

Health Ministry Announced on Saturday That the Number of Deaths From the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran Increased to **144,706** With Two **More** Iranians Killed by the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

IRAN NEWS

The Guardian Council's Spokesman Elaborated on the Examination of a Plan of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), Saying The Crime and Punishment in the Plan Were Not Proportionate

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2 DOMESTIC

Iranian, Pakistani FMs Speak Out Against Islamophobia in France
> SEE PAGE 2



Iran Urges UNSC to Condemn Israeli Crimes



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations has strongly condemned desecration of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of al-Quds by Israel's new far-right security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir.

"We urge the Security Council to condemn the ongoing violations and crimes of the Zionist regime in the occupied Palestinian territories, and to force the lawless regime to strictly adhere to international regulations, including relevant United Nations resolutions," Amir Saeed Iravani told a UN Security Council meeting to discuss recent developments in al-Quds.

"It is regrettable that the Zionist regime's blatant violations of human rights and international humanitarian principles in the occupied Palestinian territories, including systematic and brazen provocations as well as desecration of holy places, are met with the international community's apathy," Iravani stated.

He touched on the sensitivity of Muslims worldwide to any desecration of their holy places, saying that "if the international community, especially the Security Council, remains silent in the face of the Zionist regime's ongoing violence, the regime will pluck up the courage to press ahead with its crimes and acts of aggression."

The diplomat also dismissed Israeli envoy Gilad Erdan's anti-Iranian allegations, emphasizing that such unfounded claims are meant to divert the world public opinion away from the continuing crimes and serious violations of international principles that the regime is perpetrating against the Palestinian nation.

Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour pushed for the Security Council on Thursday to take action against Israel over Ben-Gvir's provocative actions.

"What red line does Israel need to cross for the Security Council to finally say, enough is enough?" Mansour asked the 15-member council, denouncing Israel for showing "absolute contempt".

The al-Aqsa Mosque compound, which sits just above the Western Wall plaza, houses both the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Iran Exports to U.S. Rise 10 Folds

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The value of Iran's exports to the United States registered a 10-fold increase in the first 11 months of 2022 from the same period in 2021, based on the data released by the United States Census Bureau.

As IRNA reported, the U.S. imported commodities worth \$11 million from Iran in the first 11 months of this year, while the figure was only \$1.1 million in the same period of time in the past year.

According to the mentioned data, the two countries traded \$51.3 million worth of goods during January-November which was 38 percent more than the figure in the first 11 months of 2021 when the trade between the two sides amounted to \$37.2 million.

The United States Census Bureau's data shows that the value of U.S. export to Iran also increased 11 percent to \$40.3 million in the 11-month period of this year, from \$36.8 million in the same time span of the previous year.

As previously reported by this bureau, the value of Iran's exports to the United States increased by 11 folds in the first 10 months of 2022 from the same period in 2021.

See Page 7

Rise in Interest of Investors, Shareholders to Shares of Shiraz Petrochemical Co. Simultaneous With Increasing Growth in Production and Sales

Open Horizons Ahead of Shiraz Petrochemical Co.

The statistics and figures of the capital market in recent weeks show that with the increase and continuation of production in Shiraz Petrochemical Company, the shares of this petrochemical company have been welcomed considerably by shareholders and investors. According to the public relations of Shiraz Petrochemical Company, the continuation of production and activities of this petrochemical company has won the trust of investors and shareholders and the company once again shown its value to them in the capital market of the country, and the field has helped the ground to continue in creating added value, production and employment in the oldest unit of petrochemical productions of the country will continue. Therefore, the shares of Shiraz Petrochemical Company began to rise in value again from December 21st, and during the last three weeks, they compensated for the decrease in price of shares, and at the end of trading hours of December 11, the price of each share of Shiraz Petrochemical Company rose to 80,000 rials. The release of the Iranian calendar month of December financial report of Shiraz Petrochemical Company on December 10 showed that from the point of view of statistics, this petrochemical company has witnessed a growing and promising trend. The amount of sales of petrochemical products in November was close to 146 thousand tons of products, and in the monthly activity report of month of Day, this amount reached 198 thousand tons, which includes 73.5 thousand tons of domestic sales and 124.3 thousand tons of exports. In this way, the amount of products sold by this company in the month of Day has grown by nearly 36 percent compared to the preceding month. Also, the sales amount of Shiraz petrochemical products in Day was 2,531 billion tomans, which has grown by 29 percent compared to November. This amount was 1960b tomans in the month of October. Thus, it is predicted that the interest of investors and shareholders in Shiraz Petrochemical shares will increase and we will witness the increase in the price of this fundamental and valuable share in the coming weeks.



3 DOMESTIC

Iran to Launch \$8b Oil Projects By March 2023
> SEE PAGE 3



ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

"Charlie Hebdo Insult" Part of Zionists' Plot

In recent days a wave of successive plots against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Palestinians and predominantly the Muslims has been shaped and everybody can see the trace of Zionists' behind this wave and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the first which has detected these plots and will have due responses to them in due time.

While Iran and freedom-loving people in the world were preparing themselves to mark the martyrdom anniversary of General Qassem Soleimani, a series of strange things happened to overshadow the anniversary of this commander of hearts and symbol of fight against terrorism.

First, a far-right Israeli minister attracted international uproar by storming the al-Aqsa Mosque's compound recently and later caused another scandal by visiting a high-security Israeli prison to make sure Palestinian inmates' conditions there has not improved.

Ben-Gvir had stormed the al-Aqsa Mosque's compound in the holy occupied city of al-Quds' Old City on Tuesday. The compound is regarded by Muslims as their third-holiest site.

This move led to some unrests and protests in the Occupied Lands and in the Muslim world and it was just for provocation of Muslims because the Zionists are well aware that Muslims are sensitive to any disrespect to their sanctities.

Then an infamous French weekly continued this game of provocation as Charlie Hebdo weekly magazine's profane through some cartoons continued enraging Muslims. The magazine is to publish several insulting cartoons of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in a special issue later this week. The controversial right-wing magazine had in early December announced a competition for producing the cartoons.

Charlie Hebdo's insult reveals once again that Zionism has taken advantage of media to promote anti-Islamic sentiments and foment hatred and division among societies and people.

Reacting to this insult, Iran's Foreign Ministry in a statement blamed the Zionists for this insult and urged the French government to stop it but it seems the French government does not intend to take any action because the government follows the Zionists under the pretext of freedom of expression.

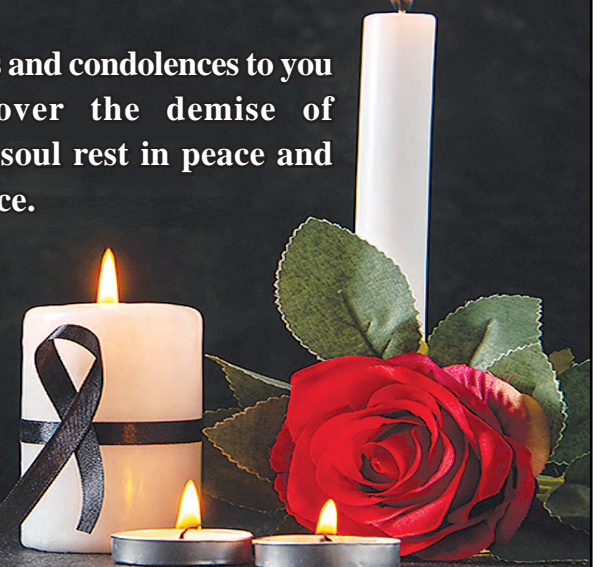
The statement said such an offensive move by the notorious magazine amounts to the violation of the recognized moral norms, barbaric desecration of religious sanctities, a sacrilegious move against the political and religious authorities, and an offense against the administrative symbols and national values of Iranians.

See Page 7

Dear Mr. Hamid Reza Naghashian, Managing Director of Sokhan Gostar Institute

We express our deepest sympathies and condolences to you and your esteemed family over the demise of your beloved aunt and may her soul rest in peace and wish you and your family patience.

Staff of IRAN NEWS and Sokhan Gostar Institute



FFIRI Reacts to Fake Name of Arab Countries Tournament

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran’s Football Federation (FFIRI) will complain to FIFA over the use of a fake title by Arab states for the Persian Gulf. Referring to the fake title used for the Arab cup hosted by Iraq in the city of Basra, FFIRI in a statement expressed the official objection of the Iranian football community and nation to FIFA. The statement further added that it is clear that the Persian Gulf is an original and historical name that has been used continuously for

many years in all languages and world literature, and it has been mentioned in its entirety with this title in atlases containing ancient and historical maps.

Based on this, the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran will send the relevant documents to FIFA to correct the unfair trends against international custom in the coming years, the statement concluded.

Iranian, Pakistani FMs Speak Out Against Islamophobia in France

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran and Pakistan have condemned the spread of Islamophobia in France, urging Muslim countries to act decisively to counter any move against Islam and violation of its sanctities.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his Pakistani counterpart Bilawal Bhutto Zardari held a phone call on Friday following a decision by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo to publish cartoons of Iran’s top religious authority.

During the phone conversation, Amirabdollahian criticized the Israel lobby for spreading Islamophobia around the world, but added that nothing annuls the responsibility of the French government vis-à-vis such incidents.

“Muslim countries should not allow certain Western countries to insult the sanctities and spread hatred in the name of freedom [of speech],” he said.

For his part, Zardari said the French magazine has a dark record of insulting Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) as well as religious figures and values and expressed Islamabad’s readiness to cooperate with Muslim countries and the OIC to counter any move to spread Islamophobia.

The French magazine is set to publish several insulting cartoons of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in a special edition later this



week. The controversial right-wing magazine had in early December announced a competition for such cartoons.

In a statement on Thursday, Iran’s Foreign Ministry said Tehran holds the French government responsible for an “anti-cultural and anti-human move” by the notorious French weekly to publish insulting caricatures of the country’s top politico-religious authority, announcing a decision to revise cultural relations with Paris in response.

Amirabdollahian and Zardari also denounced the Israeli regime’s aggressive measures, particularly its provocative actions against al-Aqsa Mosque.

The silence of countries in the face of injustice in occupied Palestine must come to an end, the Pakistani foreign minister asserted.

On Tuesday, far-right Israeli minister Itamar Ben-Gvir entered the holy site of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the occupied Old City through the Moroccan Gate, also known as the Mughrabi Gate, in what was described by Palestinians as an “unprecedented provocation.”

Leader Appoints Radan as Iran’s New Police Chief



TEHRAN (MNA) – The Leader of the Islamic Revolution appointed Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan as the new commander of the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In a decree issued on Saturday, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei appointed Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan as Iran’s new police chief.

The decree by Leader also commended the former commander Brigadier General Hossein Ashtari for his attempts during his tenure in the position.

Ashtari has been working as the police chief since March 8, 2015, in the decree issued by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei.

90 People Accused of Participating in Assassination of Martyr Soleimani



TEHRAN (IP) - Speaking at the 2nd conference commemorating martyr Soleimani and his companions in Milad Tower, the head of an Iranian special committee tasked with prosecuting suspects in the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani said: “In the legal aspect, the case of Martyr Soleimani was followed up internally and it has reached good stages.”

General Esmail Qaani, commander of IRGC Quds Force, some other officials, and the families of the martyrs, are present in the ceremony.

Abbas Ali Kadkhodaie, the head of an Iranian special committee tasked with prosecuting suspects in the assassination of General Soleimani, says: 90 citizens of different countries are accused of participating in the assassination of Martyr Soleimani, and their names are listed in the indictment.

General Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Second-in-Command Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were assassinated along with their companions in a U.S. drone strike authorized by the former U.S. President Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

General Soleimani and his companions were highly popular because of their key role in eliminating the U.S.-backed ISIS terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

Kadkhodaie said: “The crime that America committed by assassinating Martyr Soleimani was a clear crime in terms of international laws. It violated both Iraqi sovereignty and international laws. According to international laws, governments are obliged to protect the lives of representatives and envoys of other countries.”

“Although the influence of arrogant countries is high in the international forums, the action of America was so heinous that most international experts emphasize that the assassination of Soleimani was a crime, reminded Kadkhodaie adding. In his report, the human rights rapporteur announced the assassination a violation and did not accept the U.S. excuses,” he noted.

While appreciating the good cooperation of the Iraqi government in this case, he said: “If we form an international court between Iraq and Iran, we can speed up the proceedings. Of course, the Iraqi government has announced its readiness for that.”

“Americans should know that this is a crime and they should be held accountable for their crimes,” the head of an Iranian special committee tasked with prosecuting suspects in the assassination of General Soleimani added.

Enemy’s Economic Sanctions Aim to Impoverish Iranian People

TEHRAN (MNA) – Major General Hossein Salami said Saturday that the enemies’ aim is to spread poverty in Iran with their economic sanctions, stressing that the IRGC is fighting poverty in defense of the Islamic Revolution.

Commander in Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) made the comments on Saturday during the inauguration ceremony of the 3,500 Basij projects in Tehran during which he said that “building a powerful Iran is our main goal.”

“A modern Iran with people who live in comfort



and well-being is our goal; An independent but prosperous and modern Iran is our main mission,” Gen. Salami added.

The IRGC commander further said that they seek to eradicate poverty, describing eradicating poverty as one of the main goals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

“The enemy’s goal is to spread poverty in our society and economic sanctions were the version of impoverishing our society,” he went on to highlight.

He continued by underlining that the country’s economic problems could be resolved with the ‘jihadi’ presence of the popular Basij forces.

European Acknowledged Iran Is a Regional Power

TEHRAN (IFP) - The vice chairman of the Iranian parliament’s national security commission says the European troika has sent a message to Iran recently and, as a result, the road has been paved for the victory of the Iranian people.

Abbas Moghtadaei said in their message, the three European countries, namely Britain, France and Germany acknowledged that Iran is a powerful regional country. The lawmaker said they sent the message after the West failed to gain what they sought from the recent unrest and riots in Iran.

He said the rioters acted as a tool in the hands of those who sought to push the aims of foreigners in Iran.

Referring to the JCPOA revival talks, Moghtadaei said Iran is rational and it never walked away from the negotiating table.

The MP noted that those who violated the nuclear deal left the talks but Iran will not surrender. Moghtadaei also said the Western sides must know that they can only talk with Iran by respecting the country, not through intimidation and pressure.

Minister Attends Ceremony in Mauritania

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran’s Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohammad-Mehdi Esmaili, took part in a ceremony held in Mauritania to introduce the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, as the Culture Capital in the Islamic World for 2023.

Esmaili has been in Mauritania since January 5 to participate in the ceremony.

Iran minister attends ceremony in Mauritania on introducing Islamic Culture Capital

During his visit to the northwest African country, the Iranian minister of culture held talks with Mauritanian President Mohamed Ghazouani.

Iran minister attends ceremony in Mauritania on introducing Islamic Culture Capital

The talks focused on ways to widen relations among Islamic, Arab, and African states.

Esmaili noted that African, Arab, and Islamic



countries have good potential for having new interactions.

He went on to say that holding talks with his counterparts in the Islamic states on the sidelines of the ceremony in Mauritania is a good opportunity for fostering cultural ties between Iran and Islamic countries.

He further described Iran’s rich culture as an important tool for deepening Islamic Republic’s diplomacy.

For his part, the Mauritanian president appreciated the Islamic Republic for its stable and principled stance on the issues related to the World of Islam.

Ghazouani said development of cultural, economic, and political relations between his country and Iran would be strategic and important.

Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) has introduced Nouakchott as the Culture Capital of the Islamic World for 2023.

Tehran Not Like Neighbors to Become Battlefield With Israel

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian Ambassador to the Republic of Azerbaijan warned Zionists not to get closer to Iran’s neighbors, saying Tehran does not like neighboring countries to become a battlefield with fake Israeli regime.

Muslim nations definitely detest the usurping, fake, and terrorist regime of Zionists, Seyed Abbas Mousavi said on Friday in an interview with Iranian media in reaction to the previous interview with the newly appointed Israeli regime’s envoy to Baku by the Azeri media.

Not only Zionists’ presence in the region is temporary, but the disgraceful life of this regime is coming to an end, Mousavi added.

“In the talks and negotiations that we have with the officials of the neighboring and friendly country of Azerbaijan, we have clearly warned about the consequences of the presence and influence of the Zionist regime in the form of economic and cultural cooperation, and we have said that the Zionist regime will never be a friend of Muslim states and nations. Strengthening and normalizing relations with Islamic countries is a special project of this regime to create division among Muslim countries, institutionalize usurpation and occupation, and continue crimes against the Palestinian nation and other Muslim nations,” the Iranian envoy to Baku said.

Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran May Engage In Gas Supply From Turkey

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran may participate in gas hub project in Turkey, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez said, Trend reports citing Turkish media.

“Two pipelines of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline were put into operation. The first line is intended for gas supplies to Turkish consumers, the second - for gas supply to Europe through Bulgaria. Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran can be participants here,” he noted.

The Minister also said that the infrastructure for the creation of a trading platform for the European market is ready, while the roadmap is currently being finalized.

Regarding talks with Russia to defer payment for natural gas, Donmez said talks are ongoing.

Tehran, Seoul Discuss Expansion of Economic Cooperation



TEHRAN (MNA) - South Korea’s Trade Minister Ahn Duk-Geun met with Iran’s envoy to Seoul on Thursday for talks on ways of boosting trade of humanitarian items and the overall economic ties.

During the meeting in Seoul, Ahn and Iran’s Ambassador to South Korea Saeed Shabestari discussed ways of expanding bilateral economic cooperation, including the exchanges of humanitarian items, according to South Korea’s Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy.

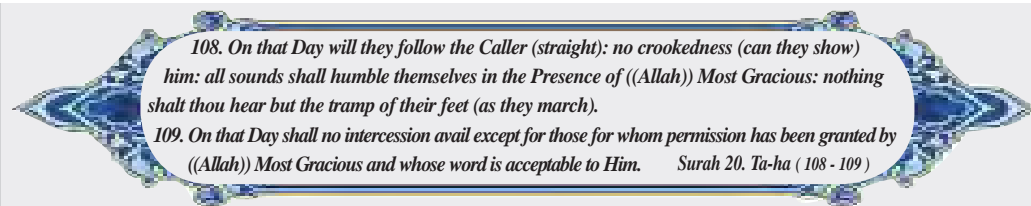
The two nations have discussed how to expand the trading of medicine, medical equipment and other humanitarian items, as those items are exempted from international sanctions regimes, Yonhap News Agency reported.

Ahn also asked for Iran’s backing for Seoul’s bid to host the 2030 World Expo, the ministry said.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:10
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:27
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:45
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14



Iran to Launch \$8b Oil Projects By March 2023

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Oil Minister Javad Owji said a number of unfinished petroleum projects worth \$8 billion in total are scheduled to come on stream by the end of the current Iranian calendar year to March 23, 2023.

Javad Owji told a live televised interview that by God's grace, 8 billion dollars of half-finished projects will be completed in the current calendar year, adding the projects are aimed at addressing such priorities as enhancing oil and gas production, boosting gas refining capacity, gas transmission pipelines, petrochemical compounds and gathering associated petroleum gases.

Referring to the president's emphasis on the implementation of half-finished projects and the need to determine their fate as soon as possible, he clarified: "Since the beginning of the work of the government, with a jihadist action, the Oil Ministry has carried out basic and infrastructure works to complete the half-finished projects, and priority projects have been identified."

One of the projects is Phase-11 of the massive South Pars gas field development.



Once operational, the project will add 14 million cubic meters of gas to the country's natural gas production capacity.

Owji also announced the completion of the third sweetening train of the South Pars Phase-14 Refinery, and said: "The most important of all projects was the South Pars Phase-14 Refinery, which will become fully operational by the calendar yearend to March 2023.

He mentioned new development plans, and announced: "Good projects and plans for increasing oil and gas production, increasing refining capacity, including petrol production, gas oil, gas transmission lines and collecting flare gases, as well as petrochemical complexes and complementary chain industries, and most importantly consumption optimization projects for which we have signed \$110 billion of memorandums and contracts."

The Oil Minister added that for these plans, the capacity of investment participation of domestic and foreign sectors have been tapped.

PR Fully Reflecting Organizational Success of HOSCO

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – The manager of the public relations of Hormozgan Steel Company says the public relations office is the mirror for reflecting all organizational successes and developments of the company.

On the occasion of the 11th foundation anniversary of HOSCO, Mr. Reza Safarian, the manager of public relations and advisor to the CEO of the company, in an interview highlighted many achievements of the company especially in the field of public relations and having effective communication with outside of the company.

He first said that the public relations connect the company with the outer world and it is today an art and a social science and by the way the public relations are in charge of painting the picture of goals of an organization and ways for attaining the programs. He added that public relations are a full reflection of success, achievements and probably failures of an organization, and in other words, public relations is considered as the flagship of an organization.

Safarian then pointed to major actions of the public relations of HOSCO in recent two years in the field of social responsibilities. He said that HOSCO is considered as one of the biggest economic enterprises in Hormozgan Province and it is expected to do more in connection with the society and commitment to its social responsibilities. He said that fortunately today, all in Hormozgan Province acknowledge that HOSCO is the leading economic enterprises in fulfilling its social responsibilities and fortunately the company has done a great job in this field after forming a committee on social responsibilities which pursues the goals and programs of the company in fulfilling the obligations.

He then highlighted major actions of the public relations of HOSCO in boosting connection between the company and the outer world and ways of communication. He said that one of the important tasks of the public relations is timely dissemination of information and publishing the news related to the company as well as having good relation with media for reflecting the performance of the company and HOSCO has been successful in this field in recent years as all achievements and developments of the company have been published.

Safarian noted that because of this success, the public relations of the company has won many awards in festivals and events as the best public relations and the latest one was the top award which was given to the company in the 20th national awards of public relations industry.



IME Posts Higher Records in Trade Value

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week experienced trade of 2,228,487 tons of commodities and 5,002 vehicles with a total trading value of more than \$680m, posting growths of 18.85% in value of trades compared to the figures

of the previous week.

According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 1,777,503 tons of commodities worth more than \$422m.

On this floor the IME sold 1,130,388 tons of cement, 320,000 tons of iron ore, 276,541 tons of

steel, 42,125 tons of aluminum, 35,400 tons of zinc, 8,250 tons of copper, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 4 kg of gold bars and 5,002 vehicles.

Furthermore, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 411,948 tons of commodities valued at more than \$236m.

Commodities traded on this floor included 117,025 tons of bitumen, 101,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 100,832 tons of polymeric products, 48,500 tons of lube cut, 34,673 tons of chemicals, 2,000 tons of sulfur, 6,023 tons of base oil, 2,424 tons of petroleum products and 200 tons of insulation.

The IME also traded within the same week 38,613 tons of commodities on its side market.



CEO of Roham Pars Steel Company of Bakhtegan:

Launch of Sponge Iron Plant to Turn East Fars Province Into an Economic Hub



With the presence of the Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade, the construction of the sponge iron plant started in Bakhtegan. With the presence of the Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade, the construction of the sponge iron plant started in Bakhtegan, Fars Province. In this ceremony, which was attended by the Fars governor, some members of parliament and other provincial officials, the sponge iron plant with investment of 6,000b tomans and capacity of 1.2m tons per year was inaugurated in Bakhtegan. Seyed Reza Fatemi Amin, the Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade, expressed his hope that this project will be implemented within the specified period of time, and at the same time, he reminded that local forces should be used in this economic project. Dr. Mohammad Shahbazipour, the CEO of Roham Pars Steel Company of Bakhtegan also explained that the construction of this factory started with an investment of 6,000b tomans in a land with an area of 150 hectares, 35 kilometers from Tashk-Abadeh Road to Neiriz, and the area of the plant is also 50 hectares. Pointing out that this industrial unit will create 700 direct and indirect jobs, Shahbazipour also touched upon the fact that the sponge iron plant with an annual production capacity of 1.2m tons will be operation in 32 months. The CEO of Roham Pars Steel Company stated that the country's steel giants such as Chadormalu Industrial and Mining Company, Arfa Iron and Steel Company, Iran International Engineering Company and Parse Refractory Company are the shareholders of this company, and acknowledged that Engineer Taherzadeh, the respected CEO of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company, with owning major shares is the supporter of this project with full discretion and wisdom. At the same time, Shahbazipour emphasized that this

factory will have access to Persian Gulf water in the future and will turn Southeast Fars into an industrial area. He said that one of the major problems of steel industry of Fars Province is gas supply and noted that despite the fact that there are two free gas lines near Bakhtegan and the sponge iron plant, the gas problem still exists. The CEO of Roham Pars Steel Company asked the Minister of Industry to resolve the gas problem. Oghlid steel project, Roham Pars and Kharamah by revising the list of industries and mines. Referring to the role of Roham Pars Steel Company in empowering other sectors of the economy and reducing dependence on oil and gas sales as well as reducing dependence on foreign countries, he emphasized that the mining sector can generate income and produce instead of all other sectors of the country's economy and boost the exports. Dr. Farhad Tahmasbi, the representative of the people of Neiriz, Estahban and Bakhtegan in the parliament, was also present in this ground breaking ceremony and emphasized that this event in Bakhtegan city can turn Fars into an industrial hub in the future and lead to the development of the province. Dr. Tahmasabi also pointed out that the water required for this large industrial project will be supplied from the Persian Gulf and water from the city's underground sources will not be allocated for this industry.



Iran Steel Alloy Co Has Effective Role in Drawing the National Industrial Development Map

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Steel Pension Fund of Iran believes Iran Alloy Steel Company as a national and transnational company which meets the domestic needs to the alloy steel, preventing the flight of forex, pick-up in occupation and production with reliance on the knowhow of its experts and staff, and it is a source of honor for the country.

After visiting Iran Alloy Steel Company, the CEO of Steel Pension Fund Mr. Seyed Hojjat Kazemi had a meeting with the CEO and senior officials of Iran Alloy Steel and pointed to the specialized capacity and knowledge-based capability of officials of this company. He said that what has been achieved by the country was not possible without empathy, sacrifice and taking responsibility.

He noted that the company with its efforts not only resolved the past problems but also has become a brilliant name in the country, Middle East and even in the world and for this reason one should be proud of the performance of the company. He added that a glance at the performance of the country in the first half of the current year bespeaks of transparency and success of the company in making profits. He then thanked every one of the personnel of the company for their efforts.

Then the CEO of Iran Alloy Steel Company Mr. Alireza Chaichi, for his part, said that the knowhow of the company was attained from the Austrian Company Bohler in 1999 which was one of the then reputed alloy steel producing companies in the world and three years later Italian company Danieli which was also one of the then reputed companies provided Iran Alloy Steel Company with required equipment and gradually the company was developed and now it has four big steel plants and they have helped the country to cut its dependence on foreign countries for imports.

He then pointed to some of the underway projects and plans of the company and said that over 1800 human forces either directly or indirectly work with this company.

He then said that the company was chosen as the top country for observing environmental issues and was named the top green industry as the company has won this accolade 6 times.



Iran Burns Mazut in 14 Thermal Power Stations

TEHRAN (IFP) - A senior environmental official says Iran burns highly-polluting mazut as alternative fuel in 14 out of 16 thermal power stations across the country, but that is not the root cause of severe air pollution in metropolis like Tehran.

Dariush Gholizadeh, the head of the National Climate Change Center of the Environmental Protection Organization, said there has been no disruption in supply of gas to the thermal power stations across the country in order for them to switch to mazut, a heavy low-quality type of fuel.

He ruled out speculation that an excessive use of mazut has been behind the latest wave of severe air pollution in mega cities.

As a case in point, he referred to the northwestern city of Tabriz, which has been suffering from air pollution over the past two years while no mazut has been burned in nearby industrial facilities.

He attributed the problem to the phenomenon of temperature inversion, during which cold air underpins warm air at higher altitude, leading to the entrapment of air pollutants and causing heavy smog over cities.

Residents of the capital, Tehran, and other major Iranian cities have been breathing polluted air for weeks since the start of the cold season.

Unhealthy levels of air pollution have forced the cancelation of in-person classes at schools and universities there.

Armed Fighters Kill Six During Village Raid in Somalia

MOGADISHU (Dispatches) - Armed fighters from al-Shabab have killed at least six people in an attack on a village in central Somalia that they were pushed out of last week, a government-allied militia said.

Friday's attack targeted the village of Hilowle Gaab in Hirshabelle State, which Somalia's army and allied clan militiamen captured from al-Shabab last week.

The fighters attacked the village during morning prayers at about 5am (02:00 GMT) with car bombs, said Hussein Aden, a spokesman for the local clan militia. A gunfight ensued, during which the armed rebels were repelled, he said, adding that soldiers and militiamen were among those killed.



Uzbekistan Arrests Four Over Indian Cough Syrup Deaths

TASHKENT (Dispatches) - Uzbekistan has arrested four people in an investigation into the deaths of 19 children who consumed cough syrup made by Indian drug maker Marion Biotech, the Uzbek state security service said.

Two of the detained were senior employees of the Scientific Center for Standardization of Medicines, who circumvented the proper testing procedures for the Doc-1 Max cough syrup, it said.

Two others were executives of the Quramax Medikal Company that imported the Marion Biotech drugs. Marion Biotech said last month, shortly after the series of deaths, that it had halted production of the syrup.



Signs of Fighting in Ukraine Despite Russia's Unilateral Truce



KYIV (Dispatches) - A unilateral ceasefire in Ukraine declared by Russian President Vladimir Putin was due to come into force but the hours leading up to the temporary truce saw renewed fighting, with Kyiv rejecting the move as a trick.

Russia's defense ministry said its troops began observing the ceasefire from noon Moscow time (0900 GMT) "along the entire line of contact" in the conflict but said Ukraine kept up shelling Russian-populated areas and military positions.

Reuters could not immediately establish if there had been any lull in fighting after the deadline, which marked the eve of the Russian Orthodox Christmas in the region.

In the hours prior, rockets slammed into a residential building in the Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk close to the eastern frontline, damaging 14 homes but with no casualties, the mayor said. Residents described several explosions.

"It's bad, very bad. We need to pressure them, get them to leave, maybe more air defence systems would help. This happens often, not only on festive occasions. Every other day," said Oleksandr, 36, outside a supermarket at the time of the attack.

Shortly after the ceasefire was supposed to come into effect, Russian-backed officials accused Ukraine of shelling the regional capital of Donetsk with artillery, Russia's state-run TASS news agency said.

Putin ordered the 36-hour ceasefire in the 10-month-long war in a surprise move in Thursday, saying it would run through to the end of Russian Orthodox Christmas on Saturday.

But Ukraine and its Western allies dismissed his call, calling it a ploy aimed at giving Moscow time to reinforce troops and equipment after heavy losses in the industrial Donetsk region where Kramatorsk is located.

Despite air raid warnings sounding in several regions, no major air strikes were reported by Ukrainian officials after the ceasefire starting time.

One rescue worker was killed and four others injured after Russian forces shelled a fire department in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson before the deadline early on Friday, the regional governor said.

The battles had not previously slowed during the festive season and Russia mounted waves of air strikes over New Year, usually a time of celebration in both Ukraine and Russia.

Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24 last year, starting a war that has killed tens of thousands of people, displaced millions and reduced cities to rubble.

With weapons and financial support from the United States and Europe, Ukraine has driven Russia back from some of its territory but battles are raging over eastern and southern cities.

Bakhmut, 12 miles (20 km) southeast of Kramatorsk, has been the most intense battleground, still in Ukrainian hands despite dug-in trench warfare and months of battering by Russian forces that have left much of it in ruins.

"I tell people we should pray for the guys holding Bakhmut. If Bakhmut is given up, Kramatorsk will suffer heavily," said Yehven, 32, also at the supermarket.

McCarthy Finally Elected U.S. House Speaker

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Republican Kevin McCarthy was elected speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives early on Saturday, after making extensive concessions to a group of right-wing hardliners that raised questions about the party's ability to govern.

The 57-year-old Californian suffered one final humiliation when Representative Matt Gaetz withheld his vote on the 14th ballot as midnight approached, prompting a scuffle in which fellow Republican Mike Rogers had to be physically pulled away.

McCarthy's victory in the 15th ballot brought an end to the deepest congressional dysfunction in over 160 years. But it sharply illustrated the difficulties that he will face in leading a narrow and deeply polarized majority.

He won at last on a margin of 216-212. He was able to be elected with the votes of fewer than half the House members only because six in his own party withheld their votes - not backing McCarthy as leader, but also not voting for another contender.



UNSC Stresses Al Aqsa Status Quo, Takes No Action

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - United Nations Security Council members voiced concern and stressed the need to maintain the status quo at the Al Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem, but did not commit to any action days after Israel's new far-right security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir made a controversial visit to the site, which Palestinian leaders called "an unprecedented provocation".

The decades-old status quo at the Al Aqsa Mosque compound allows only Muslim worship at the site, which is Islam's third-holiest after Mecca and Medina.

But the site is also revered by Jews, who call it the Temple Mount. Israel's far-right groups have long attempted to change the status quo and allow Jewish prayer at the site. Calls have also been made by the far right for a Jewish temple to be built in place of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour pushed for the Security Council to take action against Israel over Ben-Gvir's provocative actions. Israel's new security minister is well known for racist incitement against Arabs, opposition to Palestinian statehood, and for leading raids by settlers into the Al Aqsa Mosque compound and the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in occupied East Jerusalem.

"What red line does Israel need to cross for the Security Council to finally say, enough is enough?" Mansour asked the 15-member council, accusing Israel of showing "absolute contempt". Al Jazeera's Diplomatic Editor James Bays, reporting from UN headquarters in New York, said Security Council members had expressed concern about the situation at the Al Aqsa compound and the dangers of escalation "but their words were measured and limited, with little direct criticism of Israel".

The Palestinian ambassador, Bays said, expressed his dismay that the council was taking no action and warned the council that the situation could turn into an uprising. "All 15 members of the Security Council restated, as they always do, their commitment to a two-state solution. However, in recent days, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said his new government supports continued settlement across Palestinian land, further undermining that internationally-desired outcome," Bays said.

Mexico Captures Son of El Chapo Sparking Wave of Violence

MEXICO CITY (Dispatches) - Mexican security forces captured drug cartel leader Ovidio Guzman, a son of jailed kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, triggering a wave of violence ahead of a visit by U.S. President Joe Biden next week.

The violence took place largely in the city of Culiacan in the northern Sinaloa state, home to the powerful drug cartel of the same name that El Chapo headed before his extradition to the United States in 2017.

State governor Ruben Rocha said seven members of the security forces had been killed, including a colonel, and 21 had been injured as well as eight civilians.

Rocha said there had been 12 clashes with the security forces, 25 acts of looting, and 250 vehicles had been set on fire and used to block roads.

"Tomorrow we think we will be able to work normally," he said, adding that he had not discussed calling more reinforcements from the army or the National Guard.

A failed operation to detain Ovidio in 2019 ended in humiliation for the government of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, after the arrest triggered a wave of violence that forced authorities to shutter Culiacan's schools and airports.

At that time, Ovidio, who has become a key figure in the cartel since the arrest of his father, was quickly released to end violent retribution from his cartel.

Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval confirmed the capture of the 32-year-old on Thursday, saying Ovidio was being held in the capital, Mexico City.

Videos shared on social media, which Reuters was unable to immediately verify, appeared to show heavy fighting overnight in Culiacan, with the sky lit up by helicopter gunfire.

The city's airport was caught up in the violence, with Mexican airline Aeromexico saying one of its planes had been hit by gunfire ahead of a scheduled flight to Mexico City. No one was hurt, it said.

David Tellez, a passenger who boarded the plane with his wife and three children, said they had decided to stay in the airport until it is safe to leave.

"The city is worse," he said. "There is a lot of shooting and confusion."

A Mexican air force plane was also shot at, the federal aviation agency said, adding that the airport in Culiacan, as well as in the Sinaloa cities of Mazatlan and Los Mochis, would remain closed until security could be ensured.

Ovidio's latest capture comes before a North American leaders' summit in Mexico City next week, which U.S. President Joe Biden will attend and is expected to discuss security.

The United States had offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to Ovidio's arrest or conviction.



UN Internal Report Flags Rebels Flouting Ceasefire in Eastern DRC

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - United Nations intelligence analysts have spotted suspected movements by M23 rebels in parts of the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from which they were meant to have withdrawn, internal UN documents show.

There were also signs the armed group has seized ground in other areas, amid uncertainty about the exact status of the conflict in the Kibumba area, which the rebels were meant to have left as of December 23 as part of a ceasefire brokered by East African leaders.

"Their total withdrawal from the area has not yet been confirmed," wrote the Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC), a UN intelligence unit, in a confidential report covering the period from December 26 to January 3, and seen by Reuters news agency.

"Suspected M23 movements were still sighted in the area," it added.

The report also highlights examples of M23 violently seizing new territory elsewhere even after they participated in the ceremony to hand over Kibumba to East African Community (EAC) forces in what they called a goodwill gesture under the ceasefire.

"Several clashes involving M23 were reported during the week, resulting in M23 taking control of further areas, notably threatening Kitchanga, Mweso, Sake, Kilorirwe, Mushaki and Nyamilima, and raising serious PoC (Protection of Civilian) concerns."

On Wednesday, the M23 denied reports of its failure to leave Kibumba, saying it had withdrawn from its positions there as of December 23. It added that it was committed to the agreement reached by regional leaders in November for the M23 withdrawal from recently seized positions and allow thousands of displaced people to return to their homes.

At least 450,000 people were displaced last year in the new offensive by the Tutsi-led rebel group, which the DRC government, the European Union and a UN expert group say is supported by neighbouring Rwanda.

The M23 has conquered swaths of territory in the eastern DRC since it launched its latest offensive in late 2021.

Rwanda denies any involvement in the M23's resurgence, but the accusations have led to a serious diplomatic crisis in the region.



China COVID Data Shows No New Variant

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Data from China shows no new coronavirus variant has been found there, but it also under-represents how many people have died in the country's rapidly spreading outbreak, World Health Organization officials said.

Global unease has grown about the accuracy of China's reporting of an outbreak that has filled hospitals and overwhelmed some funeral homes since Beijing abruptly reversed its "zero COVID" policy.

The U.N. agency was releasing data provided by the Chinese Center For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a day after WHO officials met Chinese scientists. China has been reporting daily COVID deaths in single figures.

Mike Ryan, the WHO's emergencies director, told a media briefing that current numbers being published from China under-represented numbers of hospital admissions, ICU admissions and "particularly in terms of death."

WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the U.N. agency was continuing to seek more rapid and regular data from China on hospitalisations and deaths.

"WHO is concerned about the risk to life in China and has reiterated the importance of vaccination, including booster doses to protect against hospitalization, severe disease and death," he said.

China's People's Daily, the Communist Party's official newspaper, sought to rally worried citizens for what it calls a "final victory" over COVID-19, rebutting criticism of its policy of strict isolation that triggered rare protests last year.

Beijing's abrupt axing of those ultra-strict curbs last month has unleashed the virus on China's 1.4 billion people, who have little immunity after being shielded since it emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan three years ago.

Health officials abroad have been struggling to work out the scale of the outbreak and how to stop it spreading, with more countries introducing measures such as pre-departure COVID tests for arrivals from China, moves that Beijing has criticized.

European Union health officials meet on Wednesday to discuss a coordinated response to it.

China's CDC analysis showed a predominance of Omicron lineages BA.5.2 and BF.7 among locally acquired infections, according to the data reported by the WHO.

Omicron is the dominant variant based on recent genomic sequencing, confirming what scientists had already said but allaying concerns for now about a new variant emerging.

However, many Chinese funeral homes and hospitals say they are overwhelmed, and international health experts predict at least 1 million COVID-related deaths in China this year.

China has reported five or fewer deaths a day since the policy U-turn.

"That is totally ridiculous," a 66-year-old Zhang, a Beijing resident who only gave his last name, said of the official toll.

"Four of my close relatives died. That's only from one family. I hope the government will be honest with the people and the rest of the world about what's really happened here."

China's cabinet said it would step up medicine distribution and meet demand from medical institutions, nursing homes and rural areas, state media reported.

Beijing has hit back against some countries demanding visitors from China show pre-departure COVID tests, saying the rules were unreasonable and lacked a scientific basis.

Japan, the United States, Australia and several European states are among countries requiring such tests.



Fears for French Baguettes as Power Prices Burn Bakers

PARIS (Dispatches) - Recently described as "250 grams of magic and perfection" by President Emmanuel Macron, the French baguette is at risk from surging energy prices, with some bakers warning they can no longer afford to fire up their ovens.

Already struggling with sharp hikes in the price of butter, flour and sugar over the last year and a half, the prized industry is now alarmed by astronomical electricity bills looming in 2023.

"It was absolutely inconceivable to me that a power bill could make me close my shop and stop my life here," Julien Bernard-Regnard, a distraught baker in the village of Bourgaltrouff in eastern France, told AFP by phone.

He is still coming to terms with closing his doors for the final time in early December having decided that continuing his business, built up over the last five years, was impossible given the cost of electricity.

"I had to renew my contract at the beginning of September and it increased by three and half times," he said.

His monthly power costs rose from around 400 euros (\$420) a month to nearly 1,500, while shopping around for an alternative supplier brought no relief.

"I'm in lots of online groups with other bakers and on social media. There are bakeries closing every day. Some have bills that are multiplied by 10 or 12. There's someone else 40 kilometres (25 miles) from me who's just shut down," he added.

In a country where the availability of crusty daily bread is a political issue fraught with danger for any government, Macron's cabinet is keen to show it is doing everything possible to safeguard the nation's 35,000 bread and croissant makers.

Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne announced Tuesday that bakers with a cashflow problem could ask to delay the payment of their taxes and social charges, while Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire welcomed the national bakers' federation for talks at his offices.

Le Maire acknowledged that the nation's bread makers were "worried" and some were "in complete despair" just a month after the sector was honoured with UNESCO world heritage status.

"At the moment when the French baguette has been given world heritage status by UNESCO, there would be a real paradox in not giving everything possible to support our bakers who are struggling with the price of electricity and energy in general," he told reporters.

Existing schemes to help the industry, including direct state aid and a mechanism enabling them to demand a reduction in their electricity bill from suppliers, could help reduce the power costs for many businesses by around 40 percent, Le Maire said.

"At the moment unfortunately, this is not widely known," he added at a press conference in which he also criticised energy suppliers for not playing their part.

Although France has capped electricity prices for consumers, limiting rises to four percent in 2022 and 15 percent in 2023, no such protection exists for businesses.

Meanwhile, cut-throat competition from supermarkets means bakeries are unable to pass on major price increases to customers.

Bernard-Regnard was dismissive of government pledges and said he was "fed up with the propaganda", saying that red tape and the complicated application procedure for aid meant he had been entitled to "zero" help.



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Saudi Arabia Cuts Feb Arab Light Crude Price for Asia to 15-Month Low

RIYADH (Dispatches) - Top crude exporter Saudi Arabia lowered prices for the flagship Arab light crude it sells to Asia to \$1.80 a barrel above the Oman/Dubai average, the lowest since November 2021, Aramco said.

The price cut - \$1.45 a barrel less than the January official selling prices and in line with market expectations - comes amid global pressures hitting oil prices, which are set for small gains in 2023 as COVID-19 flare-ups in China threaten demand growth and offset the impact of supply shortfalls caused by sanctions on Russia.

Four respondents surveyed by Reuters this week had forecast a \$1.50 a barrel price cut.



Venezuela's Oil Exports Slipped

HOUSTON (Dispatches) - Venezuela's oil exports last year declined due to infrastructure outages, U.S. sanctions and rising competition in its key Asia market despite assistance from ally Iran, according to shipping data and documents.

Exports this year are expected to get a lift after the United States relaxed oil sanctions by authorizing some partners of state-run firm Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) to resume taking Venezuelan crude.

Iran expanded its role in Venezuela last year, sending supplies to boost exports and technicians to repair a refinery. But the poor condition of the country's ports, oilfields and refineries and harsh competition from Russia on crude supplies to China will keep limiting export gains, experts said.

PDVSA and its joint ventures exported some 616,540 barrels per day (bpd) of crude and refined products last year, a 2.5% drop from 2021 and slightly below 2020, according to a Reuters tally of data and documents.

Shipments of crude and refined products by the OPEC-member nation, which has been under U.S. oil sanctions since 2019, fell by 2.5% in 2022 even amid higher production, as outages and more competition at exports markets hit state company PDVSA.

"Despite the increased Iranian help, the decline in net exports results from a combination of production stagnation and the increasing competition of Russian exports in the Chinese black market," said Francisco Monaldi, a Latin American energy expert at Rice University's Baker Institute.

PDVSA did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

The OPEC-member country boosted its exports of petroleum coke, methanol and other oil byproducts, which helped offset some of the revenue loss. Shipments of these lower-value products more than tripled to 4.36 million metric tons last year from 2021.

PDVSA's refineries began the new year processing 386,000 bpd of crude, less than 30% of their 1.3 million-bpd installed capacity, according to figures from employee unions.

Refining shortages due to plant outages and delayed maintenance at year-end left the domestic fuel market with long lines of drivers waiting for gasoline in front of stations.

The new gasoline crisis is emerging even though Venezuela tripled oil imports to 78,170 bpd, mainly from deliveries of crude and condensate from Iran, which helped produce exportable crude grades and motor fuels.

Venezuela's crude production averaged some 721,000 bpd according to a preliminary data for December and OPEC reports. Output rose 13% from the previous year and stood above pandemic levels, but it remained well below historic averages and fell short of PDVSA 2022 goal of 2 million bpd, the data showed.

Even after bouncing to more than 700,000 barrels per day in 2022, the South American nation is far away from reaching the 3 million bpd of crude it last produced in 1998. Crude oil output is set to increase by about 100,000 bpd this year, Baker's Monaldi said, adding that exports could recover a little more if the joint ventures can drain millions of barrels in inventories and if PDVSA is able to compete more aggressively in Asia.

Reducing Inflation Top Priority for South Asian Nations

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Taming inflation is the top priority for South Asian countries as risks to growth and investment outlook could rise if price pressures persist at high levels, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das said.

Speaking at an event organized by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Indian central bank chief said policy challenges in the region have sharpened due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. "While the recent softening of commodity prices and supply chain bottlenecks should help in lowering inflation going ahead, risks to growth and investment outlook may rise if inflation persists at high levels," Das said.

"Prioritizing price stability may therefore be the optimal policy choice for the South Asian region in the current context."

Das said the region's heavy dependence on imported fossil fuels has made it vulnerable to fuel inflation while food inflation has averaged more than 20% during the first three quarters of 2022.

"For successful disinflation, credible monetary policy actions accompanied by targeted supply side interventions, fiscal trade, policy and administrative measures have become the key instruments," he added.

Apart from inflation, Das said reducing external debt vulnerabilities, moving focus to high productive sectors, strengthening energy security, cooperation on greener economy and increasing tourism were key areas of focus for the region.

Earlier, IMF Deputy Managing Director Antoinette Sayeh said India is in a relative "bright spot" in the world economy, but needed to leverage its existing strength in services exports and extend it to job-rich manufacturing exports.

Intra-regional trade in South Asia is only at one-fifth of its potential, Das said, adding that boosting it can enhance growth and employment opportunities for the nations in the aftermath of the pandemic.

World Food Prices Hit Record High in 2022

PARIS (Dispatches) - A surge in the cost of most food commodities last year, as the disruption caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine raised concerns of shortages, sent the U.N. food agency's average price index to the highest level on record.

The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index, which tracks international prices of the most globally traded food commodities, averaged 143.7 points in 2022, up 14.3% from 2021, and the highest since records started in 1990, the agency said on Friday.

The index had already gained 28% in 2021 from the previous year as the world economy recovered from the impact of the pandemic.

Food prices surged after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year on fears of disruptions to Black Sea trade. They have pared some of their gains since, in part because of a U.N.-backed grain export channel from Ukraine and the prospect of improved supplies in producing countries.

In December the benchmark index fell for the ninth consecutive month to 132.4 points, compared with a revised 135.0 points for November. The November figure was previously given as 135.7 points.

"Calmer food commodity prices are welcome after two very volatile years," FAO Chief Economist Maximo Torero said.

The decline in the index in December was driven by a drop in the international price of vegetable oils, together with some declines in cereal and meat prices, but mitigated by slight increases in those of sugar and dairy, the FAO said.

Still over the whole of 2022, four of the FAO's five food sub-indexes - cereals, meat, dairy and vegetable oils - had reached record highs, while the fifth one, sugar, was at a 10-year high.

The FAO Cereal Price Index rose 17.9% in 2022 due to factors including significant market disruptions, higher energy and input costs, adverse weather and continued strong global food demand, the FAO said.

Taliban Sign Oil Extraction Deal With Chinese Company

KABUL (Dispatches) - Afghanistan's Taliban-led administration has signed a contract with a Chinese company to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin and develop an oil reserve in the country's northern Sar-e Pul province.

The contract was signed by acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum Sheikh Shahabuddin Delawar and an official of Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) in a ceremony held in capital Kabul.

It was the first major public commodities extraction deal the Taliban administration has signed with a foreign company since taking power in 2021.

Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan Wang Yu also witnessed the signing ceremony, state-run Bakhtar News Agency reported.

"Recently, several projects were approved by the Economic Commission, and with their undertaking, fundamental steps will be taken for the prosperity of the country and public welfare," the agency quoted Baradar as saying.

"We request that the company continue the procedure in accordance with international standards and in the best interests of the people of Sar-e Pul," he added.

Speaking on the occasion, Delawar said under the deal the Chinese company will be extracting oil from an area covering 4,500 square kilometres (1,737 square miles) collectively in northern Sar-e Pul, Jawzjan, and Faryab provinces.

"Over 3,000 local people will get jobs in this project," he said.

The Chinese envoy called the deal important for the economic growth of the war-torn country and a positive step towards close relations between Kabul and Beijing.

"The Amu Darya oil contract is an important project between China and Afghanistan," Wang Yu said.

CAPEIC will invest \$150m a year in Afghanistan under the contract, the spokesperson for the Taliban-run administration, Zabihullah Mujahid, said on Twitter.

Its investment would increase to \$540m in three years for the 25-year contract, he said.

The Taliban-run administration will have a 20 percent partnership in the project, which can be increased to 75 percent, he added.

The state-owned company China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) signed a contract with Afghanistan's previous, United States-backed government in 2012 to extract oil at the Amu Darya basin in the northern provinces of Faryab and Sar-e Pul.

At the time, up to 87 million barrels of crude were estimated to be in Amu Darya. Delawar said a condition of the deal was that the oil be processed in Afghanistan.

Baradar told Thursday's news conference that another Chinese company, which he did not identify, discontinued extraction after the fall of the previous government so the deal had been struck with CAPEIC.

Turkish Factory Activity Shrinks For First Time Since 2020



ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkey's industrial production index is expected to have shrunk year-on-year for the first time since 2020 in November, a Reuters poll showed, as a slowdown in some of Turkey's main trade partners hit factory activity.

Industrial activity had bounced back strongly after the initial coronavirus wave in April 2020 and has been expanding for more than two years straight since then. But annual growth has slowed significantly since the summer, with demand declining due to the wider global slowdown.

The median estimate in the Reuters poll of six institutions showed a year-on-year contraction of 0.95% in the calendar-adjusted industrial production index (TRIP=ECI) in November.

Three economists expected the index, seen as a preliminary indicator of growth, to expand up to 1% while the other three expected a contraction of up to 2.8%.

President Tayyip Erdogan's economic programme prioritises growth, exports, investments and employment while cutting interest rates.

The central bank cut its policy rate by 500 basis points last year, lowering it to 9% after Erdogan called for a single-digit rate by year-end. The bank justified the cuts by saying financial conditions must remain supportive to maintain the growth in industrial production.

The index expanded 0.5% in September and 2.5% in October, indicating the impact of declining demand due to the global economic slowdown.

The Turkish Statistical Institute will announce November industrial production figures at 0700 GMT on Jan 10.

Amazon to Cut More Than 18,000 Roles

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Amazon has announced it will cut more than 18,000 jobs from its workforce, citing "the uncertain economy" and the fact that it had "hired rapidly" during the pandemic.

"Between the reductions we made in November and the ones we're sharing today, we plan to eliminate just over 18,000 roles," said CEO Andy Jassy in a statement to his staff. The company had announced 10,000 layoffs in November.

The jobs to be slashed under the plan amount to 6 percent of Amazon's roughly 300,000-person corporate workforce, the largest among recent workforce reductions that have impacted the US tech sector.

Jassy said the company's leadership was "deeply aware that these role eliminations are difficult for people, and we don't take these decisions lightly."

"We are working to support those who are affected and are providing packages that include a separation payment, transitional health insurance benefits, and external job placement support," he said.

Some of the layoffs would be in Europe, Jassy said, adding that the impacted workers would be informed starting on January 18.

He said the sudden announcement was being made "because one of our teammates leaked this information externally".

The online retailer increased its workforce during the pandemic to meet an explosion in demand for deliveries, doubling its global staff between the beginning of 2020 and the beginning of 2022.

The group had a total of 1.54 million employees worldwide at the end of September, not including seasonal workers recruited during periods of increased activity, particularly during the holiday season.



It now braced for likely slower growth as soaring inflation encouraged businesses and consumers to cut back spending and its share price has halved in the past year.

"Amazon has weathered uncertain and difficult economies in the past, and we will continue to do so," Jassy said.

In the tech sector, major platforms with an advertising-based business model are facing budget cuts from advertisers, who are reducing expenses in the face of inflation and rising interest rates.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, announced in November the loss of 11,000 jobs, or about 13 percent of its workforce. At the end of August, Snapchat let go of about 20 percent of its employees, some 1,200 people.

“The Zoo” Joint Winner at Diyarbakir Short Film Festival

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Iranian short film “The Zoo” written and directed by Nafiseh Zare’ is chosen joint winner of the best film prize at Second Diyarbakir International Short Film Festival in Turkey.

The Zoo won the award jointly with another movie named “Where the Winds Die” at the festival which is held in Turkey’s second largest Kurdish city of Diyarbakir.

The film is produced by Kaveh Mazaheri and Sorena Ekbatani and has already featured in the 12th Beijing International Short Film Festival as well as in the 19th KIN International Film Festival. According to the film’s synopsis, Ra’na is looking for a deer she has dreamt of in the zoo while her mother is trying tell her important news.



Warm Winter Breaks Temperature Records in Europe

LONDON (Dispatches) - Record-high winter temperatures swept across parts of Europe over the new year, bringing calls from activists for faster action against climate change while offering short-term respite to governments struggling with high gas prices.

Hundreds of sites have seen temperature records smashed in the past days, from Switzerland to Poland to Hungary, which registered its warmest Christmas Eve in Budapest and saw temperatures climb to 18.9 degrees Celsius (66.02°F) on Jan 1.

In France, where the night of Dec. 30/31 was the warmest since records began, temperatures climbed to nearly 25C in the southwest on New Year’s Day while normally bustling European ski resorts were deserted due to a lack of snow.

Czech Television reported some trees were starting to flower in private gardens, while Switzerland’s office of Meteorology and Climatology issued a pollen warning to allergy sufferers from early blooming hazel plants.

The temperature hit 25.1C at Bilbao airport in Spain’s Basque country. People basked in the sun as they sat outside Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum or walked along the River Nervion.

“It always rains a lot here, it’s very cold and it’s January and it feels like summer,” said Bilbao resident Eusebio Folgeira, 81.

French tourist Joana Host said: “It’s like nice weather for biking but we know it’s like the planet is burning. So we’re enjoying it but at the same time we’re scared.”

Scientists have not yet analyzed the specific ways in which climate change affected the recent high temperatures, but January’s warm weather spell fits into the longer-term trend of rising temperatures due to human-caused climate change.

It follows another year of extreme weather events that scientists concluded were directly linked to global heating, including deadly heatwaves in Europe and India, and flooding in Pakistan.

“The record-breaking heat across Europe over the new year was made more likely to happen by human-caused climate change, just as climate change is now making every heatwave more likely and hotter,” said Dr Friederike Otto, climate scientist at Imperial College London.

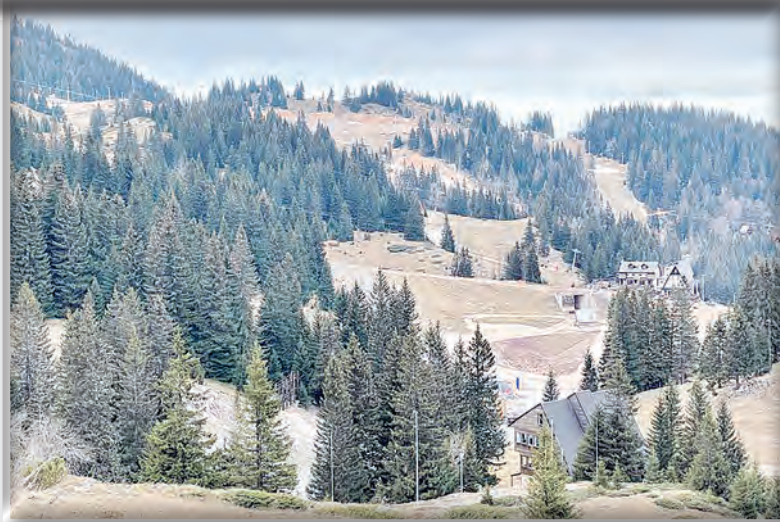
Temperature spikes can also cause plants to start growing earlier in the year, making them vulnerable to being killed off by frosts, said Otto.

“When millions of people across Europe are experiencing a heatwave in January it might be time to completely end our society’s dependence on planet-heating fossil fuels,” Greenpeace UK said.

French national weather agency Meteo France attributed the anomalous temperatures to a mass of warm air moving to Europe from subtropical zones.

It struck during the busy skiing season, leading to cancelled trips and empty slopes. Resorts in the northern Spanish regions of Asturias, Leon and Cantabria have been closed since the Christmas holidays due to lack of snow.

On Jahorina above Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, home to the 1984 Winter Olympics, it should have been one of the busiest weeks of the season. Instead, the



chair-lifts hung lifeless above the grassy slopes. In one guesthouse a couple ate dinner alone in the restaurant, the only guests.

A ski jumping event in Zakopane, southern Poland, planned for the weekend of Jan. 7-8 was cancelled.

The unusually mild temperatures have offered some short-term relief to European governments who have struggled to secure scarce gas supplies and keep a lid on soaring prices after Russia slashed deliveries of the fuel to Europe.

European governments have said this energy crisis should hasten their shift from fossil fuels to clean energy - but in the short term, plummeting Russian fuel supplies have left them racing to secure extra gas from elsewhere.

Gas demand has fallen for heating in many countries, helping to reduce prices.

The benchmark front-month gas price was trading at 70.25 euros per megawatt hour on Wednesday morning, its lowest level since February 2022 before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The head of Italy’s energy authority predicted that regulated energy bills in the country would fall this month, if the milder temperatures help keep gas prices lower.

However, a note by Eurointelligence cautioned that this should not lull governments into complacency or remove a sense of urgency over Europe’s energy crisis.

“While it will give governments more fiscal breathing room in the first part of this year, resolving Europe’s energy problems will be taken concerted action over the course of several years,” it said. “Nobody should believe this is over yet.”

Germany Misses 2022 Climate Target on Ukraine War Fallout



FRANKFURT (Dispatches) - Germany used more renewable energy than ever in 2022 but again failed to reach its CO2-reduction goal as Russia’s war in Ukraine prompted a return to more coal and oil use, a think tank reported.

Europe’s biggest economy emitted 761 million tons of greenhouse gases last year, just one ton fewer than in 2021 and overshooting the target of 756 million tons, the energy think tank Agora Energiewende said in a statement.

“CO2 emissions are stagnating at a high level, despite significantly lower energy consumption by households and industry,” said Agora’s Germany director Simon Mueller. “This is an alarm signal with regard to climate targets,” he added.

The German government had aimed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 40 percent by 2020 compared with 1990 levels, but has yet to achieve the feat.

For 2022, Germany managed a 39-percent reduction from 1990 levels, Agora calculated.

The setback comes despite a record 4.7 percent drop in energy consumption last year, partly in response to soaring fuel prices because of the war in Ukraine.

But the energy saving gains were wiped out by the government’s decision to bum more coal and oil to make up for the loss of Russian natural gas deliveries, Agora said.

The turn to fossil fuels also overshadowed another milestone: renewables accounted for 46 percent of Germany’s power supply mix last year, an all-time high.

The increase was mainly down to favourable weather conditions for wind and solar power, Agora said.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has stressed repeatedly that the return to fossil fuels is a temporary measure sparked by an energy crisis, and that his government remains committed to combatting global warming.

Germany still aims to phase out coal-fired power plants by 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2045.

But Agora said Berlin needed to drastically ramp up the expansion of renewables this year.

To meet key targets set for 2030, Germany would have to double its solar energy production and more than triple wind power capacity.

OPEC Oil Output Rises Despite Production Target Cuts

LONDON (Dispatches) - OPEC oil output rose in December, a Reuters survey found, despite an agreement by the wider OPEC+ alliance to cut production targets to support the market.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) pumped 29.0 million barrels per day (bpd) last month, the survey found, up 120,000 bpd from November. In September, OPEC output had been its highest since 2020.

December’s rise was led by recovering output in Nigeria, which has been battling for months with crude theft and insecurity in its oil-producing region.

Many Nigerian crude streams produced more in December, sources in the survey said, with some companies citing improving security.

OPEC+ had been boosting output for most of 2022 as demand recovered. For November, with oil prices weakening, the group made its largest cut to production targets since the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Its decision from November called for a 2 million bpd cut to the OPEC+ output target, of which about 1.27 million bpd was meant to come from the 10 participating OPEC countries. The same target applied in December.

With the rebound in Nigerian output in December, compliance with the agreement weakened slightly to 161 percent of pledged cuts, according to the survey, down from 163 per cent in November.

Output is still undershooting targeted amounts because many producers — notably Nigeria and Angola — lack the capacity to pump at the agreed levels.

The 10 OPEC members required to cut production pumped 780,000 bpd below the group’s December target, the survey found. The shortfall in November was 800,000 bpd.

Africa’s top exporter pumped 1.35 million bpd in December, up from 1.18 million bpd the previous month, the survey found. Shipments increased from oil streams including Forcados and Brass River, sources in the survey said.

Nigeria is aiming to lift output to 1.6 million bpd this quarter, the country’s finance minister said last month, in what would be a remarkable recovery if achieved.

OPEC Persian Gulf producers complied relatively closely with their output targets under the OPEC+ agreement, the survey found. Saudi Arabia curbed output slightly, as did Iraq, and there was little or no change from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Iran Among World’s Top Agro-Food Exporters in 2021

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Based on the data released by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Iran has been among the top exporters of agricultural products in the world during 2021.

Iran was the world’s top exporter of figs in the mentioned year, exporting 8,763 tons of the products in 2021. Austria and Spain occupied the second and third places, respectively.

The Islamic Republic was also the world’s second-biggest pistachio exporter in the year under review after the U.S. The country exported 136,000 tons of pistachios to foreign destinations in the mentioned year.

Iran was also ranked second in terms of the export of raisins and eggplant, according to the FAO statistics. The country ranks third in the world in the export of watermelon and gooseberry.

In 2021, Iranian farmers exported more than 245,000 tons of dates, which was less than the exports of only three countries. Saudi Arabia ranked first in terms of the export of dates with 318,000 tons, followed by Iraq and the United Arab Emirates.

Over 166,000 tons of cucumbers were also exported from Iran in 2021, which was less than the exports of only four countries. Mexico stood in first place in the world

with the export of 840,000 tons of the mentioned product.

As for the exports of kiwis and onions, the Islamic Republic was ranked sixth among the top exporters of the mentioned products. Iran exported more than 69,000 tons of kiwis in 2021 when New Zealand was the top exporter of the mentioned fruit, exporting 85,000 tons.

FAO statistics show that Iran also stands among the world’s top producers of many agricultural products.

Based on the FAO data, the Islamic Republic is the third-largest producer of dates, honey, pistachios, and walnuts in the world.

Iranian farmers produce 1.28 million tons of dates annually, making the country the third-largest producer of this product in the world after Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Honey production in Iran is 80,000 tons per year, which is the highest honey production in a country after China and Turkey. China’s honey production is estimated at 458,000 tons per year.

The FAO has put Iran’s pistachio production at 190,000 tons in 2020, placing the country in third place among the world’s top producers of the mentioned products after the United States and Turkey.

“Charlie Hebdo Insult”...

FROM PAGE 1

It added that the French government bears “undeniable responsibility” to deal with violations of the sanctity of freedom, breach of human rights, insults against religious values and beliefs and threats to the national sovereignty of other countries by legal and natural persons subject to the rule of the European country’s government.

The French publication’s move was another sign of the Zionists’s role in a media campaign to promote Islamophobia, incite hatred and sow discord among peoples and countries, it said.

It added that the French publication has for many years misused the noble concept of “freedom of speech” as a cover for its anti-cultural acts and desecration of humans as well as sublime moral and religious values.

The statement noted that in the past years, the French magazine has repeatedly provoked Muslim anger by publishing insulting cartoons of Prophet Mohammad.

This is not the first time this French weekly insulting Muslims and this time the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Supreme Leader has been the target of the magazine which likes notoriety than positive fame.

Of course nobody can ignore the influence of the Zionists on this weekly and now in recent years the weekly has been used as a tool for enraging Muslims and now that the West and Zionists are unable to bring Tehran to its knees, the game has shifted into “insulting game” and Charlie Hebdo acts as the best weapon for them to make angry Iranians and Muslims in the world through publishing such profane cartoons or articles under the guise of freedom of expression.

But the Zionists and their weapon the “Charlie Hebdo” are better to know that such childish and stupid moves are unable to stop Iran and Muslims in fight against the Zionists and even such moves are unable to overshadow the braveries of Martyr Soleimani and this hero will remain hero in the memories and hearts of all freedom-loving people and nations, and his path of fighting against terrorists and world hegemony will continue without any delay.

Of course such moves and publishing insults will ham the principle of freedom of expression and magazines like Charli Hebdo are killing the spirit of freedom of expression and are turning into a tool for spreading hatred, profane and insult and it will darken the future of media and freedom of expression and even according to the statistics and polls coming from the West, many people have lost their faith and trust to media and believe the media are misused and misleading.

So the French are recommended not to fall in the trap of the Zionists and following the atrocities of this inhuman fake regime which knows nothing but killing the Palestinians and terrorism.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has shown the world that it shows restraint against accusations but it does not tolerate any insult and the country will give its due answer in right time and this weekly should stop fooling its readers and people by publishing such insulting cartoons under the banner of the freedom of expression because what they are doing is freedom of flow of insult than disseminating information.

Of course one should wait and see what will be the next plot of Zionists against Muslims and which country or Muslim personality will be the next target because this is the policy of the Zionists to provoke Muslims to take hasty action and Muslims need to react wisely with smart responses because the Zionists want to paint a negative picture of Muslims for future use..

Iran Exports to...

FROM PAGE 1

The U.S. imported commodities worth \$10.9 million from Iran in the first 10 months of this year, while the figure was only \$1 million in the same period of time in the past year.

The two countries traded \$46.5 million worth of goods during January-October which was 41 percent more than the figure in the first 10 months of 2021 when the trade between the two sides amounted to \$33.8 million.

The United States Census Bureau’s data shows that the value of U.S. export to Iran increased eight percent to \$35.6 million in the 10-month period of this year, from \$32.8 million in the same time span of the previous year.



Bayern Munich Sign Netherlands Int'l Daley Blind

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich have signed Netherlands midfielder Daley Blind, the club announced on Thursday evening.

The former Ajax and Manchester United player's contract will run until the end of the season, with the possibility of an extension.

Blind, 32, terminated his contract by mutual consent with Dutch giants Ajax in December, six months before it was due to expire, and was officially a free agent.

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Chelsea Sign Defender Badiashile From Monaco

LONDON (Dispatches) - Chelsea have completed the transfer of defender Benoit Badiashile from Ligue 1 side Monaco, the Premier League club said, with the Frenchman signing a seven-and-a-half-year contract.

Financial details were not disclosed but British media reported the deal was worth £35 million.

"We're delighted to welcome Benoit to Chelsea," Chelsea chairman Todd Boehly and co-controlling owner Behdad Eghbali said in a joint statement.

Tatum's Triple-Double Leads Celtics Past Mavs

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Boston Celtics broke out of their funk as Jayson Tatum's 29-point triple-double propelled them to a 124-95 victory over Luka Doncic and the Dallas Mavericks.

The Celtics boast the best record in the NBA but had dropped two straight coming into the contest in Dallas and knew things needed to change.

"It was a tough one the other day," Tatum said in an on-court post-game interview of the Celtics' loss to the lowly Thunder in Oklahoma City on Tuesday.

"We lost two in a row but we had a responsibility just to respond, to play better. That last two games hasn't defined our season.

"We're one of the best teams and we just had to come out and play like it and get back to playing like we know how."

Tatum connected on just eight of 22 shots from the field but he added 14 rebounds and 10 assists in just his second career triple-double.

Jaylen Brown scored 19 points for the Celtics, who ended the Mavericks' seven-game winning streak.

Tatum said the Celtics defensive strategy on Doncic was to "just try and make it tough for him. He's obviously a hell of a player that can get any shot he wants."

Doncic, who had averaged a stunning 46.2 points, 12.7 rebounds and 10 assists over the prior five games, scored 23 and sat out the entire fourth quarter after the Celtics took a 24-point lead into the final period.

The Slovenian star, who appeared to be hindered by a sore left ankle, made seven of his 23 attempts from the field and missed all six of his three-point attempts.

Despite the defeat the Mavs remained in fourth place in the West.

The Denver Nuggets remained atop the West with a crushing 122-91 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers.

Jamal Murray scored 18 points to lead seven Nuggets players in double figures. Denver led from wire to wire and were up



by 43 points going into the fourth quarter — in which the starters for both teams sat out.

Murray said consistency was the key to the Nuggets' big win, despite the lack of a big game from star center Nikola Jokic — who scored 12 points.

"We kept the same defensive energy the whole game and obviously we just had it rolling," Murray said in an on-court interview.

"I think the best thing about us is we did good in the first half but we kept it going throughout the game."

The Clippers' star duo of Kawhi Leonard and Paul George combined for nine points as not a single Los Angeles starter scored in double figures.

The Memphis Grizzlies kept the pressure on the Nuggets at the top of the standings with a 123-115 victory over the Magic in Orlando.

Ja Morant scored 32 points and Jaren Jackson added 31 points and set a strong defensive tone for the Grizzlies, who led by as many as 25 points midway through the third quarter.

A late push by the Magic wasn't enough, despite 30 points from Orlando's number one draft pick Paolo Banchero.

Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said his players got "a little casual" with too many late turnovers.

He said they were troubled by Orlando's full-court press but added: "When we got organised we came up with some big-time plays."

In Houston, Finland's Lauri Markkanen scored a career-high 49 points to lead the Utah Jazz to a 131-114 victory over the Rockets, Utah snapping a five-game skid.

Italian Player Gianluca Vialli Dies At 58



ROME (Dispatches) - Former Juventus, Chelsea and Italy striker Gianluca Vialli has died aged 58 of pancreatic cancer, his former club Sampdoria announced.

Vialli was diagnosed with cancer in 2017 but was still able to play a significant role in Italy's European Championship title-winning campaign in 2021 assisting long-time Sampdoria strike partner and national coach Roberto Mancini.

"We have come a long way together, growing and searching, winning and dreaming. You came as a boy, we salute you as a man," Genoa-based Sampdoria said in their statement.

He made his name in eight seasons at Sampdoria, winning the Serie A title and European Cup Winners' Cup before joining Juventus in 1992 for a then world record 16.5 million euros.

He won the Champions League with Juventus before joining Chelsea in 1996 and becoming player-manager in 1998.

Vialli took over from the sacked Ruud Gullit late in the season, and went on to lead Chelsea to victory in the League Cup, UEFA Cup Winners' Cup and UEFA Super Cup.

He also guided Chelsea to victory in the 2000 FA Cup final but was sacked in the following season.

Sabalenka, Nishioka Power Into Adelaide Semis

ADELAIDE (Dispatches) - World number five Aryna Sabalenka held off Marketa Vondrousova to book her place in the Adelaide International semi-finals in a boost to her Australian Open preparations.

The Belarusian overcame hot conditions to dismiss her Czech opponent 6-3, 7-5 in 1hr 34mins to continue her strong 2022 late-season form where she finished runner-up at the WTA Finals.

The second seed's reward is a last-four clash with Russian world number nine Veronika Kudermetova or Romania's Irina-Camelia Begu.

"It was a tough match and she fought until the end and I was really happy I was able to win this match," Sabalenka, who is yet to win a Grand Slam, said.

"I think because I'm staying really calm and I feel like I'm at home here, that's why I play really well.

"I haven't dropped a set yet. Hopefully I'll keep going like that."

Sabalenka broke for 3-2 in the first set and closed the set out on her 15th winner.

A double break in the second set put her 4-1 ahead before Vondrousova battled back, only to be denied as the Belarusian regrouped to take the match.

The Australian Open starts in less than two weeks.

Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka was the first of the men into the final four, outlasting Australian Alexei Popyrin 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (8/10), 6-2 to continue his storming early season form, having already upset world number 11 Holger Rune.

It set up a semi-final with American Sebastian Korda, who defeated Italy's Jannik Sinner 7-5, 6-1.

Top seed Novak Djokovic's bid for a 92nd career title and first in Adelaide since 2007 ramps up when he locks horns with seventh seed Denis Shapovalov in an evening clash.

The Canadian has failed to beat his Serbian rival in seven previous attempts, with the pair last meeting in the Wimbledon semis in 2021.

Whoever wins will face either third seeded Daniil Medvedev or fellow Russian eighth seed Karen Khachanov for a place in the final.



vote-getter in the Eastern Conference with 3,118,545.

The players who lead the voting in each conference captain the two All-Star teams.

James has been a captain in all five All-Star Games that used that format, and his teams beat Durant-captained Eastern outfits in 2020 and 2021.

Voting continues through January 21 for the mid-season exhibition scheduled for February 19 in Salt Lake City.

James, Durant Lead Early NBA All-Star Voting

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James, closing in on the top spot on the NBA's all-time scoring list, leads the fan voting for the league's All-Star Game in the first returns announced.

Fifteen days after voting opened, James has collected 3,168,694 votes.

Brooklyn Nets star Kevin Durant is the top

While James's Lakers are struggling this season and are currently out of playoff position at 12th in the West, James himself is approaching the most coveted record of the league.

He is on pace to surpass Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (38,387 points) as the league's all-time leading scorer sometime in February, perhaps before the All-Star Game.

Milwaukee Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo is second to Durant in Eastern Conference voting for front court players with 2,998,327 votes, followed by Philadelphia's Joel Embiid (2,226,712).

Denver's two-time reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic is second to James in the West (2,237,768 votes) with James's Lakers teammate Anthony Davis third (2,063,325).

Brooklyn's Kyrie Irving and Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell are also currently positioned to start for the East.

In the West, Golden State's Stephen Curry and Dallas' Luka Doncic are holding down the remaining two starting spots.

Laporta Says European Super League Could Start in 2025

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Barcelona president Joan Laporta said he believes a European Super League could be up and running from 2025 if a key court ruling goes in the project's favor.

A suit alleging football governing bodies UEFA and FIFA had abused their power when they threatened to expel clubs or players who joined a proposed Super League is awaiting a verdict from the European Court of Justice.

European football was rocked in 2021 by an attempt by 12 clubs to set up a Super League, but after a backlash by fans and governments, most pulled out of the project.

Barcelona, Real Madrid and Juventus have continued to insist on a potential Super League, despite disapproval from various quarters.

"In March or April we will have the verdict from the European Court of Justice," Laporta told radio station Cadena SER. "The Super League will be an open competition. I would not have entered in this project if the competition was not open."

Laporta said he wanted clubs to have the capability of governing themselves and that UEFA could also have a seat at the table.

"If the resolution is favorable, I think the Super League (could start) in 2025," he added.

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez, who presented the initial Super League project in 2021, said in October last year that football was "sick" and that a European Super League could revive it.



World Cup Penalty Miss to Haunt Kane For Rest of His Life

LONDON (Dispatches) - Harry Kane said his World Cup penalty miss that condemned England to a quarter-final exit will stay with him for the rest of his life but vowed it will not affect him personally or professionally and has made him hungrier than ever for success.

In England's 2-1 defeat to France last month, captain Kane scored their first goal from the spot but blazed his effort over the bar when presented with a second chance to pull them level six minutes before the final whistle.

"I'll probably remember it for the rest of my life, but that's part of the game. It's not going to affect me as a player or as a person. I'll keep working hard to improve," Kane told the Evening Standard newspaper.

"After it happened, I just wanted to play again as quick as possible and get it out of my head. It's something you have to deal with It was a tough moment for me. It's never an easy thing to go through, but it's part of the highs and lows of our sport."

Since returning to Tottenham Hotspur, Kane has found the net three times in as many games and scored a brace in Wednesday's 4-0 Premier League win at Crystal Palace.

"I had a bit of time away after, just to reflect, and it's made me even more hungry to come back and be successful. So nights like last night (against Palace) are always good for me and the team, and it was much needed after the last couple of results," Kane added.

