

IRAN NEWS Congratulates Its
Christian Readers Over the
Start of the New Year, 2023,
And Wish Them Happiness and a
Prosperous and Happy Year

IRAN NEWS



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Home-Grown Iranian Air Defense Systems Intercept, Down Drones

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Home-grown Iranian air defense systems have intercepted and shot down hostile drones during large-scale military exercises, which the Iranian Army has undertaken in a zone spanning from the country's southeastern ports and waters to the northern tip of the Indian Ocean.

During the main stage of the Zolfagar 1401 joint drills on Saturday, Iranian Army forces practiced detection and downing of a range of aerial targets with various radars and advanced homegrown air defense systems.

Low-altitude Majid air defense missile system and Khatam artillery fire control system were employed, and they could down several unmanned aerial vehicles.

Majid is an agile electro-optical air defense missile system, and reportedly has an operational range of eight kilometers. It is equipped with a long-range thermal optical system, and is paired with Khatam artillery fire control system to hit designated targets.

Also on Saturday, the Iranian Army's reconnaissance drones surveyed the war game zone, and transmitted the collected intelligence and taken topographic images to the joint operations command center. **See Page 7**

U.S. Sought to Contain Neighbors By Invading Afghanistan

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An Iranian diplomat says Washington's main goal for invading Afghanistan was to contain the Asian country's neighbors, despite its alleged fight against terrorism.

"Americans came to Afghanistan under the pretext of confronting terrorism but their main aim was to contain and dominate the neighboring countries," Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, Iranian president's special envoy on Afghanistan affairs, said on Friday in an interview with Al-Alam TV.

Kazemi-Qomi has also been recently appointed as Iran's caretaker ambassador to Kabul as the tenure of former envoy Bahador Aminian came to an end.

"Their first excuse for choosing Afghanistan for the invasion was the existence of terrorism and Al-Qaeda while the group came to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks," he said.

Americans are pursuing their plans through occupation and military presence while al-Qaeda is carrying out its assigned missions as a proxy, added the diplomat. **See Page 7**

IMF Forecasts a Positive Outlook For Iranian Economy in 2023



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Drawing a positive outlook for the Iranian economy in 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted that 10 major indicators of the Iranian economy would experience growth and improvement in the mentioned year compared to 2022.

Based on the IMF data, Iran's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) based on the purchasing power index will grow by \$91 billion or two percent in 2023 to reach \$1.7 trillion.

Meanwhile, Iran's GDP per capita is also expected to increase by \$865 based on the purchasing power index to reach \$19,528 in 2023 from \$18,663 in 2022.

IMF sees Iran's GDP excluding oil grow by two percent in 2023, and the growth of the country's economy including oil will be 2.1 percent this year.

The inflation rate in Iran is predicted to be 40 percent in 2023, registering no change compared to 2022.

The International Monetary Fund expects the rate of the country's liquidity growth to slow down in 2023. The liquidity growth that reached 47.5 percent of GDP in 2022 will decrease to 45.6 percent in 2023.

The budget deficit of the Iranian government in 2023 will reach six percent of GDP, which is 1.8 percent higher than the figure in 2022.

The Iranian government's total revenues will not change in 2023 compared to the previous year. The Iranian government's income in 2023 is estimated to be 8.3 percent of the GDP, registering no change compared to the previous year. However, the government's non-oil incomes will increase from 7.4 percent of GDP in 2022 to 7.5 percent of GDP in 2023.

Based on the IMF data, the downward trend of the Iranian government's gross debt will continue in 2023 to settle at 31.9 percent of the GDP this year.

The fund also predicts Iran's current account balance to be \$30.2 billion in 2023. Iran's current account balance in 2022 is estimated at more than \$32 billion.

Based on the mentioned data, Iran's foreign currency reserves increase by more than \$11.4 billion in 2023 and reach \$42.2 billion. Iran's available foreign currency reserves in 2022 are estimated at \$30.8 billion. This international organization has announced that Iran's foreign currency reserves are more than \$120 billion, but it claims that Iran has access to only a small part of these reserves due to the U.S. sanctions.

According to the estimate of the International Monetary Fund, Iran's foreign debt in 2022 will be equal to 0.5 percent of the GDP and it is expected that this figure will remain the same in 2023.

Saudi Arabia Seizes 4 Fuel Ships Bound for Yemen's Hudaydah

SANAA (Dispatches) - The Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC) says the Saudi-led coalition has confiscated 4 fuel ships and prevented them from reaching the Red Sea port of Hudaydah, a lifeline for millions of Yemenis which has been tightly controlled by Saudi Arabia.

YPC spokesman Issam al-Mutawakel said the vessels were impounded in clear disregard for the human suffering of the Yemeni people despite being inspected in Djibouti and holding entry permits from the United Nations, Yemen's official Saba news agency reported on Friday.

He said the confiscated ships include the gasoline ship "Sea Adore", the diesel ship "Golf Aetos" and the two diesel ships "Princess Khadija and Soprano Sirene." Mutawakel said the Saudi-led coalition and the UN are fully responsible for the damage resulting from the blockade on Yemen.

He called on the international community, particularly the UN Security Council, and human rights and humanitarian organizations to force the aggression coalition to release the fuel ships and prevent piracy on them.

In a fresh act of piracy against the besieged Yemeni people, the Saudi-led coalition seized two more Yemen-bound fuel tankers earlier this month and prevented them from docking at the strategic western port of Hudaydah.

Saudi Arabia launched the devastating war on Yemen in March 2015 in collaboration with its Arab allies and with arms and logistics support from the US and other Western states.

The objective was to reinstall the Riyadh-friendly regime of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and crush the Ansarullah resistance movement, which has been running state affairs in the absence of a functional government in Yemen.

While the Saudi-led coalition has failed to meet any of its objectives, the war has killed hundreds of thousands of Yemenis and spawned the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Is It Really Serious Or a Show?

After years of protests and complaints, the United Nations finally decided to take some action against Israel and this move has stunned many people in the world and they doubt whether this decision is serious and some analysts just see it a show to prove the UN is an independent and justice-seeking body.

On Friday, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution asking the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for its legal opinion on the Israeli regime's occupation of Palestinian territories.

The 193-member assembly voted on the resolution on Friday. Eighty-seven countries voted in favor of the resolution against 26 negative votes cast by the Israeli regime, the United States, its oldest and strongest ally, and 24 others, and 53 abstentions.

The Israeli regime claimed existence in 1948 after occupying huge swaths of Palestinian territories during a Western-backed war. It occupied more land, namely the West Bank, which includes East al-Quds, and the Gaza Strip in another such war in 1967.

Ever since, the regime has built hundreds of illegal settlements upon the occupied territories and deployed the most aggressive restraints on Palestinian freedoms there. Tel Aviv withdrew from Gaza in 2005, but has been keeping the coastal territory under an all-out land, aerial, and naval siege since a year after it left the enclave.

Addressing the Assembly's session before the vote, Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour said the world body was about to weigh in on the resolution one day after the swearing-in of an Israeli cabinet led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Mansour reminded that the cabinet -- which has been billed as the most extremist one yet in the regime's history -- had promised to expand the illegal settlements.

"We trust that, regardless of your vote today, if you believe in international law and peace, you will uphold the opinion of the International Court of Justice when delivered and you will stand up to" the Israeli officials, the envoy said.

The occupying regime's ambassador to the world body, Gilad Erdan, however, called the United Nations a "morally bankrupt and politicized" body for deciding to go ahead with the vote. Erdan also said any decision by any judicial body that would receive its mandate from such an organization "is completely illegitimate."

Via the resolution, the General Assembly asked the ICJ to give an advisory opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's "occupation, settlement, and annexation..., including measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character, and status" of the holy city of al-Quds.

Palestinians want East al-Quds as the capital of their future state, while the occupying regime lays claim to the entirety of the city as its so-called "capital."

Ever since occupying the West Bank, the Israeli regime has been trying to manipulate al-Quds' status quo through various measures, including by enforcing restrictions on the Palestinians' right to worship at the al-Aqsa Mosque's compound -- Islam's third-holiest site -- which is located in al-Quds' Old City.

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

Of course we welcome such a move by the UN although it is late but it is at least some sign of impartiality provided that it is not a show to fool the people worldwide.

For years Palestinians have suffered from the Zionists' atrocities and many people have lost their lives in the Palestine because of Israeli forces crimes but the UN and other international bodies have been watching them without taking any serious action or even sometimes they have been indifferent to such crimes which has angered the people worldwide over this passiveness of the international bodies. **See Page 7**

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Iran Athlete Maintaining Guinness Record in Full Extension Punches

SANANDAJ (IRNA) - Iranian athlete Yousef Imani maintains his Guinness record of most full extension punches in one minute.

On 7 June 2021, Imani from Lorestan Province participated in a competition at Milad Tower in the capital Tehran, where he succeeded in showing 403 full extension punches in one minute, and his name was registered in the Guinness World Records.

Earlier, an athlete from Slovakia conducted 334 full extension punches in one minute to stand first in the world records. In 2022, another Iranian athlete, Mehran Nyazi from Sanandaj, attempted to break Imani's record and see his name in Guinness Book.

Late Mesbah Was Very Knowledgeable, And Innovative

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei in his message for the second international congress in honor of Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, said: “The late Mohammad Taghi Misbah Yazdi had unique characteristics.”

The second international congress honoring Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi was held with the presence of President Ebrahim Raisi and some thinkers and military and national officials here in Tehran on Saturday.

The Leader of the Revolution, who was speaking through video conference at the beginning of the meeting, said: Honoring Mr. Mesbah is one of the obligations. Commemoration means keeping his way alive.

Mesbah had unique characteristics. Very Knowledgeable, had good and innovative thinking, had a clear expression, had inexhaustible and unique motivation, good and outstanding behavior and spirituality was among his outstanding characteristics, said the Leader.

“Death is for everyone, but his path should continue and it should not be closed,” underscored Ayatollah Khamenei.

“His thoughts should be discovered and published through his works,” noted the Leader of the Revolution.

Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi was an Iranian Shia cleric, philosopher,



and political theorist who served as the spiritual leader of the ‘Front of Islamic Revolution Stability’.

Ayatollah Mesbah passed away on 1 January 2021.

Meanwhile President Raisi described Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani as two role models for Iran's society, both in thought and action in standing against the enemy.

Speaking at the second international congress honoring Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, on Saturday, Iran's Raisi said: “Today on the martyrdom anniversary of Lady Fatima, peace be upon her, we need to recognize these role models. The success of the venerable master Mesbah is that his field was educating prominent students.”

He further stated: “Today, our society, by knowing the comprehensive personality of Ayatollah Mesbah, can have a good exemplary while looking at his course and conduct, by knowing the present time and needs that exist in the society.”

President Raisi further said that Late Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi can be a character and a role model for students and nobles.

Persian Language Department Active In Slemani for 8 Years

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's cultural attaché in Iraq's Sulaymaniyah, also known as Slemani, said that the Persian language teaching department has been active since eight years ago in the university in the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

During the past eight years, the Persian department at the University of Sulaimani has played a leading role in expansion of the Persian language, Davoud Hassanpour said at a ceremony held at the Academy of Persian Language and Literature in Tehran.

Each year, nearly 600 university students travel to Iran to attend some courses in the country to add to their knowledge, Hassanpour added.

Head of Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, Head of the Persian department at the University of Sulaimani Adnan Sajjadi, and some other university professors were present in the ceremony.

Weekly Trade on IME Exceeds 2.3m Tons



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 2,305,088 tons of commodities and 2,506 vehicles with a total trading value of more than \$572m on its physical market.

According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 1,844,503 tons of commodities valued at nearly \$314m.

On this floor the IME sold 1,074,304 tons of cement, 330,000 tons of iron ore, 246,164 tons of steel, 224,150 tons of zinc, 8,050 tons of aluminum, 5,393 tons of copper, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 4 kg of gold bars and 2,506 vehicles.

Furthermore, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 412,636 tons of commodities worth more than \$235m.

Commodities traded on this floor included 131,207 tons of bitumen, 103,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 95,664 tons of polymeric products, 38,666 tons of chemicals, 32,600 tons of lube cut, 5,530 tons of sulfur, 4,789 tons of base oil, 1,800 tons of petroleum products and 160 tons of insulation.

The IME also traded within the same week 47,948 tons of commodities on its side market.

Decay Lies in Israel's Nature

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman has censured Israel's newly-appointed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for repeating baseless allegations against Tehran, saying decay lies in the essence and nature of the Zionist regime.

“The Zionist regime's same old prime minister who is known to all seeks to fabricate an identity for himself and the illegitimate regime of Israel by repeating his bogus claims against Iran,” Nasser Kanaani said in a post on his Twitter account on Friday.

He said the Tel Aviv regime has been struggling for more than 70 years to exit its identity crisis, which he said has been mixed with genocide, plunder, forced displacement and scores of other inhumane moves.

This is an interpretation of the wrong policies and measures of Britain, the US and some European countries in supporting the illegitimate entity, the Iranian spokesperson added.

“Palestine is not destroyable and decay lies in the essence and nature of the Zionist regime,” Kanaani said.

Addressing his first cabinet meeting, Netanyahu outlined three big missions for his coalition, the first of which was stopping Iran's nuclear program.

In an earlier interview with Saudi-owned al-Arabiya TV, Netanyahu, who was prime minister between 1996 and 1999, and then between 2009 and 2021, reiterated his long-standing opposition to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Indictment of Martyr Soleimani's Assassins Nearly Ready

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of a special committee in Iran that is tasked with pursuing the case of Martyr General Qassem Soleimani's assassination in domestic and international courts says an indictment to prosecute suspects involved in the case is nearly ready.

Abbas Ali Kadkhodaie said on Saturday that some good measures have been taken by the Islamic Republic of Iran and various institutions in the country, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the country's judiciary system, to prosecute the assassins of General Soleimani.

Kadkhodaie added that Iranian judges and prosecutors have been pursuing the case to help it lead to an acceptable legal outcome.

He termed the assassination of General Soleimani as an unforgivable crime, saying that the US officials responsible for it must be brought to justice.

“The US violated all of its international obligations by assassinating General Soleimani,” said the official, adding that non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, compliance with human rights standards, and respect for the sovereignty and independence of nations are among the obligations violated by the US in General Soleimani's case.

Kadkhodaie reiterated Iran's strategy to fight and resist foreigners in the West Asia region, adding that the Islamic Republic of Iran was at forefront of the fight against terrorist groups like ISIS when General Soleimani was martyred on January 3, 2020.

Iran, Azerbaijan FMs Discuss Regional Developments

TEHRAN (MNA) – Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian on Saturday morning in a phone talk with his Azeri counterpart discussed the latest regional developments.

Tehran-Baku bilateral relations were other topics discussed between Amirabdollahian and Jeyhun Bayramov.

The two Iranian and top Azeri diplomats also held a phone conversation on November 15. Amirabdollahian, during the phone talk, reiterated that respecting the sovereignty of countries is an important and basic principle that must be taken into consideration.

Bayramov, for his part, emphasized the need for bolstering bilateral relations and removing misunderstandings.



New Covid-19 Wave to Show Face in Iran After New Year Holidays

TEHRAN (IFP) – An Iranian Health Ministry official says the eighth wave of infections with new sub-variants of the coronavirus has already started in the country, and it is expected to show face after 2023 New Year holidays.

Shahnam Arshi, who heads the Infectious Diseases Management Department of the Health Ministry, told Entekhab that the new wave of Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, has already entered the country with the detection of the new sub-strains of the Omicron variant.

With a rise in the number of trips abroad and back home, the new wave will likely show face after New Year holidays, he explained.

The official said the new wave of infections is expected to be less severe than the previous ones, but he warned that the pandemic is still not over across the world and people need to adhere to the health protocols against the highly infectious disease.

According to the latest updates to the color-coded coronavirus tracking map, released by the Health Ministry on Friday, 382 Iranian cities are still categorized as “blue,” where there's no risk of infection, but the number of “yellow” and “orange” zones are on the rise.

Currently, 62 cities are classified as “yellow” and 4 cities as “orange.” There is still no “red” areas on the map.

Top General Terms Power of Iran's Armed Forces as Devastating

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Commander of Khatam-al Anbiya Central Headquarters, Major General Gholamali Rashid, stating that the combined power of Iran's armed forces is devastating against the enemy, warned that any country that cooperates with the Zionist regime to threaten Iran's national security, will be targeted by Iran's armed forces.

On the sideline of Iranian Army's ‘Zolfagar-1401’ war games, Commander of Khatam-al Anbiya Central Headquarters, said that the Zionist regime is a destructive military-security threat to all countries in the region, including Iran, and the threatening actions of this regime against the interests and national security of Iran are evaluated with the assumption of information, coordination and support of the United States, and the response of the Iranian armed forces will be definite.

Major General Rashid in his remarks added that the combined power of Iran's armed forces is devastating against the enemy, and any country that cooperates with the Zionist regime to threaten Iran's national security, will be targeted by Iran's armed forces.

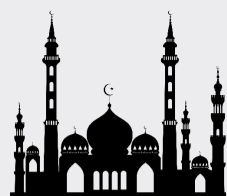
Vaccination of Foreign Nationals Against Rubella, Measles Starts in Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A plan to complete the vaccination and screening of foreign nationals living in Iran against rubella and measles started in Iran as of Saturday.

Vice President of Health of Ahvaz Jondishapur University of Medical Sciences Pejman Bakhtiari told IRNA on Saturday that vaccination and screening of foreign nationals living in Iran against measles and rubella started as of today.

The plan is expanded across the country so that foreign nationals can refer to the clinics to receive the vaccines and screening services.

Bakhtiari in his remarks added that in the second phase of this plan, which will begin next month, screening and vaccination of this population against tuberculosis will be done.



PRAYER TIME

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

97. (Moses) said: "Get thee gone! but thy (punishment) in this life will be that thou wilt say, 'touch me not'; and moreover (for a future penalty) thou hast a promise that will not fail: Now look at thy god, of whom thou hast become a devoted worshipper: We will certainly (melt) it in a blazing fire and scatter it broadcast in the sea!"

Surah 20. Ta-ha (97)

Turkish Traders Ready To Invest In Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Consul General of Turkey in Mashhad says Turkish traders are ready to cooperate and invest in different fields in Iran especially in the textile and apparel industry.

In meeting with head of Bojnourd Chamber of Commerce, Turkish diplomat Fatih Topcu said that there are good economic and trade interactions between Iran and Turkey and traders and investors of both states are ready to enhance cooperation.

Topcu pointed to the communalities of Iran and Turkey especially their many cultural commonalities and called for more efforts to make their cooperation become more colorful than before in the economic dimension and it requires all-out investment.

He then pointed to the economic capacities of North Khorasan Province of Iran and said that herbal medicines of this region of the northeast of Iran is considered a very suitable capacity for Turkish investors and this condition should be eased for Turkish investors.

He added that although some Turkish investors are active in the field of saffron and rose flower in North Khorasan but it is not enough.

Topcu went on to say that cultural commonalities between the two states have provided condition for investment for their traders and this opportunity should be used for development of both countries.



He stated that Turkey's textile and apparel industry since its shaping (in the 16th Century) has experienced many developments and today it is considered not only one of the important industries of Turkey but has made Turkey as one of the biggest exporters in the world.

Then Head of Bojnourd Chamber of Commerce Mr. Saeed Poorabadi, for his part, pointed to the potentials and capabilities of North Khorasan in different fields and said that this province enjoys potential capacities in the fields of tourism, agriculture and mining.

He then emphasized trade exchange between the two states and called for economic and trade cooperation between the two regions more than ever and announced readiness of the chamber for bilateral investments.

He went on to say that the trade volume between Iran and Turkey in 2022 has been over \$5b, adding that North Khorasan with population over one million and 9 industrial parks and 9 industrial areas as well as one special economic zone is a good opportunity for investment.

Saeed Poorabadi then added that this province with 115 tourism sites and two national model is a tourism destination in the country.

IRISL Ready for Offering Regular Services From Chabahar to Far East Ports

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Simultaneous with docking of a container vessel with 6500 TEU capacity at Chabahar



Port, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line Group (IRISL) announced that considering the existing facilities and in case of appropriate amount of arrival of cargos from the Far East ports to Chabahar Port, the group is ready to launch regular services to these ports in the near future.

According to the public relations of IRISL, a container ship with 6500 TEU capacity was docked at Chabahar Port for the first time on Friday. The ship after doing its formalities at Shahid Beheshti wharf will be unloaded.

The goal behind launching direct shipping service to the Far East from Chabahar Port is first to shorten the time for transit of cargos from the Far East and other European and African states.

It is worth noting that due to the existing facilities and in case of existence of appropriate number of importing cargos from the Far East ports, the IRISL is ready to launch direct regular services to these ports in the near future.

Future of South Iran Because of Industries in LSEZ to Be Compromising



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Representative of Velayat-e Faqih in Fars Province Ayatollah Dejkam paid a visit to Lamerd Special Economic Zone to get acquainted with the progress of the projects and trend of some important developmental and industrial projects of this zone.

In this visit that the CEO of LSEZ Mr. Fattahi and representative of Lamerd and Mehr to Majlis and some officials of the zone were present, Ayatollah Dejkam visited the project of transfer of water from Persian Gulf to LSEZ, Lamerd-Parsian Freeway, the 913-Megawatt Ghadir Energy and the big complex of South Aluminum and Petrochemical Industries which are under construction.

Ayatollah Dejkam pointed to the unique capacities of Lamerd Zone for the growth and economic boom of the country and said that considering the types of deployed industries in this industrial center, the future of the south country influenced by these investments is seen promising.

He went on to say that with valuable activities in LSEZ which are underway, the prosperous outlook is predicted for the zone in 2032.

Then the CEO of LSEZ Eng. Fattahi, for his part, pointed to several potentials and capacities of the zone and said that supply of consuming water of the industries in the zone despite existence of super project for transfer of water of Persian Gulf to the zone, provision of gas, provision of electricity from the power plant of the zone, special port of Parsian and investment of IMIDRO for connecting LSEZ to Parsian Port via construction of Lamerd-Parsian Freeway and above all huge human capitals of the town are of the advantages that investors can implement their economic projects in the zone without any concern.

Major Companies Active in Water Industry Ink MOUs

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's major companies active in the water and wastewater industry have signed several memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with each other and with other knowledge-based companies to cooperate in developing and modernizing the mentioned sector.

As reported by the Energy Ministry news portal (Paven), the said MOUs have been signed on the sidelines of the 18th International Water and Wastewater Exhibition which is being held at Tehran Permeant International Fairgrounds.

The water and Wastewater Company of Iran and the country's Water Research Institute are among the entities that signed MOUs to cooperate in providing new solutions to the water and wastewater sector's challenges.

Also, on the sidelines of the mentioned exhibition, three items and equipment which have been manufactured inside the country for the first time were unveiled.

One of these items is a hydraulic motor for water distribution and transmission, which is considered the first smart hydraulic motor built inside the country.

Hydraulic simulation of supply and distribution networks, accurate calculation of pressure and flow at network points, connection to other smart systems, the definition of control and operation rules, the definition of new elements (wells), EPS and Steady State solution, connection with GIS and geo databases, defining valve and pump operation diagrams and defining new consumption patterns are among the capabilities of this motor.

The electric actuator of adjustable industrial valves is another piece of equipment that was unveiled at the exhibition.

This actuator operates with an automatic clutch system for controlling valves in the water and wastewater network.

Optimum management of water resources and prevention of water wastage and meeting the needs of water and wastewater companies, regional water organizations, and thermal power plants are among the design goals of this actuator.

Iran's 18th International Water and Wastewater Exhibition kicked off on Friday at Tehran Permeant International Fairgrounds.

As reported, 169 domestic companies along with six foreign exhibitors are participating in this year's exhibition which was opened by Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian.

The U.S., China, Italy, and Canada are among the countries whose representatives are showcasing their latest products and services in the four-day event.

Car Production in Iran Is More Than in France, Italy

TEHRAN (IP) - The managing director of Iran Khodro Industrial Group said: Despite the cruel sanctions, Iran Khodro Company is in rank tenth in the world in automobile production, and statistics show that the company has made more cars than Italian and French companies.

Mehdi Khatibi said: "The company's priority is quality, which is possible with the efforts of the spare parts producers."

The CEO of Iran Khodro Industrial Group stated: The committed parts manufacturers have led to a 50% increase in the quality of the products, and despite all the problems, along with the increase in quality, the increase in production has been realized.

Iran Rich Gas Output Hits 1.04 bcm/d

TEHRAN (Shana) -- The director of production supervision of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) said: "Currently, NIOC produces 1 billion and 40 million cubic meters of gas daily from 23 gas fields in the country, of which about 980 mcm are delivered to National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) for distribution."

Hormoz Qalavand said: "In addition to the country's oil production, the NIOC is in charge of the country's gas production to supply feed to the country's refineries and exports."



He added: "All colleagues of the National Iranian Oil Company in land operational areas, offshore platforms, repair departments, technical services, as well as headquarters departments are working and making jihad efforts around the clock, which must be said that this volume of gas production and delivery cannot be achieved without this sacrifice."

In recent days, by the order of the CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company and with the round-the-clock efforts of the employees of the Company in the southern oil-rich regions, about 10 million cubic meters of gas from the NGL 1000 gas plant was also added to the country's production capacity.

Exports From Northwest Iran Increases Threefold in 9 Months

MAHABAD (IRNA) - Exports from the customs office of Mahabad in the northwestern Iranian province of West Azarbaijan have increased threefold by the end of autumn (December 21) compared with that in the preceding year, a provincial official announced on Saturday.

Ahmad Ahmadi, the head of the customs office of Mahabad, made the announcement while speaking to IRNA.

The worth of the exports during the mentioned period has been over ten million dollars, Ahmadi noted. The official referred to machine-made carpets, washing powder, and petrochemical products as the main commodities exported from Mahabad. The northwestern province of West Azarbaijan has over 960 km of joint borders with Iraq, Turkiye, and Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

Developing Exploration a Vital Factor for Developmental Projects of Chadormalu Co.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation (IMIDRO) Mr. Vajiollah Jaafari says development of exploration in the mineral areas of Chadormalu is a vital factor for providing future feed of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company.

Speaking in the control managing meeting of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company, Jaafari said that studies show that this area despite iron ore anomalies have high potentials for developing mining activities and providing future feed for the company.

He noted that in central Iran there are some 500m tons of iron ore with capability for mining and 150m tons of the figure is a confirmed reserve. He stressed that Chadormalu Company should focus on exploration and new reserves and asked the company to pursue its developments with taking consideration the comprehensive steel project. He noted that the organization continues talks with related officials for energy supply for mining companies.

Then the CEO of Chadormalu Company Mr. Mohammad Ali Taherzadeh, for his part, presented briefly major activities of the company and emphasized that Chadormalu group has recently launched a company to pursue exploration activities and the company has been active in exploration.

He then explained some of the programs of the company like expanding its rail transportation fleet by purchasing 200 wagons. He reiterated that all products of the company are offered on Iran Mercantile Exchange, adding that the value of the underway projects of the company is around 8.8b euros as 1.7m euros of this figure is now underway and 4.5b euros of it is on the eve of executive operation.

Taherzadeh also said that the company has plan on its agenda to increase its capital from 11900b tomans to 28800b, adding that the pellet production has increased by 1.8m tons in the first half of the year and the growth of sponge iron has been 922,000 tons and steel ingot has been 590,000 tons which shows 13.3 and 29.4 percent respectively.



India Suspends Construction Work in Delhi as Air Worsens

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India suspended most construction and demolition activities in and around Delhi on Friday after its air quality deteriorated and was forecast to worsen because of calmer winds and other atmospheric conditions, a government body said.

The national capital region's air gets filthy every winter as low temperatures and wind speeds trap emissions from vehicles, burning of farm wastes, and industries. Many of Delhi's 20 million residents complain of serious breathing problems between November and January.



Suu Kyi's Myanmar Trials End With 7 More Years in Jail

YANGOON (Dispatches) - Deposed Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi was convicted of five counts of corruption and jailed for seven more years, an informed source said, wrapping up a marathon of trials condemned internationally as a sham.

In a closed-door court session in army-ruled Myanmar, Suu Kyi, 77, who was arrested during a coup in February 2021, was found guilty of offences relating to her lease and use of a helicopter while she was the country's de facto leader, said the source, who has knowledge of her trials.



Ukraine Says Repelled Russia Nighttime Drone Attack



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine said it repelled a nighttime drone attack from Russia, a day after Moscow launched a new wave of missile strikes in the run-up to New Year celebrations.

The attacks came 10 months into Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. In recent months Russian strikes have targeted the energy grid, leaving millions in the cold in the middle of winter.

Ukraine's air force said that Russia attacked Ukraine overnight using "Iranian-made kamikaze drones".

A total of 16 drones were launched from the southeastern and northern directions and they were "all" destroyed by Ukraine's air defense, it said.

The presidency said that Ukraine "withstood" the new drone attacks, which targeted infrastructure facilities.

In the capital Kyiv, city authorities announced an air alert shortly after 2:00 am local time.

Mayor Vitali Klitschko later said seven drones had targeted the capital. Two were shot down "on approach" and five over the city.

There were no casualties, but falling debris damaged windows in two buildings in southwestern Kyiv, he added.

One of the drones hit a four-storey administrative building, starting a fire that was later extinguished, said Kyrilo Tymoshenko, deputy head of the presidential office.

The drone attack came after a barrage of Russian missiles battered Ukraine on Thursday morning, with blasts reported across the vast country, from the northeastern city of Kharkiv to the western city of Lviv near the Polish border.

Ukraine's army said Russia had launched several dozen cruise missiles, the majority of which had been shot down.

Tymoshenko said four civilians were killed and eight as a result of the strikes on Thursday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said most regions were left without power following Thursday's attack.

Ukraine's energy operator said Friday the damage had a "much smaller impact" on the power grid than "the enemy expected" and the power deficit was back to the levels before Thursday's attack.

But "the situation in the southern and eastern regions is still difficult," Ukrenergo added.

Russia has faced international condemnation and an onslaught of unprecedented sanctions over its war in Ukraine.

The growing international isolation has forced President Vladimir Putin to seek to boost closer political and economic cooperation with nations in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

A pariah in the West since the start of the assault on Ukraine, Putin on Friday spoke by video link with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, calling him a "dear friend" and hailing the two countries' efforts to counter Western "pressure".

Putin also said he was keen to ramp up military cooperation.

"We aim to strengthen cooperation between the armed forces of Russia and China," Putin told Xi, a week after the two countries conducted naval drills in the East China Sea.

Putin also hailed the efforts of Moscow and Beijing to counter "unprecedented Western pressure and provocations" and said he expected Xi to arrive in Moscow for a state visit next spring.

Putin has also relied on the backing of Belarus's long-serving president Alexander Lukashenko, who allowed Russian troops to use his country as a launchpad for the Ukraine offensive.

Sweden Takes EU Presidency After Shift to the Right

STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - Sweden takes over the EU's rotating presidency from January 1 vowing to maintain unity on Ukraine and uphold free trade in the face of calls for a tougher response to U.S. green subsidies.

But the main questions for Stockholm as it takes the reigns of the 27-nation bloc at this tumultuous time could be how new dynamics in its own domestic politics play out on the European stage.

After eight years of center-left rule, the government of conservative Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson formed in October relies on an unprecedented alliance with the far-right Sweden Democrats for a majority in parliament.

While the nationalist party has dropped its earlier calls for Sweden to quit the EU, its hardline stance in key areas such as immigration looks set to cause friction at home and curb the room for maneuver.

Helene Fritzon, a European Parliament member for the opposition Social Democrats, said there were "lots of pretty words" from the Swedish government over its plans. Alongside Russia's aggression and trade, Stockholm has outlined climate change and protecting EU "fundamental values" in the face of disputes with Hungary and Poland as priorities.

"But there is great concern when, in practice, it is the Sweden Democrats who have the whip hand," Fritzon said.

Others, however, are less worried about the potential for the far-right party to play spoilers during Stockholm's time in the European spotlight.

The deal hatched to form the government means the Sweden Democrats formally have to be informed of any decisions taken in regards to the EU.

"But generally EU matters are excluded from this agreement," Goran von Sydow, director of the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, told AFP.

For von Sydow a bigger worry is how the neophyte administration copes with the burden of helping navigate the EU through such choppy geopolitical waters.

"The challenge would be the relatively inexperienced government," he said.

"So many of the ministers and their closest political aides have very little experience of all being at EU meetings."

Bolivia Court Sentences Opposition Leader to Four Months

LA PAZ (Dispatches) - A Bolivian court sentenced right-wing opposition leader Luis Fernando Camacho to four months of pre-trial detention, a day after he was arrested in connection to 2019 social unrest that saw former leftist President Evo Morales flee the country.

Camacho was arrested on Wednesday and taken to the political capital La Paz, sparking protests amid escalating tensions between his wealthy agricultural base in the region of Santa Cruz and the national government.

Camacho, the governor of Santa Cruz, is facing a possible transfer to a high security jail in El Alto.

Prosecutors have charged Camacho with "terrorism" and are also investigating allegations including possible connections to attacks on the president and high-ranking state dignitaries, state prosecutor Omar Mejillones said on Thursday.

"I'll never surrender, this is a fight for democracy and freedom," Camacho, a proponent of greater federalization, said in a statement on his Twitter account. Camacho has said he is innocent of the charges and his lawyer said that he was "unjustly" detained.

His arrest sparked protests in Santa Cruz, with many people waving the regional flag. Civil groups started mobilizing road blockades and a general strike called from 12.00 a.m. (0700 GMT) on Friday morning.

"There are times for peace and times for war," said Keyla Garcia, a congresswoman from Camacho's party who led a rally Thursday, quoting the Bible.

Counter-protesters also came to the streets to demand justice, with people displaying coffins symbolizing victims of the 2019 unrest when Morales fled the country amid protests, some led by Camacho.

"May he go to jail for thirty years. We want justice. I was in the place where they killed the first victim," said Maria Laura, a pro-government protester.

EU Urges Members to Step Up Covid Variant Sequencing

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - The European Union should consider immediately scaling up genomic sequencing of COVID-19 infections and monitoring of waste water, including from airports, to detect any new variants given the virus surge in China, the bloc's health chief said.

In a letter to health ministers of the EU's 27 members, Stella Kyriakides said the bloc should be "very vigilant" as China lifted travel restrictions on Jan. 8 as reliable epidemiological and testing data for China were quite scarce.

Kyriakides advised ministers in the letter, which was reviewed by Reuters, to assess their current practices on genomic sequencing of the coronavirus "as an immediate step".

If sequencing had been scaled down, countries might want to consider scaling it back up, she wrote, adding that it was important to continue or start surveillance of waste water, including sewage from key airports.

If a new variant appeared, the bloc needed to detect it early to be able to react quickly, the commissioner wrote.

The commissioner's letter, dated Dec. 29, followed

an online meeting of over 100 representatives from EU members, EU health agencies and the World Health Organization to discuss how to deal with the outbreak in China.

Health experts are expected to hold a crisis response meeting next week, according to an EU source.

Italy has urged the rest of the European Union to follow its lead and test travellers from China, but most EU members have said they saw no need to do so. Kyriakides said some EU members had proposed measures such as the random testing of travellers.

Spain said on Friday it would join other countries setting new restrictions by requiring travellers from China to test negative or show they have been fully vaccinated.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control says it does not currently recommend measures on travellers from China.

It said the variants circulating in China were already in the European Union, EU citizens had relatively high vaccination levels and the potential imported infections were low compared to the number of daily infections in the EU, with health care systems currently coping.



UK Urged to Rethink Plans to Deport Asylum Seekers to Rwanda

LONDON (Dispatches) - The new UN human rights chief has urged the British government to reconsider its plans to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, warning that in the past similar "offshoring" schemes had led to "deeply inhuman" treatment of refugees.

In his first public comments on the controversy since taking office two months ago, Volker Türk rejected prime minister Rishi Sunak's description of the £140m deal as "common sense", saying that as well as being legally and ethically problematic it was also "very costly" and unlikely to work.

"You cannot offshore your responsibilities to another state in the way that is envisaged [by the UK government]," Türk told the Guardian. "It does raise very serious concerns, both from an international human rights and international refugee law perspective."

Asked whether the government should go back to the drawing board, he said: "Yes, absolutely."

The high court ruled on Monday that the Conservatives' plan to send people seeking protection in the UK to the central African country was lawful, dismissing an application from asylum seekers, charities and a border officials' union to stop it.

The victory was partial, as judges also said the government had failed to "properly consider the circumstances" of eight people it had tried to deport under the scheme in June, in one instance confusing facts relating to one Syrian Kurd with another Syrian in what the court deemed "not an immaterial error".

The home secretary, however, swiftly announced her intention to push ahead the partnership "at scale and as soon as possible". Suella Braverman claimed she was backed by the "overwhelming majority of the British people" in her desire to see an end to the people-smuggling gangs facilitating asylum seekers' Channel crossings.

More than 40,000 people have crossed the Channel in small boats in 2022, the highest number since figures began to be collected in 2018. The journey is perilous: last week four people died after their boat got into difficulties off the Kent coast.

The Rwandan government has said that it currently has capacity to receive about 200 people - less than 0.5% of the total who have crossed this year and that rights groups say is nowhere near large enough to be a deterrent.

China's Services Sector Eyes Recovery After Reopening



BEIJING (Dispatches) - Jordan Li, a restaurant owner in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu, hopes desperately that next month's Lunar New Year holidays will help him make up for business lost this year because of COVID-related travel and other restrictions.

Although infections have risen sharply since the central government lifted most of its pandemic-control curbs this month, Li thinks people will still travel to Chengdu. He envisions a different problem: a lack of workers to handle the demand.

Li says he is preparing for a worst-case scenario in which he single-handedly keeps his restaurant open as he "can be the boss, the chef, the waiter and handle the finances all at the same time."

Stung by the repeated pandemic-related disruptions to his business in the past three years, he does not want to hire staff until operations return to normal.

Li's predicament underscores challenges for China's economically crucial services sector as it bets on a post-COVID revival.

With the virus spreading unchecked across the country now, representatives from the services sector say frequent lockdowns have left them without money to expand.

They also must deal with a growing number of sick workers, especially ahead of and during the Lunar New Year next month, a peak travel period in China, when millions head home to celebrate with families.

The contact-intensive services sector, which accounted for 53.3% of China's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021, suffered the most amid the country's anti-virus curbs, which shut down many restaurants and restricted travel.

Beijing this month dismantled almost all such curbs, which have battered the \$17-trillion economy.

"There is still a shortage of labor in the services sector in the big cities, and the loss of productivity is quite obvious," said Dan Wang, chief economist at Hang Seng Bank China. "That situation won't improve significantly before Chinese New Year, and the rebound isn't happening simultaneously, but city by city."

Ordinary Chinese and travel agencies say a return to anything like normal will take months, given worries about COVID and more careful spending because of the impact of the pandemic.

"It's hard to say how much demand there will be for travel during the Spring Festival because it depends on whether people can recover in time," adds Zhou Weihong, deputy general manager at Spring Tour, the travel arm of Shanghai-based Spring Group.

Retail sales, a key gauge of consumption, dropped 5.9% in November from a year earlier, and catering fell by 8.4% amid broad-based weakness in the services sector.

Policymakers have set out plans to revive consumption and investment, but the impact of a slowing economy on unemployment and wages is expected to keep a lid on services spending in the near term.

In Lijiang city, a tourist hotspot in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan, about half of shops and restaurants have shuttered since pandemic control measures were put in place three years ago.

Standing in a small, empty restaurant this month after curbs on domestic travel were lifted, its owner, surnamed Wen, said business had been bad during the pandemic. There were little prospects for a revival, he said.

"It's not the COVID restrictions that stopped people coming, it's because people don't have money," he said.

Many shops in Shanghai, Beijing and elsewhere have also closed in recent days with staff unable to come to work, while some factories have already sent many of their workers on leave for the Lunar New Year holidays.

The lack of healthy workers has also led to long waits for deliveries in major Chinese cities.

Ukraine Aims to Develop Air-to-Air Combat Drones



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine has bought some 1,400 drones, mostly for reconnaissance, and plans to develop combat models that can attack the exploding drones Russia has used during its invasion of the country, according to the Ukrainian government minister in charge of technology.

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov described Russia's war in Ukraine as the first major war of the internet age. He credited drones and satellite internet systems like Elon Musk's Starlink with having transformed the conflict.

Ukraine has purchased drones like the Fly Eye, a small unmanned aerial vehicle used for intelligence, battlefield surveillance and reconnaissance.

"And the next stage, now that we are more or less equipped with reconnaissance drones, is strike drones," Fedorov said. "These are both exploding drones and drones that fly up to three to 10 kilometers and hit targets."

He predicted "more missions with strike drones" in the future, but would not elaborate. "We are talking there about drones, UAVs, UAVs that we are developing in Ukraine. Well, anyway, it will be the next step in the development of technologies," he said.

Russian authorities have alleged several Ukrainian drone strikes on its military bases in recent weeks, including one on Monday in which they said Russian forces shot down a drone approaching the Engels airbase located more than 600 kilometers (over 370 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

Russia's military said debris killed three service members but no aircraft were damaged. The base houses Tu-95 and Tu-160 nuclear-capable strategic bombers that have been involved in launching strikes on Ukraine.

Ukrainian authorities have never formally acknowledged carrying out such drone strikes, but they have made cryptic allusions to how Russia might expect retaliation for its war in Ukraine, including within Russian territory.

Ukraine is carrying out research and development on drones that could fight and down other drones, Fedorov said. Russia has used Iranian-made Shahed drones for its airstrikes in Ukrainian territory in recent weeks, in addition to rocket, cruise missile and artillery attacks.

"I can say already that the situation regarding drones will change drastically in February or March," he said.

Fedorov sat for an interview in his bright and modern office. Located inside a staid ministry building, the room contained a vinyl record player, history books stacked on shelves and a treadmill.

The minister highlighted the importance of mobile communications for both civilian and military purposes during the war and said the most challenging places to maintain service have been in the Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa and Kyiv regions in the center and east of the country.

He said there are times when fewer than half of mobile phone towers are functioning in the capital, Kyiv, because Russian airstrikes have destroyed or damaged the infrastructure that power them.

Ukraine has some 30,000 mobile-phone towers, and the government is now trying to link them to generators so they can keep working when airstrikes damage the power grid.

The only alternative, for now, is satellite systems like Starlink, which Ukrainians may rely on more if blackouts start lasting longer.

"We should understand that in this case, the Starlinks and the towers, connected to the generators, will be the basic internet infrastructure," Fedorov said.



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Hungary Raises 2023 budget Deficit Target to 3.9% of GDP

BUDAPEST (Dispatches) - Hungary's government has raised its 2023 budget deficit goal to 3.9 per cent of gross domestic product from 3.5 per cent targeted previously due to surging energy prices and the costs of shielding some households and companies from higher utility bills.

Hungary's budget deficit has ballooned this year after a spending spree ahead of April elections, and with soaring energy prices and additional gas purchases from Russia, its main supplier, contributing to expenditures.

The deficit will decline less from this year's estimated 6.1 per cent of GDP level despite Finance Minister Mihaly Varga pledging last week to rein in the shortfall more aggressively amid an economic slowdown



Tight Grain, Oilseed Supplies To Keep Prices High in 2023

LONDON (Dispatches) - The war in Ukraine and high energy costs accompanied by drought or too much rain seem likely to continue curbing global farm production the next year as well, tightening supplies, even as high prices encourage farmers to boost planting.

Production of staples such as rice and wheat is unlikely to replenish depleted inventories, at least in the first half of 2023, while crops producing edible oils are suffering from adverse weather in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

"The world needs record crops to satisfy demand. In 2023, we absolutely need to do better than this year," said Ole Houe, director of advisory services at agriculture brokerage IKON Commodities in Sydney.

"At this stage, it looks highly unlikely, if we look at the global production prospects for cereals and oilseeds."

Wheat, corn and palm oil futures have dropped from the record or multi-year highs but prices in the retail market remain elevated and tight supplies are forecast to support prices in 2023.

With food prices climbing to record peaks this year, millions of people are suffering across the world, especially in poorer nations in Africa and Asia already facing hunger and malnutrition.

Food import costs are already on course to hit a near \$2 trillion record in 2022, forcing poor countries to cut consumption.

Benchmark Chicago wheat futures jumped to an all-time high of \$13.64 a bushel in March after Russia's invasion of key grain exporter Ukraine reduced supplies in a market already hit by adverse weather and post-pandemic restrictions.

Corn and soybeans climbed to their highest in a decade, while Malaysia's benchmark crude palm oil prices climbed to a record high in March.

Wheat prices have since dropped to pre-war levels and palm oil has lost around 40% of its value, amid fears of a global recession, China's COVID-19 restrictions and an extension of the Black Sea corridor deal for Ukrainian grain exports.

While flooding in Australia, the world's second-largest wheat exporter, in recent weeks has caused extensive damage to the crop which was ready for harvest, a severe drought is expected to shrink Argentina's wheat crop by almost 40%.

This will reduce global wheat availability in the first half of 2023.

A lack of rainfall in the U.S. Plains, where the winter crop ratings are running at the lowest since 2012, could dent supplies for the second half of the year.

For rice, prices are expected to remain high as long as export duties imposed earlier this year by India, the world's biggest supplier, remain in place, traders said.

"Rice availability in most exporting countries is pretty thin except India, but it has export duties in place to reduce sales," said one Singapore-based trader at an international trading company.

"If we get a production shock in any of the top exporting or importing countries, it can really swing the market upside."

UK House Prices End 2022 on a Weaker Note

LONDON (Dispatches) - British annual house price growth marked a further "sharp" slowdown in December, mortgage lender Nationwide said, ending the year on a downbeat note as the impact of surging mortgage costs reversed some of the pandemic-led boom in the market.

The lender also said that the final month of 2022 saw prices record their worst run since 2008 on a monthly basis, falling 0.1% compared with November in their fourth consecutive monthly price fall. A Reuters poll of economists had pointed to a fall of 0.7%. In annual terms, house price growth slowed to 2.8% in December from 4.4% in November, Nationwide said, compared with the 2.3% growth forecast in a Reuters poll.

House prices have weakened in recent months as former Prime Minister Liz Truss's plans for unfunded tax cuts spooked markets and drove up borrowing costs, making home loans less affordable and causing lenders to suspend mortgage products at one point. That has marked a slowdown from last year when price growth reached multi-year highs due to strong demand as people desired bigger homes more suited for remote working during the health crisis.

"While financial market conditions have settled, mortgage rates are taking longer to normalise and activity in the housing market has shown few signs of recovery," Nationwide chief economist Robert Gardner said in a statement.

"It will be hard for the market to regain much momentum in the near term as economic headwinds strengthen, with real earnings set to fall further and the labour market widely projected to weaken as the economy shrinks."

Earlier in December, a survey by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) showed the most widespread house price falls in Britain since early in the pandemic last month.

RICS' chief economist Simon Rubinsohn had said the downbeat tone reflected "the uncertain macro environment and the higher cost of mortgage finance".

Nationwide's Gardner, who reiterated on Friday a previous prediction that house prices were on track to drop by about 5% next year, also said the recent weakness in mortgage applications may partly reflect an early seasonal slowdown.

He said that the housing market remaining buoyant in the first three quarters of 2022 despite weak consumer confidence gave some reassurance that there would be a pick-up in activity in the New Year.



Turkey Likely Topped \$250b Year-End Exports Target

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey is all but sure that the data next week will show that it has surpassed its year-end exports target, according to the country's trade minister.

"We will say \$250 billion-plus; we will see what that plus is on Monday. We can export above the world average. Especially in the last two years, we have increased our exports more than the world (average); we have this ability," Mehmet Muş said.

Muş was speaking during a panel held within the scope of the Turkey Export Mobilization Summit, organized by Daily Sabah's parent company Turkuvaz Media's flagship Sabah newspaper.

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

Yet, a global slowdown has dragged 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 invades 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 in November.

"In the ten years after 2011, world exports grew by 2%. Turkey, on the other hand, increased its exports by 5.3% in this period. Therefore, it is almost three times the size of the world," Muş said.

"This shows the strength of Turkey despite the circumstances. As a result, our share in global exports increased to 1.03%."

Still, Muş cited global uncertainties and challenges spearheaded by high energy prices.

"No one can predict energy prices. There is a very uncertain environment. Forecasts cannot be made in world trade either," he noted.

"We always have export capabilities above the world average. All our goals are to go above, and beyond the point we have arrived at."

Muş also stressed Turkey's goal to boost its services exports. "We care about service exports and are increasing our share here. In 2023, service exports will increase to over \$100 billion," he said.

Meloni Takes Issue With ECB, Euro Zone's Bailout Fund



ROME (Dispatches) - Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni took aim at the EU's financial institutions, telling the European Central Bank (ECB) to be more careful in the way it communicates and saying the euro zone's bailout fund serves no useful purpose.

During a three-hour, end-year news conference Meloni said the ECB should avoid making "choices that make things worse" for the bloc's economy, adding her voice to criticism leveled at the bank this month by some of her top ministers.

At its last meeting the ECB raised its benchmark interest rate by 50 basis points as widely expected, but also signaled that more hikes would follow in the coming months, triggering a sell-off of Italian government bonds.

"It would be useful if the ECB handled its communication well ... because otherwise it risks generating not panic but fluctuations on the market that nullify the efforts that governments are making," Meloni said.

Turning to the euro zone's bailout fund, Meloni gave no indication on whether Italy would ratify a treaty revamping the so-called European Stability Mechanism (ESM), and said she believed nobody would ever use the fund in its present form.

Italy is the only euro zone country that is dragging its feet over the ESM reform, which would give the institution the task of providing a backstop to deal with failing banks in the context of the Banking Union.

It would also make sovereign debt restructuring in the euro zone more straightforward.

"I fear the fund will never be used," Meloni said, because the conditions are "too stringent" and any country applying for an ESM loan would see a rise in its bond yields and "a series of disadvantageous things."

Meloni, who took office in October at the head of a right-wing coalition, said that "rather than ratifying the reform" she wanted to meet the director of the ESM to see if it was possible to put the fund to a different use.

China's Factory Activity Likely Cooled in December on COVID Surge

BEIJING (Reuters) - China's factory activity is expected to have extended declines in December, a Reuters poll showed on Friday, as the end of the country's "zero-COVID" policy and rising infections began to affect production lines.

The official manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) likely stayed at 48.0 in December, according to the median forecast of 14 economists polled by Reuters, in line with November's reading, which was a seven-month low.

An index reading below the 50-mark indicates contraction in activity on a monthly basis and a reading above indicates expansion.

The data offers the first glimpse from the National Bureau of Statistics on how factory activity was affected in December after China relaxed its strict "zero-COVID" rules, which prioritized virus containment over economic productivity.

As a result, businesses now have to contend with rising COVID infections in the workforce, leading some analysts to anticipate labor shortages and increased supply chain disruptions.

Fears of a global recession due to rising interest rates, inflation and the war in Ukraine have weakened external demand, which is likely to also impact China's export-oriented manufacturers, already under pressure to make up lost ground now that anti-virus curbs have been ditched. This means manufacturers now face a challenging winter, despite the government's renewed focus on pursuing economic growth.

BOJ Moving Towards Policy Normalization

TOKYO (Reuters) - The Bank of Japan's decision to raise its bond-yield ceiling could be the first step toward normalising ultra-easy policy, Takatoshi Ito, a Columbia University professor who is close to BOJ Governor Haruhiko Kuroda, wrote in a column.

The central bank stunned markets this month by raising to 0.50% from 0.25% an implicit cap set for its 10-year bond yield target, a move aimed at ironing out market distortions caused by its yield curve control (YCC) policy.

Kuroda said then that the move was not a prelude to an exit from ultra-loose policy, because recent price rises meant Japan's inflation-adjusted, real interest rate had been declining.

"Kuroda is correct on this technical point. But the tweak to the YCC could still be the first step toward monetary-policy normalization," Ito said in the column posted on the website of news organization Project Syndicate.

There was good reason to believe the BOJ's projection that inflation will slow back below its 2% target next year could prove wrong, said Ito, whom some analysts see as a potential candidate to become BOJ governor when Kuroda's term ends in April.

Japan's annual consumer inflation rate hit 2.8% in November even when excluding the effect of higher energy and food prices. Ito said that was a sign it could remain above 2% next year even if energy and food prices stopped rising.

Next year's annual pay negotiations were also likely to bring large wage hikes, partly to compensate employees for the rise in inflation, a move that would boost households' spending power and cause price rises driven by stronger demand, he said.

"That would be an ideal initial condition for the BOJ to start hitting its inflation target on a more sustainable basis," Ito said. "The new year may yet bring a happy ending to Japan's decade-old ultra-easy monetary policy," he added.

Ito and Kuroda, who have been close since working together at Japan's finance ministry in 1999-2001, lobbied hard for the BOJ to adopt a 2% inflation target to end deflation. The BOJ did so in early 2013 and deployed a massive stimulus program when Kuroda became governor months later.

Kuroda's "bazooka" asset-buying program, however, failed to fire up inflation, forcing the BOJ to adopt YCC in a prolonged effort to achieve its price goal.

While rising raw material prices have pushed inflation above 2% in the past few months, Kuroda has ruled out the chance of a near-term rate hike on the view that wages must rise more for Japan to sustainably hit 2% inflation.

U.S. Crimes in Assassinating Gen. Soleimani to Stay in History

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Former Iranian ambassador to Iraq Iraj Masjedi described the assassination of Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani by the U.S. as a crime recorded in history.

Addressing a specialized roundtable focusing on fighting terrorism and extremism in West Asia concentrating on efforts made by the powerful commander of Islam and Iran, which

was held at the Institute For Political And International Studies in Tehran on Saturday, Masjedi said that the legal and judicial pursuit of the case of perpetrators of assassination and those who helped the Americans will be underway.

All of Martyr Soleimani's trips to Iraq were official and at the invitation of Iraq.



How Will Japan Resolve Shipping Insurance for Russian LNG Imports?

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan, the world's top liquefied natural gas (LNG) importer, is facing its latest challenge in securing vital gas supplies from Russia after Western reinsurers said they would halt marine war insurance for ships travelling in Russian waters from Jan. 1.

Having joined other G7 countries in imposing sweeping sanctions on Moscow for the invasion of Ukraine, Japan has been reducing its reliance on Russian oil and coal, but it continues to buy Russian LNG amid elevated prices in a tight global market as Europe ramps up imports.

Japan's Tokio Marine & Nichido Fire Insurance, Sompo Japan Insurance and Mitsui Sumitomo Insurance told shipowners last week that from Jan. 1 they would stop offering insurance coverage for ship damage caused by war in Russian waters, because reinsurers were withdrawing coverage.

Without the war insurance, shippers such as Mitsui OSK Lines and Nippon Yusen might have to halt operations in Russian waters, including loading LNG from the Sakhalin-2 complex in Russia's Far East, industry sources said. Japan receives 9% of its imported LNG from Sakhalin-2, which is owned by Gazprom and Japanese trading houses.

Loss of supply from Sakhalin-2 could send Japanese power and gas utilities such as JERA and Tokyo Gas Co Ltd scrambling for alternatives.

The country has already faced repeated challenges in securing gas supplies since Russia sent its armed forces into Ukraine in February. It has had to persuade G7 partners to give it leeway so it could keep importing Russian LNG, and after the Russian government decided in June to seize control of Sakhalin-2, Japanese trading houses had to agree to remain as shareholders of the new Russian operator.

To avoid supply disruption, the three Japanese insurers are negotiating with various reinsurers to retain the war coverage.

In a rare joint letter, Japan's Financial Services Agency and Agency for Natural Resources and Energy have also asked insurers to take on additional risks to continue providing marine war insurance for shippers transporting LNG from the Sakhalin-2.

"The top priority now is to secure marine war insurance," a senior official at the industry ministry said.

It is still unclear whether the insurers can secure sufficient reinsurance, especially at a time when many Western counterparts are away on holidays.

Shipowners may continue operations without the war coverage by shouldering the risks, since voyages between Sakhalin island and Japan are short, taking just a few days, and since the LNG export facility is located far from the battlefields of Russia and Ukraine.

However, they risk losing their tankers to seizure in Russia for some unforeseeable reason. Each LNG tanker costs 20 billion to 30 billion yen (\$150 million to \$220 million).

Other parties, such as the government and Japanese utilities, the buyers of the Sakhalin fuel, might have to share the risk, industry sources said, although sources in the government and among buyers said they were not yet considering such a move.

"Insurers and shipping companies are trying to resolve the issues and we are closely watching the situation," a source at a utility said.



Another option would be to use a sovereign liability guarantee, like the one that covered shipments of Iranian oil to Japan in 2012, after Western insurers cut cover due to sanctions on Iran.

Legislation that authorized that guarantee was for Iranian oil imports only, so new law would be needed for guarantees covering shipments from Russia, the ministry official said.

The clock is ticking, but any immediate risk of fuel and power shortages looks small, even if some LNG cargoes are delayed early next month, another source at a power utility said. The reason was that stocks built up ahead of the peak winter demand season were larger than usual, that source said.

LNG inventories at Japan's major power utilities were 2.41 million tons on Dec. 25, above the five-year average of 1.84 million tons for the same time of year, according to industry ministry data.

Also, Japan has created a new mechanism to allow the industry ministry to help redirect supplies of LNG in the event of an emergency so gas and power companies do not run short.

If supply from Sakhalin-2 is disrupted, buyers can exercise the upward quantity tolerance clause typically found in long-term contracts, allowing them to request 5% to 10% additional volumes from suppliers elsewhere.

A source at an urban gas provider said his company could also get alternative supply from the spot market if it could accept the higher price there.

Japanese buyers paid \$15.78 per million British thermal units (mmBtu) for Russian LNG in November, below the average price of imported LNG of \$17.86 and an average spot-cargo price for delivery to Japan of \$18.40, according to the Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security.

The average LNG price for February delivery to northeast Asia is around \$31 per mmBtu. Japan uses LNG for 39% of its electricity generation.

Is It Really Serious...

FROM PAGE 1

But the decision on Friday can be a step forward for condemning and punishing the Zionists for their murders and occupation of land and it can restore, to some extent, the missed reputation of the UN provided that it takes serious action against Israel but still many people think this is a show for the UN to prove the world that is impartial and it takes action against any country and any person who commits international crimes and offences.



On Thursday, the Palestinian Wafa news agency cited the official heading the Islamic organization that runs the compound's affairs as saying that a record number of Israeli settlers, namely 48,238, had stormed the Muslim holy site in 2022.

According to Azzam Khatib, director of the Islamic Waqf Department, 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.

The world and especially independent and freedom-seeking nations support the Palestinians and condemn the Israeli atrocities and have repeatedly asked the international bodies to take action but so far the bodies have not taken any serious action against this fake regime and it is hoped this time every thing would go in favor of Palestinians and a serious action would be taken against Israel. We should seat and wait whether this is a serious move or a show for entertaining the world.

Home-Grown...

FROM PAGE 1

Combat drones carried out close air support (CAS) operations and attacked ground sites as well.

Moreover, the attack helicopters of the Airborne Division of the Iranian Army's Ground Force undertook sorties in turbulent weather conditions.

Zolfaqar 1401 drills kicked off late on Thursday night, and feature parts of the infantry, armored and mechanized units, surface, sub-surface and flying vessels, air defense systems, members of the marine commando force, and strategic bombers.

The drills' spokesman, Brigadier General Alireza Sheikh, said the exercises are meant to promote training and combat readiness and implementing some operational and intelligence plans to improve the security of the region.

The commander of the military exercises, Deputy Army Chief Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, said earlier on Thursday that the maneuvers bear the message that regional countries can ensure peace in their neighborhood through joint cooperation, without relying on outsiders.

U.S. Sought to...

FROM PAGE 1

"Americans brought Daesh to Afghanistan," he said, warning that the US is "trying to further its plans in Afghanistan through this proxy war."

The US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, despite the fact that no Afghan national was involved in the attacks. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans died in the US war of aggression on the country.

American forces had occupied the country for about two decades on the pretext of fighting against the Taliban. But as the US forces left Afghanistan, the Taliban stormed into the capital Kabul in August last year, weakened by continued foreign occupation.

The Taliban took over the capital Kabul on August 8, 2021, and declared that the war in Afghanistan was over. The militants entered the presidential palace after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

Hundreds of thousands of Afghans died in the US war on the country while its irresponsible withdrawal is also leading to a humanitarian crisis in the war-torn state.

Stem Cell Transplant May Slow Progression Of Multiple Sclerosis



LONDON (Dispatches) - A new study is adding to evidence that people with multiple sclerosis can benefit from a type of stem cell transplant -- including some patients who are in a more advanced phase of the disease.

The research is the latest look at a potential alternative treatment for some patients with MS -- using their own blood stem cells to try to reboot their faulty immune systems.

Studies have found that the approach may benefit some patients in the earlier stages of MS. Now, the new findings suggest the same could be true of some patients in the second phase of the disease, known as secondary progressive MS.

Researchers found that among more than 2,000 Italian adults with secondary progressive MS, those who received the stem cell therapy fared better over five years than those taking standard medications.

Overall, 62% saw no worsening in their disability, compared with 46% of patients on medication. A small number -- 19% -- even maintained some improvement over five years, versus 4% in the medication group.

Experts said the findings add to evidence of the promise of the stem cell approach. But they also had important cautions.

For one, the study was not a clinical trial that directly tested stem cells against standard MS medications: It looked back at the records of patients treated for MS at various Italian medical centers somewhere between 1997 and 2019.

That means there could be "confounding factors" -- differences between patients who did or did not receive stem cell transplants -- that make it hard to draw conclusions, said Bruce Bebo, executive vice president of research for the National MS Society.

On top of that, patients taking MS medications did not receive the latest drugs approved for the disease. So it's unclear how those more targeted medications might stack up against stem cells.

Rising Climate Costs to Challenge Countries, Companies in 2023

LONDON (Dispatches) - In a year marked by more climate-linked floods, hurricanes, and droughts, governments and companies were forced to look more closely at the financial risks and their liability exposure.

Nowhere was this more apparent than at the U.N. climate conference in Egypt, where countries reached a landmark agreement to set up a fund to help developing countries cope with climate-fueled disaster costs.

However, Egypt's COP27 talks did little to address the cause of those disasters -- the ever-rising levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

That kind of slow progress in tackling climate change made vulnerable countries determined to get the so-called Loss and Damage fund approved -- after yet another year of extreme weather disasters including record heatwaves from the United States to China, glaciers collapsing in India and Europe, and unending drought pushing millions toward famine in East Africa.

Insurers were feeling the pain as the year delivered three of the decade's costliest disasters -- "dystopian" flooding that delivered \$40 billion in damages to Pakistan, a series of deadly summer heatwaves that collectively caused more than \$10 billion in losses for Europe, and Hurricane Ian tearing across Florida and South Carolina to the cost of \$100 billion, according to risk modeling firm RMS.

The Loss and Damage fund also marked a diplomatic coup by developing nations after decades of U.S. and European resistance over fears it could open them to legal liability for their historical emissions. But countries agreed the fund would pull from existing financial institutions rather than rich nations, assuaging those liability concerns.

As watchdog groups called out companies for failing to disclose how climate change might threaten them financially, investors faced increasing pressure for going too far to address climate risks and for not going far enough.

"It's the wild west in terms of what companies should do. And some are greenwashing," said Katharine Hayhoe, a Canadian climatologist and chief scientist at the Nature Conservancy. But some making a sincere effort are "getting pushback from the purity culture,



people saying that anything but perfection isn't worth it."

Even Hayhoe and others warning about the dangers of climate change didn't escape censure, with some activists laying into them for flying to conferences or eating meat.

People started to paint at some point and glue themselves to things.

"I get it," Hayhoe said. "It's a psychological reaction to the genuine fear people feel when they start to understand the magnitude of this problem."

Others sought to take their grievances to court. There are 2,176 climate-related lawsuits worldwide, including 654 filed in U.S. courtrooms, according to the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University.

And scientists and economists are making further advances in calculating exactly how much a country's activity may have contributed to climate change -- and specific disasters. This line of argument, referred to as "climate attribution science," made its way into more courtrooms.

"So far, it's been a battle of the paper experts," said Sabin Center's executive director, Michael Burger. "What we have not yet seen is an actual trial" presenting evidence toward attributing a certain percent of obligation to a climate-polluting company or country.

But it's just a matter of time, experts say. With the new year, expect more public anxiety as climate change escalates -- and more worry among companies and governments over liability and risk.

Companies and investors will face pressure to climate-proof their supply chains and operations.

Courtrooms will see more climate cases filed; he said -- focused on challenging national governments to increase their climate policy ambitions and holding corporations accountable for their emissions or deceptive practices.

At the end of the year, countries will meet again at the next U.N. climate summit, COP28, in Dubai. And they will be under extra pressure to see that emissions are cut in half by 2030 and to net zero by 2050 -- the only path to holding global warming to within 1.5 degrees Celsius.

"An increasing number of powerful actors are coming to terms with the fact that we can't keep sticking our heads in the sand," Burger said.

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Pant Stable After Fiery Car Crash

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India cricketer Rishabh Pant suffered multiple injuries but is in a stable condition after his car hit a central divider, flipped over and caught fire in the early hours of Friday morning.
Police said the wicketkeeper-batsman, who was alone in the car when it crashed in the northern state of Uttarakhand, had lost control of the vehicle when he "dozed off".
The car flipped over twice, police added.

Triple Olympic Ski Champion Announces Retirement

BORMIO (Dispatches) - Triple Olympic champion Matthias Mayer announced his immediate retirement from skiing, shortly before the start of the men's Super-G World Cup event in Bormio.
"I did my last inspection today. I don't want it enough any more," he told Austrian television ORF after looking at Thursday's course.
The 32-year-old Austrian made his World Cup debut in Sestriere in February 2009 and went on to rack up 11 World Cup victories and 45 podiums.

Doncic's Second Straight Triple-Double Carries Mavs

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Luka Doncic recorded his eighth triple-double of the season, while Christian Wood scored 12 of his 21 points in the third period as the host Dallas Mavericks sprinted past the Houston Rockets 129-114 Thursday for their fifth consecutive victory.
Doncic finished with 35 points, 12 rebounds and 13 assists to lead a Mavericks offense that shot 51.6 percent overall while producing a 25-5 advantage in fast-break points. Doncic was coming off a historic 60-21-10 line against the Knicks two nights earlier.
Doncic had 14 points, three rebounds and three assists in the opening period, but it wasn't until the second quarter that Dallas began to pull away, starting with a corner 3-pointer from Tim Hardaway Jr. (18 points) that provided the Mavericks their first double-digit lead at 48-37 with 5:56 left in the first half. Jalen Green led the Rockets with 23 points, while Kevin Porter Jr. added 17 points and seven assists. Jabari Smith Jr. matched Doncic with 14 first-quarter points but finished with only 16 for the game.

Grizzlies 119, Raptors 106

Ja Morant scored 13 of his 19 points in the third quarter and added a career-best 17 assists as visiting Memphis defeated Toronto.
Dillon Brooks scored 25 points and Steven Adams had 14 points and 17 rebounds for the Grizzlies, who won for the second time in their past six games. Desmond Bane added 16 points and Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 15 for Memphis. Before fouling out late in the fourth quarter, Pascal Siakam had 25 points and 10 rebounds for Toronto. Gary Trent Jr. added 20 points for the Raptors, who have lost eight of their past 10 games and five straight at home.

Celtics 116, Clippers 110

Jaylen Brown and Jayson Tatum each scored 29 points as Boston beat Los Angeles to cap a seven-game homestand. Brown scored 12 in the fourth quarter to help the Celtics close out their fourth straight win, while Tatum grabbed 11 rebounds for his 14th double-double of the season. Marcus Smart had 17 points, nine assists and



two steals, while Derrick White added 15 points and Robert Williams III 12 for Boston. Kawhi Leonard led the Clippers with 26 points to go with eight rebounds, and Paul George had 24 points and six assists for the Clippers, who had five players score in double figures.

Pacers 135, Cavaliers 126

Tyrese Haliburton collected 29 points and nine assists and Buddy Hield added 25 points to fuel Indiana to a victory over Cleveland in Indianapolis.
Haliburton made six 3-pointers and Hield had five as the Pacers converted 61.3 percent of their shots from beyond the arc (19 of 31). Rookie Benedict Mathurin scored 23 points off the bench, and Indiana earned its fourth win in five games.
The Cavaliers' Donovan Mitchell scored a team-high 28 points. Jarrett Allen collected 19 points and 14 rebounds and Caris LeVert scored 19 points for Cleveland, which has lost three in a row.

Hornets 121, Thunder 113

LaMelo Ball poured in 27 points and came one assist shy of a triple-double as Charlotte returned home and defeated Oklahoma City.
Ball added 10 rebounds to an inspiring all-around performance to provide a boost to the struggling team. P.J. Washington added 25 points and Mark Williams, who has spent a large chunk of the season in the G League, came off the bench for 17 points and 13 rebounds.



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Former world number three Dominic Thiem was handed a wildcard to the Australian Open, as he continues his comeback from a serious wrist injury.

The Austrian, who pushed Novak Djokovic to five sets in the 2020 Australian Open final, was sidelined for nine months with the injury sustained during the 2021 grass-court season.
He has shown encouraging signs on his return to the tour, rising from outside the top 350 to 102 in the second half of this year, including semi-final runs at Gstaad, Gijon and Antwerp.

His rapid ranking rise meant the 29-year-old only narrowly missed directly qualifying for the main draw of the Australian Open, which starts in Melbourne on January 16.

Thiem, a two-time French Open runner-up, won the US Open in 2020.
Other wildcards went to American pair Taylor Townsend and Christopher Eubanks, and French players Diane Parry and Luca Van Assche.

Kvitova Downs World No.3 Pegula

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Petra Kvitova upset world number three Jessica Pegula, but the United States still won their United Cup tie against the Czech Republic in Sydney.

Two-time Wimbledon champion Kvitova clinched a thriller, saving seven set points in the first set before winning 7-6 (8/6), 6-4 at the Ken Rosewall Arena.
After the Americans won the opening two rubbers on Thursday, Kvitova's victory gave her country hope in the inaugural tournament, which features two men's and two women's singles matches along with a mixed doubles.

But the U.S. clinched the tie when Tomas Machac injured his ankle against 19th-ranked Francis Tiafoe and was forced to retire hurt while down 6-3, 2-4.
Kvitova, ranked 16, looked back to her best against Pegula, who burst into the top 10 in 2022 by winning the WTA 1000 tournament in Guadalajara for the biggest title of her career.

After a topsy-turvy first set that could have gone either way, she got a double break at the start of the second set and while the American got one back, Kvitova was able to hold on and take the match in two hours.

Tiafoe, a U.S. Open semi-finalist this year, started brilliantly against Machac, racing through the first set with relative ease.

Machac fought back in the second and was a break up before rolling his ankle and retiring.

Kyrgios Hits Back At Hewitt

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Nick Kyrgios said Australian co-captain Lleyton Hewitt threw him "under the bus" after his decision to withdraw from the United Cup mixed teams tournament to be in top condition for next month's Australian Open.

World number 22 Kyrgios, who enjoyed a superb 2022 winning the Australian Open men's doubles title and finishing runner-up to Novak Djokovic in the Wimbledon final, pulled out of the joint ATP and WTA event on Wednesday with an injury.

Nadal Looks to Get Back to Winning Ways



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal is shopping that playing in the United Cup will give him the confidence boost he needs as he looks to defend his Australian Open title next month after being plagued by injuries in 2022.
The 36-year-old won the Australian and French Open trophies this year to increase his Grand Slam haul to a men's record 22 but he required pain-numbing injections on his foot during his run to the Roland Garros title and then had to withdraw from his Wimbledon semi-final with an abdominal injury.

After winning four titles in the first six months of 2022, it was a case of more pain than gain for Nadal since he hoisted the Musketeers' Cup for a record 14th time in June.

"My main goal now is to regain positive feelings on the court and to be competitive, and I hope to do that. I'm ready to do it, but we'll see," Nadal told a news conference on Wednesday.
"Right now I'm just focused on having a competitive level.. on playing at the highest level possible and being competitive and fighting for everything."

The Spaniard also said he was glad that his main rival, 21-time major winner Novak Djokovic, has been allowed to return to Australia.
Djokovic, a nine-time champion at Melbourne Park, missed the season's opening slam this year after being deported in January for failing to meet the country's Covid-19 vaccination requirements for visitors.

"Djokovic being here is good for tennis and for the fans. It's always a victory to see the best on court," added Nadal.

Shiffrin Reaches 80 Career Wins

SEMMERING (Dispatches) - Mikaela Shiffrin clinched a hat-trick of World Cup wins in Semmering, taking her tally to 80 World Cup victories as the American stormed through the 60-gate course fastest on both slalom runs.

The 27-year-old's win leaves her just two short of the women's record of 82 victories set by compatriot Lindsey Vonn, and six off Ingemar Stenmark's all-time record.

"I don't know what to say about the 80-thing yet. But it was a bit wild," said Shiffrin as she pipped compatriot Paula Moltzan into second place by 0.29 seconds with Germany's Lena Duerr in third.
"I hope they all had a nice time watching, they were all cheering."

"Paula had a ripping run and it's special to share this with her."
Shiffrin, who now has 50 slalom wins, also won the two giant slalom races held over the last two days at the Austrian venue.

She now leads Petra Vlhova in the overall rankings with 875 points to the Slovakian's 506, with Italy's Sofia Goggia on 470.

In the slalom rankings, Shiffrin also leads with 425 points to Wendy Holdener's 370. Vlhova is third with 280.

Shiffrin's next target is to pass Vonn, who retired in 2019, with a series of events to come early in the new year. The calendar includes two slaloms in Zagreb on January 4-5 before two giant slaloms at Kranjska Gora in Slovenia on January 7-8.

Another slalom follows on January 10 in Flachau, Austria.

At 27, Shiffrin already has four overall World Cup crystal globes, six world titles (11 medals in all) and two Olympic titles.

In the World Cup, her statistics are staggering. In 230 starts over 11 years, she has been on the podium 127 times with 80 victories.

The victory represented the second time Shiffrin had completed a treble at Semmering.



Dallas Cowboys Beat Banged-Up Tennessee Titans

MIAMI (Dispatches) - The Dallas Cowboys did not play their best, but still did enough to beat an injury-ravaged Tennessee Titans 27-13 in the NFL with tight-end Dalton Schultz catching two touchdowns.

With their post-season place already assured, the Cowboys retain an outside chance of taking the top seed in the NFC if they can win their final game against Washington and the Philadelphia Eagles lose their last two games.

Despite their sixth straight loss, the Titans can also make the playoffs if they win their final game at the Jacksonville Jaguars.

Quarterback Joshua Dobbs was handed his first start in the NFL after Malik Willis was benched, having struggled to stand in for the injured first-choice starter Ryan Tannehill.

A former University of Tennessee player, Dobbs has spent five years as a backup with Pittsburgh, Jacksonville and Cleveland but may have done well enough to keep his place for the decider in Jacksonville.

Dobbs completed 20 of 39 attempts as he threw for 232 yards and one touchdown, with one interception.

His opposite number Dak Prescott threw two interceptions in the first half, continuing a worrying trend for the Cowboys signal-caller, but he kept a level head as he managed the team to victory in the second half.

Prescott, without star running back Tony Pollard, threw for 282 yards and two touchdowns.

Ezekiel Elliott set the Cowboys on their way with a one-yard run into the endzone for his ninth straight game with a rushing touchdown and Dallas led 10-6 at halftime.

Prescott then found Schultz with a six-yard pass to extend Dallas' lead to 11 points before Dobbs kept the Titans in the contest, connecting with Robert Woods on a seven-yard touchdown pass.

