

The Dates of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian's Visit to Russia Are Being Worked Out, Zamir Kabulov, Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Second Asia Department, Said Friday

IRAN NEWS

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Leader Urges Young Girls To Study for Sake of Iran's Progress

TEHRAN (MNA) - The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei received a group of teenage girls who have turned the Taklif age on the Imam Ali birthday anniversary on Friday evening.

Ahead the blessing birthday anniversary of Imam Ali (AS), Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei received a group of teenage girls who have turned the Taklif age for a meeting at Hosseiniyeh of Imam Khomeini (RA) on Friday afternoon.

The Taklif Celebration which is called "the Celebration of Angeles" in Iran is the occasion when a Muslim teenage girl or boy reaches the age of observing the religious obligations and responsibilities.

The Leader led the Maghrib and Isha prayers.

After the ceremony, Ayatollah Khamenei addressed the attendees and wished a happy Taklif Celebration to them.

The Leader urged them to say their prayers regularly as the best way to show their love for God.

He hailed the role that women have played in the progress of the country in the history, adding, "Today, there are a lot of prominent and committed women in the scientific, practical and jihad (great efforts) sectors, who are a matter of the pride for the country, more than in the past."

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Iran Nuclear Advances Promising, Despite Cruel Sanctions



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI) stressed that enemies failed to stop Iran's nuclear progress by imposing sanctions, industrial sabotage, and terror.

Attending the opening ceremony of Iran's 53rd Nuclear Industry achievements exhibition, and in response to Iran Press Mohammad Eslami noted: Despite efforts of the west to destroy Iran's nuclear industry, derivatives of heavy water have made great progress in medical and medicine sectors.

Eslami further noted: In the pharmaceutical field, Iran is deriving medicine that can replace their chemical ones in the world, and it is considered a fundamental development. Referring to the Islamic Revolution's victory, and highlighting Iran's prominent achievements, he concluded: "Today a cereal detoxification device was unveiled which can be useful in food industry, health sector. It improves country's economy, and will increase agricultural products' export."

During the event, the achievements of the Atomic Energy Organization, including the nuclear safety system center, the design, and construction of various nuclear measurement systems, nuclear fusion technology, the acquisition of knowledge and quantum technology, the design and construction of various industrial and medical lasers, the development of agriculture with nuclear technology have been displayed.

He also lamented the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) latest report about the country's nuclear activities at Fordow nuclear facility, saying the IAEA inspector's interpretation of their visit to the nuclear plant was "incorrect."

The UN nuclear watchdog on Wednesday accused Iran of making an undeclared change to the interconnection between the two clusters of advanced machines enriching uranium to up to 60% purity at its Fordow plant.

"The agency's position is regrettable," d Eslami, who heads the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said, during the opening ceremony of an exhibition on the country's latest achievements in the field of nuclear industry.

Eslami explained that the IAEA inspector's interpretation of their inspection of Fordow was incorrect, but they immediately reported it to the agency.

"We immediately provided the explanation [to the IAEA]...the agency's inspector found out that they had made a mistake," Eslami added.

Back in November, Iran sent a letter to the IAEA informing it of a decision to start enriching uranium to the purity level of 60% at its Fordow nuclear facility.

Eslami said the exhibition aims to prove that the nature of the country's nuclear achievements is completely different from what the West claims about non-peaceful objectives of the nuclear work.

He added that Iran intends to generate 20 percent of the country's electricity via nuclear energy.

The Iranian nuclear chief also said that the use of nuclear energy in the medical fields, the environment, health and food security is also on the organization's agenda.

The 53rd exhibition of Iran's nuclear industry achievements was inaugurated at Milad Tower on Thursday.

The exhibition showcases the latest nuclear products made in Iran. Attended by Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Mohammad Eslami, the expo put on display different applications of the nuclear sector, from centrifuges to radiopharmaceuticals and particle accelerators.

In recent years, Iran has been trying to diversify the applications of its nuclear sector. Besides power generation, the country is now focusing on particle accelerators for food irradiation and radiotherapy.

Since Iran indigenized its nuclear industry in 2006, it has constantly been targeted by sanctions over what the West calls fears of a nuclear bomb, something which Tehran categorically rejects, saying its nuclear program is civilian and peaceful.

By displaying these nuclear products, Iran tries to show the West that sanctions cannot disrupt its nuclear program.

At the same time, it wants to tell the parties to the 2015 deal that Tehran will keep building up its nuclear industry even beyond the JCPOA limits, if sanctions are not removed.

Iran Rebukes Macron's Double Standard

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has censured the latest "unconstructive" remarks by French President Emmanuel Macron after his talks with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu against Tehran's peaceful nuclear activities.

Macron warned in a statement that Iran's nuclear activities "would inevitably have consequences."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said on Friday the French president spoke against Iran's peaceful nuclear program while it seems he has forgotten the Israeli regime, which possesses tens of nuclear warheads in its nuclear arsenal, refuses to accept any international supervision. "Instead of expressing fake concerns about Iran's peaceful nuclear activities, which are completely under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the French side should inform the world about the ways that the Zionist state terrorism has obtained nuclear weapons," Kanaani said.

He said that meeting with Israel's prime minister is in itself worthy of condemnation as the world considers the Israeli regime to be the manifestation of the sinister phenomenon of organized terrorism, violence, massacre and displacement of oppressed women and children in West Asia, including in Palestine.

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Iran Entitled to Firmly Respond to Israeli Threats, Wrongful Actions

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's ambassador to the UN has underscored Israel's liability for a foiled "terrorist" drone attack on a military workshop in the central Iranian city of Isfahan, saying the Islamic Republic reserves the right to firmly respond to any threats or wrongful actions by the Tel Aviv regime.

Amir Saied Iravani made the remarks in a letter to the president of the Security Council and UN secretary general, days after Iran's air defense system successfully intercepted and brought down two of the three Micro Aerial Vehicles (MAVs) used by the Israeli regime in its aggression against the complex, effectively thwarting the attack.

He said that based on early investigations, the Israeli regime was responsible for the attempted act of aggression in Isfahan.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran reserves its legitimate and inherent right, in accordance with international law and the United Nations Charter, to defend its national security and respond resolutely to any threats or wrongful actions by the Israeli regime, wherever and whenever deemed necessary," the envoy added.

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Muslims to Punish Desecrators of Holy Quran

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says those who desecrated the Holy Quran should learn from the fate of anti-Islam notorious novelist Salman Rushdie as Muslims will punish them.

Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks in an address to the closing ceremony of the 12th round of Holy Quran Competitions in Iran's northeastern city of Mashhad.

Salami said the light and glow of the Quran is so "magnificent" that enemies cannot bear it and so they desecrate it. "We say to those who burned the Quran that this fire will engulf your body and turn your bodies into corpses. Live a secret life as of today and suffer nightmares every night, [as] Muslims will not leave you alone even if decades pass," the IRGC commander underlined.

Warning that the Iranian youths face enemies' conspiracies as the foes try to drive them away from religion and push them to accept the Western culture, Salami said, "It is a source of pride that the youths of our country live with the Quran and we all learn life lessons from this heavenly book."

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Pakistan to Seek Relief From U.S. on Iran Gas Sanctions

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Top Pakistani government authorities have decided to initiate diplomatic endeavors to seek relief from Washington on sanctions imposed on Tehran so that Pakistan could initiate building a portion of the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline.

"This has been decided in a high-level meeting on Tuesday (January 31, 2023) with the prime minister in the chair over the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. The government would also initiate efforts to persuade Iran not to seek a penalty if Pakistan fails to build the portion of the pipeline in its territory up to the Iranian border by February-March 2024," a senior official who was a part of the meeting told The News.

The official said: "Iran has already asked Pakistan in clear words to erect the pipeline by February-March 2024 or be ready to pay a penalty of \$18 billion." The News broke the story in its edition of January 31, 2023, with the headline "Iran dangles the threat of \$18 billion penalty over the pipeline project."

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Tehran Dismisses Allegations of Smuggling Arms to Yemen

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has roundly dismissed Western allegations of smuggling weapons and ammunition to Yemen, stressing that arms exporters and all those who sponsor the siege against the Yemeni nation are in position to comment on the ongoing crisis in the impoverished country.

Spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry Nasser Kanani in a statement rejected the claims that French naval forces in January had seized thousands of Iranian-supplied weapons and ammunition headed to Yemen as politically-motivated and meant to misinform the world public opinion.

"The countries that are overtly involved in and directly responsible for the inhumane blockade of Yemeni people through arms sale and providing intelligence to the countries waging a military campaign against the country are in position to level such accusations against others," Kan'ani stated.

"Instead of persisting in playing blame game and abdicating their responsibilities in imposing the war against the defenseless and oppressed Yemeni people, such states had better put an end to their opportunistic and profit-seeking approach in the brutal onslaught as soon as possible," the senior Iranian diplomat pointed out.

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Raisi Urges Speeding Up Reconstruction of Quake-Hit Khoy

TEHRAN (MNA) - In the third follow-up on the situation of the people in the quake-hit city of Khoy, President Raisi held a phone call with the West Azarbaijan province governor on Friday and urged for speeding up the reconstruction. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, during the phone call, also ordered increasing the number of temporary accommodation camps and shelters due to the frigid cold weather and meet the people's needs. The governor of the West Azarbaijan province, for his part, provided Raisi with a detailed report on the latest relief situation. So far, 60 temporary accommodation camps have been established in Khoy city, and the number of these camps will increase to 100, according to him.

Enemies Failed in Economic Warfare

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says enemies have failed in their attempts to wage an economic warfare against the Islamic Republic, stressing there is no concern about the country's foreign exchange reserves.

"You had a miscalculation. You are causing sedition in the issues of our region, our people know you well," Raisi said in a visit to Shah Abdol Azim shrine in Shahre-Ray, south of the capital, Tehran, on Thursday.

The Iranian president pointed to the volume of Iran's oil exports and said, "Enemies thought they could stop our trade, but they failed, and today our trade has grown by 40-50%."

Stressing that the Iranian nation will overcome the difficult economic situation through cooperation and perseverance, Raisi said, "We have stated many times that there are no worries about foreign exchange reserves."

The chief executive said European countries that were involved in a hybrid warfare and sanctions against the Iranian people "are sending a message that let's sit down and talk together, but "we believe that despite all hardships, the situation will progress in such a way that the problems will be fixed," he added.

"When the sanctions failed, they started a hybrid war, and all parties participated in it, and they thought they could stop our country, and they started [to stoke] sedition with all their strength and capacity, and they imagined they would achieve success, but they also faced defeat in the hybrid war," he noted.

Former US president Donald Trump unilaterally left the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in May 2018 and re-imposed the anti-Iran sanctions that the deal had lifted. He placed additional sanctions on Iran under other pretexts not related to the nuclear case as part of his "maximum pressure" campaign.



The negotiations to salvage the JCPOA have been at a standstill since August 2022 due to Washington's insistence on its hard-nosed position of not removing all the sanctions that were imposed on the Islamic Republic by the previous US administration.

Raisi also took part in the administrative council of Shahr-e Rey during his provincial tour, coinciding with the second day of Fajr (dawn) 10-day.

In the council, Raisi talked about the capacities of the city for investment in such fields as agriculture and technology.

Raisi stressed the establishment of technology parks as the activity the grounds for which is fully prepared in the city, highlighting the fact that the city was home to such great scholars as Abdul Azim al-Hassani (AS).

He also emphasized the fact that to have economic and scientific growth, it is required that the young talents and experts were trusted and more work is done.

Shahr-e Rey or simply Rey is the capital of Rey County in Tehran Province, Iran. Formerly a distinct city, it has now been absorbed into the metropolitan area of Greater Tehran as the 20th district of municipal Tehran, the capital city of Iran.

Rey is different and independent from the other parts of Tehran by its history dating back to 6000 years ago and valuable historical, religious, and cultural features.

Trade, handicrafts, agriculture, and animal husbandry are the main jobs of the Shahr-e Rey people.

U.S. Will Be Defeated Again If It Return to Persian Gulf

TEHRAN (MNA) - The Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy says that the Americans will be defeated again if they return to the Persian Gulf.



Speaking in Kordkuy city in northern Province of Golestan in a ceremony to commemorate the memory of 313 martyrs in the city on the occasion of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution victory, Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri said that today, Iran is proud that has no fear of the United States which had considered itself the world's ruler.

The IRGC Navy commander said that Iran will not kneel down against the US as it did not do that in the past during the time of Imam Khomeini (RA).

"If the Americans return to the Persian Gulf again, they will face another failure because they have been defeated before and the ardent children of the revolution have no fear," he noted.

Saying that Imam Khomeini's steadfastness against arrogance led to the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Tangsiri added that the Iranian people have sacrificed their lives during these 44 years and again will stand against the enemies. He also praised the sacrifice of the Iranian martyrs in defending the country's land.

Referring to Iran's significant growth in various fields, especially in the field of military after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Tangsiri said that the enemy cannot hurt Iran anymore.

"We stand firm in defending our rights in the Persian Gulf and the other seas," he added.

Foreign Hand Behind Terrorism In Pakistan and Iran

IRAN NEW POLITICAL DESK



TEHRAN - Iranian ambassador to Pakistan Syed Mohammad Ali Hosseini stated that foreign powers were behind terrorism in Pakistan and Iran.

"Terrorism is happening in Pakistan and Iran from outside. Pakistan and Iran will jointly implement the action plan against terrorism," he said.

"The series of joint security sessions between Pakistan and Iran is also going on. The terrorist attack in the mosque in Peshawar cannot be related to Islam in any way," he added.

"No country has the right to use its territory against another country. Unless the situation in Afghanistan improves, the situation cannot become better in the region," he asserted.

"The only solution to improve these conditions is the promotion of employment and trade in the region. The trade activities between Pakistan and Iran are going to increase further," he stated.

"The land corridor projects between Pakistan and Iran are being strengthened further. The railway corridor for trade between Pakistan and Iran is active," he added.

"Pakistan can increase its trade activities through Iran to Europe and Central Asia. India should also be included in the trade corridor," he pointed out.

"The border between Pakistan and Iran is 920km long. Iran is ready to provide electricity to Pakistan at a very low cost. If Pakistan wants, it can buy electricity from Iran at less than half price," he offered.

"Iran and Pakistan can use local currency for trade. Iran and Pakistan together are going to expand trade to other countries in the region," he maintained.

"Iran has completed the work on the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project on its territory. Pakistan has been given a deadline to lay the pipeline on its territory by March 2024," he told 24NewsHD TV channel.

"Pakistan was given a five-year period for the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project, which is ending next year," he added.

"Iran is ready to provide free electricity to the border areas of Pakistan. In the future, Iran will soon supply up to 500 megawatts of electricity to Pakistan," he said.

"Factories will be run in Pakistan with the electricity supplied from Iran. There are ample educational opportunities for Pakistani students in Iran," he added.

"Train and sea travel plan for tourism in Iran and Pakistan will be implemented in future. There are facilities for obtaining tourist and educational visas for Iran. As many as 250,000 visas were issued from Pakistan to Iran in one year," he stated.

FM, Ortega Discuss Countering Common Enemy, Sanctions

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has condemned the unlawful sanctions that United States and certain Western countries have imposed against Iranian individuals and entities, stressing that the Islamic Republic has managed to move forward despite the coercive measures designed to stop the country's progress.

Amirabdollahian made the remarks in a meeting with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega in the South American country's capital Managua on Thursday evening.

"Although the sanctions of the United States and some states have caused grave problems, we have managed to rely on our domestic capabilities and make notable progress in various spheres. The guidelines of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution [Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei] and active contribution of women and youths have played a prominent and influential role in this regard," the Iranian foreign minister noted.

Amirabdollahian went on to point to the Vienna negotiations on the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and removal of sanctions, stating that Washington has been persistently pursuing communications with Tehran.

"Given our Iranian and Islamic culture, we have never left the negotiating table. Nevertheless, we will pursue the country's national interests in a dignified manner during any round of talks," he stressed.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian Foreign Minister voiced Tehran's enthusiasm for closer relations with Managua in various fields.

He emphasized that Iran sets no limits to the promotion of cooperation with Nicaragua



Amirabdollahian highlighted that top diplomats as well as business officials from Iran and Nicaragua have signed memorandums of understanding on mechanisms for political cooperation and expansion of trade ties between the two countries.

He said Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi plans to go on a tour of Latin America and visit Nicaragua, extending the Iranian president's official invitation to his Nicaraguan counterpart to visit Tehran.

For his part, Ortega stated that Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres and the human rights institutions affiliated with the world body are being manipulated by imperialist and arrogant powers.

"We have a common enemy. The enemy which you fought and defeated in 1979 is that same foe that we (rose up against in the same year)," the Nicaraguan president said.

"The enemies of global peace and tranquility have maintained their imperialist policies, and consider the whole world, not just Latin America, as their backyard. They have committed crimes, wars and violence against nations, encouraged slavery in the name of democracy and occupied many countries. World nations have, however, fought and won back their independence. This is while imperialists continue to press ahead with their policies and terrorist acts," he said.

Ortega added, "The secretary general of the United Nations and human rights institutions affiliated to the world body have become tools in the hands of imperialism. We must join forces to confront the process."

"The path of future is quite clear as the dominance of imperialism over the world cannot last any longer," the Nicaraguan president said.

Baku Bent on Straining Ties With Tehran

TEHRAN (PressTV) - In the wake of Friday's shooting incident at Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran, a series of hostile measures taken by Baku have led to diplomatic tensions between the two countries.

Iran's government spokesman Ali Bahadori-Jahromi, speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting in the Iranian capital on Wednesday, said "judicial and diplomatic measures" have been taken over the incident.

The shooting incident took place on Friday morning when an armed man entered the embassy premises and opened fire at the staff. The police chief of Tehran, after the incident, said the assailant was immediately arrested

and added that the investigation pointed to "personal and family-related problems" as the motive of the attack.

Despite that, Azerbaijan evacuated its staff from the embassy in a surprise move on Sunday and also issued a travel advisory for Iran. Azerbaijan's foreign ministry in a statement on Wednesday alleged that Iran tried to "prevent" the country's push for international organizations to condemn what it called a "terrorist attack".

In a separate development, Azerbaijani media said on Wednesday that at least 39 people had been arrested for alleged participation in "sabotage activities and promotion of pro-Iran propaganda".

This is after Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in a Twitter post demanded an investigation into what he called a "terrorist act".

Bahadori-Jahromi in his remarks on Wednesday said Iran's diplomatic missions in Europe have come under a spate of attacks in recent months amid riots in Iran, but nobody raised questions about the security of diplomatic missions there.

He particularly mentioned an armed attack against Iran's ambassador to Denmark in October.

Iran Censures U.S. House Committee Vote to Oust Ilhan Omar

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry has censured a decision by the Republicans in the US House of Representatives to oust Democrat Ilhan Omar from a high-profile House committee.

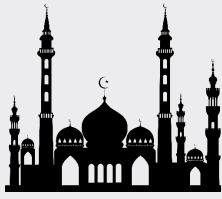
The Republican-led chamber on Thursday voted to oust Somali-born Omar from her seat on the influential Foreign Affairs Committee over the Muslim

lawmaker's mocking of American politicians for their unwarranted support of the Israeli regime in exchange for financial rewards.

In reaction to the highly politicized move, Nasser Kanaani said boycotting a critic of the Israeli apartheid regime depicts the United States' "parliamentary tyranny."

"Ousting Ilhan Omar black Muslim critic of Israeli Apartheid from a House Committee indicates practical commitment of U.S. to motto of #women, life, freedom," Kanaani tweeted, referring to the key slogan behind the recent Western-backed riots across Iran.

The spokesman added that the U.S. resorted to the slogan as a means to interfere in Iran's internal affairs.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:18
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:54
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:35
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:00

16. Say: "If Allah had so willed, I should not have rehearsed it to you, nor would He have made it known to you. A whole life-time before this have I tarried amongst you: will ye not then understand?"

17. Who doth more wrong than such as forge a lie against Allah, or deny His Signs? But never will prosper those who sin.

Surah 10. Jonah (16 - 17)

Iran Most Modern Solar Farm Launched

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has launched its most modern solar farm in its central province of Semnan amid plans by the Energy Ministry to boost renewables capacity and to make them more economically viable.

The 10 megawatt (MW) solar farm, inaugurated on Thursday in the city of Damghan by Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian, will generate 40% more energy compared to similar farms thanks to the technologies used in the plant, said a report by Tasnim news agency.

The report said the farm is equipped with bifacial solar panels, a modern light detection system and home-grown robotic panel cleaners which help it significantly reduce its water consumption and maintenance costs.

A private company has invested 5.8 million euros to build the solar farm in Damghan, said the report.

A report by the official IRNA news agency said the inverters, transformers and



other equipment installed in the solar farm have been supplied by domestic companies, adding that launching renewable projects in Iran have become more economically viable in recent years because of increased presence of local firms in the projects.

The launch of the solar farm in Damghan comes amid efforts by the Iranian government to boost renewables capacity in Iran, a country where a bulk of electricity comes from thermal power plants that mostly use natural gas or gas oil to generate power.

Senior Energy Ministry authorities said on Thursday that total renewables capacity in Iran had exceeded 1,020 MW, adding that a target of creating 10,000 MW of new renewables capacity by 2025 will be within reach.

Tehran Prepares to Export Large Shipment of Honey to China

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran will supply a large shipment of honey to China in the near future, a first of its kind for the country's honey industry.

An official in the Iranian agriculture ministry (MAJ) said that up to 2,000 metric tons (mt) of honey will be supplied to China based on a contract signed between the two countries last year.

The figure is nearly equivalent to Iran's total annual honey exports.

Toraj Saremi said honey exports to China will begin once the MAJ meets the hygiene and safety standards set by Chinese authorities.

"It is expected that exports of high-quality Iranian honey to China could begin in the near future through a direct export line between Iran and China," said Saremi.

He said exports to China will give Iranian honey producers an opportunity to market their products in other East Asian markets.

Iran's agriculture minister Javad Sadatinejad and China's customs chief Yu Jianhua signed an agreement in July last year to allow the exports of citrus fruits and honey from Iran to China.

Authorities were hopeful at the time that the agreements could pave the way for a diversification of Iranian exports to China away from traditional shipments of oil products, petrochemicals and minerals.

Agrifood shipments currently account for around 15% of Iran's annual exports to China, according to the Iranian customs office figures.

MAJ figures released in April last year showed that the country had become the third largest producer of honey in the world after China and Turkey with an annual output of 111,000 mt.

The country had some 11 million bee colonies in nearly 100,000 bee farms last year, the fifth

Iran Among Top Steel Producers in World

ISFAHAN (IRNA) - Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade of the Islamic Republic of Iran Reza Fatemi Amin said that the country ranked seventh among the top ten steel producers in November 2022.

Addressing reporters in the unveiling ceremony of the production line of stainless-steel sheet in Isfahan, the minister said on Thursday that Iran could reach the seventh rank in terms of steel production in November 2022.

According to the minister, the steel industry in Iran is an advanced industry, which produces more than 30 million tons of steel at national level.

The production of the product is not only helps supply the domestic requirements but also is very lucrative and brings value-added profit for the country, which gives Iran economic authority, he noted.



In a bid to have economic authority in the world, Iran should produce products that a few countries are capable of producing them, he argued.

The production of steel assists the Islamic country to lower the level of dependence to other nations, he said, adding that the steel production can pave the way for achieving economic power

at international export arena.

As to the unveiling of production line of stainless-steel sheet at the Mobarakeh Steel Company, the minister said that the move will not only be profitable for the firm but also honorable for the country.

The stainless-steel sheet production line has been designed and implemented in the West Asia and North Africa region for the first time.

Economic Growth Rate of 3.6% for September-Quarter

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Initial data released by the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) show the Iranian economy grew by 3.6% year on year in the three months to September 22.

CBI figures published showed that the non-oil sector of the Iranian economy had expanded by 3.1% in the September quarter last year compared to the same quarter in 2021.

The CBI uses currency prices reported in 2016 as a baseline for its calculation of the gross domestic product (GDP) in Iran. One US dollar is currently worth 447,000 rials in the unofficial market in Iran, up significantly from a rate of 37,480 rials reported in late 2016.

The bank had reported an economic growth rate of 4.4% for Iran for the calendar year to late March 2022. Its Wednesday figures showed the economy had expanded by 3% in the first half of the current calendar year.

Elaborating on September quarter growth figures, the CBI said the Iranian oil sector's GDP had grown by 10.4% compared to the same quarter in 2021.

The manufacturing and mining sector in Iran expanded by 6.9% year on year in the three months to late September while services and agriculture grew by 2.4% and 0.8%, respectively, over the period, according to the CBI figures.

Tobacco Company to Build Cigarette Plant in Zimbabwe

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Tobacco Company (ITC) will build a cigarette plant in Zimbabwe as part of an agreement reached between officials of the two countries.

Reports in local media on Thursday said an agreement for the construction of the ITC's plant in Zimbabwe had been finalized in a meeting earlier in the day in Harare between the company's CEO Mohammad Sheikhan and Zimbabwe's agriculture minister Anxious Jongwe Masuka.

The plant will produce ITC's main cigarette brand Bahman using tobacco supplies from Zimbabwean farms, said the reports.

The ITC said on its website that the agreement signed in Harare will also enable the company to receive tobacco supplies from Zimbabwe to use it in its cigarette factories in Iran or for re-exporting to Central Asian countries.

Other Iranian-made cigarette brands will be exported to Zimbabwe under the agreement reached on Thursday,

said the company.

Iran's tobacco sector has grown in recent years amid lower imports of international brands and increasing demand for local products.

The boom has enabled the ITC, a company established in 1928, to revive many of its idle plants and to launch exports to several countries in West and Central Asia.

Belarus Ready to Expand Trade With Iran

ASTARA (IRNA) - Belarusian Ambassador to Iran Dmitry Koltsov said the two countries have long-running friendly ties and that the European country is ready to expand trade with the Islamic Republic.

Koltsov made the comment during a meeting with Enayat Rezaiepour, the governor of the city of Astara, Gilan Province in northern Iran.

The Belarusian official said that Astara has proper transport facilities and can greatly contribute to the exchange of goods between the two countries.

Rezaiepour on his part said that the northern Iranian city has numerous capacities for cooperation, including its tourism sector.



Iran Resumes Gas Import From Turkmenistan

GORGAN (IRNA) - Turkmenistan has resumed exporting gas to Iran, including to the northern province of Golestan, which was halted in the recent cold wave, a provincial official said.

Golestan's Governor-General Ali-Mohammad Zanganeh said in a Thursday ceremony of inaugurating some economic and constructional projects on the occasion of the ten-day Fajr celebration (February 1 to 11) that the resumption of exporting Turkmenistan's gas to Iran has its roots in the enhancement of political and economic diplomacy pursued by the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi.

Pointing to the fact that gas per capita consumption in Iran is 4.2 times the world average, he urged the Iranians to optimize energy consumption in order to prevent gas shortage in the cold season.

As to the construction of a petrochemical complex in Golestan province, he noted that the authorities have made all-out efforts to remove obstacles in the way of implementing the project; so, the half-finished complex would become operational in the near future.

Gholam-Reza Montazeri, lawmaker, said that the Islamic Revolution was a sacred foundation, which grew based on self-confidence, and that late Imam Khomeini promoted self-sufficiency and independence as the major objectives of the Islamic Republic.

Isa Paeinmahalli, governor of Gorgan city, said that the provincial officials plan to inaugurate 328 projects during this year's ten-day Fajr festival.

The Fajr celebration is the time when the Iranians commemorate the timeline between the return of Imam Khomeini to Tehran and the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

Gov't Exempts Import of Foreign Currencies From Taxation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of the Iranian National Tax Administration Davood Manzoor has announced that all persons and entities are entitled to freely import foreign currencies from customs offices.

According to the official, the National Tax Administration issued a statement ordering all customs offices to allow entering of foreign currencies and money orders; thus, the entry of foreign currencies, such as banknotes and money orders are exempted from taxation.

The new circular provides any person or entity to import foreign currencies as much as desired from official customs offices and the security and law enforcement forces should not hinder the process, he noted.

On the basis of the new administrative circular, the Central Bank of Iran, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran and other apparatus are tasked to facilitate the entry of foreign currencies, and the economic operators should not be afraid of taxation and the supervisions of the source of the capital.

The new circular would be in place from the date of declaration until November 21, 2023.

Iran Among Top 10 in of 4 Livestock, Poultry Products

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran stands among the top 10 countries in four livestock and poultry products, an official said.

Iran is among the top 10 states in the world in producing four products of poultry meat, eggs, honey, and silkworm, the Deputy Minister of Agriculture said.

Iran ranks third in the production of honey in the world, Hossein Damavandinezhad said.

He also said that the Islamic Republic of Iran ranks eighth in silkworm cultivating and poultry meat.

With producing 1.2 million tons of eggs, Iran ranks tenth in the world, he further noted.

He added that China, Russia, and Belarus are interested in importing Iranian livestock products.

Norway to Order 54 New Army Tanks From Germany

OSLO (Dispatches) - Norway will order 54 new German-made Leopard 2 tanks for its army from the Krauss-Maffei Wegmann Group, and will get an option to buy a further 18 tanks at a later time, the government said.

"We ensure that we have the same tanks as our Nordic neighbors and many key NATO allies," Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre told a news conference.

"This further strengthens our relationship with Germany," he added.

The Nordic NATO member, which shares a 196 km (122 miles) Arctic border with Russia, had planned to choose either German-made Leopard 2 A7 tanks or the rival Korean-produced K2 Black Panther, made by Hyundai Rotem.



Spain, Morocco Seek Reset of Testy Relationship

RABAT (Dispatches) - Spain and Morocco have agreed to set aside their differences, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said, as they seek to repair a relationship marked by frequent disputes over migration and territory.

Sanchez was speaking at a summit in Rabat where the two countries signed as many as 20 agreements to boost trade and investment, including credit lines of up to 800 million euros (\$873 million).

"We have agreed on a commitment to mutual respect, whereby in our discourse and in our political practice we will avoid everything that we know offends the other party, especially regarding our respective spheres of sovereignty," Sanchez said.



Putin Evokes Stalingrad to Predict Victory Over New Nazism in Ukraine



VOLGOGRAD (Dispatches) - President Vladimir Putin evoked the spirit of the Soviet army that defeated Nazi German forces at Stalingrad 80 years ago to declare that Russia would defeat a Ukraine supposedly in the grip of a new incarnation of Nazism.

In a fiery speech in Volgograd, known as Stalingrad until 1961, Putin lambasted Germany for helping to arm Ukraine and said, not for the first time, that he was ready to draw on Russia's entire arsenal, which includes nuclear weapons.

"Unfortunately we see that the ideology of Nazism in its modern form and manifestation again directly threatens the security of our country," Putin told an audience of army officers and members of local patriotic and youth groups.

"Again and again we have to repel the aggression of the collective West. It's incredible but it's a fact: we are again being threatened with German Leopard tanks with crosses on them."

Russian officials have been drawing parallels with the struggle against the Nazis ever since Russian forces entered Ukraine almost a year ago.

Ukraine - which was part of the Soviet Union and itself suffered devastation at the hands of Hitler's forces - rejects those parallels as spurious pretexts for a war of imperial conquest.

Stalingrad was the bloodiest battle of World War Two, when the Soviet Red Army, at a cost of over 1 million casualties, broke the back of German invasion forces in 1942-3.

Putin evoked what he said was the spirit of the defenders of Stalingrad to explain why he thought Russia would prevail in Ukraine, saying the World War Two battle had become a symbol of "the indestructible nature of our people".

"Those who draw European countries, including Germany, into a new war with Russia, and ... expect to win a victory over Russia on the battlefield, apparently don't understand that a modern war with Russia will be quite different for them," he added.

"We don't send our tanks to their borders but we have the means to respond, and it won't end with the use of armoured vehicles, everyone must understand that."

A military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad, in Volgograd

As Putin finished speaking, the audience gave him a standing ovation.

Putin had earlier laid flowers at the grave of the Soviet marshal who oversaw the defense of Stalingrad and visited the city's main memorial complex, where he held a minute's silence in honor of those who died during the battle.

Meanwhile air raid sirens sounded across Ukraine on Friday as President Volodymyr Zelenskiy hosted European Union leaders to discuss further sanctions on Russia and Ukraine's prospects of joining the European bloc.

The head of the EU's executive commission and the chairman of the 27 EU national leaders travelled to Kyiv to demonstrate support for Ukraine as the first anniversary of Russia's Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of its neighbor approaches.

"There will be no let up in our resolve. We will also support you every step of the way on your journey to the EU," EU chairman Charles Michel wrote on Twitter on Friday morning under a picture of himself on a central Kyiv square.

There were no immediate reports of fresh missile strikes following the air raid warning, a regular occurrence during months of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure far from the battlefields in the east and south.

Pentagon Tracking Chinese Spy Balloon Over U.S.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Pentagon said that it was tracking a Chinese spy balloon flying high over the United States that appeared to be surveilling highly sensitive nuclear weapons sites.

At President Joe Biden's request, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and top military officials considered shooting the balloon down but decided doing so would endanger too many people on the ground, a senior defense official told reporters.

The official said the balloon flew over the US northwest where there are sensitive airbases and strategic missiles in silos underground.

"Clearly, the intent of this balloon is for surveillance, and the current flight path does carry it over a number of sensitive sites," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

But the Pentagon did not believe it constitutes a particularly dangerous intelligence threat.

"We assess that this balloon has limited additive value from an intelligence collection perspective," the official said.



Turkey Summons Nine Western Ambassadors Over Security Alerts

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey summoned ambassadors of nine Western countries including the United States and Sweden to criticize their decisions to temporarily shut diplomatic missions and issue security alerts following Koran-burning incidents in Europe.

The envoys of Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Britain were also summoned, according to foreign ministry sources in Ankara. Over the last two weeks, far-right activists burned copies of the Muslim holy book, the Koran, in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, acts that prompted Turkey to halt negotiations meant to lift its objections to Sweden and Finland joining NATO.

The European countries have denounced the incidents but some say they cannot prevent them because of free speech rules.

Over the last week, France, Germany, Italy and the United States were among those issuing warnings to their citizens of an increased risk of attacks in Turkey, particularly against diplomatic missions and non-Muslim places of worship.

Germany, France and the Netherlands were among countries that temporarily closed diplomatic missions in Turkey for security reasons this week. Some cited central Istanbul areas of high concern but did not provide the source of the information.

"Such simultaneous activities do not constitute a proportional and commonsense approach and...only serve the covert agenda of terrorist organizations," said a foreign ministry source who asked not to be further identified.

The source added that the security of all diplomatic missions is ensured in accordance with international conventions and "allies should cooperate with" Turkish authorities.

The interior minister, Suleyman Soyulu, said on Twitter the embassies were waging "a new psychological war" against Turkey.

Indonesia Tells Outsiders Not to Use ASEAN as "Proxy"

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia told major powers not to use Southeast Asia as a "proxy" for their rivalries Friday at the start of two-day talks between regional foreign ministers, while also calling for unity and progress on the Myanmar crisis.

Southeast Asia's biggest economy is the chair of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for 2023 and will later this year host the bloc's annual leaders' meetings, which are typically also joined by China and the United States.

Disputes over the South China Sea have pitted some ASEAN members against Beijing and boosted sympathy for US opposition to China's growing assertiveness, but others have shown support on issues in line with the Asian superpower.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo told ASEAN ministers in talks before Friday's meeting that "ASEAN should not be a proxy for any party", repeating a call he made at an ASEAN leaders' summit in Cambodia last year, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said.

Another issue dominating talks was the crisis in military-ruled Myanmar, which has been in turmoil since the army seized power in 2021.

The junta remains an ASEAN member but has been barred from top-level summits over a lack of progress on a plan by the bloc to achieve peace between the military and Myanmar's anti-coup movement.

Myanmar's foreign minister Than Swe -- appointed this week -- was not present at the ASEAN talks Friday, the bloc having declined to invite a junta member and only requesting a "non-political representative" -- an offer rejected by Naypyidaw.

There has been little movement on the "five-point consensus" agreed between ASEAN and the junta in April 2021 that called for an immediate end to violence and dialogue between the military and rebels.

But Widodo "emphasised that the five-point consensus of the ASEAN leaders should be the main agreement to assist the resolution of the problems in Myanmar", Marsudi said.



House GOP Ousts Democrat Ilhan Omar From Foreign Affairs Committee

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. House of Representatives Republicans on Thursday ousted Democrat Ilhan Omar from a high-profile committee over remarks widely condemned as anti-Semitic, two years after Democrats removed two Republicans from committee assignments.

The deeply divided House voted 218-211 along party lines to remove Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee with Republicans citing the 2019 remarks for which she later apologized. One Republican voted "present."

Omar, who arrived in the United States as a refugee from Somalia, is the only African-born member of Congress and one of the only Muslim women in the House. She was in line to be the top Democrat on the foreign affairs panel's Africa subcommittee.

Shortly after the vote, House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries made a countermove, announcing that he intends to appoint Omar to a seat on the Budget Committee "where she will defend Democratic values against right-wing extremism."

Republicans, who won a narrow House majority in November's election after years in the minority, said they wanted Omar, a third-term House member, off Foreign Affairs for statements that included a 2019 tweet which read, "It's all about the Benjamins baby," suggesting that Israel's supporters in U.S. politics were motivated by money rather than principle.

Benjamin Franklin, whose signature on the 1776 Declaration of Independence and 1787 U.S. Constitution earned him the reputation as a founding father, is portrayed on the \$100 bill.

During debate, Republican Mike Lawler said, "Words matter, rhetoric matters. It leads to harm. The congresswoman is being held accountable for her words and her actions."

Omar and other Democrats said that any such remarks were made years ago and that Omar had deleted the posts and apologized at the time.

Moments before the House expelled her from the committee, a defiant Omar said, "My leadership and voice will not be diminished if I am not on this committee ... my voice will get louder and stronger." Omar has said in the past that U.S. forces and those of other countries should be held to the same standards of accountability when their actions hurt or kill civilians.



Climate Disinformation Surges in Denial, Conspiracy Comeback



PARIS (Dispatches) - False information about climate change flourished online over the past year, researchers say, with denialist social media posts and conspiracy theories surging after U.S. environmental reforms and Elon Musk's Twitter takeover.

"What really surprised us this year was to see a resurgence in language that is reminiscent of the 1980s: phrases like 'climate hoax' and 'climate scam' that deny the phenomenon of climate change," said Jennie King, head of civic action at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based digital research group.

Popular topics included the false claims that CO2 does not cause climate change or that global warming is not caused by human activity, said Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), a coalition of campaigners, in a report.

"Let me expose what the climate scam is actually all about," read one of the most-shared tweets, cited in another survey by US non-profit Advance Democracy, Inc (ADI).

"It is a wealth transfer from you — to the global elite."
An analysis of Twitter messages — carried out for AFP by two computational social scientists at City, University of London — counted 1.1 million tweets or retweets using strong climate-sceptic terms in 2022.

That was nearly twice the figure for 2021, said researchers Max Falkenberg and Andrea Baronchelli. They found climate denial posts peaked in December, the month after Tesla billionaire Musk took over the platform.

Use of the denialist hashtag Climate Scam surged on Twitter from July, according to analyses by CAAD and the US-based campaign group Centre For Countering Digital Hate (CCDH).

For weeks it was the top suggested search term on the site for users typing "climate". CAAD said the reason for that was "unclear", though one major user of the term appeared to be an automated account, possibly indicating that a malignant bot was churning it out.

ADI noted that July saw US President Joe Biden secure support for a major climate spending bill — subject of numerous "climate scam" tweets — plus a heatwave in the United States and Europe.

Climate denial posts also peaked during the COP27 climate summit in November. A quarter of all the strongly climate-skeptic tweets came from just 10 accounts, including Canadian right-wing populist party leader Maxime Bernier and Paul Joseph Watson, editor of conspiracy-theory website InfoWars, the City research showed.

CCDH pointed the finger at Musk, who reinstated numerous banned Twitter accounts and allowed users to pay for a blue tick — a mark previously reserved for accredited "verified" users in the public eye.

"Elon Musk's decision to open up his platform for hate and disinformation has led to an explosion in climate disinformation on the platform," said Callum Hood, CCDH's head of research.

Musk himself tweeted in August 2022: "I do think global warming is a major risk."

Musk has also created a US\$100 million dollar prize for technology innovations shown to be effective in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

But prolific climate change contrarians — such as blogger Tony Heller and former coal executive Steve Milloy — have hailed him in their tweets.

An analysis by Advance Democracy seen by AFP found the number of Twitter posts "using climate change denialism terms" more than tripled from 2021 to 2022, reaching over 900,000.

On TikTok, views of videos using hashtags associated with climate change denialism increased by 4.9 million, it said.

Europe Looks on Helplessly At Wild Spending by Premier League Clubs



PARIS (Dispatches) - Another transfer window of record-breaking spending in the Premier League has led to more soul-searching around Europe, as clubs on the continent are unable to stop the drain of talent to England.

Chelsea have stolen most of the headlines with their eye-watering purchase of Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez from Benfica for an English record of 121 million euros (\$132m).

But he was just one of seven players to move to Stamford Bridge from clubs elsewhere in Europe, and Chelsea were not the only ones spending big.

Of the top 20 January transfers according to specialist site Transfermarkt, only two did not involve Premier League clubs -- one was Marseille selling Brazil midfielder Gerson back to Flamengo, and the other was the French side buying Portuguese striker Vitorino from Braga in a 32 million-euro deal.

There were no major moves involving any of the continent's powerhouses, with not even Paris Saint-Germain getting out their chequebook -- they failed in an attempt to sign Hakim Ziyech on loan from Chelsea.

The spending of the London outfit under new American owner Todd Boehly's consortium was watched particularly closely by Borussia Dortmund, who will be their opponents in the last 16 of the Champions League this month.

"It is very wild, you just have to say that. They are running in their own race," Dortmund sporting director Sebastian Kehl told Sky Germany.

The Premier League's financial dominance is fuelled by domestic and international television revenues which are far higher than in any of the other so-called Big Five European leagues, in Spain, Italy, Germany and France.

Eleven of the top 20 revenue-generating clubs in the world last year are from the Premier League, according to Deloitte's latest Football Money League.

The rest now struggle to keep up, and La Liga has also accused Premier League sides of being "doped" because of phenomenally wealthy shareholders putting in additional money to then spend on new players.

"Essentially they are 'doping' the club. They are injecting money not generated by the club, for it to spend, which puts the viability of the club at risk if the shareholder leaves," claimed Javier Gomez, La Liga's corporate director general, in a video defending their own stringent financial rules within Spain's top flight.

"In our opinion that is cheating because it drags down the rest of the leagues."

Gomez said La Liga would continue to demand new financial rules be applied by UEFA, whose own Financial Fair Play regulations have not been able to halt the increasing polarisation in top-level European football.

Others have highlighted the increasing spending power of more modest English clubs. Take Bournemouth, who had never played in England's top flight before 2015 and whose stadium has a capacity of little over 11,000.

In January they signed Dango Ouattara from French side Lorient in a 27 million-euro deal and then added Illia Zabarnyi, an outstanding defensive prospect at Dynamo Kyiv, for a similar fee.

They were not the Cherries' only signings either.

"While Europe is wondering about the dangers of the Super League, we need to acknowledge that there is already a super league and it makes the rules," said an editorial in Italy's Corriere dello Sport.



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Sony Hikes Net Profit Forecasts

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Sony upgraded its annual net profit forecasts, saying it expects strong results in its key gaming sector as the weak yen inflates profits on products sold abroad.

The Japanese electronics and entertainment giant said net profit in the April-December period jumped five per cent year-on-year to ¥809 billion.

This was partly thanks to strong sales in the game, music and imaging-and-sensors sectors in the third quarter, an important holiday shopping period, the company said.

In the 2022-23 financial year, Sony Group now expects net profits of ¥870 billion, up from the previous estimate of ¥840 billion.



ECB Raises Rates, Signals At Least One More Hike

FRANKFURT (Dispatches) - The European Central Bank raised interest rates by 0.5% and explicitly signaled at least one more hike of the same magnitude next month, reaffirming it would stay the course in the fight against high inflation.

But financial markets immediately interpreted the move as suggesting the tightening cycle might in fact end soon - just as they had done on Wednesday after U.S. Federal Reserve chief Jerome Powell said there were signs inflation was easing.

Separately, the International Monetary Fund published a blog urging global central banks to make clear to financial markets the probable need for interest rates to remain higher for longer in order to bring inflation sustainably back down to target.

The ECB has been increasing rates at a record pace to fight rising prices which are the byproduct of factors including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and an energy crisis that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly a year ago.

The central bank for the 20 countries that share the euro raised the rate it pays on bank deposits by another half-percentage point to 2.5%, in line with what it said in December and with market expectations.

It said the next rate increase would be of the same size, but left its options open further ahead.

"... the Governing Council intends to raise interest rates by another 50 basis points at its next monetary policy meeting in March and it will then evaluate the subsequent path of its monetary policy," the ECB said.

ING's global head of macro Carsten Brzeski said the ECB was "opening the door to either a pause or a slower rate hike pace beyond March", a view that was reflected in market moves as Germany's 10-year yield fell 15 bps to 2.14%.

ECB President Christine Lagarde disputed the interpretation that Thursday's move meant the hiking cycle was near the end.

"No. We know that we have ground to cover, we know that we are not done," Lagarde told a news conference, reiterating the bank's mantra that it would "stay the course" in the fight to bring inflation back down to its target of around 2%.

The disconnect between the ECB message and the market interpretation mirrored that on Wednesday after the Fed slowed the pace of hikes and acknowledged disinflation was underway, while reaffirming that borrowing costs needed to rise further.

The U.S. 10-year Treasury yield was down 3 bps at 3.36%, after falling as much as 13 bps on Wednesday following the Fed meeting.

Lagarde stressed that for the euro zone, she would not say the disinflationary process was already starting.

"We still have underlying inflation factors that are strong, solid and are not budging, so we need to do our job," she said, adding that beyond March, the next rate hike in May could be 25 bps, 50 bps or whatever was needed.

Separately, the IMF urged central banks to "communicate the likely need to keep interest rates higher for longer". "Loosening prematurely could risk a sharp resurgence in inflation once activity rebounds, leaving countries susceptible to further shocks which could de-anchor inflation expectations," the head of the IMF's Monetary and Capital Markets Department, Tobias Adrian, and his two deputies wrote in a blog post.

Over 90% of EU, G-7 Firms Active in Russia Despite Sanctions

LONDON (Dispatches) - Only 8.5% of EU and G-7 companies have taken steps to exit Russia or suspend their operations in the country, a new report revealed.

According to a report released by Switzerland-based St. Gallen University, despite sanction decisions against Russia, the companies continue their relations with the country as usual.

After Russia started what it called a "special military operation" in its neighbor on Feb. 24, 2022, many sectors and countries announced sanctions or suspensions for trying to exert pressure on the Russian economy. Some firms stopped their operations and deliveries in Russia, while others ended their investments or withdrew from their partnerships in Russia, even in Belarus.

The report said there were 2,405 subsidiaries owned by 1,404 EU and G-7 companies as of April 2022 and only less than 9% of them were closed or sold.

"Confirmed exits by EU and G-7 firms that had equity stakes in Russia account for 6.5% of total profit before tax. As for EU and G-7 firms with active commercial operations in Russia, with available information in the ORBIS database, 8.6% of tangible fixed assets, 8.6% of total assets, 10.4% of operating revenue, and 15.3% of total employees were found," the report stated.

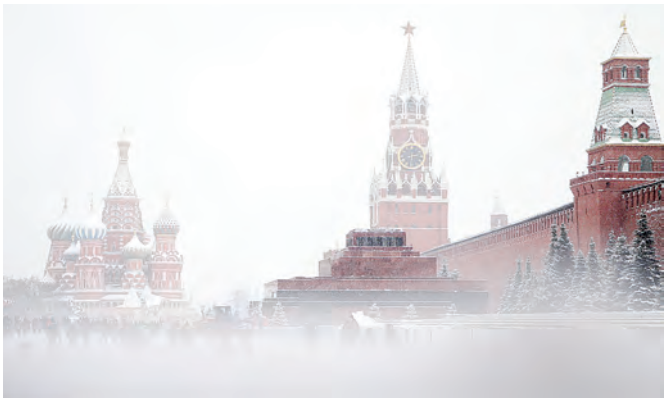
The report also showed that there are more exits by foreign firms headquartered in the U.S. than those based in the EU and Japan; fewer than 18% of U.S. subsidiaries have actually divested. "Of those EU and G-7 firms remaining in Russia, 19.5% are German, 12.4% are American owned and 7% are Japanese multinational firms," it added.

Other data released this week by Brand Finance showed that Western companies dominated the world's top brands list, and it was seen that several global brands suspended their operations in Russia, mostly in March.

Top global brands, excluding some Chinese firms, have not been active in the Russian market due to its war on Ukraine since the last February. There were 12 U.S. brands among the top 25 brands, followed by China with seven, Germany with three, South Korea, Japan and the U.K. with one.

The world's top brand, Amazon, suspended its Russian operations on March 9, 2022, announcing that it will not be accepting any new customers in Russia and Belarus.

Apple, taking second place in the top brand's list, has also suspended all official sales in Russia as of March 2, 2022, and turned off selected applications and services in the country.



Turkey Posts Record January Exports of \$19.4b

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's exports posted an all-time high January figure at \$19.4 billion (TL 365.04 billion), Trade Minister Mehmet Muş said.

Outbound shipments rose 10.4% from the same month of last year, Muş told a news conference on Turkey's preliminary foreign trade data.

Expressing that the export figures are an indicator of the success achieved in a climate of global uncertainty and in an environment where export expectations for Turkey are falling, Muş said that contrary to expectations, the country continues to excel in industrial production and exports with firm steps.

Pointing out that the political stability achieved in Turkey is behind these achievements, Muş said: "This political stability has opened the horizon for our exporters with policies that pave the way for exports and our exporters have delivered Turkish goods to large geographies of the world."

"We are making great efforts to increase the range of our exports. We will continue our commercial diplomacy activities intensively to find new markets," he said.

Stating that a difficult period is expected in the global economy in the coming period, Muş said that weak demand has been seen, especially from Europe, which is Turkey's largest trading partner and that the trend poses a risk to exports.

Stating that it is important for exporters to turn to alternative markets, Muş said, "First of all, we continue our efforts to ensure that Turkey is the first choice for the Middle East and Persian Gulf countries, whose incomes and therefore demands are increasing with increasing energy prices."

"We have accelerated our commercial diplomacy activities with the Middle East countries. While we strive to make our country a production and supply center for Europe, we continue to stand by them in directing our exporters to different markets, especially the Far Countries Strategy," the minister said.



OPEC+ Committee Recommends to Stay Course on Oil Output Cuts

VIENNA (Dispatches) - A committee of major oil producers recommended to maintain the cartel's current reduced output strategy, as the global economic outlook remains uncertain and the war in Ukraine drags on.

The 13 members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) led by Riyadh and their 10 allies led by Moscow agreed last October to reduce output by two million barrels per day until the end of this year.

Collectively known as OPEC+, the group said at the time the move — the biggest cut since the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020 — was due to "market considerations", but the US denounced it as a concession to Moscow.

Oil prices spiked following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In a virtual meeting yesterday, the group's Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) "reaffirmed their commitment" to the strategy of a production cut.

The JMMC has no decision-making power but discusses market conditions and makes recommendations, which are then formally discussed and decided at the organization's ministerial meetings.

Analysts have been widely anticipating a continuation of the status quo.

Craig Erlam, senior market analyst at trading platform OANDA, noting the "uncertainty around the global economic outlook also likely clouding their forecasts for demand."

Investors are eyeing an increase in demand after China, the world's largest importer of crude oil, lifted its "zero Covid" policy.

American West Texas Intermediate (WTI) currently hovers around US\$80 a barrel and Brent North Sea crude around US\$85 — far from their peaks of more than US\$130 dollars reached in March after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Malaysia's External Trade to Expand Steadily Beyond 2023

KUALALUMPUR (Dispatches) - MIDF Research expects Malaysia's external trade activities to expand steadily beyond 2023 amid the impacts of new trade agreements, apart from elevated commodity prices and lower monetary rates.

In a note, it said the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) were also expected to alleviate the external trade performances in 2024.

"In the post-pandemic era, Malaysia has ratified the RCEP and CPTPP, which came into force on March 18, 2022, and November 29, 2022, respectively.

"As of 2022, RCEP members contributed 58.1 per cent of Malaysia's total trade while CPTPP members sponsored 27.5 per cent," it said.

Having these two free trade agreements (FTAs), the research house said Malaysian products are able to penetrate into wider markets and enjoy cheaper imported goods, hence Malaysia's exports and imports growth rates would touch +12.1 per cent and +10.9 per cent respectively in 2024.

Besides that, MIDF Research also viewed that the external front is still on a challenging path, with concerns of a global economic slowdown, inflation bite, tightening monetary policy in many countries and geopolitical risks in Europe and Asia.

"We foresee slight moderation in exports growth forecast from +25 per cent year-on-year (y-o-y) in 2022 to +9.2 per cent y-o-y in 2023.

"On the bright side, China's reopening provides a silver lining for global trade flows. Malaysia's exports market can still hold among others underpin by overseas sales of commodity products with commodity prices remaining elevated, crude palm oil at RM3,500 per ton and Brent crude oil at US\$94 per barrel for 2023," it said, adding that it has maintained a 'Neutral' stance on plantation sector.

As for imports, it is forecast to touch +9.5 per cent y-o-y, higher than exports as the research house views domestic demand to stay sturdy.

On the plantation sector, MIDF Research anticipated the palm oil supply tightness situation would likely ease in 2023 on better weather conditions aided by recovery in a foreign labor shortage in the second half of this year.

Hong Kong Economy Shrank 3.5%



HONG KONG (Dispatches) - Hong Kong's economy shrank by 3.5 per cent in 2022, with exports plunging and the city's worst-ever coronavirus outbreak battering businesses, the government announced, while saying it hoped China's reopening would spur a recovery.

Vast swathes of Hong Kong's economy were shut down at the start of the year, when the territory recorded one of the world's highest Covid per capita death rates as it dealt with a wave of the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

In September, the government began easing the harsh pandemic restrictions that had left Hong Kong internationally isolated and had damaged its status as a financial hub.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) dropped all four quarters in 2022, with the final quarter seeing it fall 4.2 per cent year-on-year, according to the preliminary figures released.

"Domestic demand slackened, dragged initially by the (Omicron-fuelled Covid wave) and subsequently by tightened financial conditions," a government spokesperson said in a statement.

"Total exports of goods plunged amid the sharp deterioration in the external environment and disruptions to cross-boundary truck movements."

Hong Kong was in a deepening recession in 2019 and 2020 after the former British colony was roiled by pro-democracy protests and the start of the pandemic.

The city found brief respite in 2021, as its strict pandemic controls largely kept it virus-free, with the economy rebounding by 6.4 per cent — gains later wiped out by the outbreak at the start of 2022.

China's decision to reopen its borders in December sparked hopes of a recovery for Hong Kong, the government spokesperson said yesterday, adding that the city's services sector would benefit from "an expected strong rebound of inbound tourism".

Iran, Venezuela Confer On Boosting Bilateral Ties

CARACAS (Dispatches) – Iran's Foreign Minister in Caracas met with the Venezuelan President on Friday morning to talk about bilateral cooperation and boosting ties.

Hossein Amirabdollahian and the President of Venezuela Nicolás Maduro in the meeting discussed relations and development of bilateral cooperation and international issues in this meeting.

Iranian Foreign Minister called for removing obstacles and speeding up the process of cooperation between Iran and Venezuela in the field of oil industry. Meanwhile Amirabdollahian emphasized the development and strengthening of cooperation between the two countries, especially the implementation of previous Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) in the field of oil industry, during a meeting with Tarek El Aissami, the economic vice president and Venezuela's oil minister.



Iran, Russia Confer on Int'l Developments

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - he senior adviser to Iran's Minister of Special Political Affairs and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia discussed and exchanged opinions about the cooperation of the two countries in international and regional forums.

According to the General Department of Information and Spokesperson Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ali Asghar Khaji, the Iranian foreign minister's senior advisor for political affairs, who has traveled to Moscow at the head of a delegation, met with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Vershinin, on Wednesday evening, while expressing his satisfaction over the level of bilateral partners, he examined the ways of expanding these partners to solve humanitarian problems and establish international peace and security.

Iran's senior advisor on special political affairs also discussed the latest developments in Syria, Yemen, and Libya in a meeting with "Mikhail Bogdanov", the special representative of the Russian President in the Middle East and North Africa.

The two sides emphasized the need to resolve Syrian issues and problems through political solutions and dialogue and voiced their support for Syria- Turkey negotiations within the framework of the four-way meetings between Syria, Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Russia.

Iran and Russia share strategic interests in bilateral fields, especially economic, military, and security relations, as well as regional and international issues such as confronting American unilateralism, and this has been one of the main factors of close cooperation between the two sides in recent years.

Pakistan to Seek Relief...

FROM PAGE 1

The project was to be implemented under a segmented approach meaning that Iran had to lay down the pipeline on its side and Pakistan had to build the pipeline in its territory. The project was to be completed by December 2014 and become functional from January 1, 2015. Iran had already completed the part of the pipeline in its own territory from the gas fields to the Pakistan border.

In the meeting, the official said, it was decided that diplomatic efforts would also be initiated to convince Iran that Pakistan was quite serious about the project and would persuade the authorities not to seek a penalty in case Pakistan fails to meet the deadline of February-March 2024. They said the country will be trying to get a waiver or relief from the U.S. on the sanctions imposed on Iran.

"Now there are only U.S. sanctions left as the UN curbs are no longer there on Iran for its nuclear programme," the official said, adding that both countries signed the GSPA for the IP gas line project in 2009 under the French law. "Pakistan is an energy-starved country and it needs relief from US sanctions, so that it can erect the pipeline on its side and start getting gas from Iran to ensure sustainable gas availability in the country."

Iran says that U.S. sanctions are illegal and Pakistan should start constructing the pipeline in its territory to complete the project by February-March 2024. Experts say sanctions do not bar the construction of the pipeline but on gas flows from Iran. India also got the US waiver and has been getting crude oil from Iran for a long time.

The Inter-State Gas Systems (ISGS) of Pakistan and the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) signed a revised agreement in September 2019 for the construction of gas pipeline between the two countries. Under the revised accord, Iran would not approach any international court if there was a delay in the construction of the pipeline, and neither would Pakistan pay any fine to Iran till 2024. Pakistan would be able to construct its pipeline by 2024 after which it would have an intake of 750 million cubic feet of gas from Iran daily. The GSPA was signed in 2009 for 25 years, but the project could not get any shape. Almost 12 years have passed since the signing of the agreement, and the three-year construction period for the pipeline in Pakistani territory has been wasted. Under the agreement, Pakistan was supposed to lay down in its territory a pipeline of 781 kilometers from the Iranian border to Nawabshah under the GSPA. Under the original agreement, Pakistan is bound to pay \$1 million per day to Iran from January 1, 2015, under the penalty clause. And in case Iran moves an arbitration court, Pakistan would have to pay billions of dollars as penalty.

Iran Rebukes Macron...

FROM PAGE 1

With a dark record of occupation and military aggression, the Israeli regime is "the prime source of threat against regional and international peace and security," he said.

The Iranian spokesperson called on French officials to correct their wrong approaches and engage in mutual respect to stop inflicting further damage on Tehran-Paris relations.

Israel, which pursues a policy of deliberate ambiguity about its nuclear weapons, is estimated to possess 200 to 400 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, making it the sole possessor of non-conventional arms in West Asia. The illegitimate entity has, however, refused to either allow inspections of its military nuclear facilities or sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Iran, on the other hand, is a member of the NPT and has officially declared that its nuclear activities are peaceful in nature. Iran also signed a nuclear deal with six world powers in 2015 to reassure the world about the peaceful nature of its nuclear program.

Despite Iran's strict compliance with the deal, the US, under former US president Donald Trump, unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018 and pursued a confrontational policy against Israel.

At the time, Netanyahu cheered Trump's withdrawal and his so-called maximum pressure campaign against Iran.

Leader Urges Young Girls...

FROM PAGE 1

"You too try to become one of the great influential women of your beloved country in the future by studying and reading books and working and thinking," the Leader further said.

"You can play a role in this huge struggle that the Iranian nation launched since the [1979] Revolution against oppression, misery and discrimination, as many women played a role before, and today people are aware of their great efforts," Ayatollah Khamenei further noted.

Muslims to Punish...

FROM PAGE 1

Rushdie is the author of "The Satanic Verses", a blasphemous novel about Islam published in 1988 which sparked Muslims' outrage across the globe.

Rushdie went into hiding in 1989 under a British government protection program, which included a round-the-clock armed guard. He re-emerged after nine years of seclusion and cautiously resumed more public appearances in a publicity campaign against what he labeled as "religious extremism overall."

Agent: Salman Rushdie 'lost sight in one eye' after stabbing, 'hand incapacitated'

Last August, the British-American author was

stabbed by a 24-year-old New Jersey man, who injured the writer in the neck and torso just before he was to give a lecture at Chautauqua Institution, a retreat about 19 kilometers from Lake Erie in North America.

Salami's remarks came days after a Dutch far-right politician tore apart a copy of the Holy Qur'an in the city of The Hague. It followed an incident in Sweden where a politician burned a copy of the Qur'an outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm.

The politician committed the scandalous act after receiving permission from Swedish authorities who provided police guards to ensure nobody prevented it.

Iran Entitled to...

FROM PAGE 1

He emphasized that Israel's threats to use force against Iran's critical infrastructure, including its peaceful nuclear facilities, are a violation of international law and the UN Charter, saying the regime's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has admitted to Tel Aviv's involvement in acts of sabotage and terrorism in Iran.

Iravani added that the attack in Isfahan was "not the first instance where the Israeli regime has made threats to use force or carried out criminal and terrorist acts within Iranian territory."

Pointing to Israel's frequent threats and numerous acts of terrorism and sabotage against Iran's peaceful nuclear facilities, officials, scientists, and civilians in recent years, he said the regime has "openly admitted to its involvement in these reprehensible crimes."

"Hence, it must be held accountable for all criminal and terrorist acts committed against Iran and face the consequences without exception," the Iranian diplomat said.

He urged the Security Council to fulfill its responsibility under the UN Charter and condemn Israel's "warmongering statements and acts of terrorism, including state terrorism," which he said pose a serious threat to regional and international peace and security.

"The Security Council must also demand that the Israeli regime comply with international law and cease its dangerous plans and malicious activities in the region," Iravani said.

Iran's Nour News reported on Wednesday that the terrorists, ordered by a foreign intelligence service, smuggled the constituent parts of a micro aerial vehicle and explosive materials from Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region into Iran through far-flung and arduous routes, and handed them over to a liaison in a border city in the northwestern part of the country.

A recent report has revealed that Kurdistan-based terrorists were involved in a recent drone strike on a military workshop in the central Iranian city of Isfahan. The report added that the drone parts and explosives were then assembled at a modern workshop by a group of specialists and were used in the attack.

Elsewhere in his letter, Iravani pointed to the concerning, provocative and unjustified statement made by Mykhailo Podolyak, a senior advisor to Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky, who threatened brazenly to use force against Iran's critical infrastructure and said such behavior and the thoughtless statement is "not only reckless and irresponsible but also a clear violation of international law and the principles set forth in the United Nations Charter"

He reiterated once again that Iran's principled position on the current conflict in Ukraine is based on active impartiality and neutrality.

Iravani voiced Iran's objection to any form of conflict or war, both in Ukraine and around the world, saying, "Iran also places a high priority on respecting Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity. Iran supports resolving the conflict in Ukraine peacefully and through diplomatic means, using negotiations as the means to find a peaceful solution."

Tehran Dismisses...

FROM PAGE 1

Officials have told the Wall Street Journal and The Associated Press news agency that a French warship on January 15 stopped a suspected smuggling ship off the Yemeni coast, where the specially trained French team boarded the boat.

On board, the officials claimed, the French military discovered more than 3,000 assault rifles, at least a half million rounds of ammunition and over 20 antitank guided missiles. The purported operation was reportedly coordinated with the US military.

Iran has on several occasions dismissed Western claims of smuggling arms to Yemen, reaffirming its support for a political solution not a military one to the conflict in the Arab country.

Back on November 17 last year, Iran categorically rejected the US Navy's claims that the country was trying to smuggle 70 tons of a missile fuel component hidden among bags of fertilizer aboard a ship bound for crisis-stricken Yemen.

The Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations in New York, in a statement, dismissed the allegations as baseless, saying Tehran stands fully committed to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216, which imposes an arms embargo on Yemen.

Iran "has not taken any action against the resolution, and is actively cooperating with the sanctions committee formed to oversee the arms embargo," said the statement, adding that none of the accusations leveled against Iran about arms smuggling to Yemen have been substantiated.

The diplomatic mission further said "Iran is doing its utmost to restore the truce agreement, and facilitate dialogue among Yemeni groups as soon as possible in order to establish peace and stability in Yemen."

The allegations against Iran come as rights groups have accused French arms makers of war crimes complicity in Yemen.

Jammu and Kashmir: The Dispute that Needs World Attention

Jammu and Kashmir dispute is one of the longest-standing disputes on the UN agenda. It has caused three wars between Pakistan and India besides countless skirmishes and some limited conflicts. However, this is not simply a territorial dispute between two neighbors. At its core, it is a question of human rights, emanating from India's persistent denial of the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination.

India has a long history of employing different tactics to suppress the genuine aspirations of the Kashmiris. However, the developments of last four years have been particularly alarming. On 5 August 2019, India deprived Jammu and Kashmir of its special status without consent of the local people. Bringing the region under the direct control of New Delhi, India also divided it into two parts. The real intention behind these actions was to change the demographic structure of the area and further suppress the Kashmiri people.

India, subsequently, initiated a process to transform Kashmiris into a minority in their own land. Following the promulgation of fresh domicile rules, India has reportedly issued millions of domicile certificates to non-Kashmiris. Under the amended land rules, the outsiders could buy land, which was previously an exclusive right of the locals. These actions are illegal and in violation of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions and international law, in particular the 4th Geneva Convention and UN Security Council Resolution 122.

India has embarked upon political engineering to install a pliant regime through any future election of the State Assembly. Under a fresh 'delimitation' exercise, boundaries of the electoral constituencies have been re-drawn. The Hindu-majority Jammu region has been allocated six more seats while only one seat has been increased in Muslim-majority Valley area. Hundreds of thousands of new voters have been added to the electoral rolls, with the right to vote given to temporary residents from outside Jammu and Kashmir including military personnel stationed there and instrumental in suppressing the Kashmir people.

Rooted in the colonial past, the Kashmir and Palestine issues have a common evolution. Even the current situation in both cases is riddled with stark similarities. The script being enacted by the occupying powers in Palestine and Kashmir is essentially the same with particular reference to egregious human rights violations and blatantly illegal attempts to changing the demographics.

By deploying more than 900,000 security personnel in the occupied territory, the current Indian leadership continues to perpetuate India's illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir. The religious supremacism doctrine of the ruling BJP-RSS, termed "Hindutva", is anti-Muslim and anti-Kashmir. Its purpose is to wage a civilizational war against Islam and other faiths to "cleanse" India and subjugate minorities.

As if earlier repression was not enough, the Indian occupation forces have carried out massive basic human right violations and employed every tool of oppression since 5 August 2019. There have been repeated instances of arbitrary detentions, extra-judicial killings in fake "encounters"; "cordon-and-search" operations; destruction of property; and indiscriminate use of force against unarmed peaceful protestors. India's actions represent state-terrorism at its worst.

To prevent the world from hiding the reality in Kashmir, the occupation forces are harassing and intimidating Kashmiri journalists and human rights defenders. Thousands of political activists and prominent pro-freedom leaders remain behind the bars. Recently, the office of All Parties Hurriyat Conference in Srinagar has also been sealed.

To cover up its crimes and malign the indigenous resistance movement, India has branded the innocent Kashmiris as terrorists and hurls false accusations of "cross-border terrorism" against Pakistan. The practice of terming people striving for independence as terrorists has also been borrowed from the Israeli playbook.

The human rights crisis in Jammu and Kashmir warrants immediate attention of the international community, which must urge India to rescind its unilateral and illegal actions since 5 August 2019; implement the relevant UNSC resolutions to hold a UN-supervised plebiscite in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK) and halt its blatant human rights violations. Providing unhindered access to the UN, credible human rights organizations and international media to investigate and report on the situation in the occupied territory is an imperative.

The Human Rights Council should set up a Commission of Inquiry into the egregious violations of human rights in IIOJK as recommended by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. There is also a need to forcefully raise the issue at various international fora, especially the UN bodies.

As their valiant struggle in the past testifies, the Kashmiri people will never accept the Indian agenda of dispossessing them of their land, marginalizing them politically and economically, and depriving them of their distinct identity and denying them their inherent right to self-determination. It is equally important for every man and woman of conscience to do whatever they can to express solidarity with these oppressed people, bring comfort to their lives, and enable them to freely decide their own future.

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Golf Rankings Becoming Obsolete

RIYADH (Dispatches) - British Open champion and LIV Golf Rebel Cameron Smith claimed that the world golf rankings are becoming "obsolete" as a consequence of the sport's civil war. The 29-year-old Australian joined the controversial breakaway series last year after rising to number two in the world. That followed a series of spectacular performances, including winning the 150th British Open at St Andrews, the Players Championship, the Tournament of Champions in Hawaii and the Australian PGA Championship. He has, however, slipped to number four in the rankings.

Leeds Striker Rodrigo Sidelined for Two Months

LONDON (Dispatches) - Leeds United's top scorer Rodrigo Moreno has been ruled out of action for around two months with an ankle injury, the Premier League side said. A statement from Leeds said the Spanish striker, 31, had suffered bone and ligament damage from a tackle during Saturday's 3-1 win at Accrington Stanley in the FA Cup and underwent minor surgery to treat the problem, adding he was expected to be back playing in late March.

James, Davis Lead Lakers Rally Over Pacers

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - LeBron James edged closer to the NBA's all-time scoring record as the Los Angeles Lakers pulled out a thrilling 112-111 victory over the Indiana Pacers on Thursday.

James scored 26 points and now needs 63 to surpass Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's record. James's three-pointer gave the Lakers their first lead of the contest with 2:35 to play. Teammate Anthony Davis put them up 112-111 with 35.3 seconds remaining and followed up with a big block on Tyrese Haliburton as the Lakers escaped with the win.

It wasn't the only drama on a night that saw Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell and Memphis' Dillon Brooks ejected after brawling in the third quarter of the Cavaliers' 128-113 home victory over the Grizzlies.

In Dallas, it was injury that saw Mavs star Luka Doncic depart in the third quarter of a 111-106 victory over New Orleans after a fall under the basket left him with a bruised right heel.

Meanwhile, the Milwaukee Bucks, fueled by 54 points and 19 rebounds from Giannis Antetokounmpo, erased a 21-point third-quarter deficit to beat the Los Angeles Clippers 106-105.

In Indianapolis, the Lakers looked headed for another disappointing defeat until a 21-10 run to open the fourth quarter.

Davis led the Lakers with 31 points and 14 rebounds.

Haliburton, back in action after a three-week injury absence, led the Pacers with 26 points and 12 assists. But his drive to the basket with 16.5 seconds left was thwarted by Davis, who swatted the ball away.

Lakers coach Darvin Ham said that when Davis is playing pain free he's "one of the more elite defenders in our league."

But there's no doubt the spotlight now is on James. Averaging more than 30 points per game, James is likely to break Abdul-Jabbar's mark sometime next week. The Lakers close out their road trip Saturday at New Orleans then host Oklahoma City on Tuesday and the Milwaukee Bucks next Thursday.



Whenever the record does fall, James is acutely aware of the significance. "I think it's one of the greatest records in sports in general," James said, likening it to baseball's all-time home run record. "It's one of those records you don't ever think will be broken."

Things got ugly in Cleveland, where All-Star Cavs guard Mitchell was enraged when Grizzlies guard Brooks, sprawled on the court after missing a shot, flung a hand up and hit Mitchell in the groin.

Mitchell threw the ball at Brooks, shoved him and finally wrestled him to the floor before both players were restrained.

Mitchell, who connected on just two of his 11 shots from the floor, was cheered as he departed for the locker room and was unrepentant later when he confirmed he thought Brooks got in a cheap shot -- and not for the first time.

"That's just who he is," Mitchell said. "We've seen it a bunch in this league with him. There's no place for that in our game. You've got to protect yourself at the end of the day."

Darius Garland picked up the slack, scoring 32 points and handing out 11 assists for Cleveland, who pushed their lead to as many as 22 points in the fourth quarter.

The Mavericks were cruising on their home court when Doncic went down early in the third quarter after coming down hard after a dunk attempt.

Without their MVP candidate, who scored 31 points, the Mavs watched their 27-point lead dwindle to four before escaping.



Conte Already Feeling Better After Gallbladder Surgery

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham manager Antonio Conte said he was "already feeling better" after undergoing surgery to remove his gallbladder.

The Italian, 53, faces a spell away from the dugout after a medical assessment decided an operation was needed to ease severe abdominal pain.

"Following a diagnosis of cholecystitis, he will be undergoing surgery to remove his gallbladder today and will return following a period of recuperation," said a Tottenham statement issued.

After the operation, Conte — set to miss several matches while he recovers — posted on Instagram: "Thank you for your lovely messages, my surgery has gone well and I'm already feeling better."

"Now's time to recover, I can't wait to get back on the field with the team."

Conte's assistant, Cristian Stellini, is set to stand in for the match at home to Manchester City.

Former Juventus, Chelsea and Inter Milan boss Conte took over at Spurs in November 2021, leading his team to Champions League qualification in his first season in charge.

PSG Lose Injured Mbappe for First Leg of Bayern Tie

PARIS (Dispatches) - Kylian Mbappe faces three weeks out with a thigh injury and will miss the first leg of Paris Saint-Germain's Champions League last-16 tie against Bayern Munich on February 14, his club announced.

The France star was hurt during the first half of Wednesday's 3-1 win at Montpellier in Ligue 1 having earlier had two penalties saved.

PSG coach Christophe Galtier had initially suggested Mbappe had suffered a knock to the back of the knee rather than a muscle injury, but tests have since confirmed the true extent of the problem.

"After undergoing tests, Kylian Mbappe suffered an injury to the left thigh at the level of the femoral biceps," said a club statement.

If he misses three weeks as expected, Mbappe can also expect to sit out next midweek's French Cup last-16 tie against Marseille and faces a race against time to return for a potentially pivotal Ligue 1 game away to the same opponents at the end of this month.

However, PSG will hope that Mbappe, who has scored 25 goals in 26 appearances for his club this season, will be fit for the second leg against Bayern in Germany on March 8.

The news is a bitter blow for the French giants, who are desperate to avoid a repeat of what happened last season when they were knocked out of the Champions League in the last 16 by Real Madrid.

Embiid, Morant Named NBA All-Star Reserves

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Philadelphia 76ers center Joel Embiid and Memphis Grizzlies guard Ja Morant headlined the reserves announced for the NBA All-Star Game.

Embiid, who barely missed out in voting for All-Star starters announced last week, was joined by Boston Celtics guard Jaylen Brown, Miami Heat center Bam Adebayo, Milwaukee Bucks guard Jrue Holiday, Chicago Bulls forward DeMar DeRozan, New York Knicks forward Julius Randle and Indiana Pacers guard Tyrese Haliburton as reserves from the Eastern Conference.



Varane Announces International Retirement at 29

PARIS (Dispatches) - France center-back Raphael Varane, a World Cup winner in 2018 and runner-up last year, announced his retirement from international duty at the age of 29.

"I've been thinking about it for several months and I decided it was the right time for me to retire from international football," Varane wrote on Instagram.

The Manchester United defender made his France debut in 2013 and won 93 caps for Les Bleus. He had been in the running to take over as captain following the retirement of Hugo Lloris last month.

"To represent our magnificent country for a decade has been one of the greatest honours of my life. Each time I wore this special blue shirt I felt immense pride," said Varane.

Varane's decision to call time on his France career leaves Kylian Mbappe as the frontrunner for the captaincy, with Didier Deschamps' side set to begin Euro 2024 qualifying at the end of March with a double-header against the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland.

The former Real Madrid star played every minute of his country's triumphant 2018 World Cup campaign as France defeated Croatia 4-2 in the final.

He was one of five French players who also started the 2022 final defeat by Argentina on penalties, recovering from a leg injury that ruled him out of the start of the tournament.

"I'll definitely miss these moments with you, but the time has come for the new generation to take over," he said, thanking Deschamps and his coaching staff as well as the supporters.

"We have a group of talented young players who are ready to step up and who deserve their chance."

Deschamps paid tribute to Varane and praised him for the leadership qualities he had brought to the team throughout his time with France.

Kyrgios Admits Assaulting Girlfriend, Avoids Conviction



CANBERRA (Dispatches) - Australian tennis star Nick Kyrgios pleaded guilty to assaulting a former girlfriend, but avoided a conviction for what the magistrate called a "single act of stupidity".

Appearing in a Canberra court, the Wimbledon finalist admitted assaulting then-girlfriend Chiara Passari on January 10, 2021, by pushing her to the ground after a heated argument.

Kyrgios said he was "not in a good place" at the time, and that he "reacted to a difficult situation in a way I deeply regret".

"I know it wasn't OK and I'm sincerely sorry for the hurt I caused," he said in a statement.

Passari lodged a complaint with police 10 months after the incident, after the pair had broken up, lawyers told the court.

In a statement read to the court, Passari said she had been severely traumatised by the incident, experiencing severe weight loss, staying in bed day and night -- unable to sleep or form new romantic relationships.

Lawyers for Kyrgios appealed to have the charge of one count of common assault dismissed on mental health grounds, arguing it was an isolated incident and out of character.

Psychologist Sam Borenstein told the court Kyrgios suffered from recurring major depression, which included black periods, thoughts of self harm, insomnia, agitation and feelings of guilt.

Magistrate Beth Campbell heard that appeal but ultimately dismissed the case without conviction.

Campbell said Kyrgios acted poorly but the offence was not planned or premeditated and was a "single act of stupidity" by a young man attempting to remove himself from a tense situation.

Sancho Can Be Decisive Player For United



MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag said Jadon Sancho can be a decisive player for the team after the winger returned to action in Wednesday's 2-0 League Cup semi-final second leg win over Nottingham Forest.

Sancho, who spent three months out due to physical and mental wellbeing issues, received a rousing reception from the Old Trafford crowd when he was introduced as a second-half substitute for his first appearance since Oct. 22.

The forward has struggled for form since joining United in July 2021 but Ten Hag said he could make a real difference to the side.

"He has really high standards, he has great capabilities to contribute to our team and the team is improving ... Most importantly players (have to) enjoy football, which gives energy, that gives them the motivation to act and to perform," he added.

"The reception from the fans to him was great and that will give him even more a push to continue in the way he is now acting. We see that smile and hopefully he can keep that and contribute to the team because when he is in form he is important to us."

United, who earned a 5-0 aggregate win over Forest, will look to end a six-year trophy drought when they face Newcastle United in the final at Wembley Stadium on Feb. 26.