

Health Ministry Announced  
On Wednesday That the Number of  
Deaths From the Coronavirus  
Pandemic in Iran Remained  
Unchanged at **144,728** With **No Death**  
By the Virus Over the Past 24 Hours

Statistics Show that the growth  
rate of Liquidity in the Country  
Has Fallen to Its Lowest Level  
In the Past 32 Years and It Has  
Lowered to 33.4% 2. as the Gov't  
Insists on Controlling the Growth

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## Nervous, Hasty Reactions Indicate UK Malice Towards Iranians

TEHRAN (MNA) – Referring to the UK's reactions to the execution of Alireza Akbari, the Iranian Judiciary spokesperson said that the UK's nervous and hasty reactions are another sign of the malice of this government to the Iranians.

Masoud Setayeshi made the remarks in his presser, saying that Iran expected at least an official apology from the UK government but the reactions showed that Iran's hatred of this government is based on the realities.

The British government has never sought to repair the bitter and ominous history of its behavior towards the Iranian nation, Setayeshi criticized.

Saying that the country has been always hostile to the noble nation of Iran, he added that the UK's role in most sabotages against the Iranians is visible.

Supporting the Pahlavi regime and the Zionist regime, training spies, assassinating Iranian scientists, and creating seditions are some parts of the British government's malice and animosity toward the Iranian nation, according to Setayeshi.

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## No Undeclared Nuclear Sites Or Activities in Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's nuclear chief once again dismisses claims about the existence of "undeclared" nuclear sites or activities in the Islamic Republic, saying the allegations are part of a propaganda campaign against the country.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting on Wednesday in Tehran, Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said the accusations leveled against the Iranian nuclear program are rooted in the claims by "counter-revolutionary elements" abroad.

In spite of that, he added, Iran has been cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in addressing the claims.

Eslami said such allegations are nothing new and have been fabricated for 20 years, adding that the 2015 nuclear deal was in fact supposed to close the case of those claims.

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# Leader Urges Officials To Avoid Factionalism Trap

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution stressed the unity in the country, advising the officials to avoid falling into the trap of factionalism.

Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei made the remarks in a meeting with a number of Islamic Development Organization officials on Wednesday.

The Leader urged officials to avoid producing superficial and ineffective works without having the right valuable content.

Referring to the significance of using the right method and language by officials to address young people, Ayatollah Khamenei added, "The way of dealing and talking with a young person should be different from the way of dealing and talking with an ignorant or enemy."

The Leader also said that the way of propagation and talking inside and outside the country should be different from each other.

During the meeting, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that the two important duties of cultural and propagation organizations is the production and presentation of rich content based on new ideas and thoughts, as well as taking into account the social and cultural requirements of cultural activities while being God-wary at the same time.

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution praised the Islamic Propagation Organization for their endeavors. Referring to verses from the Quran, Imam Khamenei considered the fear of God in the meaning of "consideration, observance and mindfulness" as a necessary and permanent strategy for those active in the fields of culture and propagation. "Cultural-propagation organizations must make sure that the word and decree of God are not overlooked under any circumstances. One should not be afraid of controversies and accusations in this field", he added.

The Leader stated that paying attention to social requirements in propagation does not equal with ignoring God's awareness and His eminence.

He listed giving attention to the taste of the audience in cultural and propagation related activities as one of these requirements. "The language you use to communicate with a young person is different from the language you use to talk to an ignorant, or antagonistic person. In the same way, the language of speaking and preaching in other countries should be different in nature to the kind of cultural-propagation work that is being implemented inside the country, in Revolutionary institutes and organizations included."

The Islamic Development Organization is an Iranian religious and cultural organization. It was created by the founder of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini (RA) after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and is under the supervision of Ayatollah Khamenei.

## Tehran, Islamabad Urged to Finalize FTA Soon

KARACHI (Dispatches) - Pakistan and Iran should soon finalize the free trade agreement (FTA), which has been pending since a long time, leader of a trade delegation from Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) Morad Nemati said.

Although a preferential trade agreement exists between Iran and Pakistan, in order to further improve the existing trade volume, the two countries should finalize the FTA, Nemati said during a visit to the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI). He urged the chamber to push the government to expedite the Iran-Pakistan FTA and give it a final shape so that the trade between the two countries could substantially be improved as per potential.

He further stressed the need for making collective efforts to remove trade barriers, with focus on reducing the gap between the business communities, which was a major issue hindering trade and investment cooperation.

In addition to removing trade barriers, the two sides should further promote barter trade to boost the existing trade ties.

"Enhanced trade and investment ties with the business community of Karachi are very important to us, hence, we are concentrating on improving our connections with the business community of this city where an Iranian Single Country Exhibition is currently underway at the Expo Center," he said, inviting the KCCI to also send a trade delegation to Iran for exploring avenues of trade and investment cooperation. Iranian dairy industry, construction sector and other important sectors of the economy have witnessed significant growth, the business communities of the two should look into the possibility of undertaking joint ventures in these sectors.

Earlier, KCCI Senior Vice President Touseef Ahmed, while welcoming the Iranian delegation, said that despite excellent brotherly relations, the bilateral trade volume was below the potential of \$5 billion.

He said it was time to upgrade the existing Pakistan Iran Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) to FTA, which would take bilateral trade to the next level and develop deep financial and economic cooperation.

"The existing barter trade basket also needs to be expanded to other products to facilitate imports and exports between the two countries and further deepen Pak-Iran economic integration," he added.

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## ViewPoint By: Hamid Reza Naghashian Old Fox Behind All Seditions

Iranians and many countries which had been once under influence of the British governments in centuries do not trust the United Kingdom as this once colonialist country is behind most seditions in countries especially in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The British stick to the policy of divide and rule in under developed countries or countries which have been or still are their colonies and this policy has been pursued since the era of Winston Churchill.

The Divide and Rule policy, also known as the "divide and conquer" strategy, was a British colonialist policy used in India to keep the different Indian religions and ethnicities divided. This allowed the British to maintain their power and control over India for centuries and this policy has been seen in most countries which face with religious conflicts.

The policy has been used as a tool for the British governments to control the nations and the countries and this policy has been practically felt in Iran especially since the emergence of the Islamic Revolution.

In almost four decades of the Islamic Revolution's existence in Iran we have witnessed many seditions in the country which have been almost engineered or supported by the UK and for this reason new generations in Iran gradually realize what their ancestors had said in the past have been is right.

In the past what happened in Iran was believed to be masterminded by the British elements and honestly the British intelligence forces have found their elements in the country and these elements are used for any plot against the Islamic Revolution and these elements can be seen in any layer of the country.

In recent days the Islamic Revolution has executed one of the Iranian spy of the British and this move enraged the British and now the British government has reacted angrily through condemnation or threat and designating the IRGC as a terrorist group.

The United Kingdom actually fumed over intelligence failure after a senior Iranian official, Alireza Akbari, who was executed for spying for the British intelligence agency.

Akbari was arrested in 2019. He had received 1,805,000 euros, 265,000 pounds, and \$50,000 for espionage activities for the United Kingdom.

Iran's Judiciary said the convict, who had been sentenced to death on charges of "corruption on earth" and "extensive activities against the country's internal and external security" through espionage for the British government's spy agency, was hanged on Saturday.

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## Iran Annual Oil Output Grows 7% in 2022

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's oil production in 2022 increased seven percent compared to the previous year, according to OPEC's first monthly report released in 2023.

According to the OPEC report, the Islamic Republic produced 2.554 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil in 2022, 162,000 bpd more than the figure for 2021, when the output stood at 2.392 million bpd.

Citing secondary sources, the report put Iranian crude output for December 2022 at 2.574 million bpd indicating a 9,000-bpd increase compared to the figure for November.

The country's heavy crude oil price also increased by \$30.12 in 2022 to register a 43-percent rise compared to the previous year, according to the OPEC report.

Iran sold its heavy crude oil at \$99.92 per barrel on average in the mentioned year, compared to 2021 when the average price was \$69.8 per barrel.

In the last month of 2022, the average price of Iranian heavy oil was reported to be \$79.11, which has decreased by \$9.62 compared to the previous month.

Iran has been ramping up its oil production and exports over the past year as the country has been implementing new strategies to overcome U.S. sanctions.

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## Iran to Provide Neighboring States With Biotechnology

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Islamic Republic of Iran plans to establish fully home-grown biotechnology in the neighboring countries, an Iranian official said.

Mostafa Ghanei, the secretary of the Biotechnology Development Headquarters in the Vice President of Science and Technology, said on Wednesday that Iran's strategy is to set up domestically developed biological technologies in neighboring states in accordance with economic considerations.

Russia, Turkiye, and Oman are the main destinations of the program in

order to pave the ground for producing biotech products in joint ventures, Ghanei said, noting that the plan will help supply the Iranian goods to other countries and provide these states with the capabilities of the Iranians.

The Biotechnology Development Headquarters in the Vice President of Science and Technology will make all-out efforts to pave the way for the development of biological technology in line with the progress taking place in the world, he argued.

## President Raisi Will Visit Turkey Soon

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN – Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said he has made the necessary planning during his trip to Ankara for a visit to Turkey by President Ebrahim Raisi, noting that the visit will take place soon.

Speaking during a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, Amirabdollahian said that he has had important and diverse talks with Turkish officials.

He also noted that in a meeting with President Erdogan, which lasted for more than 90 minutes, they discussed bilateral cooperation, as well as issues of regional and international significance.

Iran's foreign minister also said that he and Turkish officials have reviewed a wide range of political, economic and cultural issues, urging the need for a speedy implementation of a strategic cooperation agreement signed between the two countries during a visit to Iran by President Erdogan.

Asked to comment on women's rights in Iran, Amirabdollahian said that the Iranian women enjoy a high level of rights. He noted that the death of Mahsa Amini was regretful while noting that the Western media waged a planned propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The foreign minister asked why the United States showed no reaction to the murdering of a Palestinian female reporter Shirin Abu Akleh. "Why there is no reaction to the massacre of women and children as a result of the US intervention?"

He also hailed a meeting of an Iran-Turkey Joint Consular Commission over the past few days where he said the two sides discussed enhanced tourism and trade



cooperation, as well as extradition of prisoners.

Amirabdollahian also voiced Tehran's satisfaction with the progress of relations between Damascus and Ankara.

Noting that improved relations between Syria and Turkey will benefit the entire region, he said that having close relations with both countries, Iran will spare no effort in this regard.

On the developments going on in Ukraine, the foreign minister said that Iran has announced its stances about the war in the county at the highest level. "We are against war and insist on a political solution."

He condemned and rejected false anti-Iranian claims about the war in Ukraine.

On the Caucasus developments, Amirabdollahian said Iran believes that respecting the territorial integrity of the countries is a basic principle and that no kind of geopolitical change has to take place in the region.

He stressed the need for keeping transit routes open among regional countries.

The foreign minister said that he and Turkish officials also discussed Tehran's negotiations with the West over the removal of sanctions, noting that if the US side gives up making contradictory statements and raising new conditions, and begins to act realistically, the agreement is within the reach.

## Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution Mission Is Cultural Guidance

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Stating that the Supreme Leader of the Revolution always expected the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution to lead a profound cultural transformation, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi stated, "The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, in addition to making policies and monitoring the implementation of policies, should play a role as a cultural headquarters".

Speaking at the beginning of the meeting of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution on the occasion of the appointment of the new secretary of the Council, Raisi described the position of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution as a very important one and carefully describing its missions, saying, "The position and mission of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution is cultural guidance, and this is very important".

The Chief of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution stated that the Supreme Leader of the Revolution always expected the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution to lead a profound cultural transformation, adding, "The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, in addition to making policies and monitoring the implementation of policies, should play a role as a cultural headquarters".

While thanking the efforts of Dr Ameli, the Former Secretary of the Council, Raisi pointed out the trust of the members of the Council in Hojatoleslam Abdolhossein Khosropanah and the approval of the Supreme Leader, as well as valuable scientific and practical records and experiences of the new member and Secretary of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, and stated, "It is hoped that Mr Khosropanah can take a real step in creating cultural transformation by moving towards the realization of the orders of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution with the cooperation of other real and legal members of the Council".

After the President's speech, the members voted on the appointment of Hojatoleslam Abdolhossein Khosropanah as the Secretary of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, and he was appointed as the head of the council's secretariat for a period of 4 years.

## Army Flotilla Docks at Karachi Port

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Two frigates and a submarine of Iran's Navy berthed at the southern Pakistani port of Karachi on Wednesday to follow defense diplomacy between the two countries.

Iran-Pakistan diplomacy pursues provision of security for international waters, IRNA reported. Coincident with the friendly visit of an Iranian flotilla to Pakistan, a group of vessels from the neighboring country will tour the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas today.

## Russia Ready for Joint Production of Cars, Copters With Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – An aide to the president of Russia expressed his country's readiness to embark on joint projects with Iran to manufacture automobiles, helicopters and agricultural machinery.

In a meeting with Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, held in Tehran, the Russian president's aide, Igor Levitin, said Moscow is prepared to cooperate with Tehran in supplying foodstuffs and basic commodities to regional countries.

Levitin also expressed Russia's readiness for the joint production of cars, helicopters and farm machinery with Iran.

Pointing to his meeting with the governor of the Central Bank of Iran, he called for the rapid implementation of a bilateral agreement on interaction between the central banks of the two countries.

For his part, Mokhber said Iran welcomes the participation of Russian companies in the completion of transportation infrastructures in the country.

Calling for the implementation of the energy agreements between Iran and Russia, the vice president stressed the need to for interaction in the development of oil and gas fields.

Mokhber also noted that Iran and Russia can conduct trade transactions in their own currencies in order to resolve many banking problems and promote the trade exchanges.

## Iran Ready to Develop Scientific Ties With Nigeria

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of Organization of Student Affairs said that thanks to the mutual support and existing capacities, Iran and Nigeria enjoy a good opportunity to develop scientific cooperation.

Hashem Dadashpour made the remarks in a meeting with Yakubu Santuraki Suleiman, Ambassador Extraordinary, and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to Iran.

He described Nigeria as one of the most important countries in Africa, saying that due to the positive and increasing interaction between the presidents of the two countries, the ministry of science has decided to expand



its cooperation with Nigeria in the science and technology fields.

"Iran and Nigeria cooperate in various organizations; so, by identifying scientific capacities, we can help each other," Dadashpour said.

He referred to attracting 250,000 foreign students and becoming an international hub as one of the

main objectives.

Meanwhile, Santuraki Suleiman said that Nigeria is interested in taking advantage of Iran's potential.

He hoped for developing scientific and technological interactions between the two countries.

## Pakistan Navy Ships Visit to Bandar Abbas PORT

TEHRAN (Pakistan Embassy) - In line with Pakistan's maritime tradition and to further strengthen the existing warm and cordial bilateral relations, a Pakistan Navy Flotilla, commanded by Commodore Muhammad Nasir Iqbal (SIM), Commander Submarines of Pakistan Navy will dock at Bandar Abbas, Iran from 18-21 January, 2023.

Pakistan Flotilla's visit to Iran is aimed at enhancing maritime collaboration between the navies of the two countries. The ships and submarine are bringing warm wishes and a message of solidarity, peace and prosperity for the people of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the region.

The port call of Pakistan Navy Ships and Submarine to Islamic Republic of Iran is a regular feature. During the visit, PN delegation will hold meetings with Naval, Military and Civil leadership of Iran on bilateral relations at Bandar Abbas. A diplomatic reception will be jointly hosted by Ambassador of Pakistan in Iran, H.E. Rahim Hayat Qureshi and Commodore Muhammad Nasir Iqbal (SIM), on board Pakistan Navy Ship for Iran-based Ambassadors, Military Attaches, Diplomats, Iranian military and civil officials, media persons and Iranian/Pakistani community members.

The port call by Pakistani flotilla is a testimony of growing security and defense relationships between Pakistan and Iran. The visit of the Pakistan Navy ships and Submarine to Bandar Abbas enables both navies to enrich themselves from mutual experiences and enhance cooperation in future endeavors.



Capt. Saleh Sabir received Commodore Muhammad Nasir Iqbal (SIM) on arrival of the Pakistan Navy Ships and Submarine to IRI Port of Bandar Abbas on 18-01-2023

## MP Warns EU of Fallout of Plan to Blacklist IRGC

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – An Iranian lawmaker warned the European Union that its plan to brand the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) as a "terrorist organization" may have heavy and unbearable consequences and ruin any chance of negotiations.

Speaking to Tasnim on Wednesday, Mohammad Esmail Kowsari cautioned the European governments against falling into the trap of a plot hatched by the US and the Zionist regime to blacklist the IRGC.

"The consequences of the European Union's plot against the IRGC might be unbearable for the European countries," he added.

Kowsari noted that such a sinister plot won't restrict the IRGC by any means.

He also called on the EU and the European governments to maintain their independence from the US and avoid taking any action against the IRGC, because such a hostile move could ruin any chance of negotiations with Iran.

The UK and the European Union are expected to coordinate moves to designate the IRGC as a "terrorist organization" after Iran executed dual national Alireza Akbari for spying for Britain.

## Iranian, Russian Officials Discuss Boosting Sports Cooperation

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian Minister of Sports and Youths Affairs held a meeting with the visiting Russian President's Special Aide Igor Levitin on Tuesday to discuss ways to expand bilateral cooperation in the field of sports.

Hamid Sajjadi hosted the visiting Russian President's Special Aide Igor Levitin and his accompanying delegation at the sports ministry's compound in Tehran on Tuesday.

The meeting was held to develop bilateral cooperation between Iran and Russia in the field of sports, according to a statement by the Iranian sports ministry.

A number of Iranian sports officials were present in the meeting.

## 12th Iran-Japan Joint Consular Commission Convened

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The 12th Iran-Japan Joint Consular Commission, headed by the heads of the two countries' foreign ministries' consular sections, immigration, judiciary, and international police officials was convened in Tehran.

In the consular commission, issues such as bilateral cooperation in foreign citizens' affairs, supporting both sides' citizens in the other side, university students' cooperation, judiciary cooperation, issuance of visas and immigration affairs, bilateral cooperation about illegal immigrants, campaign against narcotic drugs crimes, and exchange of criminals were reviewed and discussed.

Iran and Japan have broad-scale, old-age and broad-based relations while some 15,000 Iranian citizens are now residing in that country.

## EU's Decision Not to Affect IRGC's Anti-Terror Campaign

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Iranian interior minister said that the European countries' decision to blacklist IRGC is out of their desperation and ignorance which will not affect the Iranian forces' anti-terror work.

The Iranian interior minister Ahmad Vahidi said that the EU's attempt to put the Iranian IRGC on its terrorist list shows the Europeans' apex of helplessness and ignorance, stressing that labeling the Iranian force will not affect its work.

"The IRGC will continue its work with strength," Vahidi said.

"The IRGC is an important, valuable and essential force in our country, which uses all its potential in defending the country and the people and is always there when it is needed. The fact that some people in the West want to do such things runs against all principles of international law and call a major force a terrorist shows their intellectual, moral and political weakness," the minister added.

He pointed out that the martyr Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of IRGC Quds Force, was spearheading the anti-terrorism international campaign, underlining that "the IRGC is still the most important anti-terrorism force."

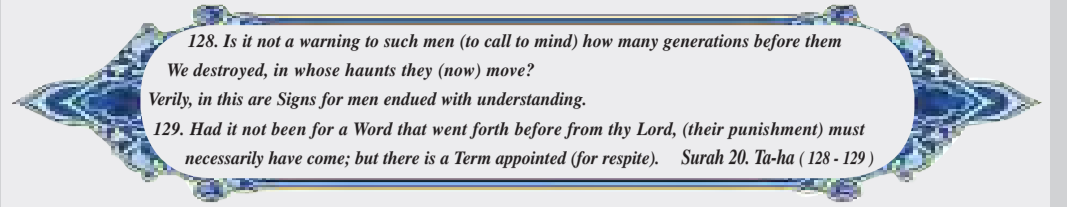
The Iranian minister continued to say that the Western countries led by the Israeli Zionist regime and the US have increased their attempts to put IRGC on their terrorism list, saying that their attempt is out of desperation and ignorance and will not affect the IRGC mission.





PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:15
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:37
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:44
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:11



# Iran Trade Turnover With ECO Hits \$12.8b

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - Iran's trade with the Economic Cooperation Organization's member states reached 16.71 million tons worth \$12.8 billion.**

Trade between Iran and the Economic Cooperation Organization's member states reached 16.71 million tons worth \$12.8 billion during the current Iranian year's first nine months (March 21-Dec. 21), registering a 28.06% fall in terms of weight, but a 9.01% rise in terms of value compared with last year's corresponding period, latest data released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration show.

Turkey was Iran's main trade partner among the countries under review with 8.37 million tons (down 42.74%) worth \$8.28 billion (down 43.35%). It was followed by Pakistan with 3.04 million tons (up 28%) worth \$1.67 billion (up 52.26%) and Afghanistan with 2.51 million tons (down 24.6%) worth \$1.23 billion (down 13%).

Iran's exports to ECO members reached 13.09 million tons worth \$7.38 billion during the nine months ending Dec. 21, registering a 34.05% and a 3.3% decline in terms of weight and value YOY, respectively.

Turkey with 5.7 million tons (down 51.2%) worth \$3.82 billion (down 7.48%), Afghanistan with 2.5 million tons (down 24.91%) worth \$1.21 billion (down 13.91%) and Pakistan with 2.44 million tons (up 12.78%) worth \$1 billion (up 10.71%) were the top export destinations, Financial Tribune reported.

Imports hit 3.62 million tons worth \$5.42 billion during the period to register a



7.11% and a 31.9% growth in terms of weight and value YOY, respectively.

Turkey was also the main exporter to Iran with 2.66 million tons (down 9%) worth \$4.45 billion (up 31.17%). It was followed by Pakistan with 599,059 tons (up 189.58%) worth \$666.58 million (up 243%) and Kazakhstan with 240,209 tons worth \$106.97 million.

Trade between Iran and ECO surged by 43% to stand at 30.87 million tons worth \$16.79 in the fiscal 2021-22. Iran's exports stood at 26.42 million tons worth \$10.85 billion while imports from ECO members hit 4.45 million tons worth \$5.94 billion.

The Economic Cooperation Organization is an Asian political and economic intergovernmental organization, which was founded in 1985 in Tehran by the leaders of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. It provides a platform to explore ways of improving development and promoting trade and investment opportunities.

The first meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organization's Permanent Representative Council in 2023 was held in Tehran on Jan. 11.

## Iran, Syria Free Trade Zones To Broaden Ties

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Secretary of the Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones, Hojjat Abdolmaleki said that the Iranian and Syrian Free Trade Zones will expand their ties in different aspects.



Abdolmaleki made the remarks in a meeting with Syrian Ambassador to Tehran.

He added that technical correspondence has already been done between the two countries regarding the cooperation with the free zones of Iran and Syria and the agreements are near final phases.

Secretary of the Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones in his remarks said that expanding cooperation with Hasiya Free Zone and Iranian free zones is on the agenda, adding, "I believe that a MoU in this regard can be quickly implemented."

The Syrian Ambassador to Iran, for his part, said that his country welcomes signing of the memorandum of cooperation with Iran's free zones.

Hasiya is a town in central Syria, administratively part of the Homs Governorate, located about 35 kilometers south of Homs.

## Tehran, Moscow Stress Accelerating INSTC Development



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash in a Tuesday meeting with the Russian president's special envoy Igor Levitin reviewed the progress in railway cooperation between the two countries and stressed accelerating the development of the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Bazrpash and Levitin also talked about Iran's railway projects that Russia is already participating in and explored ways of developing cooperation even further, the portal of Iran's Transport and Urban Development Ministry reported.

The meeting was also attended by Deputy Transport Minister Shahriar Afandizadeh and Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railway (known as RAI) Seyyed Miad Salehi.

Iran and Russia have been cooperating in various transportation projects as both countries are taking serious steps for neutralizing the impacts of the U.S. sanctions.

The INSTC has been the main focus of the collaborations between Tehran and Moscow and the Russian side has been proposing to fund various railway projects along the mentioned route.

Earlier this month, Tehran and Moscow held negotiations on completing the Rasht-Astara railway project which is a main railroad along the INSTC.

Iran has presented its proposed memorandum with 16 articles to determine how Russia will participate and invest in the Rasht-Astara railway project, Afandizadeh said on January 9.

According to the official, the Russian government is interested in participating in the completion of the Rasht-Astara railway by providing financial assistance.

## Tehran, Dushanbe Stress Need for Broader Scientific Cooperation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy foreign minister for international affairs and the head of Tajikistan Academy of Sciences in a meeting here on Tuesday agreed on the need to broaden bilateral scientific cooperation.

Deputy Foreign Minister Vahid Haddadi-Asl and Tajik scientific official Fahad Rahimi in their meeting at Science Ministry agreed on the need for strengthening scientific relations between the two countries' universities' science faculty members and researchers and implementing joint scientific projects.

In the meeting in the presence of the Ambassador of Tajikistan in Iran Zahedi Nezameddin Shamseddinzadeh, the two sides stressed the need for having broader scientific and technological cooperation and it was agreed that a Joint Scientific Cooperation Committee will be established in very near future.

Haddadi-Asl in the meeting referred to the joint languages and religions, as well as geographical proximity as factors that can deepen bilateral cooperation, noting that the past of the two countries, too, has always



been a history of cooperation and friendship.

He said that cooperation in the field of exchanging university students and providing opportunities for higher education studies for both sides' students were agreed in a recent meeting with the ambassador of Tajikistan.

"It was also agreed that science faculty members of the two countries universities, too, will be exchanged and their presence in scientific projects and seminars will be more frequently facilitated," added the Iranian deputy foreign minister.

The head of Tajikistan Academy of Sciences, too, said in the meeting that his country is enthusiastically waiting for broader scientific cooperation with Iran and exchange of professors of sciences of the two countries is an appropriate first step in that respect.

Farhad Rahimi added, "During the recent years when I was a deputy science and knowledge of Tajikistan I had visited of the Iranian universities and research centers and I am well aware of the scientific progress in different fields in Iran."

## Foreign Goods Transit Through Iran Up 8.6%

TEHRAN (MNA) - A total of 10.4 million tons of foreign goods were transited through Iran from the beginning of the current Iranian year on March 21 to Dec. 21, according to the director general of the Islamic Republic of Iran Custom.

Mohammad Rezvanifar noted that the transit volume shows an 8.6% rise compared to last year's corresponding period, Financial Tribune reported.

Shahid Rajaei Port in the southern Hormozgan Province accounts for the largest share of foreign goods transited via Iran. The port, which has a loading/unloading capacity of 100 million tons per year, accounts for over half of Iran's trade and about two-thirds of total freight transit through the country. It is Iran's biggest commercial port.

With 18 gantry cranes and 40 berths, Rajaei is the most advanced container port of Iran. Launched in 1985, the port has expanded every year and is currently connected to 80 ports worldwide.

## Motorcycle Production Up 80%

TEHRAN (MNA) - Motorbike production in Iran has grown 80 percent in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21, 2022) compared to the same period last year, as local manufacturers seek to ramp up exports to neighboring countries.

According to the secretary of Iran's Association of Motorbike Industry, about 325,000 motorcycles were produced over the nine months period of the current year, IRIB reported. Bahman Zia' Moghaddam said that the annual output of motorcycles in Iran is expected to reach over 400,000 units in the current calendar year which ends in late March 2023.

Zia' Moghaddam earlier said that Iranian manufacturers of motorbikes are struggling with relatively low levels of exports, especially to neighboring countries where affordable Chinese brands

have a strong presence in the markets.

He also blamed restrictions on banking transactions because of foreign sanctions on Iran as a major hurdle to expanding exports of motorbikes from the country.

However, Zia' Moghaddam said that Iranian motorcycle manufacturers have sought to boost local sourcing of parts and components in recent years, adding that more than 60 percent of the parts needed to produce certain Iranian motorcycle models are manufactured inside the country.

He said that three Iranian motorcycle manufacturers had launched engine production platforms in recent months to further deepen their local production capacities.

Iran has 56 motorcycle manufacturing companies of which only 30 are fully active. The industry provides permanent jobs to 16,000 people.

## Pasargad Co., BHRC Sign MoU on Cooperation



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Pasargad Oil Company (POC) as the biggest bitumen producer in the Middle East and leading industry of the country signed a MoU with Building and Housing Research Center (BHRC) to cooperate in the scientific and research fields.

According to the public relations of POC, the company signed an agreement with BHRC with the title of research and study for implementing upgraded system of classifying bitumen based on the performance.

In the ceremony for signing the MoU which was held on Tuesday at the plant of Pasargad Oil Company in Tehran in the presence of the CEO of POC Fr. Esfandiar and Head of BHRC Dr. Heydari, both sides signed the agreement to broaden cooperation.

According to the MoU, the research institute will conduct research on improving the quality of bitumen for using it in all climate conditions in the roads and airports.

It is worth noting that Pasargad Oil Company has had cooperation with BHRC in the past and it is considered as the leading company in the field of producing high-quality bitumen.

## National Gas Distribution Network, Stable

TEHRAN (Shana) - Oil Minister Javad Owji emphasized that the national gas distribution network is stable throughout the country.

Javad Owji, in a televised interview, said daily consumption of the household, commercial and non-major industries sectors has increased by 150 million cubic meters compared to the same period last year due to the extreme cold and stable weather, which is equivalent to 4 to 5 phases of South Pars.

Pointing out that 17,000 out of 97,000 gas subscribers in Torbat Jam County are facing the problem of gas pressure drop, he emphasized: "Considering the measures taken two months ago by the Ministry of Petroleum, we were not surprised in this regard. We tried to prevent more gas cuts in the country by changing the composition of the gas network, using pipeline loops throughout the country and optimal consumption by the people."

## Construction of 696 Workshops Completed in Industrial Parks

TEHRAN (MNA) - As announced by the head of Iran Small Industries and Industrial Parks Organization (ISIPO), the construction of 696 workshops have been completed in the industrial parks of the country.

Ali Rasoulouli said, "We have planned to build 1,746 workshop units in the industrial parks and zones of the country, of which 696 units have been already completed."



## Far-Right Militants Go on Trial For Macron Attack Plot



PARIS (Dispatches) - A dozen people with links to a French far-right group go on trial Tuesday, accused of plotting to assassinate President Emmanuel Macron and commit a string of other attacks.

Prosecutors say the 13 members of the group, Les Barjols, conspired to engineer a putsch, which involved a plan for an attack on Macron during a public appearance in 2018. Citing evidence collected online, from telephone conversations and meetings, they say the suspects also planned to kill migrants, and attack mosques.

None of the plots allegedly prepared by the 11 men and two women aged between 26 and 66 ever came to anything, which caused prosecutors to downgrade some of the initial charges over the course of their four-year investigation.

## Belarus Puts Exiled Opposition Leader on Trial

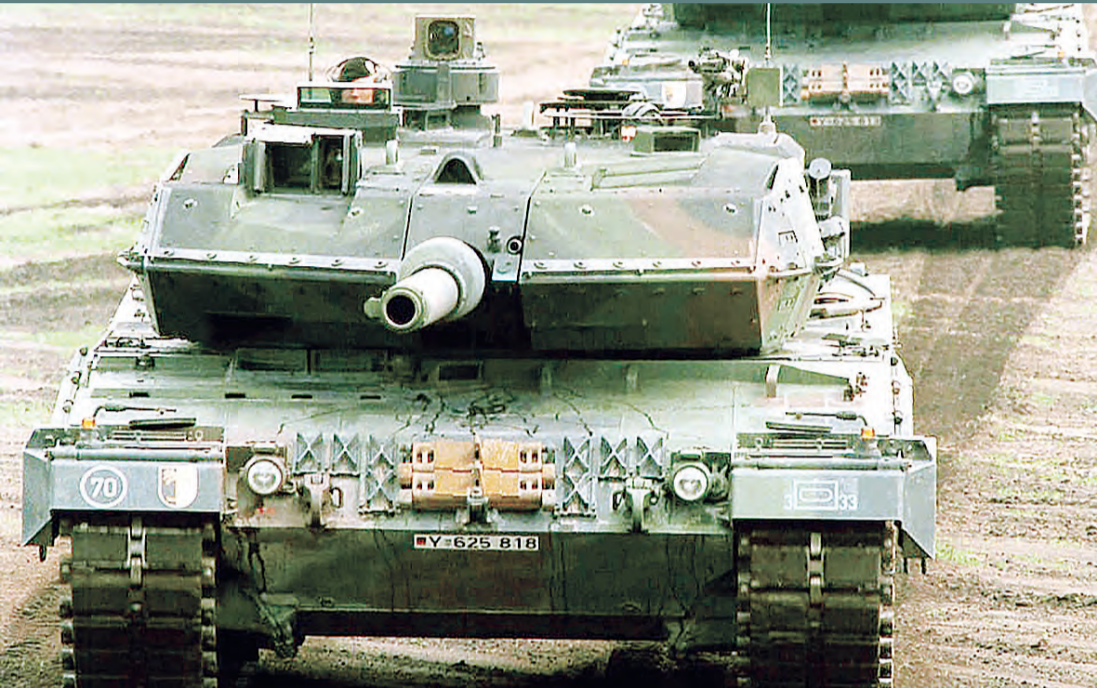


MINSK (Dispatches) - Belarus put exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on trial in absentia on treason charges, in what the outspoken critic of veteran leader Alexander Lukashenko said would be a "farce and a show".

Tsikhanouskaya, 40, fled Belarus after running against Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election which was followed by mass protests over alleged electoral fraud. She faces a possible jail term of up to 15 years.

Following a crackdown on protesters, she became the head of an opposition-in-exile and denounced the election after Lukashenko, in power since 1994, declared himself the winner.

## Tanks for Ukraine in Sight as Germany Says New Minister to Decide



DNIPRO (Dispatches) - Ukraine came a step closer to winning the fleet of modern battle tanks it hopes could turn the course of the war against Russia, after the West's big holdout Germany said this would be the first item on its new defense minister's agenda.

In the central city of Dnipro, authorities called an end to the search for survivors in the ruins of an apartment building destroyed during Russian missile attacks on Saturday.

Forty-four people were confirmed killed and 20 still unaccounted for in the attack, the deadliest for civilians of a three-month Russian missile bombardment campaign. Seventy-nine people were wounded and 39 rescued from the rubble.

Nearly 11 months after Russia invaded, Kyiv says a fleet of Western battle tanks would give its troops the mobile firepower to drive Russian troops out in decisive battles in 2023.

German-made Leopard battle tanks, workhorse of armies across Europe, are widely seen as the only plausible option available in sufficient numbers. But they cannot be delivered without authorisation from Berlin, which has so far demurred.

With Western allies meeting at a U.S. airbase in Germany on Friday to pledge military support for Ukraine, Berlin is under intense pressure to lift its objections this week, in what would be one of the most consequential shifts in Western aid so far.

The decision sits on the desk of Germany's new Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, named on Tuesday to replace Christine Lambrecht, who quit after missteps including a cheerful New Year's message about the war that opponents called tone deaf.

"When the person, when the minister of defense, is declared, this is the first question to be decided concretely," German Economy Minister Robert Habeck told Deutschlandfunk radio broadcaster on Tuesday, before the appointment was announced.

In his first comments in the job, Pistorius, a regional politician viewed as close to Chancellor Olaf Scholz, made no mention of weapons for Ukraine: "I know the importance of the task," he said in a statement. "It is important to me to involve the soldiers closely and to take them with me."

Pistorius is due to host U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Thursday ahead of Friday's big meeting of allies at Ramstein air base.

Germany has been cautious about approving weapons that could be seen as an escalation. But allies increasingly argue that concern is misplaced, with Russia showing no sign of backing down from its assault on its neighbor.

Britain broke the taboo over heavy tanks over the weekend, pledging a squadron of its Challengers. But it has too few to form the basis of a Ukrainian force. Washington's Abrams tanks run on turbine engines, seen as burning too much fuel for Ukraine to field in large numbers.

That leaves the Leopards, which Germany made in the thousands during the Cold War and which are now fielded by armies across Europe. Poland and Finland have already said they would send Leopards if Berlin gives re-export approval.

"We hope and are trying to organise bigger support for Ukraine. We hope a few partners, allies, will give tanks to Ukraine," Polish President Andrzej Duda said on Tuesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

## UN Decries Alarming Rise in Rohingya Deaths at Sea in 2022

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The UN has decried the "alarming" rise in the number of Rohingya refugees lost at sea fleeing their Myanmar homeland or Bangladesh last year, warning more would die without concerted action.

More than 3,500 Rohingya attempted sea crossings in 2022, representing a huge increase on the year before, when some 700 people made similar journeys, UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, said on Tuesday.

"UNHCR has recorded an alarming rise in the death toll. At least 348 individuals died or went missing at sea in 2022, making it one of the deadliest years since 2014," spokeswoman Shabia Mantoo told reporters in Geneva.

She said that 3,040 Rohingya who attempted to flee by sea disembarked last year, primarily in Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh. Nearly 45 percent of those who did so were women and children.

"Most boats departed from Myanmar and Bangladesh, highlighting the growing sense of desperation amongst Rohingya in those two countries," Mantoo said.

"Those who have disembarked report that they undertook these dangerous sea journeys in an effort to find protection, security, family reunification, and livelihoods in other countries," she said.

"Among them are victims of trafficking, unaccompanied and separated children, and survivors of sexual- and gender-based violence."

Several boats that departed in December remained at sea as of the end of the year, Mantoo said, adding that one boat is feared to have sunk with approximately 180 people on board.

A military crackdown in Myanmar in 2017 sent hundreds of thousands of majority Muslim Rohingya fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh with harrowing stories of murder, rape and arson.

Myanmar has faced genocide accusations at the UN's top court following the mass exodus.

Mantoo said calls by UNHCR to maritime authorities to rescue and disembark people in distress have gone unheeded, with many boats adrift for weeks.

"The current crisis in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea is a crisis of solidarity," she said.

UNHCR has called for a full regional response, addressing human trafficking, search and rescue efforts and support in countries where Rohingya refugees disembark. It also wanted to see efforts to address the root causes of why Rohingya are fleeing Myanmar.

Mantoo said that without such a response, "more people will die on the high seas" as people undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety.

The UNHCR statement came as Human Rights Watch alleged that Rohingya refugees have been suffering widespread abuse at the hands of an elite Bangladesh police unit.



## Vietnam President Quits as Communist Party Intensifies Graft Crackdown



HANOI (Dispatches) - Vietnam President Nguyen Xuan Phuc has resigned after the ruling Communist Party blamed him for "violations and wrongdoing" by officials under his control, the government said, in a major escalation of the country's anti-graft campaign.

Phuc, a former prime minister widely credited with accelerating pro-business reforms, held the largely ceremonial post of president since 2021 and is the highest-ranking official targeted by the party's sweeping corruption crackdown.

Vietnam has no paramount ruler and is officially led by four "pillars": the party's secretary, the president, prime minister and speaker of the house.

Phuc, 68, was ultimately responsible for offences committed by many officials, including two deputy prime ministers and three ministers, the government said.

"Fully being aware of his responsibilities before the party and people, he submitted an application to resign from his assigned positions, quit his job and retire," it said in statement.

Phuc's office could not immediately be reached for comment and it was not clear if a replacement has been chosen.

Vietnam has been rife with speculation he would be removed following January's dismissal of two deputy prime ministers who served under him, as the party doubles down on a "blazing furnace" anti-corruption drive led by its powerful long-serving chief, Nguyen Phu Trong.

Last year, 539 party members were prosecuted or "disciplined" for corruption and "deliberate wrongdoings", including ministers, top officials and diplomats, according to the party, while police investigated 453 corruption cases, up 50% from 2021.

Trong earlier this month said the party was "more determined" and "more effective and methodical" in its approach, and vowed to deliver results.

Opinions vary on the impact of the anti-graft drive on investment and policy.

Le Hong Hiep of the Vietnam Studies Programme at the Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute said the purge could pave the way for cleaner more capable leaders to rise.

## Pakistan PM Sharif Offers Talks With Arch-Rival India

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has offered his Indian counterpart talks over all outstanding issues, including disputed Kashmir, which he believes could be facilitated by the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

"My message to the Indian leadership and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is let's sit down at the table and have serious and sincere talks to resolve our burning issues, like Kashmir," Sharif said in an interview with Al Arabiya news channel, telecast by Pakistan's state run TV.

He said he had taken up the issue with UAE's president Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed in his recent visit to the Emirates.

"He's a brother of Pakistan. He also has good relations with India. He can play a very important role to bring the two countries on the talking table," Sharif said.

The Indian foreign affairs ministry didn't respond immediately to a Reuters request for comment.

The two arch-rival nuclear powers have fought three wars since independence from British rule in 1947. Two of the wars were over Kashmir, a disputed Himalayan region, which both the nations claim. Each controls half of it.

The two neighbours got closer to a full scale war in 2019 when India launched an air strike inside Pakistan to target what New Delhi said was a militant training facility.

Tensions rose high when India unilaterally revoked the autonomous status of its part of Kashmir later in 2019, which Sharif said resulted in "flagrant" human rights violations.

Ever since, official talks between the two countries have been suspended, although there were some backdoor diplomacy attempts to resume negotiations - one brokered by the UAE in 2021.

Sharif said the wars between the two countries brought nothing except misery, poverty and unemployment.

## Slovak PM Agrees To Early Election



BRATISLAVA (Dispatches)

- Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger said he would start discussions on holding early elections after his attempt to find a majority in parliament following a lost no-confidence vote failed.

The European Union and NATO member country's government lost the no-confidence vote in December after its former ruling partner, the libertarian Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, joined opposition parties to defeat the cabinet.

Heger tried to cobble together a new majority in the increasingly fractious 150-seat parliament, where a number of parties saw defections in recent months, but threw in the towel after the SaS rejected negotiations on Tuesday.

"With today, I consider all attempts to establish a new 76 (majority) to be closed," Heger said in an emailed statement.

He said he would invite political leaders of his former coalition for talks on Wednesday on holding polls later this year, before a regular election due in February 2024.

"At the moment, an autumn (election) date looks the most realistic," Heger said.

Opinion polls have given the opposition, including the Smer party of former Prime Minister Robert Fico, a lead over current government parties.

Fico has spoken against weapons supplies to Ukraine, marking a potential change in the NATO country's stance on the Russian invasion of Slovakia's neighbour.

SaS left Heger's government in September after disputes with ruling party OLANO's leader, Igor Matovic, who has since resigned as finance minister. Matovic's exit helped win SaS's support to approve a 2023 budget at the end of December.

But Matovic remains the head of OLANO, built as an anti-corruption movement with a strong Catholic and social-conservative faction.

Heger has since indicated he may split from the party to try to build a wider centre-right platform, Slovak media have reported in the past days.



## Scientists Use Laser To Guide Lightning Bolt For First Time

PARIS (Dispatches) - Scientists said they have used a laser beam to guide lightning for the first time, hoping the technique will help protect against deadly bolts -- and one day maybe even trigger them.

Lightning strikes between 40-120 times a second worldwide, killing more than 4,000 people and causing billions of dollars worth of damage every year.

Yet the main protection against these bolts from above is still the humble lightning rod, which was first conceived by American polymath Benjamin Franklin in 1749.

A team of scientists from six research institutions have been working for years to use the same idea but replace the simple metal pole with a far more sophisticated and precise laser.

Now, in a study published in the journal Nature Photonics, they describe using a laser beam -- shot from the top of a Swiss mountain -- to guide a lightning bolt for more than 50 metres.

"We wanted to give the first demonstration that the laser can have an influence on lightning -- and it is simplest to guide it," said Aurelien Houard, a physicist at the applied optics laboratory of the ENSTA Paris institute and the study's lead author.

But for future applications "it would be even better if we could trigger lightning," Houard told AFP. Lightning is a discharge of static electricity that has built up in storm clouds, or between clouds and the ground. The laser beam creates plasma, in which charged ions and electrons heat the air.

The air becomes "partially conductive, and therefore a path preferred by the lightning," Houard said. When scientists previously tested this theory in New Mexico in 2004, their laser did not grab the lightning. That laser failed because it did not emit enough pulses per second for lightning, which brews in milliseconds, Houard said.

He added that it was also difficult to "predict where the lightning was going to fall". For the latest experiment, the scientists left little to chance.

They lugged a car-sized laser -- which can fire up to a thousand pulses of light a second -- up the 2,500-metre peak of Santis mountain in northeastern Switzerland.

The peak is home to a communications tower that is struck by lightning around 100 times year. After two years building the powerful laser, it took several weeks to move it in pieces via a cable car. Finally, a helicopter had to drop off the large containers that would house the telescope.

The telescope focused the laser beam to maximum intensity at a spot around 150 metres in the air -- just above the top of the 124-metre tower.

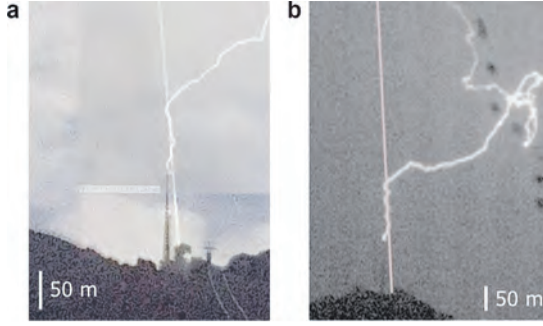
The beam has a diameter of 20 centimetres at the beginning, but narrows to just a few centimetres at the top. During a storm in the summer of 2021, the scientists were able to photograph their beam driving a lightning bolt for 50 around metres.

Three other strikes were also guided, interferometric measurements showed. Most lightning builds up from precursors inside clouds, but some can come up from the ground if the electric field is strong enough.

"The current and power of a lightning bolt really becomes clear once the ground is connected with the cloud," Houard said.

The laser guides one of these precursors, making it "much faster than the others -- and straighter," he said. "It will then be the first to connect with the cloud before it lights up."

This means that, in theory, this technique could be used not just to drive lightning away, but to trigger it in the first place.



## Runaway W. Antarctic Ice Sheet Collapse Not Inevitable

PARIS (Dispatches) - The runaway collapse of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet -- which would trigger catastrophic sea level rise -- is not "inevitable", scientists said Monday following research that tracked the region's recent response to climate change.

As global temperatures rise, there is mounting concern that warming could trigger so-called tipping points that set off irreversible melting of the world's massive ice sheets and ultimately lift oceans enough to drastically redraw the world map.

New research published Monday suggests a complex interaction of factors affecting the melting of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, which is home to the enormous and unstable Pine Island and Thwaites glaciers -- nicknamed the "Doomsday glacier" -- that together could raise global sea levels by more than three metres (10 feet).

Using satellite imagery as well as ocean and climate records between 2003 and 2015, an international team of researchers found that while the West Antarctic Ice Sheet continued to retreat, the pace of ice loss slowed across a vulnerable region of the coastline.

Their study, published in the journal Nature Communications, concluded that this slowdown was caused by changes in ocean temperatures that were caused by offshore winds, with pronounced differences in the impact depending on the region.

Researchers said that this raises questions about how rising temperatures will affect the Antarctic, with ocean and atmospheric conditions playing a key role.

"That means that ice-sheet collapse is not inevitable," said co-author Professor Eric Steig from the University of Washington in Seattle.

"It depends on how climate changes over the next few decades, which we could influence in a positive way by reducing greenhouse gas emissions."

The researchers observed that while in one region, in the Bellingshausen Sea, the pace of ice retreat accelerated after 2003, it slowed in the Amundsen Sea.

They concluded that this was down to changes in the strength and direction of offshore surface winds, which can change the ocean currents and disturb the layer of cold water around Antarctica and flush relatively warmer water towards the ice.

Both the North and South Pole regions have warmed by roughly three degrees Celsius compared to late 19th-century levels, nearly three times the global average.

Scientists are increasingly concerned that the Pine Island and Thwaites glaciers have reached a "tipping point" that could see irreversible melting irrespective of cuts to greenhouse gas emissions.

Anders Levermann, a climate scientist at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research who was not connected to the latest study, welcomed the approach of bringing together multiple observations and records, although the study period was "the blink of an eye in ice terms".

"I think we still have to live and plan and do our sea level projections and coastal planning with a hypothesis that the West Antarctic Ice Sheet is destabilised and we will get three and a half meters of sea level rise just from this area of the planet alone," he said, adding however that this would happen "over centuries to millennia".

The United Nation's science advisory panel for climate change, the IPCC, has forecast that oceans will rise up to a metre by the end of the century, and even more after that.

Hundreds of millions of people live within a few metres of sea level.



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## India Hopeful of Rupee Trade With Russia

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India is hopeful of a rupee trade with Russia, a trade ministry official said on Monday, as government data showed a near 400% jump in Russian merchandise imports from April-December compared with a year ago. India has been exploring a rupee trade settlement mechanism with Russia since soon after Moscow invaded Ukraine in February last year. The two sides have spoken about facilitating trade in local currencies, Satya Srinivas, a secretary at the trade ministry, told reporters in New Delhi. However, rules have not yet been formalised. India is hopeful that rupee trade with Russia will pick up in the future, Srinivas said.



## WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

## Recession Casts Long Shadow Over WEF Summit

DAVOS (Dispatches) - The prospect of imminent global recession cast a long shadow over Davos as participants gathering for the opening of the World Economic Forum's annual meeting counted the likely cost for their economies and businesses.

Two-thirds of private and public sector chief economists surveyed by the WEF expect a global recession this year, with some 18% considering it "extremely likely" - more than twice as many as in the previous survey conducted in September 2022.

"The current high inflation, low growth, high debt and high fragmentation environment reduces incentives for the investments needed to get back to growth and raise living standards for the world's most vulnerable," WEF Managing Director Saadia Zahidi said in a statement accompanying the survey results. The WEF's survey was based on 22 responses from a group of senior economists drawn from international agencies including the International Monetary Fund, investment banks, multinationals and reinsurance groups.

Meanwhile, a survey of CEO attitudes by PwC released in Davos on Monday was the gloomiest since the "Big Four" auditor launched the poll a decade ago, marking a significant shift from optimistic outlooks in 2021 and 2022.

The World Bank last week slashed its 2023 growth forecasts to levels close to recession for many countries as the impact of central bank rate hikes intensifies, Russia's war in Ukraine continues, and the world's major economic engines sputter.

Definitions of what constitutes recession differ around the world but generally include the prospect of shrinking economies, possibly with high inflation in a "stagflation" scenario.

On inflation, the WEF survey saw large regional variations: the proportion expecting high inflation in 2023 ranged from just 5% for China to 57% for Europe, where the impact of last year's rise in energy prices has spread to the wider economy.

A majority of the economists see further monetary policy tightening in Europe and the United States (59% and 55%, respectively), with policy-makers caught between the risks of tightening too much or too little.

"It is clear that there is a massive drop in demand, inventories are not clearing up, the orders are not coming through," Yuvraj Narayan, deputy chief executive and chief financial officer of Dubai-based global logistics company DP World told Reuters.

"There are far too many constraints imposed. It is no longer a free-flowing global economy and unless they find the right solutions it will only get worse," he said, adding the group expects freight rates to drop by between 15% and 20% in 2023.

Few sectors expect to be totally immune.

Matthew Prince, chief executive of cloud services company Cloudflare Inc, said internet activity was pointing to an economic slowdown.

"Since New Year's, when I catch up with other tech company CEOs, they're like, 'have you noticed the sky is falling?'" he told Reuters.

PwC's survey found confidence among companies in their growth prospects dropped the most since the 2007-08 global financial crisis, although a majority of CEOs had no plans to cut the size of their workforce in the next 12 months or to slash remuneration as they try to retain talent.

"They're trying to do cost reduction without human capital changes and large layoffs," said PwC global chairman Bob Moritz.

## Japanese Firms Seen to Offer Biggest Wage Hikes in 26 Years

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Big Japanese firms are likely to offer the biggest pay hikes in 26 years, a research firm forecast today, supporting policymakers' aim to achieve sustainable wage growth and stoke economic growth led by the private sector.

Big Japanese firms will offer pay rises of 2.85 per cent on average for the financial year starting in April, according to estimates by Japan Economic Research Center (JERC). If realized, they would be the fastest pay rises since 1997 when Japan was entering grinding deflation and 'lost decades' of stagnation.

Japanese policymakers are urging cautious Japanese businesses to accelerate wage growth at closely-watched annual 'shunto' spring labour-management talks that conclude around mid-March.

While Japan's inflation rate is now well above the Bank of Japan's 2 per cent target, policymakers say it is mostly driven by commodity and energy costs and is therefore unsustainable without accompanied wage growth.

JERC's forecast for big firms to offer pay hikes of 2.85 per cent, comprises a 1.08 per cent rise in base salaries and a 1.78 per cent increase in additional salary based on seniority.



## Fragmentation Could Cost Global Economy Up to 7% of GDP

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Up to 7% of the global economic output could be lost due to severe fragmentation of the global economy after decades of increasing economic integration, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a new staff report.

But the losses could reach 8-12% in some countries if technology is also decoupled, the IMF said. Even limited fragmentation could shave 0.2% off global gross domestic product (GDP), it warned but said more work was needed to assess the estimated costs to the international monetary system and the global financial safety net (GFSN).

The note, released late Sunday, noted that the global flows of goods and capital had leveled off after the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and a surge in trade restrictions seen in subsequent years.

"The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have further tested international relations and increased skepticism about the benefits of globalization," the staff report said.

It said deepening trade ties had resulted in a large reduction in global poverty for years while benefiting low-income consumers in advanced economies through lower prices. The unraveling of trade links "would most adversely impact low-income countries and less well-off consumers in advanced economies," it said.

Restrictions on cross-border migration would deprive host economies of valuable skills while reducing remittances in migrant-sending economies. Reduced capital flows would reduce foreign direct investment, while a decline in international cooperation would pose risks to the provision of vital global public goods.

## Canadian Firms Expect Mild Recession and Inflation to Remain High

OTTAWA (Dispatches) - Most Canadian businesses expect a mild recession over the next year because higher interest rates are curbing investment plans and consumer spending, while at the same time more see inflation staying high for longer, the Bank of Canada said.

Business sentiment continued to weaken in the fourth quarter and expectations for slower sales growth increased for a fourth consecutive quarter, according to a quarterly survey. Some two-thirds of firms expect a recession over the next 12 months, with 90% of those expecting it to be mild.

Almost 30% of firms see sales falling over

the next year, mainly because of weakening domestic demand. Several businesses said rising interest rates were slowing household demand and housing market activity.

When it hiked rates in December at its last policy meeting to 4.25% - the highest level in almost 15 years - the Bank of Canada said it would study economic data to gauge whether to raise interest rates further.

"The Bank of Canada's aggressive rate hikes through 2022 have clearly weighed on economic sentiment among both businesses and consumers," Shelly Kaushik, an economist at BMO Capital Markets, said in a note.

"However, still-elevated inflation expectations will keep the Bank on alert. This survey is consistent with our call of a 25 basis-point rate hike at next week's meeting, after which we anticipate the Bank will hold interest rates steady through the remainder of 2023," she said.

December consumer price figures will be released on Tuesday, and the Bank of Canada will publish new forecasts and its next policy decision on Jan. 25.

The Canadian 2-year yield fell 9.5 basis points to 3.585%, its lowest in more than four months. The Canadian dollar was trading 0.1% higher at 1.3388 to the greenback, or 74.69 U.S. cents.

In his most recent remarks, Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem cited the risk of sticky - or persistent - inflation, which might require "much higher" rates.

The survey showed that 84% of firms expect inflation to remain above 3% for the next two years, up from 77% in the third quarter.

Canada's annual inflation rate eased to 6.8% in November as gasoline prices rose more slowly, still well above the central bank's 2% target, data showed last month.

Around 71.5% of consumers also expect "a mild to moderate recession" and just under half of those expect it to be "moderate in severity and length", according to a separate quarterly survey.

## Turkey Sees Lower Inflation, Larger GDP Per Capita in 2023

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's Treasury and Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati said the government would continue to pursue policies that prioritize economic growth and jobs in 2023, a year he said would see a further drop in inflation and an increase in household income.

Turkey has left behind what Nebati said will go down as one of the most challenging years of the last century, marked by historic global inflation and soaring shipping costs. Yet, he said the government's "new economic model" helped the country "write a success story" and achieve success in almost all of the macroeconomic indicators.

Nebati was speaking at a meeting in Istanbul to evaluate 2022 and convey the government's targets for this year.

He promised a continuation of policies that prioritize investment, employment, production and exports in 2023, part of the economic model that the government introduced in late 2021 that aims at flipping Turkey's persistent trade deficits, a major component of the current account.

The model relies on targeted loans and low interest rates and also aims at eventually helping reduce inflation, which hit a 24-year high in October but moderated over the last two months and is expected to decrease significantly this year.

Nebati said the main policy tools of the new economic model have been determined as encouraging Turkish lira savings, selective credit policy and improving the investment environment. He noted that they aim for balanced and sustainable growth with the effective use of these policy tools.

Authorities have sought to discourage foreign exchange use following the steep depreciation in the lira in 2021. The government adopted a scheme aimed at protecting lira deposits from depreciation versus hard currencies.

The initiative sought to keep dollarization at bay and curb demand for foreign currency by compensating depositors for lira losses against foreign currencies.

The budget payments into the state-backed scheme, known by its acronym KKM, reached TL 92.5 billion in 2022, official data showed Monday. The scheme attracted around TL 1.4 trillion in total, Nebati said.

The lira lost some 44% of its value against the dollar in 2021. It declined another 30% in 2022 but held mostly stable in the last quarter.

Nebati stressed multiple measures, including the KKM, which he said helped ensure stability in the foreign exchange rates in the second half of 2022 and boosted financial stability. He said they managed to ensure the highest decrease in foreign currency deposit accounts in the history of the Republic.

## Lula to End Industrial Tax IPI



SAO PAULO (Dispatches) - Brazilian leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will seek to end the industrial tax IPI, Vice President Geraldo Alckmin said on Monday, which would continue an exemption policy initiated by his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

At an event hosted by Sao Paulo's industry group FIESP, Alckmin acknowledged that the current administration considered reversing Bolsonaro's 35% IPI tax reduction, amid discussions on how to slash this year's primary budget deficit.

But Alckmin, who is also Lula's minister of industry and trade, pointed out that the idea, which industrialists rejected for increasing the sector's production costs, was abandoned.

"We managed to get that removed, not incorporated into the (fiscal) proposal. It wasn't incorporated and the next goal is to end the IPI, and ending the IPI is (through) tax reform," he said.

Alckmin reiterated that the government would now push for tax reform in Latin America's largest economy, adding it is "essential to industry."

The tax is levied on companies manufacturing and importing products, such as refrigerators, cars, air conditioners and televisions. It is raised or lowered by presidential decree, without the need for congressional approval.

Bolsonaro cut the IPI by 35% last year, in an effort to boost economic activity that the COVID-19 pandemic has dented. During the presidential campaign, he promised to zero the tax rate.

Lula, who won the election by a narrow margin, never mentioned reducing the IPI tax as a priority. His Finance Minister Fernando Haddad even discussed with his team ending Bolsonaro's tax reduction, which would increase government revenues by 9 billion reais (\$1.8 billion).



## Magnitude 5.4 Quake in Iran's Khoy Leaves 120 Injured

TEHRAN (MNA) – An earthquake measuring 5.4 on the scale of Richter struck Khoy in the West Azarbaijan Province in northwestern Iran on Wednesday afternoon.

According to the preliminary reports, the quake struck at 1:38 pm (local time) and happened at the depth of 12 km from the ground surface. It reportedly has been felt in Tabriz, the

capital of neighboring East Azarbaijan province and all of the surrounding town in the province.

There have been no immediate reports of any casualties. The Iranian Red Crescent reported it has sent search and rescue teams to the quake-hit areas while there are reports of damages to the buildings in some villages that were close to the epicenter.



## Messina Denaro: a Ruthless Boss of the Sicilian Mafia

ROME (Dispatches) - Sicilian godfather Matteo Messina Denaro, who was arrested on Monday after 30 years on the run, is a ruthless assassin whose violence fuelled the bloody reputation of the Cosa Nostra Mafia.

"With the people I have killed myself, I could fill a cemetery," he is said to have boasted.

The phrase is impossible to confirm but speaks to the legend that surrounds him.

Known as Diabolik, after an Italian comic character, he was the undisputed leader of the Cosa Nostra in the Trapani province of western Sicily.

But his power extended further, including to the capital Palermo, where he was arrested.

A fan of Rolex watches and designer clothes -- as well as comicbooks and video games -- he had a reputation as a playboy, and was once featured on an Italian magazine cover in dark glasses, looking like a rock star.

But his list of victims was long and his crimes horrific, not least the murder of the teenage son of a turncoat.

The boy was kidnapped and held captive for two years and his body then dissolved in acid.

Born on April 26, 1962, in Castelvetro, in southwest Sicily, Messina Denaro grew up in the heart of organized crime.

His father, Don Ciccio, was the head of the local clan and his godfather, who attended his baptism, was also a member of the mob.

His first run-ins with the law began in 1989, when he took part in a bloody struggle between two clans.

He was accused that year of murdering Nicola Consales, a hotel owner who complained to an employee of always having "these little mafiosos under our feet".

Unfortunately, the employee was Messina Denaro's mistress.

In 1992, he was part of a mob group sent to Rome to try and kill anti-mafia judge Giovanni Falcone.

The group was eventually recalled by Toto Riina, the Corleone boss dubbed "the Beast", who decided on another approach. Falcone was murdered in a car bomb near Palermo on May 23, 1992.

Messina Denaro himself was ruthless throughout his career.

In July 1992, after taking part in the murder of Vincenzo Milazzo, the head of the rival Alcamo clan, he strangled the latter's partner, who was three months pregnant. The two bodies were buried in the countryside.

As head of the Castelvetro clan, he was allied to the Corleonesi clan, who were immortalised in the legendary "The Godfather" films.

After Riina was arrested in January 1993, Messina Denaro continued his strategy of all-out terror, providing logistical support to bombings in Florence, Milan and Rome that year, which killed 10 people and wounded around 100.

In November 1993, a court later found, he was one of the organisers of the kidnapping of Giuseppe Di Matteo, then 12, whose father had given testimony about the murder of Falcone.

In one of the most notorious Cosa Nostra incidents, the boy was held for 779 days before being strangled and his body dissolved in acid.

Messina Denaro had disappeared from public view in the summer of 1993,



beginning what would be 30 years on the run from accusations including mafia association, murder, theft and possession of explosives.

In 1994 and 1996, statements from mobsters who turned state witness shed some light on his role within Cosa Nostra.

In 2000, after a maxi-process against the Sicilian Mafia in Trapani, he was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment.

During his decades as a wanted man, Messina Denaro managed his affairs by communicating under the pseudonym "Alessio" through the pizzini system, where messages were left on tiny bits of paper.

His whereabouts and his activities during that time were subject to intense rumour, including that he had plastic surgery to render his appearance unrecognisable.

He had numerous sources of revenue, from drug trafficking to gambling, both in Italy and abroad.

In 2015, an Italian prosecutor on his trail, Teresa Principato, said he had likely eluded capture for so long because he was protected "at a very high level".

She did not say whether this meant Cosa Nostra, politicians or institutions.

"We have confirmation of his presence in Brasil, Spain, Britain, Austria. He travels for extremely high-level business, and his return to Sicily is irregular and increasingly infrequent," she told Il Fatto Quotidiano daily at the time.

In 2020, several of Messina Denaro's collaborators were arrested, tightening the net around the boss.

And in October that year, he was again sentenced in absentia for his role in Falcone's murder.

## Household Wealth Optimism Collapses

LONDON (Dispatches) - Barely two in five people believe their families will be better off in the future, according to a regular global survey that also identified growing levels of distrust in institutions among low-income households.

The Edelman Trust Barometer, which for over two decades has polled the attitudes of thousands of people, found that economic pessimism was at its highest in some of the world's top economies such as the United States, Britain, Germany and Japan.

It further confirmed how societies have been divided by the impacts of the pandemic and inflation. Higher-income households still broadly trust institutions such as government, business, media and NGOs. But alienation is rife among low-income groups.

"This has really shown the mass class divide again," said Richard Edelman, whose Edelman communications group published the survey of over 32,000 respondents in 28 countries interviewed from Nov. 1 to Nov. 28 of last year.

"We saw it in the pandemic because of differential outcomes in terms of health, now we see it in terms of the impact of inflation," he added. The World Health Organization and others have noted the higher toll of the pandemic on the poor, while those on low incomes suffer most from costlier basic items.

Globally, only 40% agreed with the statement "my family and I will be better off in five years" compared to 50% a year before, with advanced economies most downbeat: the United States (36%), Britain (23%), Germany (15%) and Japan (9%).

Fast-growing economies saw much higher scores - albeit lower than last year - with only China bucking the trend with a one percentage point rise to 65% despite the economic disruption caused by its now-relaxed "zero COVID" policies.

Such anxieties reflect deep uncertainty about the state of the global economy as the Ukraine war continues and central banks hike their lending rates to tame inflation. The World Bank on Tuesday warned it could tip into recession this year.

While Edelman's longstanding Trust Index registered an average 63% trust level in key institutions among high-income U.S. respondents, that figure fell to just 40% among low-income groups. Similar income-based divergences were present in Saudi Arabia, China, Japan and the United Arab Emirates.

In some, that hinted at outright polarisation, with high levels of respondents agreeing with the statement "I see deep divisions, and I don't think we'll ever get past them" in countries as different as Argentina, the United States, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and Colombia.

## Myanmar Arms Industry Growing After Army Takeover

BANGKOK (Dispatches) - Companies from at least 13 countries have helped Myanmar build up its capacity to produce weapons that are being used to commit atrocities following a 2021 military takeover, independent international experts have found.

The report released Monday by the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar details how the country has stepped up arms production since the army seized power on Feb. 1, 2021, igniting a mass public opposition movement.

The army's takeover from elected civilian leaders reversed nearly a decade of progress toward democracy after 50 years of military rule. After security forces used lethal force against peaceful demonstrators, opponents of military rule took up arms. Some U.N. experts have characterized the situation as a civil war.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has documented more than 2,700 civilian deaths in the violence, including 277 children, while more than 13,000 people have been detained. The true number is believed to be much higher.

Companies in the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle



East are supporting the military supply chain, the report says, urging those businesses to ensure they are not facilitating human rights abuses.

The growth of the homegrown arms industry comes as some countries have enforced arms embargoes or sanctions against individuals and companies involved in trading or manufacturing arms.

In October, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions against Aung Moe Myint, a businessman close to the army who it said facilitates arms deals on its behalf. His brother, Hlaing Moe Myint, and the trading company they founded, Dynasty International Company Ltd., were also targeted. One of its directors, Myo Thitsar, also was designated for sanctions.

In November, the U.S. imposed sanctions on aircraft suppliers to the military, citing deadly air strikes on civilians.

Myanmar has no private arms makers, so any such companies are run by the Ministry of Defense and Directorate of Defense Industries, the report said.

Local factories still can draw upon licensed technology and overseas supply chains, technical support and other backing, sometimes by sending equipment to Singapore and Taiwan for upgrading and maintenance, it said.

In a statement, council expert Chris Sidoti urged that governments investigate and when justified initiate action against companies that enable Myanmar's military to make weapons used in "indiscriminate attacks on civilians."

### Tehran, Islamabad...

FROM PAGE 1

Ahmed said that the Joint Trade Committee's consensus to ensure phase-wise implementation of border markets and investors' access to the special economic zones would not only strengthen cross-border economic cooperation, but also discourage illegal border trade. This, he said would subsequently improve formal trade between the two countries.

He pointed out that the unavailability of a payment mechanism was a major hurdle, therefore, both countries need to explore other workable payment mechanisms like local currencies. "To broaden the economic ties, the Pak-Iran gas pipeline project also needs to be prioritised."

KCCI Vice President Haris Agar also stressed the need for having a banking channel between the two countries, which would substantially raise the existing trade volume.

Presently, the business communities were unable to directly send and receive payments due to lack of banking channel, which was a major hurdle in improving trade.

### No Undeclared Nuclear Sites...

FROM PAGE 1

The Western side abandoned the nuclear deal and now that it is seeking a return to the agreement, those allegations are renewed, the top nuclear official said.

"We declare that there have been no undeclared activities and undeclared sites in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These are the remarks of the Agency itself," Eslami said.

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

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

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

### Old Fox...

FROM PAGE 1

This is just small simple of British plot against Iran as London still seeks regime change in Iran or bringing a puppet government or ruling system in Iran and it will continue its policy of divide and rule and Iranians should not fear of such bully by the British statesmen.



The British interventionist policy or better to say divide-and-rule policy is not limited to Iran and every day we see some of the masterpiece crimes of the British.

Meanwhile an investigative journalism website has recently revealed that the former United Nations special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, is linked to the British spy agency MI6 through the private conflict resolution company Inter Mediate.

According to the Declassified UK report, the British diplomat, who currently serves as the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, is both a co-founder and an adviser to the firm, which also has ties to the Foreign Office and is known to have among its trustees and advisers a range of former British military and diplomatic figures.

It is proclaimed that Inter Mediate "focuses on the most difficult, complex and dangerous conflicts where other organizations are unable to operate" and "brings together some of the world's leading experts on dialogue and negotiation."

The company was established in 2011 by Griffiths and Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's former chief of staff. Powell has been Inter Mediate's chief executive since its founding.

Powell and Inter Mediate have run numerous projects funded by the Foreign Office in countries such as Burma, Libya and North Korea.

Declassified discovered 23 payments made by the Foreign Office to the company from 2013 to 2020.

The Foreign Office told Declassified it "provided just over £4 million (\$4.86 million) to Inter Mediate between 2011-2020 to support work towards resolving international conflicts."

Inter Mediate, according to its chief executive, launched "starting work" in Yemen and Syria six years before Griffiths became UN envoy to Yemen. At the time, the British diplomat was serving as a senior UN adviser on Syria.

Powell has been described by the specialist media organization, Intelligence Online, as the Foreign Office's "private partner."

This is another evidence that the British infiltrate in the countries through any tool that they can use either statesmen or UN officials, and people in the world and especially in Iran are right not to trust the Britons or officials of some international bodies and blame London for any rift and domestic conflict especially religious, ethnical and political rifts which are used for increasing influence for taming the nations in order to obey them.

So Iranians are right not to let observers from international bodies and organizations to help them or launch any probe in the country because they are acting in favor of Iran's enemies.

We Iranians will never trust the Old Fox (Britain) because we know their true nature no matter their ambassador joins his French and German counterparts to show muscles because this is the Islamic Republic of Iran which will have crushing and strong response to any threat or baseless remarks as I mentioned earlier that historically Iranians believe the British mastermind rifts and seditions in the country and fortunately so far all of those seditions have been failed and will fail in the future, too, God willing.

### Nervous, Hasty Reactions...

FROM PAGE 1

Akbari, 61, was arrested in 2019 after he returned to Tehran from London, where he has relatives. Akbari had engaged with British spies and received cash and other benefits from MI6, including a British passport, €1.8mn, £265,000, and \$50,000.

The ex-official Akbari was executed on Saturday. Iran's judiciary sentenced him to death on charges of spying for UK MI6.

Setayesh also said that Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, a politician and former lawmaker, has been sentenced to jail following conviction in two different cases brought against her. Setayeshi said Hashemi Rafsanjani, the daughter of ex-President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, had been found guilty of two offenses, namely propaganda against the Iranian establishment and insults against sanctities.

The spokesman added that she was sentenced to 15 months in jail in the first case and another 37 months for the second conviction.

Faezeh Hashemi was arrested on September 27, after protests and riots erupted in different Iranian cities over the death of a young woman in police custody.

Last year, she angered Iranians by making disrespectful comments against Prophet Muhammad.



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## Aston Villa to Sign Colombia Forward Duran

**LONDON (Dispatches)** - Aston Villa have reached agreement with Chicago Fire for the transfer of Colombia international Jhon Duran, the Premier League club said. The 19-year-old, who has three caps, scored eight goals for Chicago Fire last season in Major League Soccer (MLS). A report on the American league's official website said the deal is worth up to \$22 million, citing sources. "The deal is subject to the player passing a medical, agreeing personal terms and obtaining the necessary work visa," Villa said in a statement.

## Nuebel Will Not Replace Injured Neuer at Bayern

**BERLIN (Dispatches)** - Goalkeeper Alexander Nuebel, on loan from Bayern Munich to AS Monaco until the end of the season, will not come back to replace injured Manuel Neuer, his agent said. The 26-year-old Nuebel, whose contract with Bayern runs to 2025, had been a main candidate to come in until the end of the season after Germany keeper Neuer broke his leg during a skiing holiday last month. Neuer has been ruled out for months and will miss the rest of the season following surgery.

# Djokovic Storms Into 2nd Round on Australian Open Return

**MELBOURNE (Dispatches)** - Novak Djokovic swept past Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena to launch his bid for a 10th Australian Open title, with the Serb enjoying a rousing reception following his deportation a year ago.

The 35-year-old, who was banned from last year's tournament, showed few signs of the hamstring niggle he picked up in Adelaide this month as he raced to victory on Rod Laver Arena 6-3, 6-4, 6-0.

After not being able to play last year over his Covid vaccination stance, there were concerns over how he might be received by fans in Melbourne.

The city endured lengthy lockdowns during the height of the pandemic.

But, as in Adelaide, the fourth seed walked out to loud cheers and chants of "Nole", with vocal backing during the match from a stadium awash with Serbian flags.

"Thank you for giving me such a welcoming reception that I could only dream of," said Djokovic, who is chasing a record-equalling 22nd major title.

"I feel really happy that I'm back here in Australia and on the court where I have had the biggest success in my career.

"Definitely this court is the most special court in my life and I couldn't ask for a better start to the tournament."

He arrived at Melbourne Park in sizzling form after ending 2022 by winning another ATP Finals title, then followed that up by triumphing at the Adelaide International.

Meanwhile American Taylor Fritz dispelled any notion of a "Netflix curse" at the Australian Open, even as it claimed another high-profile victim.

Nick Kyrgios, Paula Badosa and Ajla Tomljanovic all pulled out of the Grand Slam with injury -- all three are featured in the new Netflix documentary series "Break Point".

So too does Italy's 13th seed Matteo Berrettini, who promptly lost to British veteran Andy Murray in the first round in Melbourne.

Norwegian second seed Casper Ruud battled through to the Australian Open second round as he kicked off a campaign that could see him become world number one.

The 24-year-old ground down Tomas Machac of the Czech Republic 6-3, 7-6 (8/6), 6-7 (5/7), 6-3 on Margaret Court Arena in a match that finished after 1:00am.

He will next play American Jenson Brooksby who toppled Australian Christopher O'Connell.

"It's been a long day," said the world number three Ruud, whose build-up suffered an unexpected blow when he lost his first match at the Auckland Classic warm-up tournament.

"I'm very eager to hopefully have a good tournament and this was a good start, a tough one.

"Tomas played well, very aggressive, but I was able to come back and stay strong towards the end, so very happy," he added.

Ruud missed last year's event with an ankle injury, but recovered to enjoy a breakthrough 2022, reaching the final of both the French and US Opens.



But Fritz, who is also in the fly-on-the-wall series, defeated Nikoloz Basilashvili of Georgia and afterwards dismissed any light-hearted social media talk of a supposed curse. "I noticed the people pulling out of the tournament but I didn't know it was a thing," said the 25-year-old.

"I'm not going to lose my first-round match because I'm in the Netflix show, so I didn't think about that."

Fritz defeated Basilashvili 6-4, 6-2, 4-6, 7-5 and faces either Australian Alexei Popyrin or Taiwan's Tseng Chun-hsin in round two.

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## Bolt Under Fraud Probe Over Millions Feared Missing

**MIAMI (Dispatches)** - Jamaican financial authorities have launched an investigation into a company holding investments for eight-times Olympic gold medallist Usain Bolt after reports that he may have lost millions to large scale fraud.

Jamaica's Financial Services Commission (FSC) said in a statement that it had placed the firm, Stocks and Securities Limited (SSL), in "enhanced oversight" while it conducts the probe.

Bolt's manager Nugent Walker told the Jamaica Gleaner newspaper that the retired sprinter, one of the greatest athletes of all time, has had investments with the company for over a decade.

"All the relevant steps have been taken to come to the bottom of this," Walker told the paper, saying the athlete had noticed discrepancies with his account on Wednesday.

"He's been with this entity over 10 years... His entire portfolio is being reviewed," he added.

The newspaper said millions of dollars were reported missing from Bolt's account. Walker was not immediately available for comment.

SSL did not respond to calls made to their office on Friday.

The FSC said it was "aware of reports of allegations of fraud at one of its licensees, Stocks and Securities Limited (SSL)."

## Sabalenka Breezes Into Australian Open 2nd Round

**MELBOURNE (Dispatches)** - Fifth seed Aryna Sabalenka breezed into the second round of the Australian Open, needing only 69 minutes to beat the Czech Republic's Tereza Martincova 6-1, 6-4.

"It wasn't that easy, I'm super-happy to start with the win," said Sabalenka, who has been known to suffer from nerves in the past.

At her two season-opening tournaments in Australia last year she was reduced to tears as her serve collapsed.

"I have to work on my mindset and stay calm and not get too upset when I make mistakes," she said. "I really believe this is the only thing missing in my game."

Sabalenka, who reached the semi-finals at the US open last year, continued her good form in Australia this year after winning the recent Adelaide International without dropping a set.

She hit 29 winners and saved all five break points faced and was rarely troubled as she looks to get past the last 16 in the Australian Open for the first time, having reached that stage in each of the last two seasons.

The Belarusian world number five will play Shelby Rogers next, after the American beat Dutch qualifier Arianne Hartono 6-4, 6-3.

## Klopp Not Too Loyal To Underperformers

**LIVERPOOL (Dispatches)** - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said he is not being "too loyal" to long-serving players who are underperforming at the club but that a lack of adequate replacements means he has to keep picking them.

Liverpool have failed to mount a Premier League title challenge this season and are down the table in ninth — 19 points behind leaders Arsenal.

"I am loyal, I think everyone should be loyal, but I am not too loyal," Klopp told reporters ahead of Liverpool's FA Cup third-round replay at Wolverhampton Wanderers.

"You have a good player who did a lot of good stuff in the past and then maybe, in your mind, you think: 'That's it for him now.' If you can then go out and bring in another player to replace him then it makes sense from both sides.

# Ronaldo to Make Saudi Debut in Friendly Against PSG



Ronaldo is set to play in Saudi Arabia for the first time since joining Al Nassr after he was named as captain of Riyadh ST XI for an exhibition match against Lionel Messi's Paris St Germain, officials announced.

The 37-year-old Portuguese will lead the team made up of players from Saudi sides Al Hilal and Al Nassr against Messi's PSG in what will be the latest chapter of the

**RIYADH (Dispatches)** - Cristiano Ronaldo is set to play in Saudi Arabia for the first time since joining Al Nassr after he was named as captain of Riyadh ST XI for an exhibition match against Lionel Messi's Paris St Germain, officials announced.

The 37-year-old Portuguese will lead the team made up of players from Saudi sides Al Hilal and Al Nassr against Messi's PSG in what will be the latest chapter of the

celebrated global soccer rivalry.

The line-up also features Saudi internationals Salem Al-Dawsari, who scored in the shock group-stage win over Argentina in last year's World Cup, and Saud Abdulhamid.

The highly anticipated showdown, which reportedly had more than 2 million online ticket requests, will take place in Riyadh on Thursday.

The bidding for a VIP "Beyond Imagination" ticket to the match has already topped 10 million riyals (\$2.66 million) in an auction that was set to end on Tuesday.

## Schmeichel Defends Man Utd Presence in Davos

**DAVOS (Dispatches)** - Manchester United great Peter Schmeichel defended the club's decision to set up a luxury lounge at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week which has sparked speculation that it is being used to market the team to potential buyers.

Positioned near global software companies, consultancies and banks, the club has created a lounge on the main high street of Davos, a luxury Swiss ski resort teeming with billionaires and CEOs this week during the annual Forum.

"If you look at what we say about ourselves -- we say that we are one of the biggest sporting brands in the world -- then I think you have to back it up by having a presence in places like this," Schmeichel, who is acting as an ambassador, told AFP.

"Of course, our football club is not just about the commercial side, making money," added the Danish legend, who won five Premier League titles and the Champions League with United.

Ellie Norman, a club spokeswoman, said the lounge -- with a bar, multiple seating areas and screens showing club heroes -- served as a place to meet with existing and future corporate partners and sponsors.

"We are in a strategic review. That's a process that's ongoing," she told AFP, referring to the club-owning Glazer family's announcement in November that they were considering "all strategic alternatives" for the club including a sale.

"We don't know the outcome of that, but that is not connected to why we're back in Davos," she adding, stating that Manchester United had been a partner of the World Economic Forum since 2019.



## Messi Greater Than Maradona

**BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches)** - Lionel Messi has surpassed Diego Maradona as the greatest player of all time, Argentina's World Cup winning coach Lionel Scaloni has said.

"If I have to choose one I choose Leo, I have something special with him. He is the best of all time although Maradona was also great," Scaloni told Spanish radio station Cope on Tuesday.

Argentina fans have long preferred Maradona over Messi but attitudes appear to be shifting after the Paris St Germain forward led the team to lift the World Cup last month for the first time since Maradona inspired them to win it in 1986.

Scaloni also revealed that he prioritized speaking to Messi when he was named Argentina coach in 2018, while the forward was taking a break from international duty following the disastrous World Cup in Russia.

"The first thing we did was have a video call with Messi. He said he was honoured and the first thing we said to him was 'Come back. We'll wait for you'. That's what we did and eight months later he came and found an incredible group," Scaloni added.

"Coaching Messi is not difficult. You cannot correct him on a technical level but sometimes you can instruct him to press or to attack in a certain way. When he smells blood he is the number one."

Scaloni also defended his goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez after he was criticised for his overzealous celebrations following Argentina's triumph, such as making an obscene gesture when collecting the Golden Glove award and carrying a toy baby with Kylian Mbappe's face on it during the open-top bus parade.

"There are attitudes which he will not be happy with, but he is a spectacular guy. He is like a child. He is an incredible guy, his personality has given so much to the group," Scaloni added.

