

Wednesday Coincides With The Birthday Anniversary of Imam Mahdi (AS) and It Is a National Holiday. IRAN NEWS Felicitates Its Shiite Readers as the Next Issue Will Hit the News-Stands on Saturday

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Iran Plans to Launch Satellites in Cooperation With Russia

TEHRAN (ISNA) - Iran plans to launch two homegrown satellites into space in cooperation with Russia in December 2023, an official said.

Kowsar and Hodhod, built by an Iranian consortium of knowledge-based companies, are planned to be sent into an orbit 500 km above the Earth's surface by a foreign launch vehicle, it was announced on Sunday.

Kowsar is an observation satellite with an imaging resolution of 3.5 metre per pixel, which can be used for agricultural purposes, surveying and demarcation. The satellite has an orbital lifespan of two years, Xinhua news agency reported.

The Hodhod satellite has uses in the area of the Internet of Things as well as agriculture, transportation and crisis management scenarios, according to the report.

Citing Hossein Shahrabi, Head of the Kowsar Space Consortium, ISNA reported that the contract for the launch of the satellites has been signed.

ISNA reported in February 2022 that the Kowsar satellite had reached the testing and assembly stage after two years of development efforts by the consortium.

Iran Committed to Diplomacy to Resolve Differences With IAEA

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry says Tehran is committed to diplomacy and will continue to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in order to resolve the remaining issues over Tehran's civilian nuclear activities.

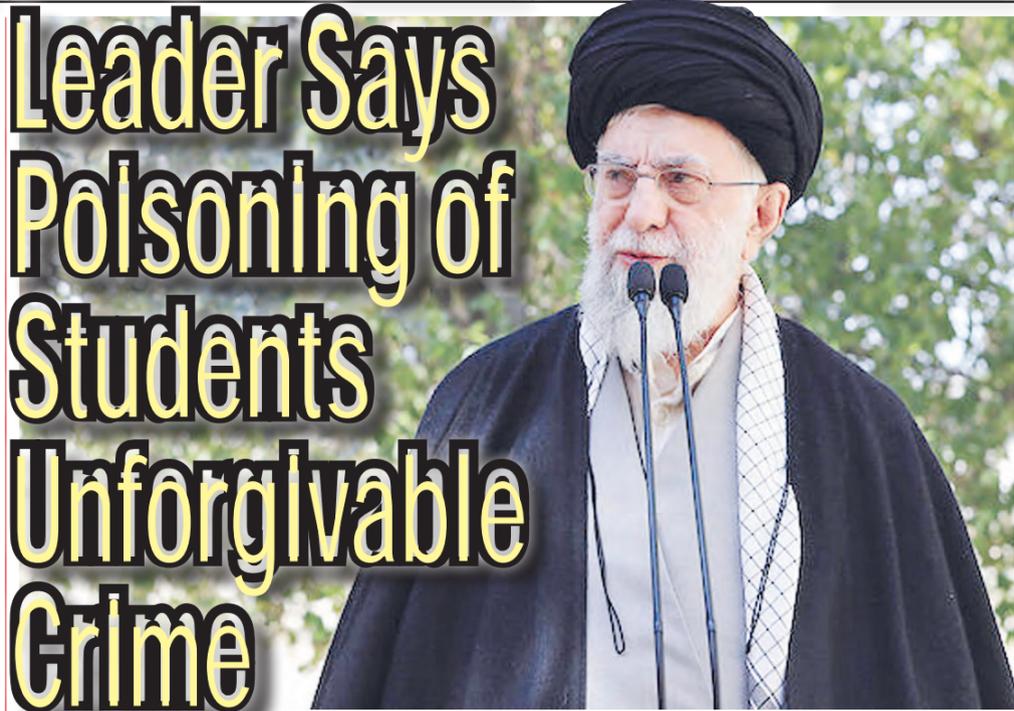
Iran remains committed to negotiations and diplomacy, as it strongly believes that it can achieve tangible and practical results under such a framework, Nasser Kanaani said at a weekly press briefing in the capital Tehran on Monday.

He emphasized that Iran holds a deep-seated belief in multilateral diplomacy and has been engaged in the Vienna talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), on that basis.

The top Iranian diplomat noted that IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi's latest trip to Tehran was in line with Iran's active diplomacy with the UN nuclear agency and yielded encouraging results.

He expressed hope that the trend of cooperation between Iran and the IAEA would result in the resolution of issues pertaining to the Safeguards Agreement in a technical manner and would eliminate any chance for those who consider the matter as an obstacle on the path of returning to diplomacy.

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Leader Says Poisoning of Students Unforgivable Crime

IRAMN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has called the suspected poisoning of students in Iran's schools an "unforgivable and big" crime, calling on authorities to seriously pursue the issue.

"If it is proven that the students were poisoned, the perpetrators of this crime must be severely punished. There will be no amnesty for them," the Leader stressed.

Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks on Monday as he planted saplings to mark Iran's national Arbor Day. "Officials should seriously pursue the issue of students poisoning. This is a big and unforgivable crime," the Leader said. Since November 2022, some Iranian students have reported symptoms of poisoning while in school. The outbreak started in the central city of Qom before expanding to other cities.

In most cases, students suffered respiratory problems, nausea, fatigue and dizziness, while some were hospitalized. Referring to the importance of planting saplings in preserving the environment, Ayatollah Khamenei called for planting forest trees in addition to fruit trees and said that the wood trade has a significant impact on the country's economy.

Ayatollah Khamenei, elsewhere in his remarks, called on the officials to solve the problems of the Iranian people through every economic means possible.

"The current state of the country is the outcome of a single-product economy, which has problems in terms of the value of the national currency and inflation," he argued.

Referring to the efforts of the officials to resolve the problems, the Leader said they need to "use all possible economic ways so that they can reach the right solution to remedy the people's problems."

He also said that declaration of the preservation of the environment is one of the outstanding features of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution, stressing that "no one should violate this law."

The 15th day of Esfand (the last month of the Iranian calendar year), which will end on March 20, is National Arbor Day also known as "National Tree Planting Day".

Meanwhile President Ebrahim Raisi said the issue of schoolgirl poisonings across Iran amounts to a "crime and an inhumane act" committed by the enemies against the nation.

"The enemy's new conspiracy of creating fear in the hearts of students... and their parents is a crime and an inhumane act," Raisi said in an address to a cabinet session.

The president ordered Iranian officials to swiftly probe into the case and inform people about its whereabouts to allay their concerns.

He emphasized that the move is "another link in the chain of the enemy's plots" which has been carried out to create chaos in the country, manipulate public opinion, and instill fear among the students.

The Iranian chief executive stressed the importance of finding the main perpetrators of the act and dealing with them seriously.

Iran's Actions Not Based on JCPOA

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) says the country remains committed to the Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), considering them as the basis for its nuclear activities, along with the strategic law adopted by the Iranian parliament.

Mohammad Eslami made the remark in an interview on Sunday, following a trip to Iran by Director General of the IAEA Rafael Mariano Grossi.

Commenting on Grossi's visit, he said Iran's interactions with the agency should continue and "we must not allow the destructive Zionist and terrorist current to take advantage of our relations and find excuses to mount pressure on the country."

Eslami added that the nuclear deal reached in 2015, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), can no longer be taken as the basis of Iran's activities.

"Naturally, the JCPOA, with which the other side does not comply, cannot form the basis of our action, because the basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's action is the strategic law passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iranian parliament) and the removal of unjust sanctions" that have been imposed on the country, the AEOI head said.

The law, dubbed the Strategic Action Plan to Counter Sanctions was adopted by Iranian lawmakers in December 2020 to counter sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States and its Western allies, and promote the country's peaceful nuclear program.

Under the parliament's law, the Iranian administration is required to restrict the IAEA's inspections and accelerate the development of the country's nuclear program beyond the limits set under the JCPOA.

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ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Poisoning the New Game of Enemies

In recent days the Islamic Republic of Iran has been struggling with a new mysterious plot of poisoning of students in schools which is aimed at creating chaos and psychological war in the country and this poisoning game threatening lives of many young predominantly girl students as well as affecting normal lives of the people.

After months of riots engineered by the enemies and mainly by the West and the Zionist regime, enemies have turned to the dirty game of poisoning the students to paint a negative picture of the Islamic Republic about its approach regarding the girls and women.

After the first plot of poisoning students in Qom, nobody thought that this horrible crime and plot will continue but unfortunately it turned into serial poisoning and every day the number of poisoning is on the rise and even boys' schools have not remained immune against this plot.

President Ebrahim Raisi last week ordered a thorough investigation into the issue and instructed Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi to lead the probe with assistance from other ministries.

Several theories have been floated about the cause of the mysterious illness, which has seen hundreds of schoolgirls in different Iranian cities being hospitalized, albeit with mild symptoms.

Iranian authorities, however, maintain there is something deeply sinister in this frenzy.

Speaking at a public rally in southern Iran's Bushehr city on Friday, President Raisi described the serial poisonings as "part of the hybrid war" against Iran designed to "create unrest and problems".

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian also took to Twitter to denounce Western countries for "shedding crocodile tears" over serial poisonings in the Islamic Republic.

"The interventionist reaction of some Western authorities to the issue of suspected poisoning of dear Iranian female students is the continuation of the enemy's hybrid war," he tweeted, adding that the matter is being "followed up seriously" by relevant institutions.

Their remarks came after the United States and Germany, yet again, made "interventionist" remarks regarding Iran's internal matters, much to the chagrin of Tehran.

"It's deeply concerning news coming out of Iran. These - what, what could be the poisoning of young girls that are just going to school," White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said.

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Israel Exports Weapons to Azerbaijan in Return for Access to Iran, Oil

TEL AVIV (Dispatches) - A new investigation by the Israeli daily Haaretz has revealed that the Israeli regime is exporting weapons worth billions of dollars to Azerbaijan in return for the former Soviet republic supplying Tel Aviv with oil and providing access to Iran.

Haaretz reported that since 2016, at least 92 cargo flights flown by Azerbaijani Silk Way Airlines have landed at Israel's Ovda airbase, the only airfield in the occupied territories through which explosives are transferred.

In October 2013, the head of the Israel Civil Aviation Authority signed an exemption permitting Silk Way planes to fly shipments of explosives - "classified as dangerous materials banned to fly" - from Ovda to a military airfield on the outskirts of the Azeri capital city of Baku, the report said.

The data, it added, expose an increasing pace of flights to Baku, especially in the middle of 2016, in late 2020 and at the end of 2021, which coincide with periods of Azerbaijan-Armenia fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

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Iran, Pakistan Trade Reaches \$2.5 b

TEHRAN (IP) - The Deputy Minister of Economic Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran announced that the trade between Iran and Pakistan reached 2.5 billion dollars.

Mehdi Safari said that cooperation and trade between Iran and Pakistan have increased significantly in recent months. The amount of exports from Iran to Pakistan is only 350 million dollars in agricultural items, and this amount for Pakistan is 650 million dollars, Safari said.

The reason for the growth of exports and trade between the two countries is the preparation of infrastructure such as border markets, customs, and the new transportation routes, Safari highlighted.

Yemen Never Forget Israeli Crimes

TEHRAN (IP) - Foreign Minister said that the Yemeni people would never forget the Israeli crimes in the country.

Hossein Amirabdollahian's message was read at the International Congress of Solidarity of World Elites with Yemenis' Resistance which was held on Monday.

The conference aimed to examine the internal, regional, and international dimensions of the Yemeni crisis and its national and international consequences, attracting the attention of global elites in various political, artistic, social, legal, and media fields to the issue of Yemen and the resistance of the Yemeni people.

The message read: "While the Zionist regime is facing deep and multi-layered crises and the new government of this fake regime has reached an impasse in less than a few weeks, it is one of the main roots of the crisis and insecurity in the region."

In these years, Amirabdollahian said: "The oppressed people of Yemen have not lost sight of the crimes committed by the Zionists against the region and Yemen."

"The Yemeni people and the resistance have condemned the normalization of the relations of some countries with the Zionist regime, in line with supporting their territorial integrity and independence, he noted."

The Iranian FM stressed that just as the Islamic Republic of Iran has announced its opposition to resorting to war in Yemen, it has also adopted such a stance to the conflict in Ukraine.

"The Islamic Republic believes that the Yemeni-Yemeni talks are the first step to the end of the Yemeni crisis; it also believes in the same principle in wider and regional dimensions and has always emphasized that in order to achieve regional stability, it is necessary for the countries of the region to follow up intra-regional dialogues to overcome misunderstandings," the statement added.

The Iranian FM called on all the thinkers of the Islamic world and the region to continue efforts and consultation for consolidating the unity of the Islamic Ummah.

Meanwhile Secretary of Science of the Congress of Solidarity of World Elites with Yemenis' Resistance says the event, inside and outside Iran, focused on introducing the dimensions of the resistance culture.



Elaborating on the conference at the event, Shohreh Pirani said that since the secretariat of the conference began its work, 10 meetings around the international event and its axes were held with the aim of introducing Islamic resistance to different countries.

Pirani added that guests from India, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Australia attended the conference.

She said: "In general, we received 70 articles, and after the reviews, 15 articles were selected as the best ones for lectures and publication in the conference booklet."

In another part, the President of Shahed University said: "The solidarity of politicians, global elites, and international figures with the resistance of Yemeni people is integral to helping them defend their country."

Ahmad Cheldavi stated that the role of the Yemeni people's resistance in the formation of the new Islamic civilization is among the axes of the international conference.

Cheldavi stressed: "The enemies have gone to the battle of the oppressed Yemeni nation with all their evil forces and caused extensive human disasters."

Biggest Dry Port, Rail Terminal Goes Operational

TEHRAN (MNA) - The first phase of Iran's biggest dry port and rail terminal called Aprin was officially inaugurated on Monday in a ceremony attended by the country's Transport and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash, Fars News Agency reported.

Covering approximately 450 hectares of land near the capital Teheran, Aprin is located at the junction of Iran's East-West and North-South rail corridors, which makes it a significant hub for the distribution and exports of goods via railroad.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, Bazrpash said the first phase of the terminal, covering 55 hectares, has been developed with an investment of 10 trillion rials (about \$22.1 million) by the private sector.

According to the minister, faster clearance of imported goods, as well as reduced fuel consumption, time of deposition of goods in customs, carrying out formalities for exported goods in the vicinity of the capital, job creation, and production boom, are among the benefits of this strategic port.

6 Sentenced to Death Over Terror Attacks in Khuzestan

AHVAZ (IRNA) - The Revolutionary Court in the southern Iranian city of Ahvaz has sentenced six people to death over involvement in terrorist attacks in the province of Khuzestan in recent years.

According to a Monday statement by the Iranian judiciary, the six had been involved in armed terrorist operations in Khuzestan over 2017 and 2018.

The statement identified the six as Ali Mojaddam, Mohammad Reza Moghadam, Moein Khanfari, Habib Deris, Adnan Ghoobeishavi and Salem Mousavi.

All those sentenced to death were members of the Harakat al-Nezal terrorist group and had received orders and instructions for terror attacks in Iran from ringleaders in Europe.

The convicts had killed two members of Basij security forces in the city of Aabdan as well as a law enforcement officer and a conscript in the nearby city of Bandar Imam Khomeini.

Iran, Kuwait

Discuss Expansion of Bilateral Relations

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister Mansour Al-Otaibi and Iranian Ambassador to Kuwait Mohammad Irani, in a meeting on Sunday, explored ways to enhance bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries.

During the meeting in Kuwait city, the Iranian ambassador and the Kuwaiti deputy foreign minister underlined the need for the further expansion of mutual cooperation.

The government of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has emphasized that it prioritizes the broadening of bilateral relations with the neighboring countries, including the Persian Gulf littoral states.

Iran to Start Up Newly-Discovered Lithium Mines by 2025

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An official from Iran's Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade (MIMT) says the country will be able to extract lithium from two newly-discovered lithium deposits in the next two years.

Mohammad Hadi Ahmadi, who serves as deputy head of MIMT's local branch in western Hamedan province, said that production from two lithium ore deposits in the region whose discovery were announced last week will begin by 2025.

Press TV first reported on the discovery of Iran's first lithium ore deposits on February 27. MIMT's exploration department said at the time that the deposits in Hamedan contain some 8.5 million metric tons of lithium ore, making the pair one of the largest in the world.

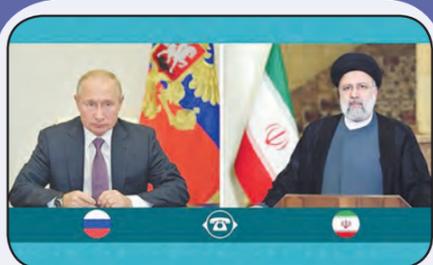
Ahmadi said that the two deposits cover an area of around 11 square kilometers in Qahavand Plain, located more than 50 kilometers to the east of the provincial capital of Hamedan.

He said the discovery of the deposits had taken nearly four years, adding that the MIMT is currently studying technological capacities existing in two developed countries as part of efforts to start up the mines through a partnership with private investors.

MIMT authorities expect more lithium ore deposits could be discovered in Hamedan, a province with vast deposits of clay which is a source of lithium.

Demand for lithium has risen in the global markets in recent years as the metal is a key ingredient in manufacturing batteries used in mobile phones and electric cars.

Raisi, Putin Confer on Bilateral Ties Over Phone



TEHRAN (MNA) - President Ebrahim Raisi held a phone call with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, on Monday.

Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov made the announcement on Monday.

According to Peskov, the two presidents discussed the bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation.

"Both sides agreed that relations between Iran and Russia are developing in a positive way. The issues of bilateral cooperation in different fields were also discussed."

Earlier, the two presidents also discussed the situation in Syria and cooperation in the fields of transportation and energy during a phone call.

Iran Has Had Unique Success in Exports

TEHRAN (IP) - Referring to the achievements of the Ministry of Defense, the minister says that Iran has had significant success in exports, which is unique compared to the past, and in the sales, there has been a 2.5 times growth.

Speaking at a press conference on Monday, Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani elaborated on Iran's achievements in the production of air defense systems, saying: "Iran has unique defense systems such as Bavar 373 that many countries aspire to have."

Referring to the defense ties between Iran and Russia, he stated that Iran and Russia enjoy a high level of defense relations. He added that Iran has reached a high level of technology and self-sufficiency in the field of producing defense systems.

Regarding the possibility of buying air defense systems from foreign countries, he added: "Whenever it is necessary to add other defense systems to the existing ones, we will decide then, but there is no need for that right now."

Iran Not to Cooperate With IAEA Beyond Law

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Islamic Republic of Iran will not cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) beyond the Iranian Parliament's law and the Safeguard Agreement, an Iranian lawmaker said.

Member of the presiding board of the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) Alireza Salimi told IRNA on Monday that Tehran would collaborate with the IAEA in line with the Iranian parliament's regulations and the UN nuclear watchdog's Safeguard Agreement.

According to the legislator, Majlis emphasizes the need for cooperating with the IAEA and sees collaboration as a criterion, but the legislative entity urged the government to stand against non-compliance from the Western sides and the nuclear watchdog.

The IAEA and the Western states should be aware that their expectations to collaborate beyond the Safeguard Agreement as well as beyond the laws of the Islamic Republic would not be met by the Iranians, he noted.

Iran has had transparent and unambiguous cooperation with the IAEA, he said, adding that the country has always backed collaborations in line with laws and regulations.

He further expressed hope that the recent visit by IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi to Tehran and an agreement between the two sides would end the enemies' attempts against the peaceful program of Iran.

Grossi paid a two-day visit to Tehran on Friday and Saturday at the invitation of Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Mohammad Eslami. The IAEA chief held talks with the AEOI chairman, President Ebrahim Raisi as well as Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amirabdollahian.

The visit came to an end with a joint statement by the IAEA and Iran, underlining that the Islamic Republic voluntarily allows the agency to conduct verification and supervision missions if possible. The two sides will determine the way to implement the missions in a meeting in Tehran in the near future.

Over 80,000 Prisoners Pardoned in Iran On Supreme Leader's Order

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Judiciary Chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei says the number of prisoners who have been pardoned based on a recent order by Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has reached over 80,000.

Mohseni-Ejei made the announcement in an interview with Ayatollah Khamenei's website on Sunday.

He said those who have been granted amnesty include many people who were arrested in recent riots in the country, adding that the number of pardon cases could reach 90,000.

The judiciary chief said, however, that the pardons have not affected inmates who are behind bars because of complaints by private plaintiffs.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said last month that his government had been authorized to use the pardon power to release university students, cultural, sports and media figures who have been arrested because of their involvement in the riots.

Official Stresses Expansion of Trade Ties With Qatar

TEHRAN (MNA) - The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) stressed the expansion of trade ties with Qatar and cooperation with the Qatari traders and businessmen in the field of partnership and joint investment and infrastructure development.

Alireza Peyman-Pak made the remarks on the sidelines of the first day of Iran-Qatar business forum in Tehran on Monday. Referring to the 13th government's emphasis on developing relations with its neighbors, the official said: "Qatar is one of the countries that, although it has close political relation with Iran, unfortunately in recent years enough attention has not been paid to the use of commercial and economic opportunities of cooperation with this country".

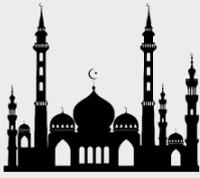
"During the past few months and in the 13th government, we have paid serious attention to the development of business relations with this country", he noted, adding, "In this regard, we have sent commercial attaché to Qatar, established a trade center, held a special exhibition, and sent business delegations".

Tehran and Doha have set a target of three billion dollars of annual trade by 2025.

In a meeting between Mohsen Rezaei, the Iranian vice president for economic affairs, and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani in October 2022, the two sides discussed ways of expanding trade ties between the two countries and emphasized the need for taking the necessary measures to reach the mentioned economic goal.

During the meeting, which was also attended by the TPO head, the Iranian side proposed drawing a roadmap for the two countries' trade development which was welcomed by Qatar's Emir.

Rezaei and Peyman-Pak visited Doha on top of a trade delegation to attend the opening ceremony of Iran's exclusive exhibition in the country.



PRAYER TIME

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| ■ Noon (Zohr) | 12:15 |
| ■ Evening (Maghreb) | 18:22 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr) | 05:01 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Sunrise | 06:25 |

61. In whatever business thou mayest be, and whatever portion thou mayest be reciting from the Qur'an, - and whatever deed ye (mankind) may be doing, - We are witnesses thereof when ye are deeply engrossed therein. Nor is hidden from thy Lord (so much as) the weight of an atom on the earth or in heaven. And not the least and not the greatest of these things but are recorded in a clear record.
62. Behold! verily on the friends of Allah there is no fear, nor shall they grieve;
Surah 10. Jonah (61 - 62)

Iran Oil Exports To Increase in Coming Months

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Oil Minister Javad Owji says crude oil exports from the country will further increase in the upcoming months despite the growing pressure of the U.S. sanctions on the Iranian energy sector.

Owji said that Iranian oil exports had reached significant levels in February amid efforts by the country to get round the sanctions and pump more oil to markets in East Asia.

"Iran's oil sales over the last month (February) was considerable despite the sanctions and they are expected to further increase in the coming months," the minister was quoted as saying by the official IRNA news agency.

Figures by international tanker tracking services released in January showed that oil exports from Iran in late 2022 had reached records not seen since the country came under US sanctions nearly five years ago.



The figures suggested that Iran had pumped more than 1.2 million barrels per day of oil to export markets late last year and showed that Iranian crude shipments had continued to rise in early 2023 with higher exports to China and Venezuela.

In his remarks, Owji said revenues collected from Iranian oil exports had more than doubled in early 2023 compared to the same period last year.

He said revenues from sales of Iranian petrochemical shipments had reached nearly \$14 billion in the 11 months to late January.

Iran Exports to India Increase in January

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's trade with India fell 6.19% in January 2023 compared with the same month of last year to stand at \$197 million, the latest data released by the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry show.

Iran's exports stood at \$68 million, registering a 122.07% rise compared with the previous year.

The exported goods mainly included dye intermediates worth \$33 million, petroleum products worth \$20 million and fresh fruit worth \$12 million.

Iran's imports from India during the period stood at \$129 million, registering a year-on-year decline of 27.97%.

Iran, Turkmenistan to Hold 17th Joint Economic Commission

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran and Turkmenistan are set to hold the 17th Joint Economic Commission.

The coordination meeting for the 17th Iran-Turkmenistan Joint Economic Commission was held on Saturday with the presence of representatives from ministries and economic organizations on the eve of the upcoming visit of Iran Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Mehrdad Bazrpash, to Turkmenistan.

At the beginning of the meeting, a report on the history of Iran-Turkmenistan relations and previous MoUs and negotiations between the two countries was presented.

Moreover, bilateral trade potentials through four important borders between Iran and Turkmenistan, namely Sarkhs, Lotfabad, Inche Borun and Bajjiran were discussed and requirements to facilitate border traffic were reviewed.

According to the reports presented in the meeting, Iran's export to Turkmenistan was 741 thousand tons to the value of \$321 million and the import from Turkmenistan was 122 thousand tons to the value of \$243 million, which indicates a trade surplus of Iran. Additionally, issues such as transit, tariffs, green customs, rail, road, sea and air transportation between Iran and Turkmenistan were among other agendas discussed.

Shahriar Efendizadeh, Deputy Transport Minister, Mahdi Safari, Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy, and representatives from the Customs, the Central Bank, the Joint Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Free Zones Organization, attended the meeting.

Media Festival of Water Messenger Wraps Up at ABFA of Isfahan



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN – The closing ceremony of the media festival of "Ghased-e Abb" (Messenger of Water) was held at the Water and Wastewater Company of Isfahan Province (ABFA of Isfahan) with cooperation of water and wastewater as well as regional water companies of Isfahan Province.

In the closing ceremony, the CEO of ABFA of Isfahan Mr. Hossein Akbarian felicitated on the occasion of the birthday of Hazrat Ali Akbar (A) and National Water Day and said that today societies have realized the role of the media in awareness, development and improving the quality of life and media outlets can manage the critical conditions and to boost social capital whose main pillar is trust.

Akbarian then pointed to the role of journalists in increasing the water knowledge of the society and said that water knowledge as one of the dimensions of environmental knowledge has important stand in the water management and developing the social justice and once can change first the knowledge and then the approach and ultimately behavior of the addressee with increasing the water knowledge in the public.

He urged the media to educate their audiences how their required drinking water is supplied and how they have efficient consumption of these limited resources.

Akbarian then emphasized the significance of jihad of explanation which has been repeatedly emphasized in the remarks of the Supreme Leader, adding that the Supreme Leader has termed jihad of explanation as the most important jihad and the approach of ABFA of Isfahan is jihadi work based on knowledge and explanation of this jihadi work is responsibility of journalists of the province.

It is worth noting that the first call for paper of the festival was in December and 155 papers were sent to the secretariat of the festival and 131 works were evaluated by the jury in the news, title, interview, editorial, satire and infographic categories and ultimately 21 works were ranked.

South Pars Phase 14 Most Important Industrial Project after Revolution

TEHRAN – Deputy Head of the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran (IDRO) for Mega Projects and Advanced Industries Hamid Bazargan hailed Phase 14 of the South Pars gas field as the most important industrial project carried out in the country after the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Speaking at a news conference on Sunday, Mr Bazargan said that Phase

14 of the South Pars gas field is the most indigenized phase which was launched under the strategy of IDRO.

He put the cost needed for launching the giant industrial project at \$150 billion and added that Iran managed to overtake the Qatari side in the field of gas production after its inauguration.

The megaproject of Phase 14 is the largest and an outstanding achievement of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past two decades, he emphasized.

Bazargan termed Phase 14 as the largest industrial project of the country with a focus on domestic production after sanctions were imposed against Iran in 2018, adding that eight Iranian companies played an important role in launching this industrial project.

He noted that the project had come to a five-year halt due to some reasons and the construction of the Phase 14 of South Pars was no longer on the agenda. He note that as everyone knows, completing the incomplete projects is more difficult than launching new ones and this happened through the support of IDRO and its financial support from the contractors.

Bazargan further said that eight companies had roles in this consortium which is considered a record.

Meanwhile in the presser, the CEO of the Industrial Projects Management of Iran (IPMI) said that all sections of Phase 14 of the South Pars gas field have been launched by domestic experts and engineers without any foreign assistance.

Mohammad Reza Naseh noted that a joint consortium was held with Japanese and South Korean partners for the development of phases 6, 7 and 8 of the South Pars gas field.

He went on to say that Phase 14 was fully launched by the Iranian engineers without the presence of foreign representatives or supervisors.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



Elsewhere in his remarks, Naseh pointed to the sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic, adding that the imposition of sanctions against Iran and the pandemic forced the country to accelerate the development of the phase.

He pointed to the high potential of Iranian knowledge-based companies and added that his company used maximum technical know-how of these firms to launch

Phase 14 of the South Pars gas field and the Phase 14 is the most Iranian-made refinery and its whole management is under the control of Iranians.

Then the CEO of Iran Shipbuilding and Offshore Industries Complex (ISOICO) Mr. Salman Zarbi, for his part in the presser, said that the company was the main contractor in the Phase 16 and it has recently won the tender for developing the Phase 11. He added that ISOICO was the executor in manufacturing and installing the offshore platforms of the super project of Phase 14, adding the company equipped 4 500m cu ft platforms during this project and achieved many records to be the leading contractor of this project. He then enumerated the achievements of this super project, reiterating that replacing foreign contractors with Iranians was the most important achievement.

Phase 14 of the giant South Pars gas field in Iran's southern coastal province of Bushehr formally came into operation on March 2 in a ceremony attended by President Ebrahim Raisi.

Phase 14 is going to produce a daily output of 50 million cubic meters of sweet gas, 400 tons of sulfur, and 75,000 barrels of gas condensates.

The new phase of the gas field is also expected to produce 1 million tons of ethane and 1 million tons of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) as petrochemical feedstock per annum.

The Phase 14 project has been fully designed, carried out and operated by Iranian experts under the pressure of foreign sanctions.

The South Pars gas field, whose development has been divided into 28 phases, is located in the Persian Gulf straddling the maritime border between Iran and Qatar.

It covers an area of 9,700 square kilometers, of which 3,700 square kilometers belongs to Iran.

MAPNA Group Fully Ready to Develop Water Projects of Country

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The water desalination project of Lian of Bushehr Province with capacity of daily 35,000 cubic meters of water supply was inaugurated on Thursday in the presence of President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi and during the ceremony the CEO of MAPNA Group announced full readiness of this industrial group for developing water projects in the country.



In the opening ceremony, President Raisi pointed to the water tension in Bushehr and rationing of water in this province that with inauguration of this project, rationing will come to its end. He also hailed efforts of domestic experts in MAPNA Group and said that they have done a big job and by this project, major part of water problem of Bushehr will be resolved and reiterated that actions of MAPNA Group are source of pride.

Then the CEO of MAPNA Group Mr. Abbas Aliabadi said that water supply issue will be one of the serious challenges in the upcoming years, and technology and scientific solutions will resolve the problems. He added that fortunately Iranian experts have mastery on this science and technology and pointed to the importance of productivity.

He then pointed to some of activities of MAPNA in the field of water and announced full readiness of the group for developing water projects in the country and said that the group is in talks for signing a deal for construction of a 200,000-cubic meter water desalination system in Chabahar and also it has started technical and environmental studies for possibility of transferring water from sea to the Central Desert of Iran.

Chadormalu Co. Opens Its Development and Innovation and Technology Support Center



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The center for development and innovation and technology center of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company was inaugurated and started its work at Yazd Science and Technology Park.

According to the public relations of the company, this center is aimed at creating innovation capacity as well as creating value in the mining and industrial industries of Chadormalu Company and also improving their productivities.

In the inaugural ceremony, the CEO of Chadormalu Company Eng. Taherzadeh pointed to inevitability of the move of the mining sector and mining industries as one of the driving forces of national development on course to creating sustainable value and improving competitive advantages especially in the international markets.

He added that in this line, the company decided to launch the center for innovation at Yazd Science and Technology Park and a deal was signed between the two sides. He reiterated in the year which was named year of production, knowledge-based and job creation, this center was launched in line with the law of surge in production, knowledge-based and general policies of the country for developing knowledge-based economy and to provide the ground for constructive cooperation for support of developing technologies, technological services and products as well as developing bio-environment of technology and innovation of Yazd Province.

Taherzadeh said that Chadormalu Company as one of the biggest actors in the national economy and concurrent with cooperation with knowledge-based companies and research centers are moving towards smartizing the production process for improving productivity.

After the inauguration of the center, Chadormalu Company and Yazd Science and Technology Park signed two MoUs on cooperation.

Two Int'l Red Cross Workers Kidnapped in Mali

PARIS (Dispatches) - Two workers with the International Committee of the Red Cross were kidnapped in northern Mali on Saturday, the organization said, the latest abduction in the troubled West African country.

Kidnappings are common in Mali, which has been battling a security and political crisis since jihadist and separatist insurgencies broke out in the north of the country in 2012.

Jihadists affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group have escalated their operations into central Mali and neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso.

Thousands of civilians, police and troops have been killed across the region, and more than two million have fled their homes.



U.S. General Says Syria Mission Worth the Risk

NORTHEAST SYRIA (Dispatches) - The nearly eight-year-old U.S. deployment to Syria to combat Islamic State is still worth the risk, the top U.S. military officer said on Saturday, after a rare, unannounced visit to a dusty base in the country's northeast to meet U.S. troops.

Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, flew to Syria to assess efforts to prevent a resurgence of the militant group and review safeguards for American forces against attacks, including from drones flown by Iran-backed militia.



Poor Nations' Leaders Unleash Anger and Despair at UN Summit



DOHA (Dispatches) - Leaders from the world's poorest nations poured out their disappointment and bitterness at a UN summit on Sunday over the treatment of their countries by richer counterparts.

Many made pointed calls for the developed powers to come good with billions of dollars of promised aid to help them escape poverty and battle climate change.

Central African Republic's president told the UN Least Developed Countries meeting in Doha that his resource-rich but impoverished nation was being "looted" by "Western powers".

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres followed up an attack he made a day earlier on the "predatory" interest rates imposed by international banks on poor states.

He said there could be "no more excuses" for not providing aid.

But the opening day of general debate at the once-in-a-decade summit saw no major announcement of desperately needed cash -- apart from \$60 million that host Qatar said it would give to United Nations programs.

Leaders of the world's major economies have been markedly absent from debate, which will last five days, on the turmoil in poor nations.

At a meeting with LDC leaders on Saturday Guterres called for \$500 billion to be mobilized for social and economic transformation.

Leaders also used the first day of public debate to renew demands that industrialized governments hand over a promised \$100 billion a year to support their efforts to counter global warming.

Presidents and prime ministers from Africa and the Asia-Pacific region made calls for financial action.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, whose country of 170 million is scheduled to graduate out of LDC status, said poorer nations "deserve" certainty over financing for development and climate.

"The international community must renew its commitment for real structural transformation in LDCs," Hasina said.

"Our nations do not ask for charity. What we seek are our due international commitments."

Zambia's President Hakainde Hichilema said providing the finance was "a matter of credibility".

"LDCs cannot afford another lost decade," declared Narayan Kaji Shrestha, deputy prime minister of Nepal, which is also to leave the LDC club for the Middle Income Countries division by 2026.

Shrestha said that in the five decades since LDC status was established to give countries trade privileges and cheaper finance, they had been "fighting an epic battle against poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy."

He highlighted that only six countries had so far escaped the LDC status that some nations consider a stigma.

Central African Republic's President Faustin-Archange Touadera used his speech to lash out at sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and other institutions against the huge but sparsely populated nation that has seen decades of instability.

Touadera said the country's 5.5 million people could not understand how, with vast reserves of gold, diamonds, cobalt, oil and uranium, it "remains, more than 60 years after independence, one of the poorest in the world".

"Central African Republic has always been wrongly considered by certain Western powers as a reserve for strategic materials," he added.

"It has suffered a systematic looting since its independence, helped by political instability supported by certain Western powers or their allies."

China Proffers Peaceful Reunification, Taiwan Says Respect Our Democracy

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledged "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan as well as resolute steps to oppose Taiwan independence, with Taipei responding that Beijing should respect the Taiwanese people's commitment to democracy and freedom.

China, which claims democratic Taiwan as its own territory, has increased its military activity near the island over the past three years, responding to what it calls "collusion" between Taipei and Washington, Taiwan's main international backer and arms supplier.

In August, China staged war games around Taiwan in response to a visit to Taipei by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Speaking at the opening of the annual meeting of China's parliament, Li said Beijing stands by the "one China" principle, which states that Taiwan is part of China, though did not directly threaten military action.

The government should implement our party's policy for "resolving the Taiwan question" and "take resolute steps to

oppose Taiwan independence and promote reunification", he told the roughly 3,000 delegates at Beijing's enormous Great Hall of the People.

"We should promote the peaceful development of cross-strait relations and advance the process of China's peaceful reunification."

Most Taiwanese people have shown no interest in being ruled by autocratic China, which has never renounced the use of force to bring the island under its control.

Li, in separate comments on defense, said the armed forces should boost combat preparedness, though did not mention Taiwan within that context.

Taiwan's China-policy making Mainland Affairs Council responded to what it called Li's "reaffirmation" of China's Taiwan policy by saying Beijing should face up to the reality that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are "not subordinate to each other".

China should "respect the Taiwanese people's commitment to the core concepts of holding fast to the sovereignty, democracy and freedom of the Republic of China", it said, using Taiwan's formal name.



Pakistan Police Attempt to Arrest Ex-PM Imran Khan

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Islamabad police officials travelled to Lahore to arrest the former Pakistan PM from his residence.

Officers have arrived at the residence of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in a bid to arrest him in a case related to the purchase and sale of gifts.

In a series of tweets on Sunday, the police said Khan was "avoiding" arrest after officers arrived at his home in Lahore, adding that a police superintendent had "gone to the room" but the 70-year-old was not there.

On Tuesday, an Islamabad sessions court issued a non-bailable arrest warrant against Khan for avoiding hearings in connection with the illegal purchase and sale of gifts received from foreign dignitaries when he was prime minister. He has denied the charges.

Following the police's attempt to arrest him, Khan addressed workers from his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party at his Zaman Park home and said he is being summoned for "fake cases" and that his life was under threat.

"I have said this earlier, and I was proven right when I was attacked, that there is a threat to my life," Khan told his supporters.

"They keep summoning me to various courts in Lahore and Islamabad where they don't provide security despite knowing about the danger that I face."

Khan was removed from power in April last year after he lost a parliamentary vote of confidence and is facing dozens of cases against him, ranging from charges like terrorism and corruption.

On Sunday, police officials, who had travelled from the capital, Islamabad, were seen outside the entrance of Khan's residence.

Islamabad police inspector general, Akbar Nasir Khan, told Geo News TV channel that the team went to Lahore to arrest Khan, not just to serve the warrant.

Nasir added that according to the law, the first step of a non-bailable arrest warrant was to serve notice to the accused and make the arrest immediately. Khan's supporters and members of the PTI party gathered in their hundreds to protest against the attempted arrest.

Greek PM Seeks Forgiveness as Thousands Protest Over Rail Tragedy

ATHENS (Dispatches) - Greece's prime minister on Sunday asked for forgiveness from the families of the 57 dead in the nation's worst rail disaster as thousands of furious protesters rallied in Athens and clashed with police.

"As prime minister, I owe it to everyone, but especially to the victims' relatives, (to ask for) forgiveness," Kyriakos Mitsotakis wrote in a message addressed to the nation.

"For the Greece of 2023, two trains heading in different directions cannot run on the same line and no one notice," Mitsotakis said in the message posted on his Facebook page.

The crash between passenger and freight trains near the city of Larissa on Tuesday has sparked widespread outrage across Greece.

Thousands of angry demonstrators gathered outside the parliament in Athens on Sunday following a call by students, rail workers and public sector employees.

AFP journalists saw violent clashes erupt between police and the protesters.

They had released hundreds of black balloons into the sky in memory of the dead, with some holding signs reading "Down with killer governments", while train and metro services were paralyzed by strike action.

Michalis Hasiotis, head of the chartered accountants' union, told AFP they felt "an immense anger", blaming "the thirst for profit, the lack of measures taken for the passengers' protection" for the disaster.

Relatives and loved ones of those killed were also expected to gather Sunday for a memorial outside Larissa station, central Greece, near the site of the accident.

The station master implicated in the disaster was due in court on Sunday, a hearing postponed from the previous day, where he may face charges of negligent homicide.

Hellenic Train, the rail company that has become the focus of some of the anger expressed in the wake of the crash, released a statement late Saturday defending its actions.

Hundreds of people had demonstrated during the week outside their Athens headquarters, and one legal source has said that investigators are looking at the possibility of bringing charges against senior members of the company.

Over the last few days, rail union officials have insisted they warned the company about the safety issues on the line. Hard questions are also being asked of the government over its failure to pursue rail safety reforms.

The demonstrations and vigils across Greece have expressed a combination of grief and anger at the disaster, which happened when a passenger train and a freight train collided.

Syntagma Square, next to the Greek parliament in Athens, was the scene of clashes between police and angry protesters on Friday night.

Candle-lit marches and ceremonies have also been held in memory of the victims, many of them students who were returning from a weekend break.



Estonians Go to the Polls With Parties Split Over Ukraine Aid

TALLINN (Dispatches) - Estonians were voting for a new parliament in an election that could strengthen far-right nationalists, who have campaigned against further arms deliveries to Ukraine.

Prime Minister Kaja Kallas's center-right Reform Party is predicted to win by the opinion polls, but will likely have to form a coalition to hang on to power.

The party is expected to garner 24 percent to 30 percent of votes, according to final polls during the week. The far-right EKRE was predicted to take second place with 14-25 percent.

The Centre Party was on 16-19 percent and Estonia 200 between nine and 15 percent.

"Those who don't vote for EKRE will not be rid of the Reform (party)", EKRE leader Martin Helme wrote on Facebook on Sunday.

Former prime minister and Reform Party member Siim Kallas warned of a splintered vote.

"The more the result is muddled and split, the more the government will be muddled, the more the ruling coalition will be weak," he posted on Facebook.

Estonia, a country of 1.3 million people bordering Russia, has a unicameral parliament with 101 seats, all of them at stake in the election.

The Baltic state, a member of the EU and NATO, has led international calls over the past year for more military aid to help Ukraine fight off Russia's invasion.

Estonia's military assistance to Ukraine amounts to more than one percent of GDP -- the biggest contribution of any country relative to the size of its economy.

"It's obvious that what is happening in Ukraine is very important for Estonia as well" 35-year-old engineer Juhan Ressar told AFP at a polling station the capital Tallinn.

"Maybe people ... have forgotten the importance of independence," he said. Reform's Kallas told AFP in a recent interview, "We support an open, friendly, Western-minded, European, smart country."

"My biggest competitor thinks that we shouldn't help Ukraine, we shouldn't support Ukraine, we should only look for our self-interest," she said.

According to EKRE's Helme, Estonia should not be "further escalating tensions" with Moscow.



WHO Urges Countries To Reveal Intelligence On COVID-19 Origins



GENEVA (Dispatches) - The World Health Organization has urged all countries to reveal what they know about the origins of COVID-19 following claims by the United States that the virus was likely leaked from a Chinese laboratory and which has led to furious denials from Beijing.

US Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Christopher Wray told Fox News this week that the FBI had assessed the source of the COVID-19 pandemic was "most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan", the Chinese city that hosts a virus research laboratory and was the location of the first COVID infections in late 2019.

"If any country has information about the origins of the pandemic, it's essential for that information to be shared with WHO and the international scientific community," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"Not so as to apportion blame but to advance our understanding of how this pandemic started, so we can prevent, prepare for and respond to future epidemics and pandemics," the WHO chief said.

The WHO has not abandoned efforts to identify the source of the pandemic, he said. "WHO continues to call for [China] to be transparent in sharing data and to conduct the necessary investigations and share the results. To that effect, I have written to, and spoken with, high-level Chinese leaders on multiple occasions, as recently as just a few weeks ago."

The WHO chief also said that "all hypotheses on the origins of the virus remain on the table".

Chinese officials have angrily denied the FBI's claim of their country being the origin of the pandemic, calling it a smear campaign against Beijing.

Wray also told Fox News television that China had thwarted efforts to identify the origin of the virus. "I will just make the observation that the Chinese government ... has been doing its best to try to thwart and obfuscate the work here, the work that we're doing, the work that our US government and close foreign partners are doing," Wray said.

Politicisation of the search to identify the origin of the virus was making the scientific work harder and the world less safe as a result, Tedros added.

Tedros said there was a moral imperative to find out how the pandemic started, for the sake of the millions who lost their lives to COVID-19 and those living with long COVID.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's COVID-19 technical lead, said the organisation had reached out to the US mission in Geneva for more information regarding the FBI chief's claims.

So far, however, they did not have access to the data on which the US reports were based, said Van Kerkhove, who is an infectious disease epidemiologist.

"It remains vital that that information is shared", to help move the scientific studies forward, she added.

China's foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said last week that Beijing had been transparent in the search for the origin of the virus. She countered that the US should look to its own biological laboratories scattered across the world when searching for the virus's source.

"It is the US who should respond to the world's questions and concerns over Fort Detrick and its military and biological labs across the world," Mao said.

"By politicising the issue, the US will not succeed in discrediting China. Instead, it will only hurt the US's own credibility."

As of February 21, there have been more than 757 million virus infections and 6.85 million related deaths, according to the WHO's global COVID-19 trackers. The WHO also acknowledges that the true death toll is far higher.

Mediterranean Diet May Help Prevent Memory Loss in People With MS



LONDON (Dispatches) - A Mediterranean diet may help multiple sclerosis (MS) patients ward off damage to their thinking skills.

New research finds that a diet rich in veggies, fruit, fish and healthy fat reduced their risk of developing memory loss as well as losing the ability to concentrate, learn new things or make decisions.

A loss of such key mental skills, or "cognitive impairment," is a common feature of MS, a neurological disease that short circuits critical communication between the brain and body.

But the new analysis of diet and mental status among 563 people with MS linked the Mediterranean diet to a 20% lower risk for cognitive difficulties.

"Mediterranean diet is a broad term and there are geographical variations," said lead author Dr. Ilana Katz Sand, an associate professor of neurology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. "However, it refers to an overall pattern that favors fruits, vegetables, olive oil, nuts, fish, and whole grains and limits meats - particularly red meat - baked goods, and highly processed foods."

Prior research has suggested that Mediterranean diets "have broad health benefits," Katz Sand added, including some protection against heart disease, obesity, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's and overall mental health decline.

"In this study," she said, "we demonstrate a significant positive association between the level of alignment of one's diet with a Mediterranean pattern and better cognition in people with MS."

Katz Sand stressed that the protective association "remained strong" even after her team accounted for factors that can influence mental status. Those included age, gender, race, ethnicity, income, obesity, diabetes, smoking history, exercise habits and high blood pressure.

About 7 in 10 of the study participants were women, at an average age of 44. All completed a nutrition assessment and a screening for mental sharpness, or acuity.

About 19% of the MS patients had already experienced some degree of mental decline. "When we grouped people according to their Mediterranean diet score, those in the lowest (scoring) group were far more likely to meet our criteria for cognitive impairment than those in the higher (scoring) groups," Katz Sand said.

More research will be required to fully understand why such a diet would be protective among MS patients. One possibility: The benefit may owe to "the chemical structure of the foods themselves, and the effects of these foods on the composition and function of the gut microbiota, (meaning) the bacteria that live in the gut," she suggested.

In sum, she noted, the metabolites produced by digestion may have "distant effects outside the gut, including the ability to protect the brain from physical and cognitive decline due to MS."

Katz Sand stressed that the findings are "observational," reflecting the cognitive status of each participant at one moment in time. In other words, the study cannot prove that a Mediterranean diet staves off progressive mental decline in MS patients.

"We are encouraged by these results, but because of the study design, we are not able to say for certain that if people make a change in their diet, that they will have better cognition going forward than if they did not make that change," Katz Sand said. "Before we make recommendations that promise particular benefits for people living with MS, we need well-designed interventional studies that provide a high level of evidence."



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German Sanctions Against Russian Oligarchs Advancing Slowly

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany is making slow progress in enforcing sanctions against Russian oligarchs and institutions, according to government numbers seen by Reuters on Saturday.

Germany has frozen around 5.25 billion euros (\$5.57 billion) in assets belonging to sanctioned oligarchs since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, according to the German finance ministry. The figure was 4.28 billion euros six months ago.

The ministry shared this information in reply to a request from member of the German parliament Christian Goerke. "Since December, only 200 million euros in oligarch assets have been frozen, and for half a year, just one billion. Not a single oligarch has reported his assets since December," Goerke criticized.



March 19 Election, the Biggest Political Event for Future of Kazakhstan

BY: F. TAHERPOOR

TEHRAN - The countdown has started for one of the biggest political event in the history of Republic of Kazakhstan as Kazakhs will go to polls on March 19 for the parliamentary elections, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Tehran H.E. Askhat Orazbay said.

Speaking in a presser on Monday at the Embassy of Kazakhstan, Orazbay highlighted major developments regarding the March 19 parliamentary election in Kazakhstan. He first said that Kazakhstan has announced three days of holiday for celebrating Nowruz (New Year) as many countries in the region celebrate it.

He then said that the snap parliamentary (lower parliament) election is considered an important event in the framework of political developments in Kazakhstan, noting that Kazakh President pursues a new policy for building a country based on justice and this needs major developments in all fields and after the referendum, the parliamentary election is the other development.

Orazbay said that Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev is determined to direct his country towards justice and reshuffling laws of election and helping openness and freedom of expression in the country. He reiterated the country needs a new parliament (Mazhilis) to help the president for building a new Kazakhstan.

In his Address to the Nation on September 1, 2022, President Tokayev said: "The holding of early elections to the Mazhilis and maslikhats is dictated by the logic of the constitutional reform, supported by citizens at the national referendum. According to its results, our country moved to new, fairer, and more competitive rules of formation of the representative branches of power".

He then said that the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced the admission of all seven registered political parties to participate in the 2023 legislative elections to field their candidates according to their party lists as people will elect deputies for 98 seats in the parliament as 70% of deputies have been elected from the lists of political parties and 30% of deputies from the candidates who are not on the list of the political parties and they compete individually.

Aq Jol, Amanat, Auyyl, Baytaq, National, People's Party and Republica are seven qualified political parties which have lists in the election.

To be eligible to run for the seat in the Mazhilis, a candidate must be a citizen of Kazakhstan, be at least 25 years of age, and should also have resided in Kazakhstan for the past ten years, he said, adding that a candidate for the seat in the maslikhat must also be a citizen of Kazakhstan, live in the region the candidate wants to represent, and be at least 20 years of age.

Mr. Orazbay went on to say that Kazakhstan has invited observers for its election from 34 countries who are mainly heads of election commissions in their own countries.

He stated that to participate in the observation of the early parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, invitations were sent on behalf of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to 10 international organizations: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, CIS Executive Committee, CIS Inter-parliamentary Assembly, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, CSTO Parliamentary Assembly, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Organization of Turkic States, and Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic States.

Orazbay said that CEC has so far accredited 111 international observers for the elections from 3 international organizations (the OSCE ODIHR, the Inter-parliamentary Assembly of the CIS member states, CIS observer mission) and 16 foreign states (PRC, the Kingdom of Netherlands, the State of Palestine, the Republic of Korea, the Kingdom of Belgium, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Kingdom of Thailand, the Republic of Armenia, Georgia, French Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Great Britain, the Slovak Republic, the Republic of Estonia).

The election will be an acid test for Kazakhstan for experiencing new era and political development which can propel this country towards prosperity something that President Tokayev is determined to happen by recent drastic changes in political system and behaviors of the country.

UAE, Italy Announce Promoting Relations to Strategic Partnership Level

DUBAI (Dispatches) - The UAE and the Republic of Italy have announced the promotion of their relations to the level of Strategic Partnership.



The announcement came during a meeting held between President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni at Al Shati Palace in Abu Dhabi.

During the meeting, the two sides announced a "Declaration of Intent" on enhancing cooperation within the United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28) and climate action, in addition to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation on energy transition projects and sustainability initiatives between ADNOC and the Italian energy group Eni.

The MoU aims to strengthen cooperation in the field of emissions reduction, new energy technologies and low-carbon solutions.

It also contributes to enhancing the long-term strategic partnership between the two companies, boosting energy security and accelerating low-carbon economic and industrial growth.

Areas of cooperation include reducing carbon emissions, with a focus on carbon capture, utilisation and storage technologies, enhancing energy efficiency, joint investment in green hydrogen, and renewable and clean energy.

"The governments of the United Arab Emirates and the Republic of Italy, based on the strong ties binding the two countries and the common objectives and mutual interests of both governments, and on the occasion of the first visit of Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to the UAE, during which she met with President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, where they held discussions and exchanged views on the latest international developments and explored ways to increase cooperation in the fields of political, economic, humanitarian, cultural, climate and energy transformation between the two countries, while emphasising the commitment of their two governments to strengthen bilateral relations between the UAE and Italy on the basis of confidence, understanding and mutual respect to achieve the benefit and prosperity of their two peoples, and pursuant to all agreements and memoranda of understanding concluded between the UAE and Italy, and recognising the progress currently made in the field of multidimensional and multifaceted cooperation, the two sides agreed to promote bilateral relations as an embodiment of their common and strong determination to cooperate at all levels.

The UAE and Italy share common goals, including achieving sustainable development and economic growth, strengthening cooperation with the international community, prosperity and stability, and traditional values of peace, tolerance, human fraternity, coexistence, dialogue and openness.

This strategic partnership will enable the UAE and Italy to focus their joint efforts towards expanding and deepening the horizons of cooperation in areas of mutual strategic interest, including political, diplomatic, international, economic and trade cooperation, in addition to collaboration in the field of direct investment and partnerships between various sectors, including healthcare and sustainable development, food and water security, cooperation in industry and advanced technology, defence and climate change, renewable energy and clean technologies, energy security and transition, education, culture, people-to-people exchanges, sports and other vital areas."

World Food Prices Fall 11th Month in Feb.

ROME (Dispatches) - In February, the world price index of the United Nations food agency declined for the 11th consecutive month, resulting in a 19% decrease from the peak reached in March last year following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) price index, which tracks the most globally traded food commodities, averaged 129.8 points last month against 130.6 for January, the agency said Friday. It was the lowest reading since September 2021.

The monthly update said the decline in the index reflected lower prices for vegetable oils and dairy products, which more than offset a steep rise in sugar prices.

The FAO cereal price index fell by a marginal 0.1% month-over-month in February, with a marginal rise in wheat prices, more than offset by lower rice prices.

Vegetable oils fell by 3.2% and dairy by 2.7%, while sugar rose by 6.9% to a six-year high due largely to a downward revision to production in India.

In a separate report on cereals supply and demand, the FAO issued a first preliminary forecast for global wheat production in 2023, with a year-over-year decline to 784 million tons seen although the crop would still be the second highest on record.

"In Ukraine, severe financial constraints, infrastructure damage and obstructed access to fields in parts of the country have resulted in an estimated 40% year-over-year reduction in the 2023 winter wheat area and a well below-average wheat output is anticipated in 2023," the FAO said.

The decline was partially offset by an expected rise in U.S. production to 51 million tons, with high prices leading to an increase in wheat sowings to the highest level since 2015.

The FAO raised its forecast for world cereal production in 2022 by 9 million tons to 2.77 billion tons, although that would still be 1.3% lower year-over-year.

The report said the bulk of the upward revision related to rice, with an improved outlook for production in India.

China Approves \$1.3b for Cash-Strapped Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistan sees a ray of hope as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) approved the rollover of \$1.3b facilities.

Taking to Twitter, Pakistan Finance Minister Ishaq Dar announced, "Formalities completed [and] Chinese Bank, ICBC approved rollover of \$1.3b facilities which has been repaid by Pakistan to ICBC in recent months."

He further said that the facility would be disbursed in three installments, the first one of \$500m has been received by the State Bank of

Pakistan and added "It will increase forex reserves!"

Pakistan is currently facing growing economic challenges, with high inflation, sliding forex reserves, a widening current account deficit and a depreciating currency, reported Geo News.

Foreign exchange reserves were at \$3.8b as of February 24, just enough for less than a month of imports. While the liquid foreign exchange reserves stand at around \$9b which includes \$5.5b in net reserves held by commercial banks.

Hours before his announcement, the finance minister revealed that China has renewed a facility under which Pakistan expected an additional inflow of \$500m in the "next few days".

Highlighting the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)-led government's economic achievements, Dar said that the foreign exchange reserves held by the SBP climbed to \$3.8b from \$2.8b -- recorded last month. He maintained that the government returned \$6.5b of foreign debt during the current fiscal year, according to Geo News.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics said that the monthly inflation, measured by a basket of products called the Consumer Price Index (CPI), jumped to 31.6 per cent in February year-on-year.

Last month, prices rose at the fastest pace ever in the country's history, according to available data, with food, beverage and transport costs driving inflation to a point where analysts fear "families will have to make choices and sacrifices," reported the Dawn.

Japan Unions Ask Average 4.5% Wage Hike



TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan's trade unions are demanding the biggest wage hike in more than two decades at their spring pay negotiations, a national labor tally showed, as the government and central bank urge firms to raise workers' wages to support the economy.

A survey of more than 2,000 unions nationwide showed an average 4.49% raise request for this year, first time above 4% since 1998's 4.36%, according to the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC). This is also the highest since the mid-1990s, a statement by JTUC shows.

Workers in the world's third-largest economy have been emboldened by policymakers' calls for wage hikes to sustain a frail post-pandemic economic recovery threatened by a four-decade-high inflation.

Despite the higher cost burden, major Japanese firms have promised large pay increases to retain skilled workers amid labor crunch.

World's largest car maker Toyota last week accepted a union demand for the biggest base salary growth in 20 years, followed by rival Honda's agreement with its union requesting a 5% pay increase.

Gaming giant Nintendo said it will lift workers' base pay by 10%, while fashion brand Uniqlo parent Fast Retailing announced an up to 40% raise.

The JTUC preliminary survey showed the average union demand during this year's annual labor talks, called "shunto" in Japanese, was much larger than 2022's 2.97%.

UAE Taps Into 10% of Global Economy With Latest CEPA

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Signing its fourth CEPA with Turkey, besides those signed with India, Indonesia, and Israel, will give UAE access to enter new markets that reach more than 2.2 billion people, including the Greater Arab Free Trade Area Agreement that was signed more than 15 years ago, Dr Thani Al Zeyoudi, Minister of State for Foreign Trade said.

Four bilateral agreements will contribute to an over 2.4 per cent increase in the country's GDP by 2031, further driving the growth of UAE exports by adding \$120 billion over the next 10 years. This will create more economic and trade opportunities, Dr Al Zeyoudi explained, noting that, after signing the agreement with Turkey, the UAE's economy will be linked to more than 10 per cent of the global economy.

The Minister said that Turkey was the UAE's sixth-largest trading partner in 2022, recording a growth of 40 per cent compared to 2021, with non-oil foreign trade reaching \$18.9 billion last year.

Dr Al Zeyoudi added that the UAE-Turkey CEPA will see tariffs removed from 83 per cent of the commodities in the two countries, in addition, the liberalising non-oil trade by 93 per cent of the commodities. This will further help create a new market for the two countries in sectors such as food security, agriculture, financial technology, telecommunications, logistics, renewable energy, and real estate. With CEPA, the volume of trade exchange between the two countries is expected to grow to over \$40 billion annually within five years, in addition to creating over 25,000 jobs, especially in the skilled labour sectors, in the UAE by 2031. The UAE's exports to Turkey are expected to grow by 20 per cent during the next stage.



Iran Sets Target to Produce 160k Tons of Shrimp Per Year

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of Iran Fisheries Organization (IFSRI) says that the country has set a target to produce some 160,000 metric tons (mt) of shrimp per year.

Hossein Hosseini said on Monday that the target will be part of Iran's Seventh Five-year Development Plan which will start in 2025.

Hosseini said Iran has also set a target to reach some 500,000 mt of farmed output from the sea and some 850,000 mt of sea fishing.

IFSRI figures show Iran farmed some 61,000 mt of shrimp in 950 aquaculture locations in the 11 months to late February this year.



Trump's Legacy: Republicans Torn by Infighting, Revolts as 2024 Looms

LAS VEGAS (Dispatches) - In Las Vegas, Nevada, Republican activists want to recapture the party from a local leader who backs former President Donald Trump's false election fraud claims. In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, a battle for control of the local Republican party's assets has wound up in court. In North Carolina, party activists are seeking to punish Republican Senator Thom Tillis for his support for same-sex marriage rights.

As the 2024 presidential race kicks into gear, local Republican party organizations in many parts of the United States are consumed by rebellions, infighting and court battles that some officials and strategists said could damage the party's chances of winning back the White House.

Reuters spoke to more than 50 operatives, activists and party officials in competitive states Arizona, Georgia and Nevada, which Trump narrowly lost in 2020; North Carolina, which he won; and in the key early primary state of South Carolina. Nevada also holds an early presidential nominating contest.

While Republican divisions in Congress have been widely covered, Reuters looked at grassroots battles, especially in the small handful of states that remain truly competitive, that have not been closely examined.

Some strategists and officials warned the spectacle of a party at war with itself in electoral battlegrounds and early primary states risks turning off voters and donors.

"The degree to which we can manage this will determine how well our presidential candidate does," said Maurice Washington, the chair of the Republican Party in South Carolina's Charleston County, a regular campaign stop for presidential candidates, and himself a target of right-wing challengers.

"There's always that potential of behavior patterns turning off middle-of-the-road voters," Washington said.

Although it is too early in the election cycle to see a direct impact of these fights, and these feuds could subside once a presidential nominee is chosen, Ronna McDaniel, the head of the Republican National Committee, the party's central governing body, has called for unity.

Larry Hogan, a Trump critic who left office in January after serving two terms as the Republican governor of Maryland, told Reuters it was crucial for the party to move beyond the former president if it wanted to win the 2024 elections.

Democrats outperformed expectations and avoided a Republican "red wave" in the November 2022 midterm elections, in part because voters shunned a slew of Trump-backed, hard-right candidates.

"Voters sent a clear message in the last three elections: they want competence and common sense solutions, not more crazy," Hogan said. "If we want to start winning again, then we have to start listening."

Not everyone agrees. North Carolina State Representative Mark Brody, who supports censuring Sen. Tillis, says it is better to address differences directly.

"I think one of the things that we fight against is that there is a tendency to say: Maybe we should just leave this alone. One side says: don't bring this up because some people might turn away," he said. "My side is: Let's address that, and let's set the record straight."



In Nevada's Clark County, which accounts for more than two-thirds of the state's population, Margaret White, a former chief of staff for county Republicans, is leading about 50 current and former party members in a rebellion against the current county party leader Jesse Law in the swing state.

White said that Law's support for Trump's false election fraud claims and his backing for far-right candidates in last November's midterm elections are damaging Republicans' prospects in 2024. Most state and local candidates backed by Law lost in the midterms.

The activists filed paperwork last month to launch a non-profit organization called "Las Vegas Voices of Reason." White and Drew Hirsty, the county party member who made the filing, told Reuters that formalizing the structure will allow them to raise funds among independent voters as well as Republicans.

The group is contacting 400 Republicans, who resigned or were expelled from the party since Law took over in 2021, asking them to register to vote so they can remove him in the summer leadership contest, White said.

"We want normal people in charge who can appeal to moderates, independents and minorities, and that's not Jesse Law," White told Reuters.

White said the party needs to appeal to a broader set of voters; otherwise it will keep losing elections. About half of White's core group of 50 are Black, Hispanic or Asian, reflecting the diverse demographics of Nevada. Law backed several far right candidates that lost in November's midterms.

Law, who served as a senior member of Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaigns in Nevada, and the county party did not respond to requests for comment.

John Bruchhagen, a Republican podcaster who says he is friends with people in both factions, said Law has worked hard to boost voter turnout and promote candidates but has an "impossible" job because the local party has become so factionalized.

Poisoning the New Game...

FROM PAGE 1

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, commenting in a Twitter post, said "girls must be able to go to school without fear" and "all cases must be fully investigated".

In response, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani in a series of tweets slammed the top German diplomat's remarks as "hypocritical and meddlesome", reminding her of Germany's role in chemical attacks on the people of Iran during Saddam Hussein's war in the 1980s.

This poisoning game reminds us of what happened against Mahsa Amini which led to the riots in the country. Before the officials started probe over the death of Amini, enemies fanned the flame of riots in the country by accusing morale police of Iran of being accountable for her death.

And now that riots have been quelled and enemies have failed in materializing their sinister plots against the Islamic Republic, the poisoning game has started in the country to create chaos and even re-igniting riots because of these nasty actions.

In a statement late on Saturday, Interior Minister said "suspicious samples" were discovered during the investigation and are being examined in the country's premier laboratories.

Since the outbreak of these poisonings, Vahidi asserted, the perpetrators of the hybrid war against Iran have sought to fuel "mental-psychological pollution" in society and force the closure of schools. "We assure our dear people that the health of students was and remains the top priority for (government) officials and they will spare no effort to create peace and comfort for them," he said.

Enemies are trying to make the Islamic Republic accountable for poisoning students to show that the Islamic establishment does not like girls to study while the truth is that the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the main supporter of women and one can even compare the achievements of women during the Islamic Revolution with what they had achieved during the Pahlavi era.

Of course nation should be wise and vigilant that all of these atrocities are aimed at creating rift between the people and the establishment and attacks on schools by poisoning will not be the last plot and every day we may see such an atrocity by the enemies of the Islamic Republic.

And officials are recommended to inform the nation about their latest actions and probes against these attacks because any delay in informing the people will help the enemies to use their media outlets against the Islamic Republic by disseminating fake reports for misleading the public opinion and losing trust on the establishment like what happened in Mahsa Amini case which let the enemies by using their media outlets create mistrust against the establishment.

We hope that only responsible officials speak about the results of probes and irresponsible people are better to stay silent because their irresponsible remarks may lead to individual assumptions and likely to another chaos. Domestic media are also better to disseminate verified and reliable information on the case rather than resorting to assumptions and false claims which are the root of all seditions and disputes in the countries and in the world.

Iran Committed to...

FROM PAGE 1

In response to a question about the Israeli regime's threat to carry out act of sabotage in the Iranian nuclear facilities, Kanaani said, "You should ask this question from the IAEA officials."

"Iran has utilized all recognized rights and has explored available political and legal channels, as well as international regulations. Protection of Iran's nuclear capabilities and capacities has been carried out in light of such measures," Kanaani said.

He pointed out that Iran has frequently drawn on Resolution GC(XXXIV)/RES/533 of September 21, 1990, which states "An armed attack or a threat of armed attack on a safeguarded nuclear facility, in operation or under construction, would create a situation in which the United Nations Security Council would have to act immediately in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations Charter," throughout meetings and official correspondence with the IAEA.

Kanaani further explained that Iran has time and again emphasized its rights in line with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) when it comes to cooperation with the UN nuclear agency.

Iran and the IAEA have agreed to take steps aimed at facilitating enhanced cooperation and expediting the resolution of outstanding safeguards issues.

Tehran Hosting Iran-West Africa Economic Cooperation Meeting

TEHRAN (MNA) - Scientific and Economic Cooperation Meeting Between Iran and West African Countries (IRAN WAC) kicked off in Tehran and will wrap up on Wednesday.

Addressing the first day of the gathering, Mohsen Rezaei, the Iranian vice president for economic affairs, mentioned the importance of expanding trade between Iran and the mentioned countries, and said, "We can establish large multinational commercial companies in cooperation with each other and increase our share of international trade; What Europeans and Americans do and are proud of."

"My suggestion is to establish a joint bank of Iran and Africa; A bank that can have bilateral accounts; It means that capital should be allocated by the countries in the opposite country so that the traders of the other

parties can do business with the common currencies of the countries without depending on dollars and euros. The joint bank of Iran and Africa can be a good starting point for the development of cooperation", the official further explained.

Also, the head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) said, "The African continent has a lot of potential in the field of trade and economy for our country, which has been neglected in the past years."

Making the remarks on the sidelines of the mentioned event, Alireza Peyman-Pak said, "In the 13th government, special attention was paid to the African region, so that Iran's exports to African countries experienced a growth of 10-15 percent and exceeded 1 billion dollars and reached 2.10 billion dollars."

Referring to the potential of West African countries,

the official said: "Most of our trade has been with East and North Africa, and trade with West African countries, which are an important place of mineral resources and high potential, has been neglected."

"One of the obstacles in trade with West African countries was the lack of recognition and communication; so steps are taken to develop trade in today's international economic conference, which is held with the presence of 50 officials and entrepreneurs from 10 West African countries", the TPO head further highlighted.

The value of Iran's non-oil export to Africa rose six percent in the first 11 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2022-February 19, 2023), as compared to the same period of time in the past year, the vice president of Iran and Africa Merchants Club Ruhollah Latifi said.

Israel Exports...

FROM PAGE 1

Haaretz also cited foreign media reports that said Azerbaijan has allowed the Israeli spy agency Mossad to set up a forward branch in Azerbaijan to monitor what is happening in neighboring Iran and has even prepared an airfield intended to aid the occupying entity in case it decides to attack Iranian nuclear sites.

It further highlighted official reports from Azerbaijan that said Israel has over the past years sold Azerbaijan the most advanced weapons, including ballistic missiles, electronic warfare systems, kamikaze drones and more.

An investigative report in the Czech media in 2018, it continued, found that weapons banned for sale to Azerbaijan were flown there in spite of the arms embargo - in a circular deal through Israel.

"Azerbaijan's relations with Israel are discreet but close," wrote Rob Garverick, head of the political and economic department in the US embassy in Baku, in a 2009 telegram that was published as part of the Wikileaks documents.

Each side "finds it easy to identify with the other's geopolitical difficulties and both rank Iran as an existential security threat. Israel's world-class defense industry with its relaxed attitude about its customer base is a perfect match for Azerbaijan's substantial defense needs that are largely left unmet by the United States, Europe and Russia for various reasons tied to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh."

Recent estimates show that Azerbaijan has become Israel's largest supplier of oil while Tel Aviv is now responsible for almost 70 percent of Baku's weapons.

In contrast to its warming of ties with Israel, Azerbaijan's relations with Iran were strained in January following an attack on the Eurasian country's embassy in Tehran.

Politicizing the incident, Azerbaijan closed its diplomatic mission and evacuated staff over what it called a "terrorist act," with President Ilham Aliyev blaming it on the "Iranian establishment." This is while an initial investigation pointed to "personal and family-related problems" as the motive of the assailant.

Iran's Actions...

FROM PAGE 1

Eslami added, "We fulfill our responsibilities and [carry out] our activities according to the strategic law. The important point is that we take our steps based on this law and within the framework of the Safeguards [Agreement] and the NPT... but they intend to exaggerate these steps in line with their double standards and create [media] hype."

"We announced yesterday that we are committed to the Safeguards and the NPT, and the agency oversees and assesses our activities. However, this oversight must be carried out within frameworks and considerations acceptable for the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said.

Explaining about a controversial IAEA report claiming that uranium particles enriched to about 84 percent of purity have been found in Iran, Eslami said the agency has mentioned such particles in a report to its Board of Governors.

"However, after repeated assessments and inspections, and through the interaction carried out [between Iran and the IAEA], it was decided that the criterion for measuring [the degree of enrichment] should be the final output of the production line."

"No enrichment above 60 percent has taken place in storage tanks that are currently operating and whose entire process is being supervised by the IAEA in

accordance with the Safeguards Agreement. [Therefore,] they have practically announced the closure of this case. The case of 84-percent [enriched] uranium particles has been closed and decided," Iran's nuclear chief said.

Eslami added that pressures exerted on the IAEA chief by Western media with regard to Iran's nuclear activities are masterminded by "the Zionist current."

"They are angry and upset with Mr. Grossi's trip [to Iran] and are increasing pressure on him. It is natural [for them] to mount media pressures as a result of their anger with the [IAEA] director general's visit to Iran," the AEOI head said.

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Ko Retains HSBC Women's World Championship Title

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - South Korea's Ko Jin-young became the first player to successfully defend her HSBC Women's World Championship title when she closed with a three-under-par 69 in Singapore. Victory at the Sentosa Golf Club, with a 17-under-par total of 271, was especially sweet for the world number five because it also marked her return to the winner's circle for the first time since her win at the same venue last year. "It was a great honour to defend my title," Ko said.

Woods Skipping Players Championship

TORONTO (Dispatches) - Twice-champion Tiger Woods was not listed in the field for next week's The Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, meaning his next start will likely come at the Masters in April. Woods has said his schedule would be limited to the majors and a few other events each year, given the injuries he suffered in a 2021 car crash.

Verstappen Cruises to Bahrain Grand Prix Victory

MANAMA (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen won the Bahrain Grand Prix, the first of the 2023 Formula One season. He took an absolutely dominant victory for Red Bull from pole to flag, in complete control at the Sakhir circuit as he put what looks to be a fearsomely competitive championship contender car through its paces with ease. He beat his Red Bull teammate Sergio Pérez into second with Fernando Alonso taking a superb third for Aston Martin.

Alonso's place confirmed the form Aston have shown all weekend and that they are now very much competing among the big three teams. Indeed they looked comfortably quicker than the Mercedes for whom Lewis Hamilton and George Russell could manage only fifth and seventh respectively as their cars struggled, as they did all weekend.

Ferrari, unable to match Red Bull for pace, also suffered a demoralising failure when Charles Leclerc had to retire with an engine problem while in third place. His teammate Carlos Sainz managed to bring his car home in fourth.

For Alonso, who drove the socks off the Aston, this was a mighty result, his first podium since Qatar in 2021 with Alpine. Moreover he delivered with the usual verve and confident, decisive overtaking that has characterised his 20-season career in F1. He was also potentially nursing a damaged car after he took a hit at the start from his teammate Lance Stroll, who finished sixth.

The win opens Verstappen's season with the same confident and controlled statement of intent with which he closed out his dominant, championship-winning year in 2022.

He took 15 victories from 22 races on his way to the title but only after a tricky start with two mechanical failures from the opening three races. This time he is out of the blocks with alacrity, once more displaying a formidable race pace indicating his car has lost none of its strengths from last year.

For the team it is an auspicious start. They have not won the season-opener since Sebastian Vettel did so in Australia in 2011 and from which he went on to dominate the championship. The team have also not won in Bahrain since Vettel did so in 2013, when he also went on to a commanding title win by what was a record number of points.

76ers Snuff Bucks' 16-Game Winning Streak

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - James Harden had 38 points, nine rebounds and 10 assists as the visiting Philadelphia 76ers rallied from an 18-point deficit to snap the Milwaukee Bucks' 16-game winning streak with a 133-130 victory.

Joel Embiid tallied 31 points and 10 assists and Tyrese Maxey scored 26 points for Philadelphia, which outscored Milwaukee 48-31 in the fourth quarter. Giannis Antetokounmpo led the Bucks with 34 points and 13 rebounds, Brook Lopez scored 26 points and Jrue Holiday added 26 points and 13 assists. Grayson Allen made six 3-pointers and finished with 20 points, all in the third quarter. Milwaukee led by 18 in the third quarter before Philadelphia used a 23-9 run to tie the game at 108 midway through the final period.

After Antetokounmpo converted two foul shots with 1:43 remaining to put the Bucks ahead 125-121, Harden and Embiid hit consecutive 3-pointers to give Philadelphia its first lead since the second quarter. Maxey made two free throws to extend Philadelphia's lead to four with 25 seconds left, and the Sixers converted their final four foul shots to seal the comeback win.

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Timberwolves 138, Kings 134

Anthony Edwards scored a team-high 27 points and answered Sacramento threats with two critical hoops in the final two minutes, allowing visiting Minnesota to hold off the Kings.

After Rudy Gobert and De'Aaron Fox traded hoops, Edwards came through with the first of his big buckets, a layup with 1:51 to go that became a three-point play when he was fouled by Kevin Huerter. The Kings immediately countered, this time on a Domantas Sabonis layup to get within two, and the hosts had chances to tie and go ahead. But Fox couldn't connect on a driving layup with 57 seconds left and, after an offensive rebound, Harrison Barnes on a 3-pointer five seconds later.



Verstappen was rapid in the clean air however, opening a lead of over a second on Leclerc after only one lap. By lap five it was a chasm of over three and half seconds, a menacing display of pace for which the Ferrari had no answer. He was lapping at approximately six-tenths a lap quicker than his rivals, a huge advantage despite complaining of some rear-locking.

Behind them Alonso was easily staying with the two Mercedes and looked to be quicker when attacking. The Mercedes was expected to be hard on its tyres and both drivers were indeed already losing grip. With Alonso attacking Russell and making the pass on lap 13, Mercedes pitted Hamilton. Russell, Leclerc and Sainz followed a lap later.

With Verstappen and the first stops shaken out, he had retained an almost 11-second lead over Leclerc, with Pérez in third. The latter on softer rubber did catch Leclerc however and made the pass on lap 26, now up to second trailing his teammate by 13 seconds.

Hamilton made his second stop for the hard tyres on lap 30 and Russell followed a lap later, their race concerned solely with taking on Alonso and Stroll. Stroll was on warmer tyres making the pass on Russell while the British driver was on his out lap.

Hamilton and Alonso vied with one another on track after their stops, with the Aston clearly enjoying greater pace. Hamilton defended well and they went wheel to wheel over two laps before Alonso made it stick up the inside through turn 10 on lap 38, taking fifth place.

It was dramatic stuff in contrast to the consummate control Verstappen exhibited in front. He maintained his lead over Pérez with ease to take the flag with an 11-second gap and his title defence off to the most intimidating start.



ACAPULCO (Dispatches) - Australia's Alex de Minaur defeated Tommy Paul of the United States in three sets to win the Mexican Open in Acapulco.

The 24-year-old de Minaur fought back after dropping the opening set to clinch the seventh title of his professional career with a 3-6, 6-4, 6-1 victory.

The win was the seventh title of de Minaur's career and his first in an ATP 500 event.

It was another battling fightback from de Minaur, who had also recovered after dropping the opening set of his semi-final against Holger Rune on Friday.

De Minaur's dogged performance was epitomised by the opening game of the final set, when he saved five break points to hold before winning in 2hr 27min.

"It feels great, it feels amazing," De Minaur said in an on-court interview following his win.

"I know the hard work that's put in to be here and it's good to see the results.

"It's not always that you win the tournament and you get to finish a week unbeaten, so I'll definitely cherish this going into Indian Wells and Miami."



Mbappé Playing to Make History

PARIS (Dispatches) - Kylian Mbappe became Paris Saint-Germain's all-time top scorer with his 201st goal for the club as the Ligue 1 leaders warmed up for their crunch trip to Bayern Munich with a 4-2 win over Nantes.

The superstar had equalled Edinson Cavani's previous record mark of 200 goals with a brace in last week's win at Marseille and went one better by netting in stoppage time at the Parc des Princes.

PSG had earlier squandered a two-goal lead, with Lionel Messi putting them ahead and a Jaouen Hadjam own goal making it 2-0 inside 17 minutes before Nantes fought back to draw level.

Ludovic Blas pulled one back for the visitors and Ignatius Ganago equalised, but

Mbappe set up Danilo Pereira to put PSG back in front on the hour mark and then claimed his record-breaking goal late on.

Mbappe reached the record in just 247 appearances since signing from Monaco aged 18 in 2017.

Uruguay star Cavani needed 298 games, and seven years, to establish the previous record in 2020.

The 24-year-old Mbappe was handed a trophy by the club after the game to mark his record in an on-field presentation.

"I play to make history and I have always said I wanted to make history in France, in the capital of my country, in my city, and I am doing that. It's magnificent, but there is still a lot to be done," Mbappe, who finished the game as captain, told broadcaster Canal Plus.

"For me, as a native Parisian, this is special. If someone had said to me I would score the goal to beat the record while wearing the captain's armband, I would not have believed it."

Paris Olympics Tickets Viewed as Too Pricey, poll finds

PARIS (Dispatches) - Around four out of five French people think tickets for the 2024 Paris Olympics are too expensive, a poll showed today, underlining growing public frustration with organizers over the issue.

A total 82 percent of respondents said that tickets for the games were "not accessible in terms of price", according to a survey from the Odoxa polling group for the RTL media group and sports betting firm Winamax.

Around the same proportion of people (79 percent) found the ticketing process to be "complicated," the survey found.

The president of the 2024 Paris organizing committee Tony Estanguet has been forced on the defensive in the last fortnight after the first major release of tickets to the public under a lottery system.

Successful applicants have been obliged to buy places for three events at the same time, with many finding sports priced at a minimum €80, meaning a family of four could face a bill of nearly €1,000.

"We're not more expensive than London in 2012," Estanguet told RTL radio on February 22. "It's the same for the football and rugby World Cups. These are the prices."

The official slogan for the Paris event is "Games Wide Open" and former canoeing gold medallist Estanguet promised "a large number of tickets at accessible prices, for all the sports" when the ticketing policy was announced in March last year.

Organizers have pledged a million tickets at €24 euros and almost half at under €50, but the difficulties in obtaining these cut-price offers appears to be the reason for the public frustration.



Rampant Liverpool Trounce Man United 7-0

LONDON (Dispatches) - Cody Gakpo, Mohamed Salah and Darwin Nunez both scored twice as a resurgent Liverpool team thrashed Manchester United at Anfield.

While manager Jurgen Klopp has been reluctant to call his team's recent upturn in form a genuine comeback, the Reds rolled back the years at the expense of their greatest rivals.

As was so often the case during the glory years under Klopp, Liverpool flew out of the blocks and looked particularly dangerous through Mohamed Salah, who was guilty of dragging his shots wide in the opening few minutes.

United, on the backfoot for the opening 30 minutes, did manage to grow into the game as the first-half went on and could well have had an opener through either Bruno Fernandes or Marcus Rashford. They, however, fluffed their lines from close range.

Five minutes before the break, Gakpo struck. Fizzed in a fierce ball from Andy Robertson, the Dutchman got in-behind Fred and away from the covering Raphael Varane before unleashing an emphatic finish across David De Gea. Still, United would have gone into the break confident of springing a comeback, much as they did against Barcelona only a matter of days ago.

Liverpool would soon put an end to that. Minutes into the second-half, Nunez headed home before United collapsed.

Gakpo drifted in and hit a sublime finish over De Gea to put the hosts three ahead before Salah - who certainly has previous in the fixture - made it four with a lethal strike after a Liverpool counter.

By the time Nunez towered above the United defence to head in his second, it all felt a bit Ralf Rangnick era for the travelling support. When Salah's second made it six, and him the club's all-time top Premier League goalscorer, and Roberto Firmino grabbed a seventh it somehow felt worse.

