

The Secretary General of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce Hamid Hosseini Says That the U.S. Has Agreed to Unfreeze Some \$500m Worth of Iraq's Electricity Arrears to Iran

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani on Saturday Condemned a Terrorist Attacked Which Targeted a Gathering of Journalists in Mazar-e Sharif, the Capital City of Balkh Province

VOL. XXVIII, No. 7730 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SUNDAY MARCH 12, 2023 - ESFAND 21, 1401

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Belarus President Due in Tehran Today

MINSK (IP) - Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus, will arrive in Tehran today, for an official meeting and discussion with high-ranking officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The office of the President of Belarus in a statement said that Lukashenko will pay a two days visit in Tehran and he will meet and talk with the President of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi.

On the sidelines of the 16th meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Samarkand, the presidents of Iran and Belarus tasked the foreign ministries of the two countries to work to strengthen and deepen bilateral relations.

Development of all-around cooperation and economic and commercial relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Belarus are on the agenda of Lukashenko during his visit to Tehran. Lukashenko is accompanied by a high-ranking delegation on this trip.

The officials of the two countries will exchange views on industrial, agricultural, and transportation plans in their meetings and negotiations.

Also, during Lukashenko's visit, special attention will be paid to regional and global issues.

Int'l Community Urged To Fight Islamophobia

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations Amir Saeid Irvani has strongly condemned any violence against persons based on religion or belief, stating that the time has come for the international community to combat Islamophobia and take actions against hatred towards Muslims, who constitute a large portion of the world population.

He made the plea at a UN General Assembly event on Friday in commemoration of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, which takes place on March 15 every year.

"Today's meeting represents the strong determination of the participants to address the issue of Islamophobia, including hatred, discrimination, terrorist attacks and violence against Muslims and their religious principles, beliefs and rituals," the senior Iranian diplomat stated.

"Currently, the world continues to witness the relentless aggression of the occupying Zionist regime against al-Quds and Muslims across the occupied Palestinian territories. Moreover, the Holy Qur'an is desecrated in some European countries under the pretext of freedom of expression," he said. **See Page 7**

Iran Launches Assembly Line of Indigenous Yasin Training Jet



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani has launched the production line of homegrown Yasin training jet, which could also be tasked for close air support (CAS).

"Among our main concerns is training fighter pilots, because the process is of paramount significance and requires training aircraft in different classes," Ashtiani said at ceremony in the capital Tehran on Saturday morning.

He stated that experts and specialists at the Iran Aviation Industries Organization (IAIO) started designing Yasin training jet years ago, and its second prototype was unveiled Saturday.

"The homegrown characteristics of the training jet make it suitable to be utilized for close air support (CAS) of military aircraft" against hostile targets as well, the Iranian defense chief said.

Ashtiani said most of the military gear and equipment of the advanced aircraft have been localized, expressing hope that it will perform assigned tasks and prove effective in reducing training duration and improving training quality.

Commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi also said, "Previously, our fighter pilots used to be trained abroad. The first sector affected as a result of the sanctions against our country was this field, which created difficulties for us in terms of training."

"Utilization of the new aircraft will make training duration more complete and shorter," he said.

The new version of Yasin training jet that was unveiled on Monday appears to have been much more upgraded and developed in tactical terms compared to the first prototype unveiled during a ceremony in Shahid Noje Airbase in Iran's western province of Hamadan on October 17, 2019.

The Iranian jet trainer is now furnished with a homegrown ejection seat, avionics, engine, and landing gear.

The airborne weather radar installed on its radome has been manufactured by domestic knowledge-based companies.

Yasin reportedly weighs 5.5 tonnes, and is able to fly up to 1,200 kilometers.

Its wing design enables the jet to land and take off at a speed of at least 200 kilometers per hour.

Iranian military experts and engineers have in recent years made remarkable breakthroughs in manufacturing a broad range of indigenous equipment, making the armed forces self-sufficient.

Officials have repeatedly underscored that the country will not hesitate to strengthen its military capabilities, including its missile power, which are entirely meant for defense, and that Iran's defense capabilities will be never open for negotiations.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has repeatedly called for efforts to maintain and boost Iran's defense capabilities, decrying enemies for questioning the country's missile program.

Tehran-Riyadh Rapprochement Can Open Up New Horizons in Region

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has welcomed a surprise Chinese-brokered deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore bilateral ties severed in 2016, saying it could open new horizons throughout the region, including Lebanon.

Nasrallah, who was speaking in a televised address aired on Friday, said the Iranian-Saudi reconciliation announced earlier in the day is a "good development" that will not be at the expense of the region's peoples.

"An Iranian-Saudi rapprochement won't be at the expense of Yemen, Syria and the resistance," he said.

"It's an important development, of course, and if it proceeds in its natural course it could open up horizons in the entire region, including in Lebanon," he added.

After several days of intensive negotiations hosted by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia finally clinched a deal on Friday to restore diplomatic relations and re-open embassies, seven years after ties were severed over several issues.

Commenting on Hezbollah's recent nomination of Suleiman Franjeh as the party's candidate for the presidential race, Nasrallah said nominating a candidate for the election is the "natural and legal" obligation of any political party.

"We have called for dialogue over the president and no one has the right to prevent anyone from nominating anyone," Nasrallah said.

The Hezbollah chief added that no party or individual had the right to impose their candidate on the Lebanese people.

"Some claimed that we want to impose a president on the Lebanese and Christians, but this is not the case," he clarified. "If a country helps Lebanon, that does not grant it the right to impose a president."

"We welcome any foreign assistance but we do not accept dictations," Nasrallah asserted.

Regarding the developments in neighboring countries, the prominent Lebanese figure said that what happens in Syria and Palestine reflects on the regional countries and has a strong impact on Lebanon in particular. **See Page 7**

ViewPoint

Tehran-Riyadh Agreement A Big Blow to Zionists

On Friday a report by Iranian and Chinese news media outlets shocked and enraged the Zionist regime and if this report comes true in practice, it will be a major blow to Israel who has been trying to normalize its ties with Persian Gulf countries and will be a big victory for the Islamic Republic of Iran and President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi and his policy of thawing ties with neighboring states.

Iran and Saudi Arabia reportedly reached an agreement in the Chinese capital of Beijing on Friday to restore their diplomatic relations and re-open embassies and missions, seven years after their ties were broken off over several issues.

The agreement was struck on Friday after several days of intensive negotiations between Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani and his Saudi counterpart in Beijing. It was officially announced in a joint statement by Iran, Saudi Arabia and China.

The statement was inked by Shakhani, Musaid Al Aiban, Saudi Arabia's national security adviser, and Wang Yi, the director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party.

Shamkhani has been involved in intensive talks with his Saudi counterpart in Beijing since Monday to find a final solution to the issues between Tehran and Riyadh. The negotiations followed a meeting between Iranian President Raisi and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing last month.

"As a result of the talks, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia agreed to resume diplomatic relations and re-open embassies and missions within two months," the joint statement said.

It added that the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers will meet to "implement this decision and make the necessary arrangements for the exchange of ambassadors."

According to the statement, Iran and Saudi Arabia highlighted the need to respect each others' national sovereignty and refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of one another. They agreed to implement a security cooperation agreement signed in April 2001 and another accord reached in May 1998 to boost economic, commercial, investment, technical, scientific, cultural, sports and youth affairs cooperation.

Iran, Saudi Arabia and China expressed their firm determination to make their utmost efforts to promote regional and international peace and security, it emphasized. **See Page 7**

Iran Annual Export to Iraq Expects Record High

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iranian traders believe the trade between Iran and Iraq will hit a record high because both countries have great potentials to boost their bilateral trade.

As announced on Friday by a board member of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce, the value of Iran's daily exports to Iraq is about \$30 million, half of which is related to oil and gas exports, and the other half is related to goods exports.

Hamid Hosseini said, "Considering the favorable situation of exports to Iraq this [Iranian calendar] year (ends on March 20), it is expected that our export record to this country will be broken and exceeds \$9 billion."

"Although our exports to Iraq experienced some problems during a period of this year, statistics show that Iran's exports to Iraq are currently favorable", he added.

Also, in mid-December, Head of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce Yahya Ale-Es'haq said trade challenges between the two countries have been mostly resolved and bilateral trade is expected to reach \$10 billion by the end of the current Iranian calendar year. **See Page 7**

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Tehran, Muscat Review Latest Status of Nuclear Negotiations

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Foreign Ministers of Iran and Oman in a phone talk on Friday night exchanged views on the latest status of Iran's nuclear talks with world power to remove sanctions.

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi in his phone talk with Hossein Amirabdollahian expressed satisfaction about the reached agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, congratulating him on his own behalf and on behalf of the Omani government.

Amirabdollahian, too, in the phone talk appreciated the Omani government for its previous efforts aimed at facilitating an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Tehran-Caracas Comprehensive Agreement, A Step to Thwart Enemies' Media War

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Culture and Islamic Guidance minister said the comprehensive Iran-Venezuela media agreement is an effective step aimed at confronting both countries' shared enemies' media invasions.

The Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili in his Friday meeting with Freddy Alfred Nazareth, Venezuela's Minister of Communication and Information and the Vice-President for Culture and Tourism in the residence of the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Caracas presented a report on broad media activities in Iran.

Esmaili said that the global oppression system's media with their large-scale and fake news dissemination aim at harming the will and resistance power of the Iranian nation ever since the victory of the Islamic Revolution and during the course of the past few months, too, they have intensified their media campaign in the course of their hybrid war against the Iranian nation, but all their hatched plots have been dismantled by the noble and alert Iranian nation.

"Iran and Venezuela, despite their geographical distance from each other, have lots of shared interests, and are side by side each other, like two real neighbors, and they are of course both targeted by the global oppression system," he added.

The Venezuelan vice-president, too, said that mental proximity of the two nations and their viewpoints about Imperialism, and especially the western media and cultural invasion are shared by the two countries, and based on them it is possible to



establish different foundations for broadening cooperation.

Freddy Alfred Nazareth further reiterated, "The rich cultures and national identities and beliefs of our countries have mightily dismantled many strong plots of the enemies."

The culture and Islamic guidance minister on the first day of his visit of Venezuela, too, had an interview with that country's Telesur TV and visited the different sections of that TV network.

Iran's minister of culture said that Iran and Venezuela have had constructive and good ties in various fields despite the long distance between them.

Meanwhile Esmaili told IRNA that this visit was being done according to the government's central policy in expanding cultural interactions with friendly and allied countries.

He expressed hope that he would have good talks with the Venezuelan authorities and that cultural ties between the two countries and the two nations would witness expansion.

Leader Urges All Justice-Seeking Nations For Joint Efforts



TEHRAN (MNA) – Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei urged all justice-seeking nations to become more familiar with each other and combine their efforts.

In the ceremony announcing the official release of the Spanish translation of the book "Cell Number 14" in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, Ayatollah Khamenei's message to all the Spanish-speaking people of the world was published.

The book "Cell Number 14" (in Spanish "Celda n.º 14") contains Ayatollah Khamenei's memories of resistance from the periods he spent in prison and exile during his fight against the Pahlavi regime.

Leader urges all justice-seeking nations for joint efforts

The text of the Leader's message is as follows:

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
If I have been able to communicate with you Spanish-speaking people by way of this book ("Cell Number 14"), I will be very pleased. This covers a small part of my life. It is very good if all of us and you and all justice-seeking nations are able to become more familiar with each other and combine our efforts. I pray that God will grant you prosperity.

Cyberspace Must Be Regulated

TEHRAN (IP) - Sharif Technology University president stressed the important role of cyberspace in people's lives in all aspects, so it must be regulated.

The seventh international edition of the "Culture and Training in the cyberspace and the smart university" conference was held on Saturday.

Attending the event, Rasoul Jalili said: humanizing requires training and education both in the real and cyberspace world.

Jalili noted: Parts of the servicing for people are controlled by the enemies to decide for us what to do or not to do, but we must prevent them to do so.

As the other keynote speaker, Azad University's head of the Electronic Unit Aziz Najafpour said that the theoretical roots of cyberspace can be elaborated in three mechanical worlds, artificial intelligence appointment, and information revolution in the new era.

He further said: The cyber and social societies are intertwined, and it is indivisible, so physical-cyber society has been created to govern.

He added: Cyberspace is a society that has cultural, economic, and political dimensions which revolutionize people's lives.

In conclusion, he said: About 100 articles, 360 reports, 50 cultural contents, and 60 cultural softwares have been submitted to the conference.

Southern Export Hub Ready to Come on Stream

TEHRAN – Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehرداد Bazrpash inaugurated floating metal wharf of Khamir Port and during the ceremony he said blue economy is the priority of his ministry and the ministry is ready to hand over projects to the private sector.

Bazrpash said that in the opportunity which is provided for developing portal capacity all companies should help because it has higher profits as well as helping the people.

Due to endeavors of young engineers and elites of Makin Darya Qeshm Industrial Group, the design, manufacture and installation of multifunctional floating metal wharf of Khamir Port with using the capacity of domestic experts were carried out in just 45 days and the southern export hub of the country is now ready for operation.

Speaking to reporters, the CEO of Makin Darya Qeshm Industrial Group Mr. Mehdi Zare said A to Z of this project was carried out by this group and with using capabilities of experts of this group. He added that the production time of this project which was 6 months was ended in just 45 days and this is a unique achievement in terms of time for full implementation of the project.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



He added that this project needs pile driving in 28 points and 84 pile drivings which was carried out by the specialized pile driving equipment of this company and of the important properties of this project is its service for load and unload of construction materials in the worst tidal condition.

Zare added that this industrial group so far has succeeded in design, manufacture and launch of steel and aluminum wharfs from the easternmost to the westernmost of the coastal points with the goal of having share in marine development of the company.

He stated that in the past, Iran used to import aluminium wharfs but today due to the efforts of experts of this group and using capacity of the young expert, the country has become self-sufficient in design and manufacture of aluminium wharfs and called for the government support for protecting these capacities.

2 Police Officers Martyred

TEHRAN (IP) - Armed insurgents' sneak attack led to the martyrdom of 2 police officers.

The patrol agents of Golshan city of Sistan and Baluchistan, while being on a security mission for Friday prayers and ensuring the safety of the people on the outskirts of the city, were attacked by the insurgents.

According to Iran press, in this attack, which took place in a sneak attack format and in a cowardly way, "Lieutenant Colonel Mohsen Pudinei" and "Third Lieutenant Ehsan Shahraki" were martyred due to bullet wounds.

More "Red" Cities on Iran's Color-Coded Covid Map Amid Surge in Infections

TEHRAN (IFP) - The number of "red" or "high risk" cities is on the rise on Iran's color-coded coronavirus tracking map, as more patients are diagnosed with Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus.

According to the latest updates to the map, released by the Health Ministry, the number of "red" cities rose from 1 to 4.

Meanwhile, 23 cities were also classified as "orange," where there is a "moderately elevated" risk of infection with the respiratory disease, up from 13.

The number of "yellow" or "low risk" cities also increased from 118 to 186, while the number of "blue" cities, where the situation is normal, decreased from 316 to 235.

Over the past days, officials have reported a rise in the number of infections with coronavirus.

IME Enjoys New Record In Weekly Trade

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 4,011,030 tons of commodities and 1,175 vehicles with a total trading value of more than \$951m, posting growths of 33.1% in value of trades compared with the week before that.



According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 3,583,201 tons of commodities and 1,175 vehicles worth more than \$714m.

On this floor the IME sold 1,420,590 tons of cement, 1,420,000 tons of iron ore, 616,240 tons of steel, 110,600 tons of sponge iron, 1,200 tons of zinc, 10,650 tons of aluminum, 4,123 tons of copper, 300 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 2 kg of gold bars.

Furthermore, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 422,174 tons of commodities valued at nearly \$233m.

Commodities traded on this floor included 138,701 tons of bitumen, 126,436 tons of polymeric products, 70,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 41,624 tons of chemicals, 35,000 tons of lube cut, 5,000 tons of sulfur, 4,817 tons of base oil, 1,426 tons of petroleum products and 460 tons of feedstocks.

The IME also traded within the same week 5,655 tons of commodities on its side market.

UN Welcomes Resumption of Diplomatic Ties Between Iran, Saudi Arabia

NEW YORK (IRNA) - The spokesman of the United Nations secretary general has welcomed the resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Good neighborly ties between the two important countries "are essential for the stability" of the region, Stéphane Dujarric told reporters at a press briefing held at the UN office in New York on Friday.

On behalf of the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Dujarric said the United Nations is ready "to further advance regional dialogue and to ensure durable peace and security" in the region.

On March 10, Iran and Saudi Arabia released a statement announcing they had reached an agreement on re-opening their embassies to resume diplomatic ties after seven years.

A trilateral statement was released in the Chinese capital with Beijing declaring support for the resumption of ties between Tehran and Riyadh.

Following the February visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to China, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran Ali Shamkhani started intensive talks with his Saudi counterpart in Beijing as of March 6 to follow up on the agreements reached during Raisi's visit.

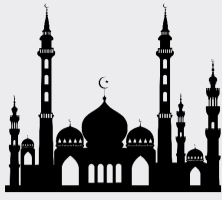
Revival of Iran-Saudi Ties Big Step for Regional Stability

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf stressed that the revival of Iran-Saudi relations is a major step in line with stability of region and Persian Gulf, as well as broader political and economic regional cooperation.

Qalibaf made the remarks after the announcement of restoration of Iran-Saudi bilateral relations.

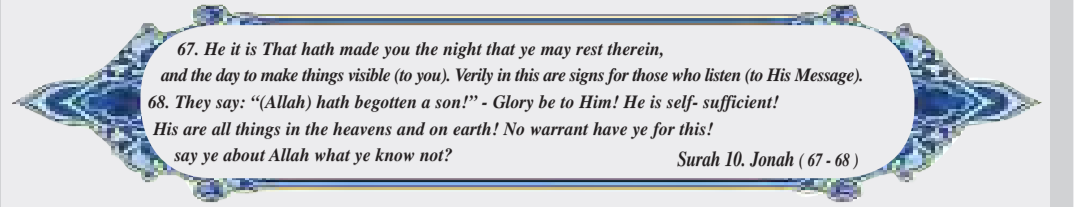
"The restoration of relations with Saudi Arabia is a major step in line with strengthening security in the region and the Persian Gulf, and broadening the political and economic cooperation in the region," the Iranian parliament speaker said.

Qalibaf added, "I hope the other side, too, will prove its good will by refraining from interference in internal affairs of our country, and adopting well intentioned decisions, especially in Lebanon, Yemen and in support of Palestine."



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:14
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:26
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:54
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:18



67. He it is That hath made you the night that ye may rest therein, and the day to make things visible (to you). Verily in this are signs for those who listen (to His Message).
 68. They say: "(Allah) hath begotten a son!" - Glory be to Him! He is self-sufficient! His are all things in the heavens and on earth! No warrant have ye for this! say ye about Allah what ye know not?
 Surah 10. Jonah (67 - 68)

Iran Exports Up 17.7% In 10 Months

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of industry, mine and trade said that the country's exports registered a 17.7 percent hike in the first 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2022 to January 22, 2023).

Speaking on the sidelines of the 10th election term of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) in Tehran on Saturday, Seyed Reza Fatemi-Amin stated that the country's imports hit 16.9 percent hike in this period.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the industry minister pointed to the trade statistics and reiterated that the country's export registered a 17.7 percent growth in the first 10 months of the current year.

Iran imported \$5 billion worth of industrial equipment and machinery in 10 months of the previous year in 1400 (from March 21, 2021 to January 22, 2022), the rate of which hit \$8 billion in the 10 months of the current year (March 21, 2022 to January 22, 2023), Fatemi-Amin added.

Despite tough sanctions imposed against the country, economic activists managed to take giant strides in realizing most economic objectives, he said, adding that the Ministry of Industry is ready to throw its weight behind economic activists of the country in line with spurring exports and export activities.



Meanwhile on Saturday and addressing a conference on enterprise, technology and economic growth, Fatemi-Amin said that the production trend in the country is very good and according to the statistics, the country has witnessed a good growth in the mine and industry sector, adding that the seasonal growth in the mine sector was minus 3.7% last summer while the figure has improve to positive 2.6% in the autumn.

He added that the seasonal growth in the industry was 2% in last summer while it has reached 5% in this year's autumn. He added that the growth in the industry sector in the first nine months of this year has been more than the same period last year and even more than average economic growth of the country and has been 5% and the statistics show that the upward trend continues.

Fatemi-Amin noted that in the past the focus was on the industry sector and it was supply-oriented but today the approach has shifted to the demand-oriented and the production is based on the demand and the knowledge-based industry is on the rise.

HOSCO Chosen as Model Employer of the Year



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In the closing ceremony of national festival of national entrepreneurs and employers of the year, the top employers and entrepreneurs of the year were named as the CEO of Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) Mr. Ataollah Maroufkhani received the top award for the model employer.

In the ceremony which was held in the presence of Minister of Cooperative, Labor and Social Welfare Mr. Seyed Solat Mortazavi, Head of Cultural and Social Affairs of Social Welfare Organization Mr. Mirhashem Mousavi and director of Cultural and Social Affairs of the organization Mr. Mohsen Taghyani, and some of officials and employers and entrepreneurs of the country.

Hormozgan Steel Company with observing all factors regarding social welfare affairs and insurance and its effective role in the national economy was chosen as the model employer of the year and Mr. Maroufkhani was feted with the top employer award.

SCO Head Terms Iran Influential State in Scientific Cooperation



TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran, as an effective member in the field of science and technology, can play a role in the cooperation with members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Zhang Ming, Secretary-General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) made the remarks in a meeting with Amir-Hossein Mirabadi, the caretaker of the Center for International Science and Technology Interactions.

In this meeting, the necessity of interaction and scientific and technological cooperation between Iran and other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was emphasized.

Referring to Iran's capability in technological and knowledge-based companies, Mirabadi expressed the country's readiness to shape a new chapter of joint relations with SCO member countries.

He also added that these countries can establish cooperation in big projects such as electric cars, trains and airplanes, and hybrid cars.

The SCO Secretary-General, for his part, hailed Iran's good capability in the field of technology, saying that this potential can form new cooperation among the members of this organization.

According to him, Iran has a say in the field of advanced and emerging technologies such as information and communication technology, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology.

He also expressed hope that Iran, as an effective member in the field of science and technology, can play a role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Iran's IAU, Pakistan's Allamah Iqbal University Sign MOU

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Islamic Azad University (IAU) and Pakistan's Allamah Iqbal University (AIU) signed an MOU for research, artistic, cultural, linguistics and Persian literature cooperation.

The MOU was signed on Friday during the visit of an IAU delegation visit of Islamabad to meet Allamah Iqbal University officials, by IAU International Affairs Deputy Dr. Jalal Derakhshe and Deputy AIU Head Raja Yunis.

In the signing ceremony of the MOU, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad-Ali Hosseini, the Head of IAU Dr. Nasser Mahmud, Iran Cultural Attache' Ehsan Khazaie, Iran Consulate Hesam Khatami and a number of faculty members and professors of the host university were present.

Scientific and academic cooperation between the Iranian and Pakistani universities grew noticeably during the recent years.

During the course of the past few weeks along, a number of cooperation documents between different branches of IAU, Al Mustafa University and the University of Religions and Schools of Thought of Iran



were signed with reputable Pakistani universities.

The IAU and Allamah Iqbal University based on this MOU will have cooperation in artistic, cultural, linguistic, and Persian literature fields.

Sponsoring joint conferences, exchanging university publications and research works, exchanging faculty members, researchers and university students, and arranging joint courses and workshops, too, are other parts of the MOU.

The Iranian ambassador said at the ceremony, "The economic and political relations between Iran and Pakistan have been growing and this is very promising that the Pakistani state officials, regardless of their political and ideological tendencies are trying to improve their relations with their Islamic and brother neighboring nation."

Hosseini added that both universities have very strong infrastructures and can improve their academic cooperation quite well.

Pakistan's AIU has already close cooperation with University of Tehran, Payam-e Noor, and University of Religions and Schools of Thought of Iran.

SADRA Building 2 Modern Ships Under Sanctions

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) announced on Friday that Iran Marine Industrial Company (SADRA) will build two modern vessels in the country.

The giant national project includes two multipurpose 3,500-ton vessels with the transport capacity of 122 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) containers and two 4,000-ton Ro-Ro (roll-on/roll-off) vessels with the capability of carrying about 40 trucks along with driver, 198 TEU containers and the general goods valued at over \$50 million, IRISL said.

The construction of the two vessels is expected to generate employment opportunities for 1,000 job-seeking people directly and also for thousands of people indirectly, lead to the activation of many small-scale industries, and result in stable transfer of technical know-how of shipbuilding in the country.

The project has been launched for the first time in Iran under the harsh and cruel sanctions imposed against the Islamic Republic.

All stages of construction of the mentioned vessels will be carried out by the domestic experts under the strict supervision of the Iranian accredited standard institutes.

Iran to Build 50 Passenger Ships for Ivory Coast

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran Shipbuilding and Offshore Industries Complex (ISOICO) has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Ivory Coast for building 50 sea taxis for the country.

The MOU was signed on the sidelines of the Scientific and Economic Cooperation Conference of Iran and West

African Countries (IRANWAC). The event was attended by senior officials from both sides including Mohsen Rezaei, the Iranian vice president for economic affairs.

Iran's shipbuilding industry, with more than 50 years of history, has been on a journey toward development since its establishment, and nowadays the Islamic Republic is considered one of the world's major shipbuilders, manufacturing and repairing all kinds of vessels.

Internet Available to 90% of Iran's Rural Population

TEHRAN (IRNA) - An official in Iran's Ministry of Information and Communications (ICT) says around 90% of Iranian population living in villages with more than 20 households have access to the internet.

Iraj Roohi, who is director of ICT's Universal Services Obligation Department, said that that internet penetration rate for Iran's rural population had increased by 9% since the current administration came to office in August 2020.

Roohi said that the development of information technology in Iran's rural areas is a priority for the ICT, adding that the country seeks to provide high-quality internet on a large scale for people living in the countryside.

He said that some 900 villages across Iran had been connected to the internet for the first time in February this year. The official added that the province of Qom, located to the southwest of the capital Tehran, is the only Iranian province with an internet penetration rate of 100%.

Over 1.8m Tons of Goods Transported in Caspian Sea



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line Group (IRISL) says some 1.8m tons of goods have been transported in the Caspian Sea so far this year.

Speaking in the ceremony for the start of operation for manufacturing two vessels for the national fleet of IRISL, Mohammad Reza Modarres Khiabani said that so far this year some 1.8m tons of goods have been transported in the Caspian Sea, adding that shipping industry in the world works based on the banking facilities and expressed hope with the assistance of the government, the group can meet some of its needs via getting facilities from the National Development Fund.

He went on to say that currently IRISL ranks 15th in the world in terms of container fleet, adding that this fleet has great capacity for carrying out mission in the North-South Corridor in a way that some 140 vessels and 200,000 possessed containers of the IRISL are ready for implementing this mission.

He further said that beside this capacity and for reinforcing the shipping fleet in the Caspian Sea in the north and completing the chain of transportation in this corridor that he can point to some of them like ordering domestic manufacturer to build four vessels, the group has taken some actions.

Modarres Khiabani further said that the group in the current year has invested \$10m in the Solyanka Port of Russia for easing the ply of its vessels and it is now in charge of the port. He said that so far this year some 1.8m tons of goods have been transported in the Caspian Sea while the figure has been over 26m tons in the southern ports that the total amount of the transportation shows 5% growth comparing to the historic record in the preceding year.

Fierce Fighting Close To DR Congo's Goma

GOMA (Dispatches) - Fighting erupted between M23 militiamen and government troops near the eastern DR Congo city of Goma, where a European mercy flight arrived in the afternoon, sources said.

The aid mission is the first in an airlift announced last Saturday by the European Union to help the beleaguered city. The plane landed on Friday afternoon, carrying 35 metric tons of material, including tents, mattresses and medical equipment.

Standing on the tarmac of Goma airport, EU ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo Jean-Marc Chataigner told reporters that another plane would land next week, with others to follow.



Blinken to Travel to Ethiopia, Niger Next Week

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Ethiopia this week, the State Department said on Friday, as concerns linger over the implementation of the peace agreement following the conflict that left tens of thousands dead and millions uprooted.

The visit, set as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has endeavored to show he is fully restored on the world stage following the two-year Tigray war, comes as foreign troops remain within the region and bureaucratic hurdles hamper the humanitarian response. Blinken will also visit Niger, an important U.S. counterterrorism partner, during the trip, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement. It will be the first-ever visit to Niger by a U.S. secretary of state, Price said.



UK Strikes 500m-Pound Deal With France



LONDON (Dispatches) - Rishi Sunak has agreed to give nearly half a billion pounds to France in a bid to tackle illegal immigration, it was announced today, as he hailed a "new beginning" in Anglo-Franco relations.

The prime minister committed to sending Paris £478 million (541 million euro) over three years to fund a new detention center in France, as well as 500 extra police officers and more drones to stop small boats leaving French shores.

The announcement came after Mr Sunak travelled to the French capital for the wide-ranging summit with Mr Macron, seen as a key moment in building relations between the UK and France, as well as the rest of Europe.

Mr Macron is seen as a crucial entry point to resetting relations with the wider EU, with the UK keenly aware of the weight France and Germany's opinions hold within the bloc.

Announcing the new package, the PM described today's meeting as "a new beginning - an entente renewed", adding that the pair were "writing a new chapter in this relationship".

But, despite the upbeat mood, there was no sign of the returns agreement with France that the Government desires as Mr Sunak makes "stopping the boats" one of his top priorities.

Mr Macron hailed the summit as "a moment of reunion, of reconnection and of a new beginning" but outright rejected the idea of a deal where France would take back those who travel to the UK on small boats.

The French President said such a pact would not be "an agreement between the UK and France (but) ... an agreement between UK and the EU."

Mr Sunak later said he hoped the UK may still be able to sign a returns agreement with France in the future. Describing the new package as "unprecedented", he added: "Going forward there will be more that we can do."

The UK has already committed more than £300 million to France in the last decade to help tackle unauthorized migration, but the latest pledge is a significant increase on previous sums.

The government's contribution towards this package will be €141 million in 2023-24, €191 million in 2024-25 and €209 million in 2025-6. The French will contribute significantly more funding, understood to be between three and five times as much.

An agreement with France designed to help prevent crossings was revised in November to be worth around €63 million in 2022/23, €8 million more than the previous year.

The detention center will be in northern France. It is unclear how many people it will hold. But it is designed to deal with those who try persistently to cross the Channel. French officials try to deter crossings by seizing boats and prosecuting criminal gangs. But it is not an offence in France to try and cross the Channel meaning some people repeatedly try to reach Britain.

Speaking at the press conference, Mr Macron said the sums of money involved were "commensurate" with the current need. He added that working together on small boats the UK and France had "dismantled" 55 organized crime networks.

Sunak said the pair agreed that "criminal gangs should not get to decide who comes to our country".

He went on to reject the idea that the new money would fuel French efforts to stop the boats. "These are joint efforts ... to tackle what is a shared challenge."

Sunak had earlier said that giving France money was a "sensible investment" when the UK is spending more than £5 million a day on hotels and that the money was already "yielding benefits".

Ukraine Says Bakhmut Battle Pins Down Russia's Best Units

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine has decided to fight on in the ruined city of Bakhmut because the battle there is pinning down Russia's best units and degrading them ahead of a planned Ukrainian spring counter-offensive, an aide to President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said.

The comments, by Mykhailo Podolyak, were the latest signal of a shift by Kyiv this week to continue the defense of the small eastern city, site of the war's bloodiest battle as Moscow tries to secure its first victory in more than half a year.

"Russia has changed tactics," Podolyak said in an interview published by Italy's La Stampa newspaper. "It has converged on Bakhmut with a large part of its trained military personnel, the remnants of its professional army, as well as the private companies."

"We, therefore, have two objectives: to reduce their capable personnel as much as possible, and to fix them in a few key wearisome battles, to disrupt their offensive and concentrate our resources elsewhere, for the spring counter-offensive. So, today Bakhmut is completely effective, even exceeding its key tasks."



Sweden, Finland and Turkey Hold NATO Talks

STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - Turkey has acknowledged that Sweden and Finland have taken concrete steps to meet Ankara's concerns over their bids to join NATO and the three will hold further meetings, Sweden's chief negotiator in the accession process said.

Sweden and Finland applied last year to join NATO, but faced unexpected objections from Turkey which says the two countries harbor members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), considered a terrorist group by Ankara and its Western allies.

"We see that Turkey recognized that both Sweden and Finland have taken concrete steps in this agreement, which is a good sign," chief negotiator Oscar Stenstrom told a news conference at NATO headquarters after trilateral talks resumed.

"A little step forward, the talks have restarted and we have agreed that we will continue to meet and I can't say exactly when."

President Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, said steps taken by Sweden and Finland to address Ankara's security concerns were positive, but not enough for Turkey's ratification of their NATO bid.

"We have once again highlighted Turkey's security concerns and expectations," he said. "The steps to be taken by the countries will determine the course and speed of this issue."

In January, Turkey suspended talks set up as part of a trilateral deal agreed in Madrid last year aimed at smoothing Finland and Sweden's accession process.

The immediate cause was a protest near the Turkish embassy in Stockholm at which a far-right politician burned a copy of the Muslim holy book, the Koran.

But Ankara has consistently said that Sweden in particular has failed to implement its part of the Madrid agreement.

Stenstrom said Sweden had fulfilled its part of the bargain. As part of its efforts to reassure Turkey it is taking its fears over militants seriously, the government will introduce a new anti-terrorism bill to parliament this week.

German Gunman Kills Six, Unborn Child

HAMBURG (Dispatches) - A gunman in Germany shot dead six people before killing himself at a Jehovah's Witness worship hall in Hamburg, authorities said, in an attack that is bound to renew calls for stricter gun controls.

Eight other people were wounded, including a seven-months pregnant woman who lost her unborn daughter, police and prosecutors said at a news conference.

Officials said they had been tipped off about the perpetrator but had not taken away his legally-owned gun before the shooting at an event on Thursday night.

The killer's motive remained unknown but a political reason had been ruled out, the officials said.

Authorities identified the gunman only as Philipp F. The 35-year-old, a German citizen and former Jehovah's Witness, began shooting through a window at the hall, where dozens of people were gathered, before entering.

He shot himself on the first floor when police arrived minutes after the shooting started shortly after 9:00 p.m. (2000 GMT), the police said.

Germany has suffered a number of mass shootings in recent years as well as a plot by a heavily armed group that aimed to overthrow the government. Following the previous shootings, Germany introduced stricter gun ownership rules and the government has announced

plans to tighten controls further.

The Hamburg shooter was known to police, who had visited his apartment prior to the attack in response to an anonymous tip raising concerns about his state of mind. But they did not have enough grounds to take away his weapon, a legally-held semi-automatic pistol made by German company Heckler & Koch, officials said.

Following the shooting, police returned to his apartment and found 15 loaded magazines of ammunition, they said.

The victims included four men and two women, and the unborn female child. The wounded included a Ugandan and a Ukrainian citizen, and four people suffered serious injuries.

Jehovah's Witnesses are an international Christian denomination that was founded in the United States in around 1870. They are best known in many countries for their door-to-door evangelism.

The Jehovah's Witnesses said in a statement the religious community was "deeply affected by the horrific attack on its members of the faith in a Kingdom Hall in Hamburg after a service".

The officials said about 50 people were at an event held in the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in the Alsterdorf district of the city when the shooting started.



Erdogan Sounds Starting Gun To Somber Election Campaign

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan banned music from his campaign stops and vowed to heal the earthquake-stricken nation's wounds as he formally set the next election for May 14.

Erdogan signed a decree on national television that kicks off campaigning for what is widely seen as Turkey's most consequential vote of its post-Ottoman history.

It is also shaping into the most difficult of the 69-year-old leader's two-decade rule.

Voters will face a stark choice between keeping Erdogan's Islamic-rooted party in power until 2028 or handing the reins back to the main secular party of Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

Erdogan said he would run under the slogan: "Now for Turkey".

But he set a somber tone to the campaign season by banning music and instructing candidates from his party to contribute to the emergency service in charge of earthquake recovery work.

"Our agenda during the election (campaign) will focus on efforts to heal the wounds of earthquake victims and to compensate for economic and social harm," he said.

Erdogan is a tireless campaigner and a gifted public speaker who appears to come alive on stage.

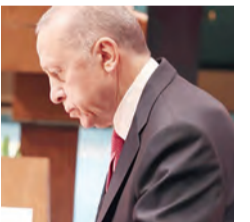
But he will have to dig deep to pull off a victory in an election that some of his own allies had suggested he should push back by a year.

Turkey was already battling the worst economic crisis of Erdogan's time in power when it was hit by a 7.8-magnitude earthquake that killed tens of thousands of people and left millions homeless last month.

The United Nations estimates the cost of damage alone at more than \$100 billion. His political opponents have formed the type of broad-tent coalition that Erdogan himself relied on to win more than a dozen elections over his career.

The six parties united behind secular opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu include die-hard nationalists and an Islamic party as well as more moderate voices who want to push Turkey back on a more predictable course.

Public opinion polls are notoriously unreliable in Turkey and some show Erdogan still holding on to a lead.



Rise in Ocean Plastic Pollution Unprecedented Since 2005



PARIS (Dispatches) - Plastic pollution in the world's oceans has reached "unprecedented levels" over the past 15 years, a new study has found, calling for a legally binding international treaty to stop the harmful waste.

Ocean plastic pollution is a persistent problem around the globe -- animals may become entangled in larger pieces of plastic like fishing nets, or ingest microplastics that eventually enter the food chain to be consumed by humans.

Research published on Wednesday found that there are an estimated 170 trillion pieces of plastic, mainly microplastics, on the surface of the world's oceans today, much of it discarded since 2005.

"Plastic pollution in the world's oceans during the past 15 years has reached unprecedented levels," said the study, published in open-access journal PLOS One.

The amounts were higher than previous estimates, and the study found that the rate of plastic entering the oceans could accelerate several-fold in the coming decades if left unchecked.

Researchers took plastic samples from over 11,000 stations around the world focusing on a 40-year period between 1979 and 2019.

They found no trends until 1990, then a fluctuation in trends between 1990 and 2005. After that, the samples skyrocket.

"We see a really rapid increase since 2005 because there is a rapid increase in production and also a limited number of policies that are controlling the release of plastic into the ocean," contributing author Lisa Erdle told AFP.

The sources of plastic pollution in the ocean are numerous.

Fishing gear like nets and buoys often end up in the middle of the ocean, dumped or dropped by accident, while things like clothing, car tyres and single-use plastics often pollute nearer to the coast.

They eventually break down into microplastics, which Erdle said can look like "confetti on the surface of the ocean".

On current trends, plastic use will nearly double from 2019 across G20 countries by 2050, reaching 451 million tonnes each year, according to the report, jointly produced by Economist Impact and The Nippon Foundation.

In 1950, only two million tons of plastic were produced worldwide.

Recycling, even in countries with advanced waste management systems, has done little to help the pollution problem since just a small percentage of plastics are properly recycled and much often ending up in landfills instead.

If landfills are not properly managed, plastic waste can leech into the environment, eventually making its way to oceans.

"We really see a lack of recycling, a flood of toxic products and packaging," Erdle said.

The rates of plastic waste were seen to recede at some points between 1990 and 2005, in part because there were some effective policies in place to control pollution.

That includes the 1988 MARPOL treaty, a legally binding agreement among 154 countries to end the discharge of plastics from naval, fishing and shipping fleets.

But with so much more plastic being produced today, the study's authors said a new, wide-ranging treaty is needed to not only reduce plastic production and use but also better manage its disposal.

"Environmental recovery of plastic has limited merit, so solution strategies must address those systems that restrict emissions of plastic pollution in the first place," the study said.

Latin America Poised To Become Renewable Energy Giant



RIO DE JANEIRO (Dispatches) - Latin America is poised to become a major renewable energy producer, with nearly a billion solar panels' worth of large-scale clean-electricity projects slated to come online in the next seven years, a report found.

In welcome good news for the climate-change race, researchers said Latin American countries had more than 319 gigawatts of utility-scale solar- and wind-power projects due to be launched by 2030 -- equal to nearly 70 percent of the region's total current electrical capacity from all sources combined.

"Rich in wind and solar resources, Latin America has the potential to be a global leader for renewable energy," said the report by the Global Energy Monitor (GEM), a US-based non-profit that tracks clean-energy development.

The new projects -- which include planned installations and those already under construction -- would expand Latin America's current utility-scale solar- and wind-power capacity by more than 460 percent, it found.

That makes the region a "global standout" on renewables, said Kasandra O'Malia, project manager at GEM. "We're already seeing a big upswing. And if you look at all the projects that are planned, it's just this big, exponential-looking explosion," she told AFP.

Even if not every planned project gets built, the region appears to be at an inflexion point, with even more projects likely to be announced in the coming years, she said.

Brazil, Latin America's biggest economy, is leading the green-energy boom, with 27 gigawatts of utility-scale solar and wind plants already operating, and another 217 gigawatts of capacity slated to come online by 2030.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who took office in January, has vowed to expand clean energy and restore Brazil's leadership role on climate change, after four years under far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

But the roots of the boom go back further, to a 2012 law that incentivized solar energy in Brazil by allowing private producers to sell electricity directly to the grid, according to energy expert Roberto Zilles.

"Today, it's cheaper to produce your own energy" than buy electricity, Zilles, the director of the University of Sao Paulo's Energy and Environment Institute, told AFP.

The report also highlighted developments in Chile -- traditionally a fossil-fuel importer, where wind and solar now represent 37 percent of total installed electricity capacity -- and Colombia, which has 37 gigawatts of new solar and wind capacity slated to come online by 2030.

However, Mexico, the region's second-biggest economy, was singled out as a case for concern.

Mexico, an early adopter of renewable energy, is currently home to Latin America's largest solar and wind projects.

But progress has declined since 2021 energy reforms pushed by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a fossil-fuels champion who has made revitalizing state oil company Pemex a cornerstone of his administration.

"Mexico has stalled," the report said.

"Even if all prospective projects were to come online, the country would only reach approximately 70 percent of its pledge to bring 40 gigawatts of solar and wind by 2030."

The report found Latin America has especially big potential as a producer of offshore wind energy.

It also said green energy exports could be a potential economic windfall, whether by sending surplus electricity to other countries or using renewable energy to produce green hydrogen for export.



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South Korea Jan. Current Account Logs Record Monthly Deficit

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's current account logged a record deficit in January, central bank data showed, as exports of goods slumped and overseas travel increased.

The country's current account balance logged a deficit of \$4.52 billion in January, after a \$2.68 billion surplus in December, according to the Bank of Korea (BOK). It was the biggest monthly deficit since the data series started in 1980.

The balances of goods and services each posted a deficit of \$7.46 billion and \$3.27 billion, with a drop in exports and jump in travel outflows, although the surplus in primary income widened to \$6.48 billion.



Slower, But Still Solid U.S. Job Growth Expected in February

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. job growth likely slowed to a still-solid pace in February, with the unemployment rate expected to hold at a more than five-decade low, which could see the Federal Reserve raising interest rates for longer and to a higher level to tame inflation.

The Labor Department's closely watched employment report today is also expected to show wage gains maintaining their upward trend, underscoring a persistently tight jobs market. The anticipated slowdown in job gains follows January's torrid pace, which led financial markets to expect that the Fed would sustain its monetary policy tightening campaign into summer.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell told lawmakers this week that the US central bank would likely need to increase rates more than expected, opening the door to a 50-basis-point hike this month.

"There is no question that the labor market is still tight, probably hot, but I think it has begun to cool and the cooling trend should continue going forward," said Sung Won Sohn, finance and economics professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

Nonfarm payrolls likely increased by 205,000 jobs last month, less than half of the eye-popping 517,000 added in January, according to a Reuters survey of economists. While that would be the smallest gain since December 2020, it would be double the 100,000 jobs per month that economists say is needed to keep up with growth in the working-age population.

Economists also argue that job growth in January was flattered by a host of factors, including unseasonably warm weather, annual benchmark revisions to the data as well as overly generous seasonal adjustment factors, the model the government uses to strip out seasonal fluctuations from the data. Robust consumer spending growth in January was also partially attributed to seasonal factors.

Estimates for February payrolls growth ranged from as low as 78,000 to as high as 325,000. Average hourly earnings are forecast rising 0.3 per cent, matching January's gain. That would raise the year-on-year increase in wages to 4.7 per cent from 4.4 per cent, in part as last year's low readings drop out of the calculation.

"January payrolls benefited from an extremely low seasonal hurdle, minus 3 million jobs, while February requires the addition of at least 770,000 jobs in order to record a positive payroll number," said Ellen Zentner, chief US economist at Morgan Stanley in New York. "With labour market indicators pointing towards labor hoarding, less seasonal fluctuation in hiring should be a drag on February jobs numbers."

Economists recommended looking at the three- and six-month averages of payrolls, to get a better picture of the labor market. Should February payrolls meet expectations, the three- and six-month averages for job gains would be above 300,000.

"This would indicate the anticipated normalization in the labour market is taking longer than expected," said Jan Groen, chief US macro strategist at TD Securities in New York.

BOJ Keeps Low Rates as Kuroda Sticks to Script

TOKYO (Dispatches) - The Bank of Japan (BOJ) maintained ultra-low interest rates and held off making changes to its controversial bond yield control policy, leaving options open ahead of a leadership transition in April.

Though widely expected by most analysts, the decision sent the yen and local bond yields tumbling as some investors unwound bets that retiring central bank governor Haruhiko Kuroda would tweak the yield curve control (YCC) at his last policy meeting.

Kuroda leaves the bank with a mixed legacy: his massive stimulus is praised for pulling the economy out of deflation, but has strained bank profits and distorted market function with prolonged low interest rates. And the country's economic growth has remained tepid.

"The BOJ has been taking various steps to mitigate the side effects of its monetary easing. I can say that the benefits of our monetary easing have far exceeded the demerits," Kuroda told a post-meeting briefing, defending his decade-long stimulus programme.

At its two-day meeting that ended on Friday, the BOJ maintained its short-term interest rate target at -0.1% and that for the 10-year bond yield around 0%.

It also left unchanged a band set around the 10-year yield target that allows the yield to fall or rise up to 0.5%. Markets have been increasingly testing the upper end of that cap as investors bet that the BOJ will have to change course soon.

"The decision to uphold policy rates comes at a cost. The BOJ will be forced to continue its massive JGB purchases to stem speculation of additional YCC tweaks, which will worsen market liquidity," said Norihiro Yamaguchi, senior economist at Oxford Economics.

The yen was last down 0.4% at 136.66 per dollar, trimming losses after a knee-jerk plunge of as much as 0.6% after the no-surprises decision. The Nikkei average slumped the most in almost three months as bank shares tumbled.

The benchmark 10-year Japanese government bond (JGB) yield pulled back sharply from the BOJ's 0.5% ceiling to hit 0.385%, its lowest since Jan. 24. The yield on the 368th 10-year note turned negative in a fresh sign of the severe market distortion caused by YCC.

Many investors expect the central bank to phase out the yield cap when Kuroda's successor, Kazuo Ueda, takes the helm in April.

A majority of economists polled by Reuters expect the BOJ to end the yield control policy this year, with half saying Ueda will carry out tweaks to the policy within three months.



European Bank to Invest Up to \$1.6b in Turkey's Quake-Hit Region

ANKARA (Dispatches) - The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will invest up to 1.5 billion euros (\$1.6 billion) in southern Turkey over the next two years after powerful earthquakes shook the region on Feb. 6.

The EBRD aims to support the recovery, reconstruction and reintegration of the region's economy to preserve human capital, livelihoods and jobs in the affected cities, the bank said in a statement Thursday.

The bank provides 600 million euros in credit lines to local lenders for businesses and individuals directly affected by the earthquakes, as well as new lending to companies participating in recovery and reconstruction efforts in the area.

It will also support the reconstruction of sustainable infrastructure in the affected cities, cooperating with municipalities such as Hatay and Gaziantep.

The bank will also focus funds on the reconstruction of the railway network to reestablish connectivity between the southeastern region and the rest of the country.

The bank will expand its strong private-sector partnerships and work with companies in various sectors to enable them to continue operating and withstand disruptions to local value chains. It will also help the private sector to adopt new technologies and green principles in planned rebuilding projects.

A key focus of the response package will be small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region. The bank will provide funding, advisory services and mentorship to repair the damage, build resilience and rebuild supply chains for businesses in the affected cities.

India's Inflation Seen Easing Slightly in February

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - Retail inflation in India likely eased a bit last month but stayed above the Reserve Bank of India's upper threshold for a second straight month, keeping the central bank on course for further policy tightening, a Reuters poll found.

Rises in food prices, which account for nearly half of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket, likely moderated last month. However, the bulk of the slowdown probably came from easing international prices and the government's

efforts to provide additional supplies of wheat.

Despite those temporary measures, lower crop yields because of warmer-than-usual temperatures last year and this year were likely to keep inflation elevated in the near-term period.

The March 2-9 Reuters poll of 43 economists showed inflation, as measured by the CPI, likely fell to an annual 6.35% in February from 6.52% in January.

Only one economist expected inflation to fall below the 6.00% mark, the upper limit of the RBI's tolerance band. Forecasts ranged from 5.89% to 6.70% for the data, which are due to be released at 1200 GMT on March 13.

"With vegetable prices normalising, inflation has started to harden as the inherent price pressures have barely shown any meaningful signs of moderation. In fact, food inflation ex-pulses and vegetables has now reached a nine-and-a-half-year high," wrote Kunal Kundu, India economist at Societe Generale.

"While we do not expect a sharp rise in inflation over the next few quarters, the pace of easing would be much slower than expected, especially given the likely impact of El Nino weather condition on food prices. We cannot rule out (a) further upside surprise to inflation."

An El Nino weather pattern usually results in below-average rainfall, cutting yields and pushing up food prices.

A weaker rupee, which fell around 10% last year and is expected to recover only some of those losses in the coming months, is also adding to upward price pressures.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy components, was also expected to remain sticky.

While data for core inflation is not released by the government, some economists said it likely remained above 6.0% in February.

Minutes from the RBI's latest meeting showed the central bank was concerned about persistently high core inflation, leaving the door open for more policy tightening.

UK Economy Returns To Growth in Jan

LONDON (Dispatches) - The UK economy rebounded to grow by 0.3% in January, according to official figures, potentially giving chancellor Jeremy Hunt more headroom ahead of next week's spring budget.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported a recovery for output last month after the bigger than expected contraction of 0.5% witnessed in December, as activity recovered from crippling strikes that month.

The main contributing sectors were education (2.5%), as school attendance returned to November 2022 levels, and arts, entertainment and recreation.

However, the UK's production sector shrank by 0.3% while construction output decreased by 1.7%. Gross domestic product (GDP) remained at 0% in the three months to January, the ONS said.

ONS director of economic statistics Darren Morgan said: "The economy partially bounced back from the large fall seen in December."

"Across the last three months as a whole and, indeed over the last 12 months, the economy has, though, showed zero growth."

"The main drivers of January's growth were the return of children to classrooms, following unusually high absences in the run-up to Christmas, the Premier League clubs returned to a full schedule after the end of the World Cup and private health providers also had a strong month."

"Postal services also partially recovered from the effects of December's strikes."

The latest GDP figure could give chancellor Hunt a slight boost before next week's budget announcement, when he will set out the government's tax and spending policies.

Hunt said: "In the face of severe global challenges, the UK economy has proved more resilient than many expected, but there is a long way to go."

"Next week, I will set out the next stage of our plan to halve inflation, reduce debt and grow the economy — so we can improve living standards for everyone."

Despite the resilience of the UK economy in the face of a cost of living squeeze and widespread industrial unrest, analysts warn that the country is still "flirting" with a recession.

Alice Haime, personal finance analyst at Bestinvest, said: "The economy may have escaped a recession in 2022 — albeit by the skin of its teeth — but it's too early to say whether the same will happen in 2023."

"The slight growth in January is certainly a better-than-expected start to the year, considering the multiple challenges hitting output from double-digit inflation and rapidly rising borrowing costs to falling real incomes and perpetual strike action," Suren Thiru, economics director at ICAEW, said.

"This modest rebound suggests that the economy is still on a downbeat path as eye-watering inflation bites into household incomes and curbs business activity."

OPEC Does Not Need to Make Up For Russia Oil Output Cut

HOUSTON (Dispatches) - There is no need for the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to increase oil output to make up for Russia's 500,000 barrel per day cut, Angola's secretary of state for oil and gas told Reuters.

"We believe the Russian oil is still there," Angola's Jose Barroso said on the sidelines of an energy conference in Houston. "They find a way, they find new markets... There is a balance in the market."

Russia said it would cut 500,000 bpd of supply from March. The Group of Seven countries, the European Union and Australia implemented the price cap on seaborne cargoes of Russian oil on Dec. 5, setting it at USD 60 a barrel.

Russian oil has found buyers in countries such as China and India that have not imposed sanctions. If China is importing more oil from Russia, then perhaps it is importing less from other countries, Barroso said.

"We believe for the time being there is no need for the OPEC member countries to increase their production," he added.

Barroso could not say whether Angola was losing market share in China to Russia, adding he lacks data on that. Energy demand in China is rising as Beijing loosens coronavirus restrictions.

Asked whether Angola would favor an increase in OPEC output quotas if it could produce more, Barroso said the country has a long way to go before reaching its current quota.

OPEC and allies, known as OPEC+, agreed to cut their output target by 2 million barrels per day from last November through 2023. As part of this, the 10 OPEC members bound by the deal have a target to produce 25.416 million bpd.

Angola's output was 1.050 million barrels per day (bpd) in February, and its OPEC target was 1.455 million bpd. OPEC output is significantly undershooting targeted amounts because many producers - notably Nigeria and Angola - lack the capacity to pump at the agreed levels.

U.S. energy envoy Amos Hochstein said this week during the CERAWEEK conference that the price cap - designed to reduce Russian revenues without slowing its exports - was working well, as Russian oil was still finding its way to market.

Félix Sánchez to Be Named as Iran's Football Team Coach

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Spaniards coach Félix Sánchez is close to signing a contract with Iran's football federation (FFIRI) to become the country's next national team coach. A Saturday report by IRNA said Sánchez may sign a draft contract sent to him by the FFIRI within the next couple of hours to become head coach of the Iranian national football team.

The report said the FFIRI may make an official statement at 20:00 PM Iranian local time on Saturday to announce the appointment of Sánchez. The Spanish coach was the manager of Qatar national football team in the World Cup 2022 in Qatar in November and December. He will replace Carlos Queiroz, the Portuguese coach who led Iran in three matches in the World Cup tournament before replacing Sánchez in Qatar's national team.



Chinese Companies Hang Onto Dollars, Hedge to Prepare for Volatile Yuan

SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - Some Chinese companies are holding on to dollar revenues from exports, while others are turning to foreign exchange hedging in anticipation of a fall in the value of the yuan, according to executives, bankers and data analysed by Reuters.

Several bankers in China told Reuters that clients are reluctant to convert export receipts, while exchange filings show more than 30 A-share listed companies have signed up to use currency derivatives for risk-hedging so far this year.

Central bank data also shows a shift, with dollar deposits at China's commercial banks, which had declined over the past year, jumping by \$34 billion in January to \$887.8 billion.

The moves are at odds with bank forecasts for a rising yuan in 2023 and broader market expectations that the U.S. dollar will fall this year, and could contribute to yuan weakness.

Ms. Zhu, the owner of a Shanghai-based electronic components exporter, said she is setting aside dollars, betting that her management of some \$7 million annual inflow of the U.S. currency will prove crucial to the profitability of her company.

"I may need to convert some dollars into yuan to make payments to domestic suppliers," said Zhu, who prefers to go by her last name. "(But) it feels like I should keep some dollars on hand, as the yuan will depreciate further."

Others anticipating a bumpy ride ahead for the Chinese currency include China Southern Airlines.

China's largest carrier by fleet size said in a Feb. 28 stock exchange filing that it planned up to \$4 billion worth of currency hedging in 2023 to "smooth out exchange gains and losses", up from \$850 million last year.

Such moves are perhaps not surprising given yuan volatility since Beijing suddenly unwound its zero-COVID strategy. The currency hit six-month highs in January, before dropping close to the closely-watched 7 per dollar level.

The yuan last traded at 6.9085 to the dollar.

In response to faxed questions on the yuan weakening past 7 to the dollar, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) directed Reuters to comments by its governor Yi Gang who said the level is not a "psychological barrier".

"Over the past five years, the exchange rate has been volatile, with a volatility rate of about 4%. And such a volatility rate is about the same as major economies," he said.

"Overall, yuan exchange rate will remain basically stable at reasonable levels," he added at a March 3. news briefing.

The yuan had its worst year in 2022 since China unified market and official exchange rates in 1994, dropping nearly 8% as rising U.S. interest rates diverged from falling Chinese ones, supporting dollar gains.

Now the prospect of Chinese tourists using foreign exchange for their trips abroad, fresh concerns that U.S. interest rates might rise further and geopolitical tensions keeping investment flows away from China are all weighing on the currency.

"It's possible to see the yuan go past the 7-mark against the dollar in the near term given the escalating geopolitical tensions between China and the U.S.," said Tommy Wu, senior China economist at Commerzbank.



"Still, the yuan could stabilise somewhat if the upcoming economic data shows continued improvement in the economy."

China on Sunday set a modest target for economic growth this year of around 5% as it kicked off its annual parliamentary gathering. With the economy staging a steady recovery, this could put a floor under the yuan and ultimately attract inflows.

While Chinese authorities have stepped in to lend support in the past and have already made it pricier to bet against the yuan, markets do not expect intervention in the near term.

"Reaction from the regulator has been benign so far, their tolerance of volatility in the yuan has risen quite a lot since last year," Becky Liu, head of China strategy at Standard Chartered Bank, said.

And unlike in 2022, the PBOC does not seem to be using the daily setting of the currency trading band to lend support.

"We do not think the central bank will defend 7 as CFETS stays strong at around 100," said Lemon Zhang, FX strategist at Barclays, referring to the trade-weighted CFETS index.

This gauge of the yuan's value against its major trading partners is up about 2% this year.

Zhang expects the yuan to hold at 7 per dollar until the end of June, before strengthening to 6.7 at the end of the year.

Ju Wang, head of Greater China FX and rates strategy at BNP Paribas, said she still holds short yuan positions against the dollar, although she does not expect significant weakness.

Tehran-Riyadh Agreement...

FROM PAGE 1

The statement further explained that delegations from Iran and Saudi Arabia, led by Shamkhani and Aiban, held several meetings over the past five days following Chinese President Xi Jinping's support for the expansion of ties between Tehran and Riyadh based on the principle of good neighborliness and his efforts to host meetings between Iranian and Saudi senior officials.



The talks between Shamkhani and Aiban were also held as a result of the keenness of Tehran and Riyadh to resolve differences through dialogue and diplomacy based on fraternal ties and both sides' adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Charter and international rules and principles, it added.

Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016 after Iranian protesters, enraged by the execution of prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr by the Saudi government, stormed its embassy in Tehran.

The two sides had held five rounds of negotiations in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad since April 2021.

In their joint statement, Iran and Saudi Arabia also thanked Iraq and Oman for hosting the talks between the two sides in 2021 and 2022 as well as the leaders and government of the People's Republic of China for hosting and supporting the talks held in that country.

Prior to the official announcement about the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Shamkhani held a phone conversation with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.

The Iranian top security official hailed great efforts by Iraq to host five rounds of talks between Tehran and Riyadh.

He also commended Baghdad's "very valuable" bids to prepare the ground for the new agreement between Tehran and Riyadh.

Speaking after signing the agreement, Shamkhani said the negotiations between the two countries were "frank, transparent, and comprehensive."

"Clearing up the misunderstandings and looking to the future in Tehran-Riyadh relations will definitely lead to the development of regional stability and security and the increase of cooperation between the countries of the Persian Gulf and the Islamic world to manage the existing challenges," he said.

Immediately after announcing the agreement, Zionist media outlets reacted and showed their anger regarding this agreement while Israeli officials have tried in recent months to normalize their ties with Riyadh and demonize the Islamic Republic of Iran for Saudis.

Former Prime Minister Yair Lapid was the first who reacted and said the Saudi-Iran deal is a dangerous development that strips Israel of its regional defensive wall against Iran.

"The agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran reflects the complete and dangerous failure of the Israeli government's foreign policy," Lapid said as he used the moment to attack Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett called the agreement a "political victory" for Iran and a "serious and dangerous development for Israel."

Israeli politicians immediately also expressed concern as the move appeared to throw a monkey wrench in one of Netanyahu's new government's chief policy initiatives — to normalize ties with Saudi Arabia.

Tehran and Riyadh can strengthen Muslim world through friendly ties and their cooperation will let no foreign force interfere in the affairs of the countries in the region, and countries in the region can settle their differences and resume their problems themselves without meddling of other states.

This will be a victorious move for the Islamic Revolution who has been under biased and negative propagations in recent months and Tehran once again showed its good will for cementing ties with regional states and resolving problems, and this big victory for Tehran is the biggest and bitterest blow to the Zionists who have tried to catch fish from the troubled water and fanning flame of rift between the countries in the region especially among the Muslim states. This is also an acid test for Saudis to show their sincerity for ties with Tehran.

And now the countdown has started for restoring ties by resumption of activities of embassies of the two countries which will be a sign of hope for greater future cooperation between Tehran and Riyadh, two major and powerful countries of the region.

Daily Walk Prevents One in 10 Early Deaths

LONDON (Dispatches) - You don't have to be a runner or play sport to feel the benefits of exercise - fitting a brisk walk into your day is good enough, UK analysis suggests.

It found if everyone did as little as 11 minutes of daily activity, one in 10 premature deaths could be prevented.

Most people don't manage to do the minimum recommended 150 minutes of exercise a week, however.

But doing some exercise is better than doing nothing, the researchers from the University of Cambridge say.

The NHS recommends everyone does 150-300 minutes of physical activity that raises the heart rate every week or 75-150 minutes of vigorous activity per week, which makes you breathe hard.

The research team looked at hundreds of previous studies on the benefits of physical activity and concluded that even doing half the recommended amount could prevent one in 20 cases of cardiovascular disease and nearly one in 30 cases of cancer.

That equates to 75 minutes per week - or 11 minutes per day - riding a bike, walking fast, hiking, dancing or playing tennis.

"You should feel yourself moving, your heart will beat faster but you won't necessarily feel out of breath," says Dr Soren Brage, who led the research.

Doing that amount is enough to reduce the risk of developing heart disease and stroke by 17% and cancer by 7%, the findings suggest.

Regular exercise reduces body fat and blood pressure while also improving fitness, sleep and heart health in the long run.

The benefits of exercise were even greater for some specific cancers, such as head and neck, gastric, leukaemia and blood cancers, but lower for lung, liver, endometrial, colon and breast cancers.

Int'l Community...

FROM PAGE 1

"Over the past few decades, we have seen a wide network of media outlets, which under the guise of news dissemination, have established a hostile and offensive atmosphere against Muslims in violation of their human rights," Iravani added.

The Iranian diplomat said the time has come for the international community, especially world bodies and the countries calling themselves advocates of human rights, to fight against hatred against Muslims, who constitute a large portion of the world population.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran strongly condemns any violence against persons based on their belief and religion, and expresses sympathy with the victims of Islamophobic attacks anywhere in the world.

"It also underscores the importance of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia in drawing attention to the culture of tolerance and peace on the basis of respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs at all levels," Iravani noted.

On March 15, 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 76/254, designating March 15 as

the International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

The resolution invites all member states, relevant organizations of the United Nations, other international and regional organizations, and civil society, private sector and faith-based organizations to observe the international day in an appropriate manner.

It recognizes "with deep concern an overall rise in instances of discrimination, intolerance and violence, regardless of the actors, directed against members of many religious and other communities."

The resolution maintains that terrorism "cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, civilization or ethnic group," and calls for "strengthened international efforts to foster a global dialogue on the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels."

The resolution was introduced by Pakistan on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). It marks the day when a gunman entered two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 victims and injuring 40 others, on March 15, 2019.

Iran Annual Export...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran and Iraq have set a target of \$20 billion in annual trade, and businessmen and authorities of both countries are determined to meet that target, Ale-Es'haq said at the time.

According to the official, Iran and Iraq have had the experience of reaching \$14 billion in annual trade in previous years.

Referring to the Iraqi prime minister's recent visit to Iran, he noted that various areas of cooperation including joint investments, oil and gas, and collaboration in the economic sector were discussed during that trip.

The value of Iran's exports to Iraq rose 20 percent during the previous Iranian calendar year (which ended on March 20, 2022) as compared to the preceding year.

Iran exported \$8.916 billion worth of commodities to its neighbor in the mentioned year, making Iraq the Islamic Republic's second-biggest trade partner.

Exports to Iraq accounted for 18.3 percent of the country's total non-oil shipments in the previous year.

Tehran-Riyadh...

FROM PAGE 1

"Speaking about the present and future of Syria is like speaking about the present and future of Lebanon," Nasrallah said.

He said that if the Daesh Takfiri terrorists, who had seized huge swathes of land in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2017, had remained in the region, it would have affected Lebanon as well.

"Had Syria fallen into the hands of Daesh, al-Nusra and the terrorists in the global war, what would have been the position of Lebanon and its people?" Nasrallah asked the Lebanese people.

The Hezbollah chief went on to dismiss recent rumors in diplomatic circles about growing division in the resistance front. It is not true that Syria will "leave the Axis of Resistance" in order to "join the Arab fold," he commented. "Syria is at the heart of the Axis of Resistance." He reiterated that the developments in Palestine affected the Lebanese people in all various aspects. "Everything that happens in Palestine affects our country, its sovereignty, and its future," he said.

"Imagine if Israel was strong and could impose its will on the entire region. Would the Lebanese have dreamed of oil and gas?" Nasrallah added.

Neymar in Qatar For Ankle Surgery

DOHA (Dispatches) - Paris Saint-Germain forward Neymar arrived in Doha for an operation on the ankle injury that has ended his season, Qatar's official news agency said.

The 31-year-old Brazilian is facing up to four months out after suffering the injury last month playing Lille -- the latest in a series of fitness problems.

Qatar-owned earlier PSG said Neymar, who became the world's most expensive player in 2017, would undergo a ligament repair operation in Doha.

LICENCE HOLDER: SOKHAN GOSTAR INSTITUTE

Switchboard:
(+98) (21) 44253448

Public Relations Tel:
(+98)(21) 44253450

Editorial Board: 44253449

Public Relations Fax:
(+98)(21) 44253395

Advertising Department:
Tel/Fax:(+98) (21) 44253335-9/44253234

Website:
http://www.irannewsdaily.com

E-Mail Address:
info@irannewsdaily.com

ISSN 1024-6053

P.O. Box: 15875-8551

Address: No 13, Pajouhesh St., Golestan II St, Golestan St.Marzadaran Blvd., Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Printed by:Honar Sarzmin Sabz

Distributed by:
Cities of Iran Cultural and Artistic Institute

Managing Director: Fereydoon Taherpour Asl

Durant Out for at Least Three Weeks With Ankle Sprain

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Kevin Durant faces at least three weeks on the sidelines after suffering a sprained ankle, the Phoenix Suns said.

Durant, who joined Phoenix in a blockbuster trade from Brooklyn last month, fell heavily during the warm-up on Wednesday for what was supposed to be his home debut against Oklahoma City Thunder.

The 34-year-old subsequently withdrew from the game with "left ankle soreness."

Murray Toughs Out Another Win

INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Former world number one Andy Murray made it through another tense match, rallying from a set down to beat Tomas Etcheverry and reach the second round of the Indian Wells WTA and ATP Masters 1000.

The Briton, who has made a habit of great escapes this year, needed three hours and 12 minutes to subdue the Argentinian 6-7 (5/7), 6-1, 6-4.

"Some of the matches I've played this year I haven't deserved to win," said Murray, who won a five-setter lasting more than five hours at the Australian Open and in Doha last month overcame eight match points in four matches before falling to Daniil Medvedev in the final.

"Today, I felt like I created so many opportunities and it was one that easily could have got away from me," added Murray, who had eight break chances in the second set.

Murray, grinding back toward the top 40 after hip replacement surgery in 2019, had to fight off two break points himself in the eighth game of the third set.

He needed five chances to get the decisive break in the next game, finally converting when Etcheverry, riding high after reaching the final in Santiago last week, double-faulted.

They arrived at match point after three hours and nine minutes, Murray missing his first chance when his drop shot attempt spun wide. Three minutes later he polished it off with an ace.

Murray improved to 7-0 in decisive sets this year and booked a meeting with 15th-seeded Spaniard Pablo Carreno Busta.

After injuries threatened his career, Murray, owner of three Grand Slam titles and two Olympic gold medals, said he wants to enjoy the final act of his career.

"I really want to make the most of these last years that I've got," he said. "It's exciting to see how far I can push this and push my body."

"There are certain things that I would like to achieve before I finish playing and goals that I set myself, but the number one thing is to give my best effort every single day."

"If I do that then I'll finish my career on a high note."

Murray was one of a string of former Grand Slam winners in first-round action as the 32 men's and women's seeds -- led by Carlos Alcaraz and Iga Swiatek -- enjoyed byes.

Britain's 2021 US Open champion Emma Raducanu rallied from a break down in each set to beat Danka Kovinic 6-2, 6-3, avenging a 2022 Australian Open second-



round loss to the Montenegrin as she continued her fightback from various ailments that have slowed her 2023 campaign.

"I'm happy I stuck in," said Raducanu, who had shut down her 2022 season early with wrist trouble and hurt her ankle in her second match of 2023 in Auckland.

She pulled out of the WTA event in Austin last week with tonsillitis and withdrew from a pre-tournament exhibition here when her wrist trouble flared up.

But she said the litany of problems only made her more determined.

"I think having something that you are going through kind of gives you in some ways more incentive," Raducanu said. "Like, 'OK, I've got to be aggressive or dominate' -- there's something to really cling onto and use."

France's Adrian Mannarino rallied for a 4-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/5) victory over Austrian Dominic Thiem, the 2020 US Open winner who was sidelined eight months after a right wrist injury in 2021.

Thiem had recovered an early break in the third set to force the tiebreaker, which he led 5-3 only for Mannarino to reel off the four points to capture the victory in two hours and 43 minutes.

In a duel of two more former Grand Slam champions, 2020 Australian Open winner Sofia Kenin beat 2017 US Open winner Sloane Stephens 6-4, 6-1.

Three-time Grand Slam winner Stan Wawrinka, with two knee and two foot surgeries behind him and now ranked 100th in the world, defeated Australian qualifier Aleksandar Vukcic 6-4, 1-6, 6-1.

In other matches, Australian qualifier Thanasi Kokkinakis, ranked 94th in the world, booked a second-round clash with top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz with a 6-4, 6-1 victory over US wild card Brandon Holt.

American Ben Shelton defeated Italian veteran Fabio Fognini 6-4, 6-1 to set up a meeting with fourth-seeded defending champion Taylor Fritz while on the women's side American Claire Liu beat Anna Karolina Schmiedlova 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 to earn a shot at top seed and defending champion Iga Swiatek.



ARE (Dispatches) - American skier Mikaela Shiffrin equalled Ingemar Stenmark's record of 86 World Cup wins with a resounding victory in the giant slalom at Are on what she called "a spectacular day".

Shiffrin finished 0.64 seconds ahead of the Italian Federica Brignone to match the milestone that has stood for 34 years.

A few days shy of her 28th birthday her exceptional run continued with her 12th World Cup win after securing a fifth overall crystal globe last weekend.

She has a shot at claiming the record outright in Saturday's slalom at the Swedish ski station where fittingly she had opened her World Cup account back in 2012 as a 17-year-old. Are also happens to be Stenmark's own home turf.

"I don't take it for granted to be in this place where people ask me when I'm going to win 86 or 87," she said.

"That's a pretty cool place to be, even though it can be difficult to focus sometimes, but today I felt like the focus was there when I needed it to be."

"It was really fun to ski and that is how I hope it would be."

"This is a spectacular day. It's amazing, incredible," added the Colorado-born skier.

The US ski superstar had set herself up for this record-levelling performance after dominating the first leg of Friday's race.

She went into the second run holding a 0.58sec advantage over Canada's Valerie Grenier. Franziska Gritsch was placed third at 0.93 with the rest of her rivals over one second adrift.

Grizzlies Rout Warriors, Bucks Hold Off Nets

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Memphis Grizzlies produced a devastating first-quarter scoring spree in a blowout 131-110 victory over the Golden State Warriors in the latest instalment of their rivalry with the NBA champions.

The Grizzlies erupted for 48 points in the first period to take a stranglehold on the contest as Golden State's suspect defense was exposed once more.

Tyus Jones led the Memphis scorers with 22 points while Desmond Bane and Jaren Jackson Jr. had 21 points apiece as six Grizzlies players finished in double figures.

The emphatic victory was a welcome piece of good news for Memphis after a challenging week that saw star point guard Ja Morant dropped by the team and put under investigation by the NBA for posting a video on social media of himself waving a handgun in a strip club.

The win also gave Memphis bragging rights over a Golden State team with whom they have developed an increasingly fractious rivalry in recent seasons.

The Warriors beat the Grizzlies in the Western Conference playoffs last season en route to the NBA title, and the build-up to Thursday's game had been marked by public feuding between Memphis' Dillon Brooks and Golden State's Draymond Green.

The bad blood threatened to spill into Thursday's clash, with the two men getting into a tense confrontation in the second quarter which ended with them being separated by a member of the officiating crew.

Brooks stoked controversy last week by voicing his antipathy towards Green and the Warriors, stating: "I don't like Draymond at all. I just don't like Golden State. I don't like anything to do with them." Green later returned the fire, declaring on Wednesday on his podcast: "I quite frankly wouldn't like a team that beats me all the time either."

Nevertheless it was Brooks and Memphis who had the last laugh after completing a wire-to-wire victory.

"We've had a rough couple of weeks but we've got dogs on our team," Brooks told an on-court interviewer from broadcaster TNT, before adding: "You should give that mic to Draymond so he can keep talking about me and making me play better."

Fernandes Urged to Learn to Control Emotions



The Portuguese impressed against Real Betis in the Europa League on Thursday, however, scoring and assisting in the 4-1 victory as United quickly shrugged off any lingering hangover from the rout at Anfield.

"I think he showed big personality by giving this performance on Thursday, leading the team, so it was brilliant," Ten Hag told reporters ahead of Sunday's Premier League clash

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United's stand-in captain Bruno Fernandes must work on controlling his emotions and channeling them in the right way, manager Erik ten Hag said.

Fernandes was heavily-criticized for his performance and antics in the 7-0 humiliation at Anfield where United suffered their biggest defeat against any club in close to 100 years.

against relegation-threatened Southampton.

"His emotion is his weapon but sometimes it's too strong and, yes, of course I help him, I support him and I give him feedback. Sometimes he has to show more to control emotions."

"He has to find the balance when to use the right show as a tool and when to use emotion as a tool. That is the next step. It is a nice development point for him and when he does it, he will be an even better player."

Ten Hag also had some positive news about injured midfielder Christian Eriksen, saying he will be back this season.

Eriksen suffered an ankle injury in late January and initial estimates said he could be missing until May.

"I think he will play, yeah, definitely," Ten Hag said. "I can't tell now an expectation, but I think his progress in the rehab is okay, is going according to plan."

"So we will definitely see him but not before the international break."

United will be anxious to bounce back in the league against 19th-placed Southampton at Old Trafford, although Ten Hag said United will need to 'outstanding' to do that.

3.25m Tickets Sold for Paris 2024 First Sales Phase

PARIS (Dispatches) - A total of 3.25 million tickets have been sold for next year's Paris Olympic Games in the first sales phase, organizers said.

For the first time in Olympic history, tickets were made available worldwide from a single platform with tickets sold in packs over three weeks in the first phase, which saw fans from 158 countries and regions register for the sale, Xinhua reported.

"The public response to the first phase of Games ticket sales was truly phenomenal. With over 3.2 million tickets sold in less than three weeks, take-up exceeded all expectations, for which we are very grateful," said Paris 2024 president Tony Estanguet.

The French public made up two-thirds of ticket purchasers, with 45 per cent of all buyers being women, a relatively high proportion in Olympic history -- with Paris 2024 set to be the first ever Olympic Games with equal participation by male and female athletes.

Tickets for climbing and BMX freestyle sold out on the first day, while those for fencing, judo, breaking and track cycling were all snapped up in just a few days.



PSG in the Race to Buy Stade de France

PARIS (Dispatches) - French champions Paris Saint-Germain confirmed it is in the race to buy the Stade de France, the centre piece for next summer's Olympics.

The French government has launched a call for tenders to find a buyer at a price of around 600 million euros (\$635 million) for the 81,500-seater stadium, the largest in France, whose current lease expires on July 1, 2025.

PSG's announcement follows a hitherto unsuccessful bid by the club's Qatari owners to buy the Parc des Princes, which has been its home for almost 50 years, from the Paris City Council to be able to expand it.

"We are candidates for the Stade de France," a PSG source said, confirming a report in the French sports daily L'Equipe, adding that it had not yet put in its bid.

The price of the Stade de France, which was built for the 1998 World Cup finals, was estimated at 647 million euros by the French government in 2021.

The current lease has been held since 1995 by a consortium comprising French business groups Vinci and Bouygues.

