother flow of people and logistics, and accelerated recovery in business and social activities."

Yin's remarks came after the tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference concluded in mid-December, sending a clear signal that reviving the COVID-hit economy and bringing GDP growth back to a reasonable range will be among the government's key tasks.

Citing key tasks mapped by the annual work conference, Yin said Beijing's adoption of a more proactive approach will aid the economic rebound.

"The downturn in recent years is only a short-term disturbance caused by the pandemic, which is not enough to change the long-term trend of China's economic development," he said. "The fundamentals of the Chinese economy — its long-term sustainability, strong resilience, enormous potential and vast room for maneuvers — remain unchanged."

Yin warned of difficulties and challenges ahead, including a more complicated external environment and slowing global demand, saying that further steps should be taken to rebalance growth with a key focus on boosting market confidence, spurring consumption, expanding effective investment and promoting healthy development in the property market.

His views were echoed by Zhu Guangyao, former vice-minister of finance, who said China's economy will likely improve as a whole in 2023, given the more pro-growth focus of policymakers for next year.



German Hospitals Fear Wave of Insolvencies in 2023

BERLIN (Dispatches) - The German Hospital Association (DKG) warned that more and more hospitals will no longer be able to bear the financial burden and will slide into insolvency next year mainly due to the energy crisis and high inflation.

"A wave of insolvencies is rolling toward our hospitals in 2023 that can hardly be stopped," Gerald Gass, the group's chairperson, told local media, adding that the government's financial aid plan has been insufficient.

The damage to medical care will be visible in many regions in 2023, Gass said, referring to the current hospital barometer of the German Hospital Institute (DKI), an annual representative survey of general hospitals in Germany.

According to the annual survey, 59% of the hospitals expect massive financial losses this year, and they are already operating on negative margins. In 2021, this share was 43%.

Meanwhile, the proportion of hospitals with a positive annual result will more than halve, from 44% to an expected 20%, according to the DKI survey. Currently, only 21% of hospitals hope for a balanced result for the 2022 financial year.

For 2023, 56% expect a further deterioration of the economic situation. Only 17% of hospitals expect an improvement and 27% foresee no change when compared to the situation right now.

Gass sees the financial aid planned by the federal government to compensate for energy price increases as helpful. However, the assistance appears non-sufficient to tackle inflation-related general cost increases.

UK Strives to Regain Investor Confidence in 2023

LONDON (Dispatches) - Following months of political unrest and ongoing Brexit uncertainties, major investors are reconsidering their support for the British economy since, according to experts, its recovery from global recession would be slow and painful.

While governments worldwide are grappling with high inflation and low growth, U.K. policymakers are still rebuilding fiscal and political credibility following the brief, chaotic premiership of Liz Truss.

Top financial industry figures say that even with Truss gone, a tight labor market, low business investment and weak exports mean the economy will lag its peers next year. Worries about growth are leading some investors to limit their holdings of the Pound and British debt.

"For the time being, we think the risks are too high compared to the rewards," said Vincent Mortier, chief investment officer at Amundi, Europe's largest fund manager, which manages 1.9 trillion euros (\$1.98 trillion) in assets.

Foreign investors have traditionally been attracted by Britain's strong rule of law, stable governance and thriving financial and professional services sector. But an open economy means any change in perception can have a large impact.

The fact that Truss — elected by her party, not the country — could pile pressure on the Bank of England (BoE) and sow mayhem in markets, has heaped scrutiny on Britain's politics and finances.

Her replacement by ex-finance minister Rishi Sunak calmed U.K. assets, but investors are still brooding over the near-collapse of pension funds and how close Britain came to a financial disaster entirely of its own making.

U.K. equity funds saw their second-biggest monthly outflows on record in November, data from funds network Calastone shows, a sign investors remain wary since the September crash.

Sterling remains down 9% against a strong U.S. dollar, and 3.5% lower versus the euro in what is set to be its worst year since the Brexit vote roiled markets in 2016.

Like other governments, Britain — which plans to raise just over 300 billion Pounds, mostly by selling bonds in financial year 2023/24 — has seen borrowing costs rise sharply in 2022.

The benchmark 10-year gilt yield is now above 3%, up more than 200 basis points — in line with U.S. and German yields, but making 2022 the worst year for U.K. government debt since 1994.

Ship Insurers to Cancel War Cover for Russia, Ukraine From Jan 1

LONDON (Dispatches) - Ship insurers said they are cancelling war risk cover across Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, following an exit from the region by reinsurers in the face of steep losses.

Reinsurers, who insure the insurers, typically renew their 12-month contracts with insurance clients on Jan. 1, giving them the first opportunity to scale back exposure since the war in Ukraine started, after being hit this year by losses related to the conflict and from Hurricane Ian in Florida.

P&I (protection and indemnity) clubs American, North, UK and West are no longer able to offer war risk cover for liabilities in the region from Jan. 1, they said in recent notices on their websites. The clubs are among the biggest P&I insurers who cover around 90% of the world's ocean going ships.

UK P&I Club said on Dec. 23 that the issue had arisen because of a lack of availability of reinsurance for reinsurers, also known as retrocession.

"The Club's reinsurers are no longer able to secure reinsurance for war risk exposure to Russian, Ukrainian or Belarus territorial risks," it said.

American P&I said on Dec. 23 that it had received a "notice of cancellation" for the region from its war risk reinsurers and was cancelling its own insurance as a result.

Ships typically have P&I insurance, which covers third party liability claims including environmental damage and injury. Separate hull and machinery policies cover vessels against physical damage.

The moves by the insurers will make it harder for ship-owners or charterers to find insurance, increase prices and may mean some ships sail uninsured, industry sources say.

Providers of reinsurance and retrocession include global players Hannover Re (HNRGN.DE), Munich Re and Swiss Re, as well as syndicates in the Lloyd's of London (SOLYD.UL) market. Munich Re and Swiss Re declined to comment.

The other firms did not immediately respond.

Reuters reported earlier this month that a proposed contract clause being circulated by reinsurers excluded war-related claims for both planes and ships in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.

The Japanese government has urged insurers to take on additional risks to continue providing marine war insurance for liquefied natural gas (LNG) shippers in Russian waters, a senior official at the industry ministry said this week.

South Korea December Exports To Fall for Third Month



SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's exports likely extended their falling streak to a third straight month in December, a Reuters poll showed, with demand from China yet to recover from loosening COVID-19 restrictions.

The country's outbound shipments were projected to have fallen 10.1% in December from the same month a year ago, according to the median forecast of 12 economists.

That would be the third straight month of year-on-year declines, after a 14.0% loss in November, which was the biggest in 2-1/2 years, and 5.8% in October.

"South Korea's exports are under pressure from declining exports to China, where the economy still remains sluggish even after easing of its COVID-19 restrictions, and weak sales of IT products, mainly semiconductors," said Park Sang-hyun, chief economist at HI Investment and Securities.

"Moreover, global economic slowdown is materialising, so exports are likely to continue the falling trend for the time being."

China has eased some of its most stringent restrictions to fight COVID-19 since last month.

During the first 20 days of December, South Korea's exports shrank 8.8% from the same period a year ago. Those to China dropped 25.5%, outweighing gains in U.S. and EU-bound shipments, in likely the seventh consecutive falling month.

Meanwhile, imports were expected to have fallen at a much milder pace of 0.6% in December, after a 24-month gaining streak through November.

Altogether, the trade balance is set to remain in deficit for a ninth consecutive month. It is also on track for the first annual shortfall in 14 years and the largest-ever.

Full monthly trade data is scheduled for release on Sunday, Jan. 1, at 9 a.m. (0000 GMT).

The survey also forecast the country's consumer price index for December to be 5.0% higher than a year ago, the same as in November, when the annual inflation rate hit a seven-month low.

