

From Millennia B.C. Up Until Now,
The Persian Gulf Has Always Been
Referred to by the Same Ancient
Name Or the “Persian Sea”,
Tweeted Iran Foreign Ministry,
In Response to FIFA President’s
Using Fake Name for It

IRAN NEWS

The Deputy Secretary General of
Lebanon’s Hezbollah Has
Highlighted the United States’
Failure in the Media and Terrorist
Assault Against the Islamic
Republic During the Recent Unrest

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Iran to Definitely Avenge Assassination of Martyr Soleimani

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says late commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani thwarted the entire plots by Iran’s enemies, stressing that the Islamic Republic will “sooner or later” avenge the U.S. assassination of the top anti-terror icon.

Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks in a ceremony on Sunday in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman, General Soleimani’s hometown, to mark the third anniversary of the IRGC’s air strike on the U.S.-run Ain al-Asad base in Iraq in retaliation for the assassination of Soleimani in a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

“The enemy had come in a powerful array to conquer the Islamic world, assail the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the independence and dignity of its people. They intended to occupy the entire Islamic territories from the eastern Mediterranean to the eastern Afghanistan,” Salami said.

“Haj Qassem’s deed dispelled the charm of all powers and he foiled all the plots of the enemy.” **See Page 7**

Army Drones Capable of Countering Any Threat

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of the Iranian Army’s Ground Force says the military unit is in the “most appropriate” situation to carry out drone operations and is capable of countering any kind of threat.

Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari said that the Army’s Ground Force has managed to use new tactics and techniques, particularly in the fields of drones and aviation, during the Zolfagar 1401 joint drills, which were held earlier this month in an area spanning from the country’s southern ports and waters to the northern tip of the Indian Ocean.

He added that the military units carry out exercises throughout the year to increase their preparedness in the face of any threat and become aware of their points of weakness and strength.

The high-ranking commander emphasized that the Ground Force has conducted various drills and succeeded in proving that it enjoys the highest combat readiness and defense capabilities in dealing with advanced threats.

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Commander Says Ain Al-Asad Was Just The Beginning



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The chief of staff of Iran’s Armed Forces says Operation Martyr Soleimani was the first retaliatory measure that was able to tear down the U.S. hegemony in the world.

Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, underlined that Iran’s goal to expel U.S. troops from the region will continue until achieved.

Bagheri spoke on the third anniversary of Iran’s missile attack on Ain Al-Asad, the biggest U.S. occupation base in Iraq, which came a few days after the martyrdom of General Qassem Soleimani by the U.S. The Iranian missile attack was named Operation Martyr Soleimani.

According to the major general, the “terrorist” act of assassinating Soleimani and his companions “took the nation of Iran, the Islamic nations and other nations in the world by surprise that how a government was able to target a guest of the Iraqi government in a drone attack in violation of all legal, political and international rules.”

Bagheri continued that “it was clear that in such a situation, responding to the American terrorist act became the first demand of the Iranian nation and even the justice-seeking nations.”

“The armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran also realized this rightful demand and prepared to strike and destroy the U.S. Ain Al-Asad Base in Iraq, which was known as one of the planning bases for the assassination of General Soleimani,” the chief of staff of Iran’s Armed Forces explained.

“Therefore, on the morning of January 8, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Air Force destroyed the core in which the assassination had been designed and implemented after firing 13 ballistic missiles,” the Iranian major general recalled.

Bagheri pointed out that Operation Martyr Soleimani was the first retaliatory measure and action that was able to tear down the US hegemony in the region and the world in an unprecedented way over the past 70 years.

However, Bagheri warned that the operation was just the beginning of the strategy of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to expel the U.S. forces from the region, stressing that this goal will be pursued until achieved.

The Iranian Major General stressed that Iran and the Resistance Front still reserve the right to take revenge against the perpetrators of the assassination of Martyr General Qassem Soleimani, adding that this case “will remain open until the terrorists are punished.”

French Magazine Insult Indicates West Fury Over Riot Failure

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN – Majlis Speaker says the sacrilegious move by a French publication against the Islamic Republic’s top religious authority indicates the Western fury at the failure of the recent foreign-backed riots in the country. Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf made the remark in an address at the onset of a plenary session in the Iranian Parliament on Sunday, following the French weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo’s move to publish several insulting cartoons in a special issue earlier this week.

“The insult of the French publication to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution is the result of the lack of logic and a sign of the Western front’s anger over the failure of the project of recent riots in the country,” Qalibaf said.

Stressing that the Islamic Revolution’s enemies used all their political, economic, international, media and security capacities to target the country’s leadership, the Iranian Parliament speaker said, “The noble people of Iran, despite all shortcomings and grievances about the economic conditions... safeguarded the Islamic Republic and foiled the plots of their country’s enemies.”

“Now that they have failed in this project, they resorted to defamation out of desperation, but it is clear that such measures will bolster the Iranian people’s resolve to move towards the country’s independence and progress,” Qalibaf added.

“It is necessary for the Iranian Foreign Ministry to implement countermeasures against the French government adamantly so that everyone understands that they are not allowed to insult the national symbols and beliefs of the Iranian people.”

Qalibaf also expressed condolences over the 2020 accidental downing of a Ukrainian passenger airplane near Tehran and called for pursuing the lawsuits filed by the families of the victims of the tragic incident.

“The tragedy of the doleful crash of the Ukrainian passenger plane and the death of a group of our dear compatriots, who were generally among the elite and future-making youths of the country, continues to weigh heavily on us and the honorable people of Iran,” the Iranian Parliament speaker said.

Offering heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims for the loss of their loved ones, he voiced hopes for the settlement of the lawsuit in a proper manner. “It is hoped that with the completion of the process of judicial follow-up of this incident, which is ongoing based on the orders of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, the lawsuit will be settled within the framework of the law and in an appropriate manner,” he said.

ViewPoint By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

U.S. Addiction to “Sanctions Therapy”

One of the tools or better to say weapons of the U.S. has been its sanctions against countries in recent centuries but it seems gradually this weapon is getting ineffective and countries are getting immune against sanctions as they can easily circumvent them and continue their ways and one of the countries which has always been under the target of this U.S. addiction is the Islamic Republic of Iran which has tasted any kind of the U.S. sanctions since its first day of emergence in 1979.

Once the U.S. governments used to invade the countries to show its power and dictate itself on the nations and countries but gradually because of suffering human and financial losses, the Americans resorted to their other weapon which is sanctions and in recent decades the number of the sanctions imposed by Washington on other countries has been on the rise and Iran has been one of the regular customers of the U.S. sanctions especially in the recent three decades.

Recent administrations in the U.S. have gradually realized that they cannot start a military confrontation with Tehran especially now that Tehran is getting powerful in any field especially in terms of military and its drone and missile power.

After the Vietnam War in 1970s and the Iraq war in 1990s, Washington has stepped up its sanctions war on countries which has less human casualties and financial damages for it, and every day the U.S. statesmen announce new sanctions against countries especially against the Islamic Republic of Iran and recently Russia and Belarus have joined the sanctions list.

But as it was mentioned before, countries have tried to find counter-sanctions measures and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the best model for those countries which hahas thwarted the effects of sanctions in many fields and now the country is on the course of progress although the Americans try to hurl stones at the train of progress of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

So every day when we wake up, we notice new round of sanctions on Iranian officials or entities and Iranians’ indifference to those sanctions make the West angry and fuming and it makes the U.S. to step up the volume of sanctions each time but every time the condition is the same, and for this reason it seems Americans are running out of sanctions and they may soon have no option but to impose sanctions on any common people in Iran.

On Friday, Washington announced a new list of sanctions against Iran which shows how the U.S. is wretched and angry over Iran’s progress in the drone and missile technology.

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Iran Reports Major Jump in Exports to Saudi Arabia

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian customs office (IRICA) has reported a major rise in exports to Saudi Arabia with a recent shipment of steel that generated over \$14 million in revenues as it expects exports to grow further with a political rapprochement between the two countries.

IRICA figures published in a Saturday report by the IRIB News showed that Iranian exports to Saudi Arabia had reached nearly \$15 million in the nine months to October last year, up from only \$42,000 reported over the same period in 2021.

IRICA said that the figure was the highest recorded in bilateral trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the two countries cut diplomatic ties in 2016.

It said, however, that resumption of efforts by Iraq to mediate a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia has helped ease the situation between the two countries while allowing bilateral trade to grow.

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info@irannewsdaily.com

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Majlis Speaker to Attend APA Meeting in Turkey

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf will travel to Turkey to attend the 13th Plenary Session of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA).

The announcement was made by Ali Alizadeh who heads the Iranian parliamentary delegation to the APA. Alizadeh did not say when the top Iranian lawmaker will depart for Turkey to attend the session set to be held on January 8-10.

He said that top parliamentary officials from 25 countries will participate in the Plenary Session of the APA which he called one of the most important bodies in Asia.

President Receives New Envoys of Russia, Malaysia, Mali and Venezuela

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN – President Ebrahim Raisi on Sunday received the credentials of the new envoys of Russia, Venezuela, Malaysia, and Mali.

In a meeting with the new Russian Ambassador to Tehran Alexey Dedov, President Raisi pointed to the favorable areas of cooperation between Iran and Russia in regional and international arenas and called for strengthening the strategic economic cooperation between the two countries.

Dedov, for his part, cited that the strategic economic cooperation between Iran and Russia has brought despair to Western countries over the sanctions policy.

Malaysia's new Ambassador to Iran Khairi Bin Omar also on Sunday submitted his credential to the Iranian President.

Referring to the growing relations between Iran and Malaysia after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian President cited, "The priority of the Iranian government is deepening and developing economic, cultural and political relations with Muslim countries."

Saying that despite the sanctions and threats, the Islamic Republic of Iran has taken great steps towards development and progress, Raisi called for utilizing the existing capacities to develop Iran-Malaysia cooperation.

Bin Omar, for his part, stated that Iran and Malaysia can cooperate in different fields, including trade, investment, education, science and technology and tourism.

In a separate meeting with the new Venezuelan Ambassador to Iran José Rafael Silva Aponte, President Raisi stressed that favorable agreements were reached regarding Tehran-Caracas bilateral cooperation during the recent visit of the Venezuelan President to Iran.

The implementation of the (reached) agreements can operationalize the diverse capacities of the two countries, Raisi added.

Referring to the Venezuelan nation's spirit of independence-seeking, the Iranian president added that the Americans' desire to get close to Venezuela is only due to their need for energy resources.

José Rafael Silva Aponte, for his part, stated that the Venezuelan governmental nation is grateful for the support of the government and the people of Iran. He also vowed to do his best to expand and strengthen the economic cooperation between the two countries.

In another meeting on Sunday, Muhammad Maïga, Mali's new Ambassador to Tehran submitted his credentials to President Raisi.

"After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought the development of relations with African countries," Raisi stressed.

Slamming the western state's policies toward African countries, Raisi stated that the Westerners did not come to Africa for helping but for colonizing and plundering the wealth of African people.

The Iranian president went on to say that the African countries will be able to achieve progress and independence without any foreign interference and by relying on their own rich resources and human force. He also announced Iran's readiness to expand economic ties with African countries including Mali.

Appreciating Iran's progress, Muhammad Maiga stressed that his country is eyeing on developing relations with Tehran.



Iran Takes First Step for Implementing 10-Year Space Plan

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian Space Agency has begun the process of implementing the country's 10-year space plan as it held the first session for mulling the execution of the strategic plan on Saturday.

The session was chaired by the Head of the Iranian Space Agency Hassan Salariyeh at the first working day after the approval of the plan in the country's Supreme Space Council.

Salariyeh said that the 10-year space plan is regarded as an important document whose implementation is of high significance for the country. He noted that the Iranian Space Agency and the country's Supreme Space Council are fully resolved to implement this document.

According to this plan, the Islamic Republic of Iran will become a regional hub in the development of space technologies and offering space launch services within a ten-year time span.

Iran plans to make these achievements with reliance on capabilities of domestic experts.

Scene of Ukrainian Plane Crash Showered With Flower

SHAHRIAR (IRNA) - The scene where a Ukrainian plane was mistakenly shot down by Iranian air defense was showered with flowers on the occasion of the third anniversary of the tragic accident, the governor of Shahriar said.

Amir-Abbas Shafizadeh said that the ceremony was held with participation of the families of martyrs of Shahriar on Saturday night.

The scene of the accident was showered with flowers by IRGC helicopter.

Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, the head of the Martyr and Veterans Affairs Foundation of Iran, had earlier said that the organization has designated 73 victims out of 133 Iranians on board of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 as martyrs.

A Ukrainian Boeing 737 aircraft, with 176 passengers and crew members on board, was mistakenly shot down by Iranian air defense shortly after it took off from Tehran's International Imam Khomeini Airport on January 8, 2020.

Iran, Iraq to Probe Into Martyrdom Case of General Soleimani

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian Judiciary's Deputy Chief for International Affairs and Secretary General of the Islamic Republic of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, Kazem Gharibabadi said that a joint judicial committee of Iran and Iraq for probing into the martyrdom case of Iran's Lt. General Qassem Soleimani is scheduled to convene on Monday (January 9).

The committee will convene in Tehran on Monday in which judicial delegations from Iran and Iraq will further discuss a 2020 martyrdom of General Soleimani, the official said.

The two delegations will review the implementation of the decisions made during the previous three rounds of committee sessions and will also exchange further data about the case, he added.

Gharibabadi noted that as Iran has finished investigating into the case, an indictment for prosecuting the perpetrators and all those behind this crime "at any level" will be presented within the next two or three weeks.

Lt. General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of IRGC Quds Force, was martyred in a US drone attack near Baghdad airport on January 3, 2020.

France Has No Right To Offend Any Religion, Its Followers

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry says France has no right whatsoever to insult any religion and its followers, calling on European country's authorities to observe the basic principle of international ties.

"Given its dismal historical record of colonialism, violation of human rights, and freedom of expression both at home and abroad, France has no right to justify its brazen insult to the sanctities of other countries, nations, and followers of divine religions under the pretext of freedom of speech," Nasser Kanaani wrote in a post published on his Twitter page on Sunday.

He added, "What the incumbent French statesmen must abide by is the observation of the basic and fundamental principles in international relations, namely mutual respect, non-interference in others' internal affairs, and respect for the national and religious values and sanctities of others."

On Thursday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry decided to shut down a Tehran-based French archaeological and historical institute in protest against the French weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo's move to insult the top religious authority of the Islamic Republic.

The Institut Français de Recherche, which is part of the cultural wing of the French embassy, used to study ancient Persian antiquities.

The move comes after the Iranian ministry decried Charlie Hebdo's profane move as an indication that Zionism has utilized media to act against Islam and promote hatred and division among human beings.

Top Cleric Says West Has Stood Against Islamic Iran

QOM (IP) - Tehran Provisional Friday Prayer Leader said on the latest sacrilege of a French magazine against Islamic sanctities that the move by a small bankrupt magazine does not matter but what really matters is the fact that the global arrogance and its allies have stood against Islamic Iran by any means they have.

People and seminary students in Qom stage a protest in the Holy Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (AS), condemning the insulting of the French publication to the Islamic sanctities and jurisprudent (Marja).

This protest rally was held on Sunday with a large presence of people, seminary students, professors of Qom seminaries, and political, religious, national, and military figures.

Speaking as the keynote speaker in the protest of prominent clerics and Islamic scholars in the Holy city of Qom against the notorious Charlie Hebdo French Magazine Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Khatami, a representative of the Assembly of Experts and Tehran provisional Friday Prayer Leader Said:

The message of this gathering to the world is that the leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is Ayatollah Imam Khamenei and just as the people of Qom are pioneers in supporting high religious authority (Marjas), in the past four decades they have always supported the Islamic State and ideals and This is also to be continued from now on as well.

Ayatollah Khatami further added: Our problem in this community is not insulting on behalf of bankrupt and small magazine; rather, the problem is that all the arrogance and enemies of the Islamic Revolution are standing against Islamic Iran with all their powers and tools.

The representative of the Assembly of Experts stated: The combined war that they have launched against the Islamic Revolution today is not unprecedented. Rather, since the beginning of Islam, it has been such a combined war and it will continue until the Day of Judgment.

It should be noted that Charlie Hebdo published an insulting cartoon insulting the Islamic religious authority in the latest issue, and the move has met with a wave of anger and protest among the people of Iran.

Foreign seminary students also had a large presence in the rally condemning the insulting of the French publication to Islamic authority.

"Charlie Hebdo" magazine recently held a contest with the aim of publishing caricatures offensive to religious and political Iranian authorities, which has brought many criticisms to this magazine as well as the French policy in the field of what it calls freedom of expression.

Iran, Libya Call for Strengthening Cultural Cooperation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad-Mehdi Esmaili in a meeting with his Libyan counterpart Mabrouka Toghi Othman on Saturday called for enhancing cultural cooperation between Iran and Libya.

On the sidelines of the ceremony to introduce the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, as the Culture Capital in the Islamic World for 2023, Esmaili met and held talks with Othman.

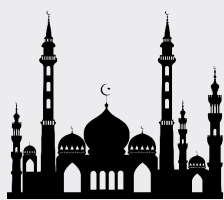
Referring to the cultural and artistic capacities between Iran and Libya, particularly in the field of cinema, poetry, literature, and visual arts, Esmaili described the meeting as the beginning of a new chapter in artistic and cultural relations between the two states.

Othman, for her part, referred to the significance of holding calligraphy exhibitions in Libya and noted that such artistic programs make people in North Africa more aware of the artistic and cultural richness of Iranian artists.

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.

He has been in Mauritania since January 6 to participate in the ceremony.





PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:11
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:28
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:45
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14

110. He knows what (appears to His creatures as) before or after or behind them: but they shall not compass it with their knowledge.
111. (All) faces shall be humbled before (Him) - the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal: hopeless indeed will be the man that carries iniquity (on his back).
Surah 20. Ta-ha (110 - 111)

Gov't Policy Is to Stabilize Forex Market

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN –Minister Finance and Economic Affairs Ehsan Khandouzi in a TV program highlighted major economic policies and performance of the government and said that the government is determined to create stability in the forex market.

Khandouzi said considering that from 2018 to 2022 the country has passed a four-year inflation era, the main priority of the economic headquarters of the government is to use all tools to rein the inflation.

He added that the government has tried to manage its budget deficits, adding that then it will manage the banking system and rein unruly money generation in this system for controlling the inflation.

Khandouzi went on to say that the third action is to manage inflation expectation like the issue of forex, adding that the policy of the government has been to create stability in the forex market that unfortunately some people had wrong notions that the government was to fix the forex rate on a certain rate but the government actually emphasized the stability of the forex market in the NIMA system.

He noted that most imports should be channeled via the NIMA system where the average price of dollar will be 28,500 toman and major needs of the country which is 85% are met via this official market.

He reiterated that the government and the Central Bank are determined to manage the forex demands in the market, adding that the remaining forex demands of the country belongs to the unofficial imports and smuggled goods whose forex are provided via the futures channels and it almost covers 15% of the forex market, and of course it has its own impact on the price of imported goods.

On the recent change in the management of the Central Bank and new policies of the bank, Khandouzi said that the new policy which has been put on the agenda of the government and the Central Bank is to take new measures with new teams for managing the forex demands in the market.

He went on to say that some of the fluctuations in the forex market have been because of the inflation expectations and but some mistakes in the



Central Bank which led to this inflation expectations and some people thought the country was facing with the shortage of dollars and rushed to buy it and it led to rise in the price of dollar.

On the complaints of people about the economic condition, the minister said that there is a difference between the complaints of the people and unfair criticisms, adding that people are right and their complaints are logical and the government is trying hard to manage these issues.

Khandouzi went on to say that when the current government took office last year, the inflation rate was 59.3% but today the inflation condition is in much better condition although the current 40% is not favorable but the policies are focused to reduce the inflation rate in the next two years.

He reiterated that the government and country according to the statistics which are announced by the official bodies is not in the worst condition and the country is on the improvement track and of course the 40-percent inflation rate is not good for the people and the country.

Khandouzi reiterated that the government tries to control inflation pressure on the public by taking proper measures. He reiterated that the government does not like the price of dollar to rise in the market while some accuse the government of enjoying the devaluation of rial to cover its budget deficit.

He also criticized the previous government for some of current problems like tying the economic condition to the international relations.

Khandouzi went on to say that the non-oil exports in 10 months of the current year have grown by 19% comparing to the same period last year and it shows that the government is expanding its economic interactions with other countries which like to work with Iran.

Iran Cuts Its Gas Exports To Turkey by 70%

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Turkey's state pipeline operator Botas issued a statement on Saturday which says that a fault on the Iranian network side had decreased the volume of gas piped to Turkey as of January 1.

Turkish authorities have requested Iran fix the issue as quickly as feasible.

Iran is the second-largest gas supplier to Turkey after Russia.

In January of 2022 and this time, a leak halted Iranian exports of gas to Turkey also. Turkey cut power supply to the industrial sector that time.

Iranian Tram Producers Plan To Cooperate With Roscosmos

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian companies plan to cooperate with the Ust-Katav car-building plant (UKCP, a Roscosmos subsidiary) on tram production, UKCP CEO Roman Novikov said.

“Two months ago, we were visited by Iranian colleagues; they talked to all producers and came back to us. They want us to produce the bogies because we do it the best. Later, the Iranian side wrote that they have high interest in cooperation because their tram and railroad enterprises are combined,” Novikov told TASS news agency.

He also noted that there is serious cooperation with Iran on gas pumps.

In early January, Roscosmos announced memorandums signed with two Iranian companies on cooperation in launch services.

The UKCP was previously a Khrunichev Center subsidiary; in February 2020, it was made completely independent. The plant is able to produce tram cars with various track widths and power control systems, as well as spare parts and service equipment.

Annual Chicken Meat Production Expected to Reach 2.65m Tons



TEHRAN (MNA) - As announced by an official with Iran's Agriculture Ministry, it is expected that the country's annual chicken meat production reach 2.65 million tons in the current Iranian calendar year (ends on March 20).

Hossein Damavandi-Nejad, the deputy minister for livestock products, stated that the production capacity of chicken meat in the country is three million tons and added that the full supply of the country's chicken meat market has been achieved so far.

He also said that egg production is forecast to reach 1.2 million tons in this year, of which 80,000 tons are exported.

“Interventions have caused ups and downs, but we must pay attention to the logic that the system is a system of supply and demand”, the official noted, adding, “Even in addition to fully meeting the domestic needs of poultry, we can respond to the needs of up to 10 million people around the country.”

Damavandi-Nejad also pointed out that about nine months have passed since the implementation of the big plan to reform the economic structure, especially in the agricultural sector and the poultry sector of the country, and said: “In the beginning, due to the magnitude of this plan, there were concerns, but with the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture, the issue was managed and now production and storage of chicken meat, eggs, and other livestock and agricultural products are in suitable conditions.”

PGPIC Welcomes Creative Ideas

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The CEO of the Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (PGPIC) announced the priority of this company to increase the production of products, and said: “In this field, we welcome creative ideas.”

According to PGPIC, Abdul Ali Askari addressed a meeting of PGPIC top executives, underlining the favorable conditions of this industrial, manufacturing and stock exchange company.

Increasing the production capacity, protecting the group's shares in the stock market, creating hope with profitability and wealth, more and special support for downstream industries are some the most important policies and strategic goals of the holding company.

Referring to the record of over 100% production in Pars, Nouri, Arvand, Bu Alisina, Tondgouyan, Ilam, Khuzestan, Bidboland etc. petrochemical compounds, he emphasized: “Our priority is to increase the product capacity from 22 to 30 million tons per year and in this context, we welcome creative ideas.”

The PGPIC CEO further noted that the holding company has currently building 29 projects across the country, said: “Three projects will be put into operation



by the end of this calendar year (to March 20, 2023), and 10 projects will come on stream next year.”

Referring to the strategic policy of PGPIC in supporting downstream industries by creating specialized parks in 13 parts of the country, Ali Askari added: “These parks will boost investment in different areas. With the designed scheme, other areas of the private sector will enter the parks.”

He continued: “Creation of the project fund is one of the initiatives of PGPIC to start new projects and exploit existing projects.”

The official further underlined conducting studies for construction of 90 projects in the downstream sector, and said: “With the conducted studies, 60 projects in the sectors of cosmetics, hygiene, paints and adhesives, household and construction industries, automobiles, fertilizers and poisons, etc. have been finalized.”

Ali Askari stated: “The PGPIC efforts should be focused on maintaining the 23rd rank among the top 100 petrochemical companies in the world and improving it to be among the top 10 companies.”

Iran LPG Exports Increase 86%

TEHRAN (MNA) - The value of Iran's liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) export rose 86 percent from the beginning of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2022) up to December 31, as compared to the same period of time in the past year, data released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) show.

Iran exported \$6.783 billion worth of LPG in the mentioned period to register a new record in the country's gas exports, Fars News Agency reported. The Islamic Republic had exported \$3.651 billion worth of LPG in the same period of the previous Iranian calendar year.

Iran's LPG exports mostly go to China despite the U.S. sanctions, facilitated by Chinese shipowners who have developed an armada of very large gas carriers since sanctions were imposed on Iran in 2014 and then in 2018.

The Islamic Republic's LPG exports could be higher without the restrictions that international shipping and trading firms face due to the sanctions and allow Iranian exporters to resume access to the global markets.

Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG or LP gas) is a fuel gas that contains a flammable mixture of hydrocarbon gases, specifically propane, propylene, butylene, isobutane, and n-butane.

One-Fifth of Online Jobs Lost Due to Internet Restrictions

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - New figures show that due to extensive internet and social network restrictions, 20 percent of people in Iran have lost their online jobs in the past four months.

According to Jobvision website, the restriction imposed on Iranians' access to social networks following riots and unrests has resulted in a series of undesirable consequences such as cutbacks, increased uncertainty about the future, reduced salaries, and the suspension of development plans.

The website published a chart showing that 46 percent of organizations have suspended or postponed more than half of their recruitment programs due to the recent internet restrictions. 45% of companies or businesses that depend on the Internet have decided to reduce their payments or had to pay wages by delay.

Petchem Self-Sufficiency, Definitive NPC Policy

TEHRAN (Shana) -- The CEO of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) called self-sufficiency in the petrochemical industry as the definitive policy of the company, and said: “An integrated planning has been done to bring the missing links of the petrochemical value chain products inside with the cooperation of various sectors.”

According to NPC, Morteza Shahmirzaei, pointing out that today human life is 100% dependent on the products of the petrochemical industry, said: “For example, this industry is in the fields of medicine, pharmaceuticals, transportation, textile, and audio industries.”

He called the petrochemical industry a driving, determining, value-creating and economy-creating industry, and stated: “This industry has provided a very important opportunity for the country. After the revolution, domestic experts controlled this industry with Iranian genius and talent and did not allow the wheel of this industry to stop moving.”

The deputy minister of petroleum emphasized the necessity of diversification and completion of the value chain, and said: “Currently, more than 550 grades of valuable petrochemicals are produced in the country. The export of products that are surplus to the country's consumption last year earned about \$15 billion, of which \$12.5 billion were deposited on the NIMA system.”

The NPC CEO continued: “This year we have had a good hard currency generation until now, so that since the beginning of this [calendar] year, the petrochemical industry has injected more than \$10.5 billion of hard currency into the NIMA system.”

Prisoner Killed, Dozens Wounded in Myanmar Jail Riot

YANGON (Dispatches) - A prisoner was killed and more than 60 wounded after a riot broke out at a Myanmar prison west of Yangon, the junta said.

Myanmar has been in chaos since Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government was toppled in a military coup in February 2021, ending the southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

The riot at the prison in Patheingyi started after guards confiscated a mobile phone from an inmate on Thursday night and took disciplinary action, the junta said in a statement.

About 70 prisoners escaped from their cells and damaged property on Friday morning.



Shelling Booms Around Bakhmut In Christmas Ceasefire



BAKHMUT (Dispatches) - Shellfire echoed around the near-deserted streets of the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut, current focus of the most intense fighting in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, despite Moscow's declaration of a ceasefire for Eastern Orthodox Christmas.

Sparkling clear skies and a dusting of snow belied the devastation of a city abandoned by most of its pre-war population of 70,000, where humanitarian volunteers now risk their lives to support those who stayed.

"Dear God, our town used to be so beautiful," said 75-year-old Olha, smartly dressed and wearing lipstick as she carried shopping bags along the street.

"There were roses everywhere, flowers," she added, hardly flinching at the sound of a distant boom. "It was clean, everything was kept in order."

Moscow said on Saturday its forces in Ukraine would maintain a 36-hour ceasefire declared by President Vladimir Putin until midnight, despite Ukraine rejecting the offer.

It said its troops had only returned artillery fire when fired upon by Ukrainian forces; Reuters was not able to ascertain the origin of the shells heard in Bakhmut.

"The ceasefire, you know how that works?" said 30-year-old humanitarian volunteer Vasyl Liesin.

"When Putin says there's a ceasefire, it's actually the other way round: there's no ceasefire. They shelled us a lot yesterday. During the night, it was more or less calm. But that's how it usually is: one day there's the shelling, the next day it's calmer."

A drive around Bakhmut, which sits on the front line bisecting Ukraine's Donetsk province, reveals the scars of months of bombardment, from smashed storefronts to mangled workshops and wrecked businesses.

Volunteers like Liesin help to maintain "invincibility centres", set up to provide electricity, heat, water, internet service, mobile phone connections and medicines free of charge as Russian attacks devastate basic civilian infrastructure.

The centres may demonstrate indomitable spirit, but they are far from invulnerable.

"When we visited another invincibility point yesterday for 15-20 minutes, a rocket hit us. It damaged a volunteer vehicle, killed one person, and injured four," said Liesin, who was wearing a helmet and a flak jacket.

"Volunteers were injured, and one local Bakhmut volunteer lost a limb and was evacuated. I hope that people were in their protective gear, but the situation is unclear. We know they were seriously injured."

Olha, who declined to give her surname, poured scorn on the idea of any Christmas respite from Russia's onslaught. "I think they're tricking us, it's pretty obvious to me," she said.

"What else can I tell you? If someone makes a promise, that someone must fulfil it. Promises are made to be kept. I just don't understand, what do they need?"

Germany Discourages Non-Essential Travel to China

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany on Saturday discouraged non-essential trips to China, the world's most populous nation, which is struggling with a surge in Covid cases after relaxing strict virus restrictions.

"We currently discourage non-essential trips to China. The reason is a peak in Covid infections and an overwhelmed health system," the German foreign ministry said on Twitter. More than a dozen countries have slapped fresh travel regulations on travelers from China.

European Union experts this week "strongly encouraged" the bloc's 27 member states to demand Covid tests from people on flights from China and conduct random tests on arrivals.



Kurds From Around Europe Demonstrate Over Killings in Paris

PARIS (Dispatches) - Thousands of Kurds from around France and Europe marched through Paris to show their anger over the unresolved killing of three Kurdish female activists in the French capital 10 years ago.

The marchers are also mourning three people killed outside a Kurdish cultural center in Paris two weeks ago in what prosecutors called a racist attack.

Kurdish activists from Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium arrived in buses, escorted by police, and joined fellow Kurds from France in a peaceful march through northeast Paris. The demonstration was timed to mark the 10th anniversary of the killings of Sakine Cansiz, Fidan Dogan and Leyla Sayilemez on Jan. 9, 2013.

Cansiz was a founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which Turkey, the United States and the European Union consider a terrorist group.

Kurdish activists suspect the Turkish intelligence service was involved in the killing. The suspected



UN Calls for Impartial Investigation After 28 Killed in Burkina Faso

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The UN rights chief called on the transitional authorities in jihadist-hit Burkina Faso to swiftly and transparently probe the killing of 28 people whose bodies were found last weekend.

Volker Turk welcomed that authorities had said they would investigate after the bodies were discovered in the northwest of the country.

"I call on them to ensure it is prompt, thorough, impartial and transparent and to hold all those responsible to account regardless of position or rank," he said.

"I have sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs underlining this exact message," the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said.

"The victims and their loved ones are owed no less."

The UN rights office said its local sources had blamed the killings on a volunteer militia, Volontaires pour la Defense de la Patrie (VDP), created to support the army's battle against jihadists.

According to the statement, they said VDP members had descended on the town, killing 28 men, "in apparent retaliation for an earlier attack on the group's military base the previous night" by suspected members of the Al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

Burkina Faso, a landlocked West African country, is one of the poorest and most volatile nations in the world.

Since 2015, it has been grappling with an insurgency led by jihadists affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group that has killed tens of thousands and displaced around two million people.

Attacks targeting the security forces and civilians have increased in recent months, especially in northern and eastern regions bordering jihadist-torn Mali and Niger.

The VDP, set up in December 2019, comprises civilian volunteers who

are given two weeks' military training and then work alongside the army, typically carrying out surveillance, information-gathering or escort duties.

Mexico Says 29 Killed in Operation to Arrest Son of Drug Kingpin

MEXICO CITY (Dispatches) - Ten soldiers and 19 suspected criminals were killed in an operation to arrest a son of jailed drug trafficker Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, Mexico's government said, with a dramatic shootout sowing terror at an airport.

Thousands of soldiers retook control of the Sinaloa cartel stronghold of Culiacan, which resembled a war zone after furious gunmen went on the rampage to try to free their boss.

Ovidio Guzman was captured in the northwestern city on Thursday and flown to Mexico City before being transferred to the high-security Altiplano prison in central Mexico from which "El Chapo" once escaped.

The 32-year-old, nicknamed "El Raton" (The Mouse), had allegedly helped to run his father's operations since the former Sinaloa cartel boss was extradited to the United States in 2017.

A colonel who commanded an infantry battalion was among those killed after his team came under attack following the arrest, Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval told reporters.

Another 35 soldiers sustained gunshot wounds and were taken to hospital, while 21 gunmen were arrested.

Sandoval said a civilian airliner that was about to take off from Culiacan International Airport, as well

as two Mexican Air Force aircraft, were hit by gunfire as cartel henchmen tried to free Ovidio Guzman.

The military planes "had to make an emergency landing" after receiving "a significant number of impacts," said Sandoval.

No injuries resulted from the plane attacks and Culiacan airport resumed operations on Friday.

The United States had issued a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to Ovidio Guzman's capture. It accuses him of being a key player in the Sinaloa cartel founded by his father.

The arrest came as Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador prepared to welcome his U.S. counterpart Joe Biden for a North America leaders' summit next week where security is expected to be high on the agenda.

The drug trafficker's detention was "not an insignificant accomplishment by Mexican authorities," U.S. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

"And we're certainly grateful for that," he said, adding that the United States would keep working "in lockstep" with Mexico, notably to tackle trafficking of the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl.

Mexico denied that the United States had been involved in the operation to catch Ovidio Guzman.



UN Envoy Meets With Afghan Higher-Education Minister Over Ban on women

KABUL (Dispatches) - A top U.N. envoy met with the Taliban-led Afghan government's higher education minister Saturday to discuss the ban on women attending universities. Markus Potzel is the first international official to meet with him since the ban was introduced last month.

Taliban authorities on Dec. 20 ordered public and private universities to close for women immediately until further notice. It triggered widespread international condemnation, including from Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

Higher Education Minister Nida Mohammad Nadim has defended the ban, saying it is necessary to prevent the mixing of genders in universities and because he believes some subjects violate Islamic principles.

That ban was followed days later by a ban on Afghan women working for national and international non-governmental groups, another decision that caused global condemnation and the suspension of work by major aid agencies.

The U.N. mission in Afghanistan said that Potzel called for the urgent lifting of these bans in his meeting with Nadim, saying the country is entering a new period of crisis. "Taliban bans on female education & work for aid agencies will harm all Afghans," the mission said.

Nadim told Potzel the ministry was working for the development and improvement of Afghans, with the protection of Islamic and national values, according to information shared by ministry spokesman Ziaullah Hashmi.

He said opponents were criticizing the implementation of Islamic affairs, using education as an argument to achieve their "evil goals."

"We need to make sure there is no place for them to criticize and, at the same time, fulfill the wishes of Afghans who have made sacrifices for Islamic rule and the implementation of Sharia rules in the country," Nadim told Potzel at the meeting.

He also said Afghanistan's rulers will not accept anyone's demands in the form of pressure against Islamic principles.

Potzel thanked Nadim for his time, saying the higher education of any country has a direct impact on the economic situation of that country, according to the ministry spokesman.

The envoy promised to cooperate in the development of Afghanistan's higher education and shared his plan for female education with Nadim.



Does Chemotherapy Impact COVID-19 Vaccine Protection?

LONDON (Dispatches) - More than 600 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been given in the United States over the past two years. These vaccines help decrease the risks of serious illness, hospitalizations, and death if you're infected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. However, patients receiving certain cancer treatments may not get the full protection of the vaccines.

Some people on chemotherapy or with a suppressed immune system may not be as protected by the COVID-19 vaccine as people without cancer.

When your immune system is weak, you may not have a powerful response to the COVID-19 vaccine.

COVID-19 vaccines are still recommended if you have a weakened immune system. The CDC advises getting an additional dose and a booster dose of the vaccine.

Certain cancer treatments may temporarily wipe out your immune system. In this case, you may need to get revaccinated after treatment.

The best approach is to speak with your cancer care team about the most appropriate time to get vaccinated and your options to protect yourself from infection.

You may have heard of the different brands of COVID-19 vaccines, like Pfizer-BioNTech (also called COMIRNATY), Moderna, Johnson & Johnson (Janssen), and Novavax. These are the four approved vaccines in the United States.

These vaccines use different mechanisms to help your immune system produce COVID-19 antibodies. When your immune system detects a foreign invader, like the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it makes proteins called antibodies to help destroy the harmful invader.

Both Pfizer-BioNTech (COMIRNATY) and Moderna vaccines use messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA). These genetic materials are created in a laboratory to help teach your immune system to recognize the COVID-19 virus. Your immune system then makes antibodies to fight the virus if you become infected later.

The Johnson & Johnson (Janssen) vaccine uses a vector virus – a modified version of a different virus – that also triggers your immune system to recognize the COVID-19 virus and create antibodies.

Novavax is a protein subunit vaccine. It's a type of vaccine that contains harmless copies of the COVID-19 spike protein and another ingredient called an adjuvant. The adjuvant helps the immune system produce antibodies to fight future COVID-19 infections.

None of these four U.S.-approved vaccines contain a live COVID-19 virus.

Studies have shown that COVID-19 vaccines might not be as effective in people who are receiving cancer treatment. This was especially true for patients receiving aggressive chemotherapy and those with blood cancers like leukemia and lymphoma.

In one study, researchers at the University of Arizona Cancer Center compared the immune response of cancer patients on immunosuppressive therapy – like chemotherapy – with healthy adults after they received two doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

The researchers looked at B-cells and T-cells, which are part of the body's defense system, and antibodies. Cancer patients had a significantly reduced antibody and T-cell response compared to the healthy participants after two doses of COVID-19 vaccines. A few cancer patients in the study had no immune response to the vaccine.

Some cancer treatments can weaken your immune system. For example, chemotherapy works by



killing cancer cells in the body. But chemotherapy also destroys normal cells like your bone marrow cells. Damaged bone marrow cells produce fewer white blood cells (your fighter cells), which means that your immune system is weak and unable to fight infections as well as it should.

If your immune system is weak, the vaccine might not trigger your defense system to produce enough antibodies to recognize and fight future COVID-19 infections.

Certain cancer treatments, like stem cells or bone marrow transplants, can wipe out your immune system. A widely used cancer drug, rituximab, can also eliminate the antibody response to COVID-19. Because of this, any protection you had from the COVID-19 vaccines may also be completely or partially eliminated. In this case, your oncologist may recommend you get revaccinated after treatment.

Should cancer patients receive the COVID-19 vaccines?

Yes. Experts agree that the COVID-19 vaccines are safe for people with cancer. Even though some cancer patients may not receive the full immune response from the vaccine, any amount of protection is better than none.

The National Comprehensive Cancer Care Network (NCCN) and American Cancer Society (ACS) recommend all people with cancer be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) states that patients who currently have cancer, are undergoing active cancer treatment, or are cancer survivors may be offered COVID-19 vaccination.

Cancer patients receiving treatment that suppresses the immune system are at higher risk for complications, hospitalization, and death if they are infected with COVID-19. That's because a weakened immune system makes it more difficult to fight an infection like COVID-19.

Let's say you're an adult with a moderately or severely suppressed immune system. In that case, the CDC recommends that you follow this COVID-19 vaccine schedule:

Based on the CDC's recommendation, people who are immunocompromised (with a weakened immune system) – including some cancer patients – should receive an additional dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

For example, you would receive three doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine to complete the primary series, plus an updated booster dose. For the Johnson & Johnson (Janssen) vaccine, you'd receive two doses to complete the primary series plus a booster. The extra dose of the COVID-19 vaccine is not the same as a booster dose.

Talk to your oncologist about the right timing to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Some healthcare providers may recommend getting the vaccine between cycles of cancer therapy if you're in the middle of treatment.

Are there any cancer patients who should not get vaccinated?

If you're undergoing bone marrow/stem cell transplant or chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy, your cancer care team may recommend delaying COVID-19 vaccination (or revaccination) until your immune system has recovered.

Even if you're a fully vaccinated cancer patient, you should still take precautions to protect yourself from COVID-19 infection. Continue to wear a mask, social distance, avoid crowds, wash your hands, and encourage family members and caregivers to be vaccinated. Discuss special precautions and other preventive measures with your healthcare providers.



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Renault Considers Making Mass-Market EVs in India

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Renault is considering building a mass-market electric vehicle in India, two people with knowledge of the ongoing review told Reuters, as part of a renewed push into a market where EV adoption is expected to grow quickly from a small base.

The study by Renault underscores how the French automaker is pushing ahead with electrification plans even as it extends unresolved negotiations with its partner Nissan Motor about investing in an EV unit it plans to carve out from its other operations.



Europe Ends Bad Inflation Year With Some Relief But Costs Still High

LONDON (Dispatches) - Price gains in Europe eased again in December, bringing some relief for the continent that ended a bad year for inflation. While the cost of living is still painfully high, the slowdown is a sign that the worst might be over for weary consumers.

The consumer price index (CPI) for the 19 countries that used the euro currency rose 9.2% in December from a year earlier, the slowest pace since August, the European Union statistics agency Eurostat said Friday. Croatia joined the eurozone on Jan. 1.

It was the second straight decline in inflation since June 2021. In November, the rate dipped to 10.1% after peaking at a record 10.6% in the previous month.

Households and businesses across Europe have been plagued by surging energy costs since Russia launched its war in Ukraine in February, which played havoc with oil and natural gas markets and has been the main driver of inflation.

The latest numbers indicate that the energy crisis may be easing for now. Energy price rises slowed to 25.7%, down from 34.9% in November and 41.5% in October.

Natural gas prices have slipped from all-time highs this summer as Europe has largely filled its storage for winter with supplies from other countries, while warmer-than-usual weather has reduced fears of a shortage during the heating season.

Food price gains, the other significant factor driving up European inflation, held pretty steady. Prices for food, alcohol and tobacco rose at a 13.8% annual pace in December, slightly higher than the month before.

Inflation has also been worsened by bottlenecks in raw materials and parts supplies amid rebounding global consumer demand after COVID-19 pandemic restrictions ended.

“The peak in inflation is likely behind us now, but far more relevant for the economy and policymakers is whether inflation will structurally trend back to 2% from here on,” said Bert Colijn, senior eurozone economist at ING Bank.

So-called core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy costs, climbed to 5.2% last month from November’s 5%, as prices rose for services and goods such as clothing, appliances, cars and computers. Colijn and other economists said that European Central Bank (ECB) officials will likely roll out more interest rate hikes to get inflation back to their 2% target.

Soaring costs for energy and food have threatened a recession and fed labor unrest as wages fail to keep pace with the price rises. Across Europe, subway staff, hospital workers, train drivers, postal workers and air traffic controllers have gone on strike, threatening political turmoil.

In a sign that energy costs remain a worry for political leaders, French President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday urged energy suppliers to renegotiate what he called “abusive contracts” with small businesses to ensure “reasonable” price hikes.

Macron spoke to bakers at the presidential palace for a traditional Epiphany kings cake ceremony, underscoring how energy and food prices are intertwined.

Turkish Retailers Unveil Wave of Price Freezes to Curb Inflation

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Major retailers in Turkey this week announced a wave of initiatives of discounts and price freezes on an array of consumer goods in a bid to tame inflation after meetings and calls by officials.

The development builds government pressure for businesses to do more to curb skyrocketing consumer prices, which have moderated over the last two months after hitting a 24-year high in October.

Major supermarket chains, including Migros, Şok Marketler and A101 Yeni Mağazacılık, recently announced they would freeze the prices of thousands of everyday goods.

The government had warned leading grocery exploitative pricing chains following a reported fresh wave of price hikes after the country announced an increase in the minimum wage for 2023.

Treasury and Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati this week called for retailers to act, stressing exploitative pricing would not be accepted.

“I am calling on both national and local markets not to increase or fix prices for a certain period. We are ready to provide any kind of contribution,” he said, informing that there are still retailers who don’t abide by the orders.

Nebati and Trade Minister Mehmet Muş separately met with top executives of leading retailers recently. Muş warned the government would never allow unfair price hikes aimed at disrupting the market order and functioning.

Şok announced it would freeze prices of some 1,000 basic consumer goods throughout January, from rice, pasta, pulses, flour, tea, coffee, sugar and oil to multiple vegetables.



Şok CEO Uğur Demirel said the retailer decided to “contribute to the national economy and the customers’ budget.” “We will continue to serve our customers with our low price policy below market prices,” Demirel said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Migros stressed its “anti-inflation commitment” and announced it was fixing prices of 419 of its own goods and was making discounts on prices of over 3,000 products. It also froze prices of many basic goods, including oil, flour, tea, sugar, pulses, detergent and diapers for this month.

Migros further said it would make constant discounts on prices of over 3,000 branded products while offering special reductions of between 25% and 50% in prices of around 20,000 goods to cover all products in 23 different groups.

German 2022 Gas Imports Dropped 12.3%, Norway Helped Replace Russia

FRANKFURT (Dispatches) - Germany imported 12.3% less natural gas in 2022 than the previous year, at 1,449 terawatt hours (TWh), as the withdrawal of Russian export supplies of fossil fuels triggered an energy crisis, the country’s energy regulator said.

Norway took over from Russia as the number one supplier, accounting for 33% of the total volume, with Russia supplying 22%, the regulator said in a statement.

Russia, which had contributed 52% of German gas imports in 2021, cut deliveries via the important Nord Stream 1 pipeline successively by 60%, then 80%, with flows falling to zero at the start of September after the line was damaged.

“The missing gas shipments from Russia were partly compensated by additional imports, among other origins, via the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway,” the statement said.

The Berlin government has also rushed through provisions for liquefied natural gas (LNG) to arrive on board ships to plug gaps.

The tighter situation in Germany meant it curbed exports to neighbouring countries that a formerly generous supply of Russian energy had traditionally allowed, although lower demand elsewhere also reduced shipments, the regulator noted.

Total German gas exports amounted to 501 TWh, down by a third from 749 TWh a year earlier.

Consumption meanwhile fell by 14%, helped by temperatures that on average were 1.1 degrees Celsius above the average of the preceding four years.

China Services Activity Logs 4th Consecutive Contraction

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China’s service sector shrank for the fourth consecutive month in December as the ongoing measures to contain COVID-19 disrupted operations and hampered demand.

At 48.0, the Caixin services Purchasing Managers’ Index rose from a six-month low of 46.7 in November, survey results from S&P Global showed Thursday. But a reading below 50.0 suggests the sector remains in the contraction zone.

The COVID-19 containment measures, including temporary business closures, dampened production.

Further, due to pandemic-related restrictions, outstanding business increased for the fifth consecutive month as firms were unable to work through backlogs of work.

Cost reduction policies together with voluntary leavers drove another fall in service sector employment. The pace of job shedding was quicker than seen on average in 2022.

On the price front, the survey showed that input cost inflation slowed to a six-month low. Consequently, firms raised their own charges at the softest pace since August.

Another reason for the easing in output price inflation was stiff competition. Optimism among service providers was the strongest since July 2021.

Companies that foresee higher output expect the pandemic situation to improve, restrictions to ease, and operations and demand to recover.

The overall private sector that combines manufacturing and services shrank for the fourth straight month in December. But the rate of contraction eased with softer falls in output across manufacturing and services.

The composite output index picked up to 48.3 in December from 47.0 in November.

Infections are expected to explode in the short run, which will disrupt production and everyday life, Wang Zhe, a senior economist at Caixin Insight Group said.

“How to effectively coordinate COVID-19 controls with economic and social development has once again become a crucial question.”

In order to prop up domestic consumption, various policies are needed that work in tandem with stabilizing the job market and effectively increasing the disposable incomes of residents, said Zhe.

China has abruptly dropped ultra-strict curbs on travel and activity, potentially unleashing the virus on the nation’s 1.4 billion people. Many funeral homes and hospitals say they are overwhelmed, but investors hope that once the infection waves pass, life and spending can return to normal and are looking beyond the most immediate difficulties.

U.S. Job Growth Solid In December; Wage Growth Slows

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. economy added jobs at a solid clip in December, pushing the unemployment rate back to a pre-pandemic low of 3.5% as the labor market remains tight, but Federal Reserve officials could draw some solace from a moderation in wage gains.

Still, the U.S. central bank’s fight against inflation is far from being won. The Labor Department’s closely watched employment report on Friday also showed household employment increasing by a whopping 717,000 jobs last month.

Recent declines in household employment had fanned speculation that nonfarm payrolls, the main measure of employment gains, were overstating job growth.

The labor market has remained strong, despite the Fed embarking last March on its fastest interest rate-hiking since the 1980s. It is underpinning the economy by sustaining consumer spending. But the economy’s resilience raises the risk the Fed could lift its target interest rate above the 5.1% peak the central bank projected last month and keep it there for a while.

“The labor market remains resilient but is losing pep and worker shortages remain intense,” said Sal Guatieri, a senior economist at BMO Capital Markets in Toronto. “While wage growth has moderated, it’s still far from consistent with price stability. Don’t look for the Fed to ratchet down its hawkish talk or slow the pace of rate hikes on February 1.”

Nonfarm payrolls increased 223,000 last month. Data for November was revised lower to show 256,000 jobs added instead of 263,000 as previously reported. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast payrolls increasing by 200,000 jobs, with estimates ranging from 130,000 to 350,000.

The economy added 4.5 million jobs in 2022, with employment gains averaging 375,000 per month.

Employment gains last month were led by the leisure and hospitality industry, which added 67,000 jobs. Restaurants and bars as well as amusement parks, gambling and recreation places accounted for the bulk of the increase in hiring.

Leisure and hospitality payrolls remain 932,000 below their pre-pandemic level.

Healthcare industry employment increased by 55,000 jobs. Construction payrolls rose 28,000, despite the house market collapsing under the weight of higher borrowing costs. Manufacturing employment rose 8,000. There were also gains in transportation and warehousing payrolls as well as retail.

India Boosts Imports of Russia’s Arctic Oil



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India continues to buy large volumes of discounted Russian crude and is importing some of Russia’s Arctic crude oil varieties for the first time, taking advantage of cheap Russian cargoes to meet robust demand.

Indian refiners imported last month the first-ever cargo of the Varandey crude blend from the Timan-Pechora oilfields operated by Russian firm Lukoil, according to tanker-tracking data from Vortexa cited by Argus.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India—the world’s third-largest crude oil importer—has also bought cargoes of other Russian crude grades from the Arctic, such as Arco and Novy Port Light, Argus reported.

India is also scheduled to receive another four cargoes of the Varandey crude this month, per Vortexa estimates quoted by Argus.

Russia is now the single-biggest oil supplier to India after overtaking Iraq in November.

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India was a small marginal buyer of Russian crude oil. After Western buyers started shunning crude from Russia, India became a top destination for Russian oil exports alongside China.

Russia overtook Iraq to become the single-largest oil supplier to India in November, as Indian refiners raced to stock up on Russian oil ahead of the December 5 price cap and associated bans on transportation services for Russia’s crude.

India and China are buying Russia’s Arctic crudes, which used to be sold in Europe before the EU embargo. Now, these cargoes are heading East to the two biggest buyers of Russian oil since the invasion of Ukraine.

In China, independent refiners have seen their refining margins jump in recent weeks as they have been able to negotiate steeper discounts for their preferred Russian crude grade, ESPO, even if they buy it above the G7 price cap.

While China hasn’t joined the Price Cap Coalition, the fact that a price cap now exists gives the world’s top crude oil importer, as well as other buyers of Russian crude such as India, more bargaining power to negotiate steep discounts for the Russian crude even outside the price cap mechanism, analysts say.

Cleric Slams French Magazine's Insulting Cartoons

QOM (IRNA) - Senior Iranian Cleric Ayatollah Hossein Nuri Hamedani denounced the recent insulting cartoons published by French magazine Charlie Hebdo, calling on international bodies of the Islamic world to follow up the issue.

According to a statement issued by the office of Ayatollah Nuri Hamedani, he slammed France for desecrating Muslim sanctities

despite claims that it advocates freedom.

The cleric said that the insults to Muslim sanctities are undoubtedly carried out under direction of "Zionist bosses", but those behind such acts should know that they will gain nothing, and that nations will remain awakened in their struggle against arrogance by the US, Saudi Arabia and the Zionist regime.



Divided Venezuela Opposition Faces Unity Challenge Ahead of Primary

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's splintered opposition, which appointed new leadership this week, faces enormous short-term challenges as it chooses a presidential candidate and tries to maintain talks with a less diplomatically isolated government, lawmakers and analysts said.

The opposition national assembly on Thursday chose new leadership and will appoint a commission to manage foreign assets, including oil refiner Citgo Petroleum, after it voted last week to remove Juan Guaido as its interim president.

Guaido in 2019 won the recognition of scores of nations including the United States after the widely disputed election that kept Nicolas Maduro in power. Because of its backing abroad, the opposition is able to control assets in other countries, like \$1 billion in gold stored at the Bank of England.

Supporters of the move to oust Guaido, whose international backing gradually dwindled, cited his failure to remove Maduro - who enjoys military support - and a need to build unity ahead of elections tentatively scheduled for 2024.

But an opposition revamp will take time and risks fragmentation of voting at a June primary.

The removal of the interim government "ended up undermining attachments among opposition leadership," said Piero Trepiccione, of Caracas' Gumilla thinktank. "It's not easy to reconstruct unity."

Three main opposition parties - Democratic Action, A New Era and Justice First - backed the interim government's removal, while Guaido's Popular Will and others rejected it.

"We'll do everything possible (to re-build unity) but today there are more values and principals separating us than bringing us together," said Popular Will lawmaker Adriana Pichardo.

"What we've just seen weakens unity, it weakens the possibility of reaching agreements and in some ways puts the primaries at risk," said Benigno Alarcon, director of political studies at Andres Bello Catholic University in Caracas.

But other lawmakers echoed new assembly president Dinorah Figuera, who on Thursday called on her colleagues to unite for the sake of the country.

"I see a real effort to continue to consolidate the platform and the road to the primaries," Justice First lawmaker Angel Medina told Reuters.

Some opposition party leaders would prefer to choose a presidential candidate through consensus rather than a primary, citing financial concerns and the millions of migrants abroad who may face difficulties voting, according to some politicians and analysts.

The opposition, many of whose leaders are in exile or barred from politics, has not held a primary for a decade.



A fractured opposition could also further complicate talks with the government being held in Mexico to find solutions for the country's social and economic crisis, analysts said.

"The more internal disagreements there are in the opposition, the government will take advantage," said Caracas university professor John Magdaleno.

Maduro has recently become less isolated amid renewed relations with countries like neighboring Colombia and some loosening of restrictions by the United States, including allowing oil giant Chevron to export crude from Venezuela.

"The motivation (the government) has to maintain dialogue is the necessity of international recognition and also (revision of) sanctions," said Institute of Superior Administrative Studies professor Michael Penfold.

The United States has said it will continue to recognize the opposition assembly. Changing the presidential election to this year instead of next may also serve Maduro, Nicholas Watson of consulting firm Teneo said in a report.

"Holding an election this year would catch the opposition off-guard and in disarray. It would also appear to deliver the 'democratic outcomes' that the U.S. demands as a precondition for further sanctions relief," he said.

Germany Wants to Deliver Around 40 Marder Vehicles To Ukraine in Q1



BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany said it wants to deliver around 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine before the end of March, and Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck said Berlin could ultimately send its entire functioning fleet of the weapons.

Germany announced on Thursday it would provide Marders to Ukraine, ramping up military support for Kyiv to repel Russian forces. The announcement came on the same day that the United States pledged Bradley Fighting Vehicles, and a day after a similar announcement from France.

Government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said a Patriot anti-aircraft missile system from army stocks will also be delivered to Ukraine in the first quarter. Washington has also offered Patriots to Ukraine.

Training on the Marder vehicle is to take place in Germany and last about eight weeks, Hebestreit added.

Speaking in Brevik, Norway, Vice Chancellor Habeck said Germany should send "all Marders that are operational" to Ukraine.

Habeck did not specify how many vehicles this would be. Germany once fielded hundreds of Marders but has been phasing out the Cold War-era weapons in favor of newer Pumas which it has purchased to replace them.

Thursday's announcement came after Chancellor Olaf Scholz faced a chorus of calls from within his three-way coalition to beef up military support for Ukraine, following France's announcement it was sending AMX-10 RC combat vehicles.

Scholz has ramped up defense spending and sent aid and weapons to Ukraine since the invasion, but has sometimes hesitated before supplying powerful weapons for fear of risking direct conflict with Russia.

He has also made it clear that he did not want to go it alone on sending heavy weapons to Ukraine and that he would coordinate deliveries with other members of the NATO alliance.

What to Know About New Omicron Subvariant XBB.1.5

LONDON (Dispatches) - The new omicron subvariant XBB.1.5 is seeing a "stunning" rate of increase in the U.S. and is on track to become the dominant strain circulating across the country, prompting many public health officials to voice concerns about the highly transmissible strain.

XBB.1.5, an offshoot of XBB, jumped from just 4% of COVID-19 infections in the U.S. to over 40% in the month of December after quickly surpassing the BQ subvariants.

"It is the most transmissible subvariant that has been detected yet," Maria Van Kerkhove of the World Health Organization said at a press briefing on Wednesday.

XBB.1.5 is also spreading at a time when the Biden administration's health officials warned of the possibility of a winter surge following gatherings over the holidays. But White House COVID-19 response coordinator Ashish Jha said the subvariant does not represent a "huge setback," though he is concerned about it.

"If you had an infection before July OR Your last vaccine was before bivalent update in September Your protection against an XBB.1.5 infection is probably not that great," Jha tweeted.

He added that whether XBB.1.5 will fuel a coronavirus wave depends on many factors, including immunity levels in the population and what actions people take to protect themselves, like masking and getting a booster shot.



Data on how the updated COVID-19 booster shots work on XBB.1.5 is limited, but Jha said that "folks without a very recent infection or a bivalent vaccine" likely have "very little protection against infection."

For now, there is no evidence that XBB.1.5 is more severe than other omicron strains, but research is ongoing. It's more transmissible because of the

mutations it has that allow the "virus to adhere to the cell and replicate easily," according to Van Kerkhove.

"We are concerned about its growth advantage, in particular in some countries," Van Kerkhove said, singling out Europe and the Northeast U.S., "where XBB.1.5 has rapidly replaced other circulating variants."

XBB.1.5 is already the dominant variant circulating in the Northeast and "will likely move to other regions quickly," according to Robert Califf, the commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.

"At this point, we're experiencing an increase in cases with no evidence of increased severity of illness related to these variants," he tweeted.

The strain is likely to challenge even the updated COVID-19 booster, which is designed to take on the original coronavirus strain and omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5. But Biden administration officials say they believe the shots will provide some protection.

"It is highly likely that the current bivalent vaccines provide some protection against XBB, especially in the prevention of serious illness and death," Califf said.

Iran Reports Major Jump...

FROM PAGE 1

Diplomats from Iran and Saudi Arabia have attended six rounds of talks in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad since 2021. That comes as foreign ministers of the two countries also met on the sidelines of a regional conference in Jordan last month in a bid to expedite efforts to restore diplomatic ties between the two influential Muslim nations.

IRICA figures showed that Iranian exports to Saudi Arabia had jumped over the past 40 days with a major steel shipment worth \$14.207 million.

It said that iron and steel ingots had accounted for 96.5% of all Iranian exports to Saudi Arabia between March and October last year.

U.S. Addiction to...

FROM PAGE 1

The U.S. imposed on Friday new sanctions against Iran, this time targeting an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles manufacturer under the unsubstantiated and disproven pretext that the Islamic Republic has provided Russia with the UAVs to be used by Moscow against Ukraine.

The United States Treasury Department slapped the sanctions on Friday against six executives and board members of Iran's Quds Aviation Industries (QAI).

It described the targeted body as a key Iranian defense industry manufacturer responsible for designing and producing drones.

The Islamic Republic has, on repeated occasions, roundly rejected Washington's allegations.

Last month, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said Ukrainian officials had failed to provide any evidence for their claim that Russia was using Iranian drones in its February-present war on Ukraine.

The Iranian defense chief says Ukraine failed to present any proof of Russia's alleged use of Iranian drones in the Ukraine war.

Speaking following a technical meeting between Ukrainian and Iranian specialists, he said the Ukrainian side had stopped short of "presenting any evidence" during the meeting "of Russia's use of Iranian drones in the war with this country."

A month earlier, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian had also reacted to the US and other Western countries' allegations, noting that Iran had provided Russia with a limited number of drones, but the delivery had taken place months before the war in Ukraine.

The U.S. Treasury Department, however, alleged, "We will continue to use every tool at our disposal to deny [Russian President Vladimir] Putin the weapons that he is using..."

The Friday sanctions also targeted the director of Iran's Aerospace Industries Organization, which the Treasury claimed, was the key organization responsible for overseeing Iran's ballistic missile programs.

In July 2021, The Wall Street Journal reported that the US was planning a sanctions campaign against Iran's defensive drones and guided missiles program, six months after the administration of President Joe Biden was sworn in.

Citing unnamed U.S. officials, the daily said the sanctions were aimed at disrupting the development of Iran's weapons program, which, the Islamic Republic has invariably defined as a purely defensive program, which does not pose any threat to any foreign country.

So we see the U.S. administration either a Republican or Democrat President seeks some pretext to continue its addiction of imposing sanctions against Iran in order it may bring down the Islamic Republic of Iran but as the Supreme Leader of Iran has reiterated recently, the Islamic of Iran has turned into a big and strong tree that nobody is able to bring it down and Americans are better to look for new tool and addiction because its current addiction of imposing sanctions is getting boring and they have become ineffective and other countries also follow the path of the Islamic Revolution to make ineffective the U.S. sanctions.

So the U.S. is better to entertain its people and allies with other game and addiction because it will be unable to defeat the strong determination of nations either with war or sanctions or any other kind of new plot or addiction, as the Islamic Republic of Iran has proved it to the world.

Iran to Definitely Avenge...

FROM PAGE 1

Stressing that the enemy's mistake cannot be forgiven and that Iran is still seeking revenge, the IRGC's chief commander said, "we avenge every day, [we] still seek to take revenge on those who perpetrated it, we will take revenge and we will do it sooner or later."

Salami also highlighted the Islamic Republic's achievements and said, "We are just at the beginning of the way and we are moving forward, we are resolving our problems but will never compromise or surrender to the enemy."

General Soleimani, Commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and their companions were assassinated in a US drone strike authorized by Former US President Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Two days after the attack, Iraqi lawmakers approved a bill that required the government to end the presence of all foreign military forces led by the U.S. in the country.



Ajax Seal Argentina Goalkeeper Rulli Transfer

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Ajax sealed the signing of World Cup-winning goalkeeper Geronimo Rulli from Spanish club Villarreal for a fee which could rise to €10 million. The 30-year-old, a reserve for Argentina at the tournament in Qatar, has penned a deal until June 2026 with the Dutch champions. “The clubs agreed on a transfer fee of eight million euros,” Ajax said in a statement. “Including variables, this amount can increase to €10 million.”

LICENCE HOLDER: SOKHAN GOSTAR INSTITUTE

Switchboard:
(+98) (21) 44253448
Public Relations Tel:
(+98)(21) 44253450
Editorial Board: 44253449
Public Relations Fax:
(+98)(21) 44253395
Advertising Department:
Tel/Fax:(+98) (21) 44253335-9/44253234
Website:
http://www.irannewsdaily.com

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info@irannewsdaily.com
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Venus Williams Out of Australian Open

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Seven-times Grand Slam Champion Venus Williams pulled out of this month's Australian Open due to injury, the organisers of the season's first Grand Slam said. Williams was set to play her 22nd Australian Open after being awarded a wildcard to the January 16-29 tournament. The 42-year-old American, twice a finalist at Melbourne Park who is now ranked outside the top 1,000, was preparing for the tournament at the Auckland Classic where she got injured.

Italy Into United Cup Final Against USA

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas battled from a set down to topple Matteo Berrettini but it was in vain as an unstoppable Lucia Bronzetti powered Italy into the final of the inaugural United Cup against a dominant United States. World number four Tsitsipas came through a do-or-die clash in Sydney 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 to earn a crucial point for his country and boost his confidence ahead of the Australian Open. But it wasn't enough with Bronzetti pummelling Greece's Valentini Grammatikopoulou 6-2, 6-3 in the following match to give Italy an unassailable 3-1 lead. They meet the United States in Sunday's final after the red-hot Americans swept past Poland 5-0. Italy went into day two of the semi-finals with a 2-0 advantage after a gutsy Martina Trevisan upset world number six Maria Sakkari 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 7-5 in a gripping encounter on Friday. Trevisan's teammate Lorenzo Musetti then crushed Greek teenager Stefanos Sakellaridis 6-1, 6-1. With Tsitsipas winning, the pressure was on Grammatikopoulou, a late replacement for Despina Papamichail. But she was outgunned by Bronzetti and reduced to tears in the first set. "It's a special moment to bring such an important point to Italy. We are a great team, great friends and I'm so excited and so happy right now," said Bronzetti. Berrettini, ranked 16, took a grip on his high-quality match with an unanswered break in game seven of the first set. They went toe-to-toe in set two before the pumped-up Tsitsipas prevailed in a tiebreaker to take it to a third set where he ground down his tiring opponent. "I hung in there and was just waiting for my chances, he's a big server," said Tsitsipas. "I was able to play with a lot of intensity."



Earlier, a composed Taylor Fritz beat Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in a battle of top 10 players to power the United States into the final. The world number nine was too good for his big-serving opponent, ranked one place behind him, winning 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5). Fritz came into the match with the United States already 2-0 up after Jessica Pegula stunned world number one Iga Swiatek 6-2, 6-2 on Friday and Frances Tiafoe swept past Kacper Zuk 6-3, 6-3. His victory gave them an insurmountable lead before Madison Keys made it 4-0 by beating Magda Linette 6-4, 6-2. "I think the difference in the tiebreakers was I just served well and I put some returns in the court, played some really solid points and didn't give him anything," said Fritz. "I'm super excited going into the finals and I think we have been the favorites all week," he said. Fritz earned break points at 4-4 in set one after putting pressure on Hurkacz's booming serve, but the lanky Pole saved them both and turned the tables to earn two set points at 5-4. But he too was denied and it went to a tiebreak, where the American dug deep. Nothing separated them in the second set, with Hurkacz slamming his racquet to the ground as his frustrations grew. It again went to the tiebreak, where two unforced errors from the Pole handed Fritz victory. Keys kept her unbeaten record at the tournament intact with a battling display against Linette. After grinding through the first set, she went a break down in the second but was ultimately too strong. "I feel like I've been playing really well on these courts and to be able to have so many matches on them already and get as comfortable as possible definitely helped me today," said the world number 11. Keys and Fritz then teamed up to win a dead mixed doubles rubber to ensure a clean-sweep.

Gauff to Face qualifier In Auckland Final

AUCKLAND (Dispatches) - Top seed Coco Gauff said she couldn't have made a better start to 2023 after dispatching another opponent with ease to cruise into the final at Auckland. American teenager and world number seven Gauff provided further evidence she will be a force at this month's Australian Open with a 6-0, 6-2 demolition of Montenegrin seventh seed Danka Kovinic. The hard-hitting Gauff is yet to drop a set at the WTA 250 tournament in New Zealand and will start firm favorite in Sunday's final against Spaniard Rebeka Masarova. Masarova, ranked 130th, beat Belgian Ysaline Bonaventure 6-3, 6-3 in a semi-final featuring two qualifiers - their advancement deep in the tournament encapsulating a week in which the seeds have struggled.

The exception is Gauff, who hasn't dropped a set in her four matches and has conceded a total of just 20 games. It will be a fourth career final for the 18-year-old and her first since losing the French Open decider to world number one Iga Swiatek seven months ago. "I didn't expect this outcome coming into the tournament," Gauff said. "I couldn't have asked for a better start to the season, regardless of the result tomorrow." Gauff, who also made a quarter-final run at last year's US Open, has won twice on the WTA Tour, most recently at Parma, Italy, nearly two years ago. She was a class above 60th-ranked Kovinic, returning serve with ferocity on her way to winning the first eight games in little more than half an hour. Her biggest challenge proved to be notching victory before storm clouds burst over centre court - a problem that has plagued organisers all week. Victory was secured three minutes before a deluge which delayed the second semi-final by about two hours. Gauff said she was keen to avoid waiting around for her match to restart. "I was trying to stay focussed on the match and not on the rain coming but it definitely plays in the back of your head when you know you're close to the end and there's a time constraint."



MILAN (Dispatches) - Roberto Mancini is grieving the loss of a man he considered his brother after Gianluca Vialli's death following a long battle with pancreatic cancer. Vialli passed away at the age of 58 in London on Friday, devastating Italy coach Mancini who was his best friend and long-time strike partner in their playing days at Sampdoria in the 1980s and 90s. The former Italy forward's death came less than a month after another of Mancini's friends Sinisa Mihajlovic succumbed to leukemia. "Only a few days after Sinisa passing away I've lost another brother, or little brother as I liked to call him," the Corriere Dello Sport quoted him as saying on Saturday. "We met at 16 years old and never left each other's side: Italy's youth and senior teams, Samp, the highs, the lows, the victories and the defeats." In eight years together at Sampdoria, Mancini and Vialli won the club's only Serie A title in 1991, the previous year's Cup Winner's Cup and three Italian Cups.

Mancini Grieves Death of "Little Brother" Vialli

They also came to within a hair's breadth of winning the European Cup in 1992, being narrowly beaten at Wembley by Johan Cruyff's Barcelona 'Dream Team'. The duo, nicknamed "the goal twins" during their Sampdoria days, were reunited in the Italy set-up when Vialli was made chief of the national team delegation in 2019, with Mancini already head coach. Their tearful embrace after winning Euro 2020 at the same ground where they tasted bitter defeat to Barca became one of the iconic moments of Italy's emotional triumph. "Those two nights at Wembley. Many years ago we cried with pain and bitterness, and then we cried with joy as though we were united by destiny before he passed away," Mancini added. "He played a key role in us winning the European Championship. The players loved him," said Mancini. "Gianluca gave us courage that we didn't know and which he used to fight his illness so hard that he managed to be with us (the team) as long as he possibly could. "Gianluca was the best of us, a perfect, courageous man... It was a privilege to be his friend, his teammate in football and life."

Odermatt Extends World Cup Lead

ADELBODEN (Dispatches) - Switzerland's Marco Odermatt extended his overall World Cup lead by winning a second consecutive giant slalom on home snow in Abelboden ahead of Norway's Henrik Kristoffersen and Swiss compatriot Loic Meillard. Odermatt, who won the overall World Cup title last season, posted the fastest time in both runs down the Arglebargling piste to finish 0.73sec ahead of Kristoffersen with Meillard third at 1.66sec. The 25-year-old stretched his overall World Cup lead with a 400-point advantage over Norway's Aleksander Aamodt Kilde. Kristoffersen is a further 81 points adrift in third. "It's just amazing, crazy, I could really enjoy the race today," said Odermatt, who as cheered all the way by 24,000 spectators waving Swiss flags. "This is for sure the best place to celebrate a victory. After last year I knew I could win this race, and now there are these emotions." Odermatt's path to a 17th World Cup success was helped when Norway's Lucas Braathen, the only man to beat him in a giant slalom this season, crashed out on the first run. Kristoffersen conceded the very fast track suited local hero Odermatt. "When it's so straight in the second run I have no chance. He is way too good on these straight courses, and when he is in this shape and flying everything is really easy," he said. "I can't get him when he's in shape like this. He risked a lot. But I am the only one who is somewhere close to him, so that is good." For Odermatt it was his sixth win from 13 starts this season, and his fourth win from five giant slalom.



Djokovic Mows Down Medvedev, Reaches Adelaide Final

ADELAIDE (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic overcame an injury scare midway through his match against Daniil Medvedev to mow down the Russian 6-3 6-4 and storm into the Adelaide International 1 final, where he will take on unseeded American Sebastian Korda. In a blockbuster Australian Open warm-up meeting between the two former world number ones it was 21-times Grand Slam champion Djokovic who shot out of the blocks quickest, as he surged to a 4-2 lead in the opening set. Djokovic was in some discomfort in the seventh game after hyper-extending his left hamstring while stretching to make a forehand, but he soldiered on and pulled off an exquisite lob before taking a medical timeout for treatment. The 35-year-old Serb claimed the opening set and raised his game at 3-3 in the next by producing a blistering return and a smooth pass at the net, before Medvedev surrendered his serve with a double fault on breakpoint. Djokovic saved a break point with a 200 kmh second serve before holding firm from there to seal a comfortable victory. "Thankfully it was nothing too serious," Djokovic said of his injury in an on-court interview. "If it was I wouldn't be able to continue. I took anti-inflammatory (medication) and settled in. "I was trying to keep the momentum going and not allow him to break my serve. That was the key. Eventually, I would get a chance. The longer the match went on, my hamstring got warmer and bothered me less. "Hopefully for tomorrow it'll be fine."



France Head Coach Extends Contract Until '26



PARIS (Dispatches) - France head coach Didier Deschamps has extended his contract until July 2026, the French football federation (FFF) said in a statement. "The French Football Federation and Noel Le Graet, its president, are pleased to announce the extension of Didier Deschamps' contract as head of the French national team until June 2026," the statement read. Deschamps' previous contract had expired after the 2022 World Cup, where France lost to Argentina in the final on penalties in Qatar. Under Deschamps, France won the 2018 World Cup in Russia and the 2021 Nations League. They also reached the final of the 2016 European Championship. France are currently third in the FIFA world rankings, behind no. 1 Brazil and second-placed Argentina. The FFF said Deschamps' assistant coach Guy Stephan, goalkeeping coach Frank Raviot and physical trainer Cyril Moine will also continue their work with the national team.