

In a Phone Talk With the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Iranian Foreign Minister Asked for an OIC Emergency Meeting to Survey Recent Zionist Regime Atrocities in Al Aqsa Mosque.

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Kish Island, Located in the Persian Gulf, Is to Host the ITF World Tennis Tour Tournaments Once Again June 4-23, 2023, as the World Tennis Tour Tournaments Was Previously Known as "Futures"

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U.S., Europe in No Position to Talk About Human Rights

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei highlighted the Western states' crimes in the past and in the contemporary era, saying the US and the European countries are in no position to comment on the human rights issue.

Ayatollah Khamenei made the comment in a meeting with a group of Iranian poets and Persian literature academics in Tehran on Wednesday.

The Leader described the pharmaceutical sanctions and the prevention of delivery of vaccines under various pretexts as other examples of the West's attacks against Iran.

"If they could do something to deprive Islamic Iran and its people of food, they would not hesitate to do so," he added.

Ayatollah Khamenei considered the media onslaught as another part of the diverse attack of ill-wishers against Iran, outlining the fact that they use thousands of forms of media to promote lies, rumors and unconventionalities.

"The enemy's goal from this attack is to deprive intellectual and educational strengths and to weaken the spirit of independence, national perseverance, Islamic unity and practice," the Leader argued.

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Tehran, Riyadh Formally Restore Diplomatic Relations



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The top Iranian and Saudi diplomats underscore the need to implement a landmark China-brokered reconciliation agreement in an attempt to enhance mutual trust and help boost regional security.

In a joint statement issued Thursday after a meeting in Beijing, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, expressed readiness to remove all impediments to the expansion of bilateral ties.

The two sides also agreed to develop cooperation in any field that can ensure the security and stability of the region as well as the interests of its nations.

They further underscored the importance of dialog on ways to bolster bilateral relations and activate a security cooperation agreement, as well as a general cooperation deal in the fields of economy, trade, investment, technology, science, culture, sports and youth.

In their joint statement, Iran and Saudi Arabia also agreed to reopen their embassies in Tehran and Riyadh, together with consulate generals in Mashhad and Jeddah within a deadline already specified.

They also agreed to keep up coordination between the two countries' technical teams in order to examine resuming flights and visits by official delegations and those by the private sector, as well as facilitating visa process for their citizens, including for the Umrah pilgrimage.

Given the existing natural resources and economic capabilities that can be used to ensure the common interests of the two brotherly nations, the two sides agreed to increase meetings and consultations to further realize the positive prospects in bilateral relations.

At the end of their meeting, Amirabdollahian and Prince Faisal thanked China for hosting Thursday's meeting. Moreover, they expressed their gratitude to Switzerland for its efforts to protect the interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, Prince Faisal renewed his invitation for Amirabdollahian to visit Saudi Arabia.

The top Iranian diplomat, for his part, invited his Saudi counterpart to travel to Tehran, an invitation which was welcomed by Prince Faisal.

On March 10, after several days of intensive negotiations hosted by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to resume their diplomatic relations and reopen their embassies and diplomatic missions after seven years of estrangement.

Meanwhile on Thursday, spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced the official restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia after top diplomats from the two countries held a landmark meeting in the Chinese capital city of Beijing and issued a joint statement.

"I am delighted to announce the first official meeting between the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers in Beijing following the [March 10] agreement between the two countries to resume formal ties, and three rounds of telephone conversations between the top diplomats," Nasser Kanaani told reporters in Beijing on Thursday.

He hailed the "very good" negotiations held between Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan in a "totally positive and constructive atmosphere" in the Chinese capital.

As a result of the foreign ministerial meeting, the formal relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been officially re-established as of today, Kanaani noted.

The official highlighted that the two Muslim countries will exchange technical delegations within the next few days to make preparations for the reopening of embassies in Tehran and Riyadh as well as their respective consulates.

Tehran Had Extensive De-Dollarization Talks With Moscow

TEHRAN (FNA) - Iran's top security official Ali Shamkhani and Russian President Vladimir Putin had extensive talks on de-dollarization of trade between the two sanction-hit countries during Shamkhani's visit to Moscow earlier this year, according to a report by Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, which is the Arabic service of the London-based website The New Arab.

Iran's semi-official Fars news agency covered the report after it was released late on Wednesday and said that the hours-long, off-the-record meeting between Shamkhani and Putin early February was mostly focused on initiatives to offset the impacts of Western sanctions on Iran and Russia, including efforts to ditch the US dollar for bilateral trade.

It said the two had agreed that Iran and Russia could increase the share of other major currencies, including the Chinese yuan, the Emirati dirham and the Indian rupee, in their foreign exchange reserves.

The report said that the agreement was a base for Shamkhani's following consultations in China, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq to boost Iran's access to international trade.

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UNSC Urged to End Israel's Criminal Acts Against Syria

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent ambassador to the UN says the Security Council needs to condemn Israel's ongoing violations of fundamental principles of international law and the UN Charter, and take a decisive action to put an end to the regime's unlawful and criminal acts.

Amir Saeid Irvani made the remark in a letter to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the head of the Security Council, after two Iranian military advisers stationed in Syria were killed in an Israeli airstrike near the country's capital Damascus last week.

Following the attack, Iran said it reserves the right to respond to state terrorism of the fake Israeli regime in due time and place. "Given the serious repercussions of such unlawful and criminal acts for regional and international peace and security, as well as the grave challenges to the rule of law, the United Nations Security Council must take decisive action to end these violations and hold the Israeli regime accountable for all its internationally wrongful acts," Irvani said.

"The Security Council must not be complicit in double standards and must carry out its mandate by explicitly condemning the Israeli regime's ongoing violations of fundamental principles of international law and the United Nations Charter," he added.

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China Destination of 31% of Iran's Non-Oil Exports

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Thirty-one percent of Iran's non-oil exports are destined for China, the chairman of the Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce said, adding that giant steps have been taken in the current year for the expansion of trade relations between the two countries.

Major parts of the Iran-China 25-Year Strategic Partnership Document will be implemented in the current Iranian calendar year of 1402 (started March 21, 2023), Majid Reza Hariri told IRNA on Thursday, noting that trade delegations of the two countries will officially strengthen their cooperation after the holy month of Ramadan.

He went on to say that Iran and China have always had amicable relations with each other since many years ago.

China is the first country that retained its friendly ties with Iran despite sanctions imposed by the Western countries against the Islamic Republic, he stated.

Chinese companies are eagerly interested in expanding relations with Iran as well, Hariri emphasized.

According to the statistics of China's Customs, trade exchanges of this country with Iran that were about \$14.760 billion in 2021 reached \$15.795 billion in 2022, showing a seven percent growth.

U.S. Dismisses Reports About Its Plans For a Partial Deal With Iran

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – U.S. State Department says reports about the administration planning a partial, interim nuclear deal with Iran are "rumors" that "tend to seldom be accurate."

In response to a question on the issue by Iran International, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel also insisted that the President Joe Biden "has long said that he's committed to ensuring Iran never get to nuclear weapon, and we still believe diplomacy is the best way to achieve that goal. At the same time, we're preparing for all possible options and contingencies in coordination with our allies and partners."

Axios reported on April 3 that according to multiple sources the administration shared a plan with allied governments to strike a partial deal with the Islamic Republic to freeze its uranium enrichment at 60 percent in exchange for some sanctions relief.

If true, Iran would gain the advantage of being a few months away from producing 90-percent enriched uranium needed for a nuclear weapon and enjoy the benefits of sanctions relief.

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Chinese Private Refineries Buying Iran Oil

LONDON (Dispatches) - Chinese private refineries are buying more Iranian oil as competition for supplies from Russia rises, Bloomberg reported.

So-called teapots are prioritizing the flows, with Russian supplies getting more pricey as mainstream buyers such as state-owned Chinese refiners and Indian processors take a greater share, according to analysts and trade data.

In March, China's imports of Iranian crude and condensate jumped 20 percent month-on-month to 800,000 barrels a day, and are on track to extend gains in coming months, according to Emma Li, an analyst with data intelligence firm Vortexa Ltd.

While Iranian oil has long been sanctioned by the US, refiners in China have proved to be a consistent outlet. Most Iranian oil used to go to state-owned refineries but "the private refiners in Shandong especially are now running the show," said Homayoun Falakshahi, senior crude oil analyst at Kpler, the data and analytics firm.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has said that the oil and gas sector experienced a growth of nine percent in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20).

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Shamkhani to Host Armenian Counterpart in Tehran

TEHRAN (MNA) – Armenian sources reported that the Secretary of Armenia's Security Council Armen Grigoryan will pay a working visit to Tehran on Sunday and will meet with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran.

The Secretary of Armenia's Security Council Armen Grigoryan will pay a working visit to Iran's capital Tehran on April 9, the press service of the Security Council reported.

It said that during this visit to Tehran, Grigoryan is scheduled to meet with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ali Shamkhani.

President Calls for OIC Emergency Meeting After Israel Raid on al-Aqsa Mosque

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

has called for an emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to discuss the status quo in the occupied Palestinian territories, where Israeli forces violently stormed al-Aqsa Mosque overnight, fired stun grenades and attacked Palestinian worshippers.

During a telephone conversation with his Indonesian counterpart Joko Widodo on Thursday, Raisi demanded that the 57-member body convene an emergency meeting in order to arrive at a joint decision on how to defend the rights of innocent Palestinians and confront the Tel Aviv regime's crimes and atrocities.

The Iranian president described Palestine as the beating heart of the Muslim world, stressing that "support for the rights of the Palestinian nation and fight against the Zionist regime constitute an underlying principle of the Muslim Ummah."

He added, "The unity of the Muslim world remains a necessity so as to confront the



aggression and crimes by the Zionist regime."

The Iranian president noted that the Muslim world, as an influential bloc within global equations, needs more integration.

For that reason, Raisi said, Iran welcomes any initiative aimed at enhancement of relations among Muslim countries.

Widodo, for his part, welcomed his Iranian counterpart's call for an emergency meeting of the OIC on Palestine, hoping that the event could further promote ties among Muslim states.

The two presidents also discussed relations between Tehran and Jakarta, and underlined the need for further development of the ties.

Shortly after the call, the General Secretariat of the OIC said it will hold an emergency, open-ended meeting of the Executive Committee at the level of Permanent Representatives, on Saturday at the headquarters of the General Secretariat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to discuss the incursions and attacks carried out by the Israeli occupation forces against al-Aqsa Mosque and worshippers.

On Wednesday, Israeli forces raided the holy site for the second time in a row and tried to evacuate Palestinian worshippers by firing stun grenades and rubber bullets. Worshipers threw objects at the Israeli troops in response.

According to the Palestine Red Crescent Society, at least six people were injured in the fresh flare-up.

French, Iranian FMs Meet in Beijing

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his French counterpart Catherine Colonna met in Beijing on Thursday evening, taking advantage of the simultaneous presence of the high-ranking delegations of the two countries in China.

Various issues of bilateral relations and regional and international issues of common interest were discussed and exchanged.

The two sides also conferred on some consular issues and emphasized the necessity of mutual respect and continuation of joint dialogues.

Colonna is accompanying French President Emmanuel Macron on his visit to China.

The Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers held talks in the Chinese capital and signed a joint statement on Thursday morning.

Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani has announced that Riyadh and Tehran resumed official diplomatic ties on Thursday.

4 Iranian Embassy Staffers Given 48 Hours to Leave Azerbaijan

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Azerbaijan has given 4 Iranian Embassy staffers 48 hours to leave the country after describing them as persona non grata.

The Azeri side made the move on Thursday. It charged that the Iranian Embassy employees had engaged in actions that violated the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Iran's Ambassador to Baku was summoned by Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry and was served a letter of protest over what was described as Iran's "provocative acts against Azerbaijan."

Baku's anti-Iran statements and acts come after the Azerbaijani foreign minister's recent visit to Israel.

Last week, Iran demanded an explanation from Azerbaijan about its agreement with the Zionist regime to form "a united front against the Islamic Republic."

After Iran's statement, Baku claimed that it arrested six people in connection with an assassination plot against an Azeri MP.

It also claimed that Tehran was involved in the plot. Iran denies this.

China Opposes Any Interference in Iran Internal Affairs

TEHRAN (MNA) – Expressing China's support for Iran's territorial integrity, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said that his country opposes any interference in the country's internal affairs.

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his Chinese counterpart Qin Gang met on Thursday in the Chinese capital Beijing.

The meeting took place hours after the top Iranian diplomat and his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud signed a joint statement on bilateral relations in the Chinese capital.

Referring to the strong steps that have been taken over the past year regarding bilateral ties, Amirabdollahian to his Chinese counterpart, "Our strategic policy is to expand ties with China."

The Iranian foreign minister further spoke about the key agreements between the presidents of Iran and China and the strategic partnership treaty between the two countries.

"I am confident that the agreements of the two presidents will be pursued and implemented seriously and bilateral ties will move ahead at higher speed," he said.

In other remarks, Amirabdollahian pointed to the policy of the Iranian government regarding the expansion of ties with regional countries, saying the Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes partnership with China and the Persian Gulf littoral states in line with the Belt and Road Initiative.

The top Iranian diplomat also called for speeding up the holding of meetings of the Iran-China joint commission for economic cooperation in order to strengthen joint work between the two countries in various fields, including economic relations.

Issues pertaining to cooperation in such fields as energy, banking, money and credit, trade and commerce, provincial cooperation, visa facilities, and cultural cooperation were among others raised by the Iranian foreign minister in the meeting. Amirabdollahian also invited his Chinese counterpart to visit Tehran.

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang for his part said following the meeting between the presidents of Iran and China, the pace of expanding bilateral ties has increased and that Beijing is willing to work toward deepening relations with Tehran based on the roadmap that has been agreed upon.

Qin described the Tehran-Beijing relations as deep, adding that China supports Iran's territorial integrity and opposes any interference in the country's internal affairs.

New Iran Envoy Submits Credentials to Kazakh President

TEHRAN (MNA) - New Iranian Ambassador to Kazakhstan Ali Akbar Jokar submitted his credential to the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on Thursday.

The Kazakh president also received the credentials of the new ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Turkey to his country on Thursday.

Tokayev wished the new ambassadors success in their mission.



Ali Akbar Jokar met with Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian several days ago before departing for the country of his mission.

In the meeting, Amirabdollahian noted that relations between Iran and Kazakhstan over the past 30 years have always been friendly and based on goodwill, stressing the need for increased efforts to bolster the ties.

Iran, Mauritania Ready to Sign Cultural, Religious MoU

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Culture Minister Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili announced his country's readiness to sign a comprehensive memorandum of understanding with Mauritania on religious and cultural issues to help boost bilateral relations.

The minister was hosting Mauritanian Minister of Islamic Affairs Dah Ould Sidi Ould Amar Taleb who is in Tehran to attend the International Qur'an Exhibition.

The Mauritanian official, on his part, expressed hope that the two sides can sign a comprehensive MoU on cultural and religious affairs as soon as possible.



Gov't, Majlis to Design Mechanism to Boost Public Participation in Various Fields

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In the meeting between the government and the Majlis, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi stated that the people hate discord and marginalization, and stated, "What makes people happy is solving their problems, we all have an obligation to fulfil the strategic orders of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution by avoiding marginalization to improve people's livelihood and business prosperity".

During the Ramadan meeting and the first joint meeting of the government and the parliament in 1402, which was held on Wednesday evening, Ayatollah Raisi appreciated the efforts of the members of the parliament in reviewing and approving the budget bill of 1402 and realizing 97% of the revenues in last year's budget, among others, as the successes achieved last year.

The President also stated that according to the report of the Plan and Budget Organization, the discrepancy between resources and expenditures in the previous years' budget was a cause for concern, and added, "There is no discrepancy in this regard in this year's budget. But at the same time, due to some changes in the bill presented by the government, a bill will soon be presented to the parliament to correct these issues".

Referring to the increase in incomes and the efforts made to grow production last year, Raisi said, "With the actions of the government, 2 million taxpayers have been added to the population of taxpayers, and tax evasion has actually decreased".

The President referred to the implementation of some construction and infrastructure projects in a number of provinces last year and stated, "In addition to the implementation of projects such as water supply, 6,000 megawatts of electricity were connected and added to the capacity of the national grid, and 7,700 megawatts will enter the national circuit before summer, which can effectively help to solve the problem of electricity imbalance".

In another part of his speech, Raisi emphasized the necessity of efforts of all the governing bodies to increase productivity, and considered economic growth to be dependent on increasing investment and productivity, and noted that last year he

assigned a team to investigate the state of productivity in executive bodies to determine to what extent the departments are compatible with their credits, capacities and duties.

Referring to the Supreme Leader's emphasis on facilitating people's participation in economic affairs, the President emphasized the consensus of the government and the parliament to design a mechanism to promote people's participation in social and cultural and especially economic fields.

Raisi invited the parliament to cooperate with the government in reviewing and formulating solutions to realize the slogan of the year, considering the imbalance in the monetary and banking system and the currency system as well as the imbalance in the budget and pension funds as problems and challenges in the economic field.

In another part of his speech, Raisi emphasized the need to control and regulate the market and stated, "The government announced its agreement to the formation of the Ministry of Commerce to the parliament, but some representatives in the specialized caucuses opposed this and demanded the formation of the Organization of Commerce".

The President added, "The government sent a new bill to the Parliament by amending its opinion, and we hope that this issue will soon be included in the agenda of the Parliament and the assignment will be determined".

In another part of his speech, Ayatollah Raisi considered the fight against corruption as a condition for success in achieving economic growth and said, "The parliament can help the government in identifying and removing bottlenecks and reforming corrupt structures so that people can be sure that in addition to identifying corruption and dealing with corruptors, the foundations of corruption will also be dismantled".

Raisi considered the members of parliament to be the best advisors of the government in the administration of the country in various fields and stated, "People are extremely tired of disagreements and arguments and marginalization, today the duty of the government and the parliament is to solve people's problems".

The President considered the increase in social participation of the people to be essential for the widespread and maximum participation in all fields, including the elections, and added, "Now that the people have defeated the enemy in the recent combined war with their insightful presence on the scene, the authorities should also serve people more and try to solve their problems".

Referring to the supervisory role of the parliament, Raisi said, "It is valuable that the representatives feel responsible in following up the work of the people, but supervision should not deprive the executive director of courage".

Tehran-Damascus Comprehensive Relations at Highest Level

TEHRAN (MNA) – Speaker of Syria's People's Assembly Hammouda Sabbagh Tehran-Damascus comprehensive relations have now reached the highest level in all fields, and efforts to develop it continue.

Sabbagh made the remarks in a meeting with the Iranian Ambassador to Syria Mhedhi Sobhani on Thursday. The Syrian parliament speaker also stressed the need for developing Iran-Syria relations as much as possible, especially in the parliamentary arena.

Sabbagh also appreciated Sobhani's efforts as Iran's ambassador in Damascus in this regard.

Sobhani, for his part, described the future of Iran-Syria relations as bright and called for the continuation of activities to expand the areas of cooperation in various fields. He also emphasized the importance of the role of diplomacy in strengthening relations between countries.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:06
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:49
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:13
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:39

84. Moses said: "O my people! If ye do (really) believe in Allah, then in Him put your trust if ye submit (your will to His)."

85. They said: "In Allah do we put our trust. Our Lord! make us not a trial for those who practise oppression;

Surah 10. Jonah (84 - 83)

Asia to Become Global Financial Hub, Iran Its Key Component

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Asia is poised to turn into the hub for the global economy and Iran will be playing an important part in that hub, says Iran's deputy foreign minister for economic affairs, Mehdi Safari.

Safaree made the remarks in an interview with Press TV's Insight show, saying a new Asia-centric global economic order is rapidly taking shape.

He said the Asian continent is on track to become the hub for the global economy and Iran will be one of the key components of this hub, adding that the move from unipolarity to multipolarity is reshaping the global economy.

"The main center of the global economy will be Asia. And I believe that we will become one of the main elements of this center as regional organizations will gain strength," Safari said.

"I believe that the equations of the world are such that the economy has come back to Asia, that is stretching from West Asia to East Asia and the future belongs to Asia."

He said while the United States' attention was focused on expanding NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) military alliance, and dividing Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union around 30 years ago, countries like China have seized the opportunity to thrive.

"The U.S. came to West Asia and its attention was diverted to the expansion of NATO. Because, they wanted to divide Russia first, then go to other places. In the meantime, this offered an opportunity to some countries like China. It means that the U.S. government forgot about China," the diplomat said.

Safari stressed that the economic war also created a great opportunity for Iran to make valuable achievements and overcome its military weaknesses.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he said regional cooperation was formed and Asian organizations gradually gained momentum.

The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the five leading emerging economies including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (known as BRICS) are developing day by day, he added.

The SCO accounts for 40 percent of the world's population and 28 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP).

Iran's accession to the full SCO membership is expected to be finalized this month, which will be a game-changer for this region.

"Look at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in this way, the two largest gas producers Iran and Russia and the largest energy consumers are present in this organization," Safari said.

SCO would expand even further, he said, adding that Azerbaijan has also applied for its membership and Belarus has agreed to be the next, the number is increasing both in terms of area and population.

"Energy is an important issue. The European Union is not self-sufficient in



everything. It is weak in [providing] energy. But the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is self-sufficient in everything in terms of energy, population size, raw materials, and technology. Therefore, it is a complete collection."

In addition to Tehran's accession to SCO, which can bring about economic benefits, the Islamic Republic's geographical location also serves it well, he asserted.

Geographically "the Islamic Republic of Iran is a transit route between Russia, China, India, and Central Asian countries and connect them to Europe, either through the Persian Gulf and the sea of Oman, or through the land route, or through the northern route," the veteran diplomat added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Safari said Iran's relations with China, the regional economic heavyweight, have become strategic over the past decade for a number of reasons.

The deputy foreign minister also noted that while China has to import six and a half million barrels of their oil through the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, Iran can play a crucial role in providing energy security in the Persian Gulf given that it has a 2000-kilometer border with the strategic body of water.

"Most importantly, Iran is a country with a population of 85 million that borders 15 countries. It also has a large, young and educated workforce, ... so, it can be the focus of economic attention in West Asia," he added.

These are the factors that could make the Islamic Republic a strategic partner of China, he said. The same goes for Russia.

"After Asia, which direction does Iran go? I think Africa is our future," he hastened to add, pointing to the significance of boosting ties with African countries.

Safari said Iran must be active in African countries as the two countries complement each other.

"They have raw materials, we have the technology. We have energy, we are in a good position regarding petrochemicals, oil products, machines and new technologies, medicine, medical equipment and health tourism," he added.

Safari said that stabilizing the Iranian rial against the US dollar can be done easily without a doubt, when asked about recent turbulence in the country's forex market.

To some extent, he said, Iran mostly relies on imports rather than exports, which needs to change.

"This is changing and I am sure that this balance will become positive soon. And then our money will become stable and valuable. And Iran will be able to interact with the countries of the world," he said

"This way we can make investments in foreign countries and inside Iran."

Minister Visits Bituman Manufacturing Complex of Pasargad Oil Co. in Tehran



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Minister of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfares Mr. Seyed Solat Mortazavi on Thursday while being accompanied by some of officials and managers visited different sections of bitumen manufacturing complex of Pasargad Oil Company in Tehran.

Mortazavi during his visit was accompanied by the Head of Social Security Investment Company (SHASTA) and Tamin Petroleum and Petrochemical Investment Company (TOPPICO).

During the visit the minister emphasized increasing efforts and endeavors on way to pick-up in production and materialization of the slogan of the year.

He said that without any doubt, with all-out efforts of the staff in the production front, economic progress in the country will be attained with more strength.

He then visited different sections of the bitumen manufacturing complex of Pasargad Oil Company in Tehran like its research and development units and laboratories and got acquainted with the activities of this complex.

In the meeting, the CEO of Pasargad Oil Company Dr. Esfandiar briefed the minister of the major activities of the complex and explained the latest condition of the production, sales and exports in this company.

Pasargad Oil Company as one of the biggest bitumen producers of the Middle East has 6 bitumen manufacturing complexes and 2 exporting terminals.

Minister Says Iraq Does Not Pay Cash for Its Energy Imports

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Oil Minister Javad Owji has said that Iran does not receive cash for its natural gas exports to Iraq and all proceeds can only be used for importing medicines and essential goods.

Speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting, Owji said that payments are deposited in the Trade Bank of Iraq and then spent on buying medications and "essential goods", which usually mean food and animal feed.

Iraq and other countries stopped banking transactions with Iran after the United States withdrew in 2018 from nuclear accord with Iran known as the JCPOA and imposed sanctions. China, South Korea, India and others owe tens of billions of dollars to Iran for their oil imports.

Iran's Membership in 3 ECOSOC Subsidiary Bodies

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has approved the membership of the Islamic Republic of Iran in three subsidiary bodies of the council.

In a Wednesday meeting local time in New York, the ECOSOC endorsed Iran's membership in the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC), the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

The CPC is the wing for policymaking in terms of programming and coordination at the United Nations. Iran has been in the charge of decision-making, guidance and consultation concerning issues related to programs and the budget of the UN.

Iran has played an active role in the UNAIDS as well as the CCPCJ. Earlier 54 members from the Asia-Pacific region endorsed Iran's membership in the three entities.

The membership of the Islamic Republic in the three organizations occurs amid vast efforts by certain Western states, who have been trying to isolate Iran at international circles, but the international community has acknowledged that the country enjoys a special position and they underlined the need for Iran's activity in the mentioned bodies.

Annual Exports Hit \$52.5 Billion

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran's deputy minister of industry, mine and trade for general industries affairs put the value of the country's total exports in the Persian calendar year of 1401 (March 2022- March 2023) at \$52.5 billion.

Mohammad Mehdi Baradaran also put the exports value of the country a year earlier at \$37.5 billion.

Speaking in the honoring ceremony of the exemplary exporters of Khorasan Razavi province on Thursday, Baradaran stated that interacting with various countries of the world, especially neighboring countries, is a top priority of the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi.

He pointed to the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia after seven years and added that as soon as the political relations between the two countries were resumed, the Saudi Arabian traders called on Iranian counterparts to export the first cargo of food to the Arab country in line with reactivating the trade exchanges between the two countries.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the deputy industry minister pointed to the upcoming visit by Raisi to Indonesia and said, "With the coordination made in this regard, giant steps would be taken in line with implementing the preferential tariffs in order to carry out imports and exports to this Muslim country with the least possible tariff rates."

Implementation of Shalamcheh-Basra Railway Kicks Off

TEHRAN (MNA) – Following the 2021 bilateral agreement for the construction of the Shalamcheh-Basra Railway, today Iran and Iraq transport ministers met to discuss the details of implementing the project.

Razak Muhibis Al-Saadawi, Iraq Minister of Transport, at the head of a delegation visited Iran Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Mehرداد Bazrpash, and his deputies today in Tehran, in order to confer on mutual transport ties, particularly the implementation of Shalamcheh-Basra Railway.

Iran and Iraq's top officials signed the agreement for Shalamcheh-Basra Railway on 26 December 2021. However, after the agreement, there were a number of problems with construction in the territory of Iraq including demining of land in Iraq, land acquisition along the project, and also the construction of a bridge over the Shatt al-Arab (Arvand River). Nevertheless, the determination of



the two countries led to proper arrangements for implementation particularly during the Iran-Iraq Joint Economic Commission in so far as Iraq has already predicted this project in its 2023 budget.

Now, in this meeting, the two sides agreed on undertaking mine clearance by Iran, the construction of a 32 km railway including stations and buildings by Iraq, and the construction of about a one-kilometer vertical-lift bridge over the Shatt al-Arab by Iranian companies. The duration of the project is expected to be 18 months.

Further in the meeting, the two sides also discussed other transport agendas in their road transit, air and maritime relations.

Shalamcheh-Basra Railway marks a historical link as negotiations for a 32 km railway between Iran and Iraq had been ongoing for about the last 20 years.

Iran Petrochemical Forum an Opportunity for Indigenizing Technologies

SHANA (Tehran) – The National Petrochemical Company (NPC) managing director Wednesday said the upcoming Iran Petrochemical Forum (IPF) will provide a good opportunity to acquire the world's modern technical know-how and indigenize technologies.

Morteza Shahmirzaei made the remarks at the third session of the Executive Working Group on the 14th IPF and added the forum will help the petrochemical industry achieve its specified goals.

He put great emphasis on balanced development and continued, "Iran has manufactured a great number of petrochemical equipment and products and is moving on a path toward self-sufficiency, acquiring technical know-how, and producing catalysts by relying on its scientists and researchers' knowledge."

The NPC chief added, "We need to promote quality of petrochemical products and produce strategic products to meet the needs of midstream and downstream industries."

Tehran will host the 14th Iran Petrochemical Forum from May 1-2.



Domestic Production of Freight Cars Grows 50%

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Minister of Road and Urban Development Mehرداد Bazrpash said that domestic production of freight cars during the last Iranian year (ending on March 20, 2023) increased 50 percent compared with a year earlier.

The minister made the announcement in a meeting with private sector managers of the railway sector in Tehran. He said that the country produced 1,598 freight cars during the last Iranian year, which was up from 1,081 a year earlier. Bazrpash also said that his ministry plans to further increase the domestic production of freight cars under its policy of supporting indigenous capabilities to develop railway fleets. Plans are also there to renovate the railway transportation fleet, including passenger and cargo trains, he added.

Robert F Kennedy Jr to Run For U.S. President in 2024



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Robert F. Kennedy Jr, the nephew of assassinated U.S. President John F. Kennedy, announced his bid for the White House in 2024.

Kennedy filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission to run for president as a Democrat, reported Anadolu Agency. Known for being an anti-vaccine activist, Kennedy has become the second Democrat to enter the 2024 presidential race challenging President Joe Biden.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is the son of former US attorney general and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1968 in Los Angeles.

Erdogan Condemns Israeli Police Raid on Al-Aqsa Mosque

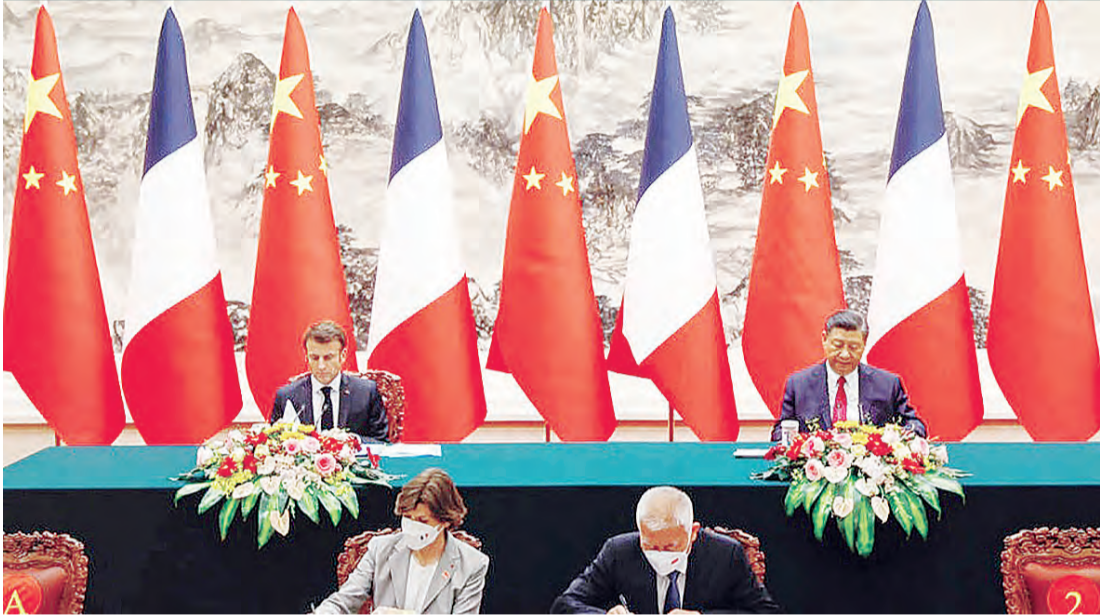


ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan condemned the Israeli police raid on Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, which led to clashes with worshippers, calling such acts in the mosque compound a "red line" for Turkey.

"I condemn the vile acts against the first qiblah of Muslims in the name of my country and people, and I call for the attacks to be halted as soon as possible," Erdogan said in a speech at a fast-breaking dinner.

The incident came during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and on the eve of the Jewish Passover, stoking fears of further violence at the mosque compound, a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

France, China Call for Ukraine Peace Talks



BEIJING (Dispatches) - French and EU leaders sought to make Europe's case for bringing an end to the conflict in Ukraine in a Beijing meeting with Xi Jinping, a close ally of Vladimir Putin.

President Emmanuel Macron met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing on Thursday, as the French leader seeks to dissuade China from supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Speaking to the press after a signing ceremony, Macron said that he and Xi had found agreement on principles during their discussions, which focussed largely on war in Ukraine.

Xi called for "restraint from all political partners" in Ukraine and said China hoped for peace to be achieved via a "political solution". The Chinese leader also condemned the bombing of civilians in Ukraine. "We need to ensure that civilians are protected and nuclear weapons are not used," he said.

Macron used stronger language than his counterpart to condemn "humanitarian violations" in Ukraine and speak out against the use of nuclear weapons.

The French president also called for peace talks, saying "the need to build sustainable, long-term peace" in Europe relied upon a "much more demanding conversation" to be had with Russia through diplomatic avenues. Without naming China directly, he ended with a call for countries around the world to "take responsibility" for peace, during a "worrying time".

Macron earlier told Xi that he knows he can count on China to "reason" with Russia and bring everyone to the negotiating table.

"The Russian aggression in Ukraine has dealt a blow to [international] stability," Macron said. "I know I can count on you to bring back Russia to reason and everyone back to the negotiating table."

Macron and Xi shook hands outside the Great Hall of the People, the heart of power in the capital.

Xi greeted his guest on a huge red carpet lined by Chinese and French flags as the countries' national anthems played, an AFP journalist said.

As the meeting between Xi and Macron got under way, Chinese state media reported Xi as saying relations between the countries were "positive and steady", adding: "The world today is undergoing profound historical changes."

Meanwhile, Macron told his Chinese counterpart that he was counting on him to "bring Russia to its senses" vis-a-vis its war in Ukraine. "I know I can count on you to bring Russia to its senses and everyone to the negotiating table," the French head of state told Xi.

Western pressure is mounting on China to help push for peace in Ukraine.

Though Beijing is officially neutral, Xi has never condemned the Russian invasion.

While he recently went to Moscow to reaffirm his alliance with Putin - framed as an anti-Western front - Xi has not even spoken on the phone with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

Macron, who is accompanied on his visit by European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, said he wants to "be a voice that unites Europe" over Ukraine, and that coming to China with her serves to "underline the consistency of this approach".

In a Thursday morning meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang at the Great Hall of the People, Macron stressed the importance of dialogue between China and France "in these troubled times".

"The ability to share a common analysis and build a common path is essential," he said.

U.S.-S. Korea Drills to Push Tension To Brink of Nuclear War

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea accused the U.S. and South Korea of escalating tensions to the brink of nuclear war through their joint military drills, vowing to respond with "offensive action", state media KCNA reported.

KCNA released a commentary by Choe Ju Hyon, whom it called an international security analyst, criticizing the exercises as "a trigger for driving the situation on the Korean peninsula to the point of explosion".

"The reckless military confrontational hysteria of the US and its followers against the DPRK is driving the situation on the Korean peninsula to an irreversible catastrophe... to the brink of a nuclear war," the article said.

It was using the acronym of North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

U.S. and South Korean forces have been conducting a series of annual springtime exercises since March, including air and sea drills involving a US aircraft carrier and B-1B and B-52 bombers, and their first large-scale amphibious landing drills in five years.

The commentary singled out the aircraft carrier's participation as aimed at stoking confrontation, saying Pyongyang will respond to the drills by exercising its war deterrence through "offensive action".

"The drills have turned the Korean peninsula into a huge powder magazine which can be detonated any moment," it added.

North Korea has reacted furiously to the exercises, calling them a rehearsal for invasion.

It has been ramping up its military activity in recent weeks, unveiling new, smaller nuclear warheads, firing an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking anywhere in the US and testing what it called a nuclear-capable underwater attack drone.

South Korea's nuclear envoy held talks with his US and Japanese counterparts and condemned those tests, saying the North will pay the price for its provocations, Seoul's foreign ministry said following their meetings in Seoul today.

The envoys agreed to step up efforts to stem the North's illegal cyber activities including theft of virtual currencies and hacking, it added.

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Ukrainian Forces Holding on in Bakhmut

NEAR BAKHMUT (Dispatches) - Ukrainian and Russian forces battled in the streets of Bakhmut, eastern Ukraine's devastated "fortress" city, and Ukrainian soldiers said they were ready to launch their long-anticipated counter-offensive once the weather improves.

On the diplomatic front, French President Emmanuel Macron urged Chinese leader Xi Jinping during talks in Beijing to use his influence to persuade Russia to halt the war and come to the negotiating table. Xi said he hoped such talks could start soon.

A French diplomatic source later said China was ready to work with France to "push hard" for negotiations.

However, an adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin rated the chances of peace talks starting this year at "zero".

The months-long battle for Bakhmut, one of the last urban centres in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk province yet to fall to Moscow, has proven one of the bloodiest of Russia's invasion, now in its 14th month.

"The battles for Bakhmut continue," said Andriy Yermak, a senior adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

"They are underway in the streets, enemy attempts to encircle the city are failing. Our command fully control the situation with the defensive 'fortress'," he said, using the nickname Zelenskiy gave to the city.

The leader of Russia's private Wagner militia, Yevgeny Prigozhin, said fighting was continuing in the west of the city.

"It must be said clearly that the enemy is not going anywhere," he said on his Telegram channel.

Prigozhin has often complained of a lack of ammunition for his fighters in Bakhmut, but Ukrainian border guard Levko Stek, speaking in a video clip released by his service on Thursday amid constant explosions in the city, said Ukrainian forces did not sense any "ammunition hunger" on the Russian side.

Protests Again Hit France as Striker Numbers Dwindle

PARIS (Dispatches) - Protesters disrupted vehicle traffic at Paris' main airport and police fired clouds of tear gas in other French cities as people marched in a new round of strikes and nationwide demonstrations seeking to get President Emmanuel Macron to scrap pension reforms that have ignited a months-long firestorm of public anger.

Talks between trade union leaders and Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne broke up Wednesday without a breakthrough, setting the stage for protesters' return to the streets.

However, the number of strikers has fallen, particularly in the transport sector, since the beginning of the movement in January. On Thursday, the Paris Metro was operating a near-normal service, in stark contrast to previous days of action, a sign that some in the movement are beginning to slow. Less than 8% of teachers are on strike, according to the Education Ministry. However, the sizeable TotalEnergies oil refinery in Gonfreville-l'Orcher remains closed.

Paris marcher Khadija Philip disagreed there was a drop in will, vowing "we won't give up as long as they haven't taken the time to hear us and reconsider their decision." Union representative Sylvain Challan Belval said that Macron's government is simply playing for time hoping that the protest movement "will blow itself out."

In Lyon, police fired tear gas — for many a new normal in France — to disperse a crowd outside a Nespresso coffee store that was being looted.

The Interior Ministry on Thursday deployed some 11,500 police officers nationwide, including 4,200 in Paris, to try to avert more of the clashes and moments of vandalism that have marred previous protests.

In Paris, rat catchers hurled rodent cadavers at City Hall Wednesday in one of the more memorable illustrations of how Macron's plans to raise the national retirement age from 62 to 64 have stoked workers' fury. Broadcaster BFMTV showed rodent corpses being tossed by workers in white protective suits.

Natacha Pommet, a leader of the public services branch of the CGT trade union, said Thursday that Paris' rat catchers wanted "to show the hard reality of their mission" and that opposition to Macron's pension reforms is morphing into a wider movement of worker grievances over salaries and other complaints.

"All this anger brings together all types of anger," she said in a phone interview.

Ten previous rounds of nationwide strikes and protests since January have failed to get Macron to change course, and there was no sign from his government that Thursday's 11th round of upheaval would make it back down.



Trump Urges Defunding Justice Department and FBI



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Former President Donald Trump called on his fellow Republicans in Congress to slash funding for the U.S. Justice Department and the FBI, one day after pleading not guilty in New York to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records.

Trump, who is seeking to regain the presidency in 2024, took aim at federal law enforcement authorities even though the criminal charges against him - the first brought against any former or sitting president - were pursued not by them but by the Manhattan district attorney.

But Trump faces two Justice Department criminal investigations led by Special Counsel Jack Smith, who was appointed by U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland. Both have seemed to accelerate in recent months.

"REPUBLICANS IN CONGRESS SHOULD DEFUND THE DOJ AND FBI UNTIL THEY COME TO THEIR SENSES," Trump wrote on his social media platform. DOJ stands for the Department of Justice.

Trump's proposal is unlikely to be heeded by Congress, with Democrats controlling the Senate and Republicans leading the House of Representatives. It would also be a sharp turn for Republicans, who in the past have supported robust funding for law enforcement and have criticized proposals from some on the left in recent years to "defund" local police departments.

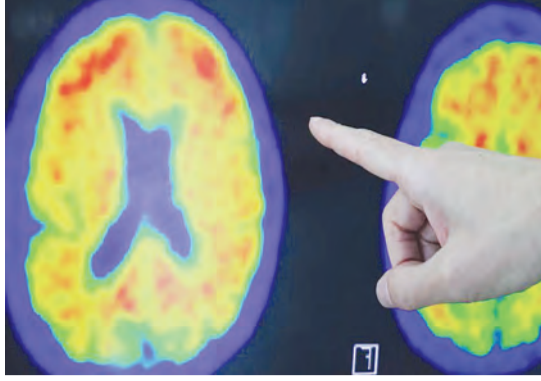
Congressional Republicans have called for sharp federal spending cuts in return for voting to raise the U.S. debt ceiling but have yet to put forward specific proposals.

The FBI, part of the Justice Department, is the U.S. domestic intelligence and security agency. Trump himself appointed the current FBI director, Christopher Wray, after firing its previous chief, James Comey, in 2017.

Trump backed spending increases for the Justice Department while serving as president from 2017 to 2021. Its budget increased 4% during that span to \$38.7 billion, White House figures showed.

One of the special counsel's investigations focuses on efforts by Trump and his allies to overturn the results of the 2020 election he lost to Democratic President Joe Biden.

U.S. to Build \$300m Database To Fuel Alzheimer's Research



CHICAGO (Dispatches) - The U.S. National Institute on Aging (NIA) is funding a 6-year, up to \$300 million project to build a massive Alzheimer's research database that can track the health of Americans for decades and enable researchers to gain new insights on the brain-wasting disease.

The NIA, part of the government's National Institutes of Health (NIH), aims to build a data platform capable of housing long-term health information on 70% to 90% of the U.S. population, officials told Reuters of the grant, which had not been previously reported.

The platform will draw on data from medical records, insurance claims, pharmacies, mobile devices, sensors and various government agencies, they said.

"Real-world data is what we need to make a lot of decisions about the effectiveness of medications and looking really at a much broader population than most clinical trials can cover," Dr. Nina Silverberg, director of the NIA's Alzheimer's Disease Research Centers program, said in an interview.

Tracking patients before and after they develop Alzheimer's symptoms is seen as integral to making advances against the disease, which can start some 20 years before memory issues develop.

Alzheimer's research has been galvanized by Leqembi, a new treatment from Eisai Co Ltd and Biogen Inc that slows advance of the disease in early-stage patients.

The database could help identify healthy people at risk for Alzheimer's, which affects about 6 million Americans, for future drug trials. It also aims to address chronic underrepresentation of people of color and different ethnicities in Alzheimer's clinical trials and could help increase enrollment from outside of urban academic medical centers.

Once built, the platform could also track patients after they receive treatments such as Leqembi, which won accelerated U.S. approval in January, and is widely expected to receive traditional FDA approval by July 6.

The U.S. Medicare health plan for older adults will likely require such tracking in a registry as a condition of reimbursement for Leqembi.

"We didn't design it for that purpose," Silverberg said, but "it might be possible" to use it for that purpose.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which runs the U.S. Medicare insurance program, did not respond to a request for comment.

Silverberg said the data platform could also help researchers working in other disease areas understand which patients are most at risk and the impact of medications. During the pandemic, the U.S. lagged other countries with national health systems in being able to analyze patient data for COVID-19.

The system would be built in a secure computing environment with a number of restrictions to ensure the privacy of people's health data, Silverberg said.

The grant, which was posted on March 13, has been years in the making. The funding announcement sets its earliest start date at April 2024, with a goal to establish an Alzheimer's registry 21 months later.

Several stakeholders including Medicare and patient advocacy groups the Alzheimer's Association and UsAgainstAlzheimer's took part in a workshop last spring to discuss the design of the platform.

Alzheimer's Association Chief Science Officer Maria Carrillo said in an interview that the organization plans to apply for the NIA platform grant, which will award \$50 million a year for up to six years.

Partha Bhattacharyya, chief data officer of the NIH Office of Data Resources and Analytics said: "We envision this platform will allow researchers to recruit across the United States."

"If we are to play a greater role in prevention, we must start early. That is not at age 65," he said.

Scientists in Arctic Race To Preserve Ice Memory



PARIS (Dispatches) - Scientists camped in the Arctic are set to start drilling to save samples of ancient ice for analysis before the frozen layers melt away due to climate change, mission organizers said.

Italian, French and Norwegian researchers are in Norway's Svalbard archipelago in what they called a race against time to preserve crucial ice records for analysing past environmental conditions -- planning to ship them all the way to the Antarctic for storage.

"Glaciers at high latitudes, such as those in the Arctic, have begun to melt at a high rate," said paleoclimatologist Carlo Barbante, vice-chairman of the Ice Memory Foundation that is running the mission.

"We want to recover and preserve, for future generations of scientists, these extraordinary archives of our Planet's climate before all the information they contain is completely lost."

The eight specialists on the mission have set up camp at an altitude of 1,100 metres on the crevasse-ridden Høltedahlfonna ice field and plan to start drilling on Tuesday, Ice Memory said.

They will extract ice in a series of tubes from as far as 125 metres (137 yards) below the surface, containing frozen geochemical traces dating back three centuries.

Analysis of chemicals in deep "ice cores" provides scientists with valuable data about past environmental conditions.

But experts warn that meltwater is leaking down and altering the geochemical records preserved in ancient ice beneath.

Ice scientists "are seeing their primary material disappear forever from the surface of the planet", Jerome Chapellaz, president of the foundation, told AFP.

"It is our responsibility as glaciologists of this generation to make sure a bit of it is preserved."

Human-caused carbon emissions have warmed the planet by 1.1 degrees Celsius since the 19th century. Studies indicate that the Arctic is warming between two and four times faster than the global average.

One set of the ice tubes extracted will be used for immediate analysis while a second set will be sent to Antarctica for storage in an "ice memory sanctuary" under the snow, where the samples will be preserved for future generations of scientists.

From their remote source, the ice cores will be transported by sea to Europe and later to the other end of the globe, for storage at a Franco-Italian Antarctic research station.

There, on territory protected by the Antarctic Treaty, they will be stored under the snow at minus 50C, where no power is needed to keep them cool.

"In coming decades, researchers will have new ideas and techniques to give voice to these archives," the researchers said in a statement.

"For instance, they may be able to isolate other information contained in the ice of which we are not aware today."

The team in Svalbard will work for three weeks in temperatures as low as minus 25C (-13 Fahrenheit), cutting and pulling out a series of cylinders of ice 10cm (four inches) wide.

The 700,000-euro (\$760,000) mission, partly funded by the Italian research ministry, follows a series of earlier ice core extractions by the foundation, including operations in the Alps and the Andes.

Further core-drilling missions are planned in the coming years in Tajikistan and the Himalayas.

A study published in the journal Science in January said that half of the Earth's 215,000 mountain glaciers are expected to disappear by the end of this century due to climate change caused by humans -- even if the target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is reached.



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Ukraine's Reserves Grow to 11-Year High on Foreign Aid

KYIV (Reuters) - Ukraine's international reserves grew to an 11-year high of \$31.9 billion at the start of April thanks to foreign aid, lower demand for hard currency and moderately-sized payments on government debt, the central bank said on Thursday.

Ukraine faces an unprecedented budget deficit this year due to high military spending to fight off Russia's invasion and it relies heavily on foreign financial aid to be able to fund public and humanitarian needs.

The central bank said it had received a total of \$5.1 billion from Ukraine's international partners, including funds from the United States, the European Union and Canada.



Iraq, Kurdish Region Sign Accord to Resume Oil Exports

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq's federal government and the Kurdistan autonomous region signed an accord to allow Kurdish oil exports to resume through Turkey after they were halted 10 days earlier.

The agreement, signed in Baghdad in the presence of Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani and Kurdish premier Masrour Barzani, was to be implemented "today", a Kurdish regional government official told AFP.

The deal was described as temporary but signals the end of independent oil exports by northern Iraq's Kurdish regional government and marks a clear limit to its autonomy.

The agreement comes two days after Iraq, Saudi Arabia and several other major oil exporters announced a sharp reduction in their production from May that sent up global energy prices.

Barzani said on Twitter that the deal is "temporary" until Iraq's parliament agrees a new oil and gas law, but he called it "a crucial step towards ending the long-standing dispute" between Arbil and Baghdad.

Ankara had stopped handling Iraqi Kurdish oil last month after an international tribunal ruled in a nine-year-old dispute that Baghdad was right to insist on overseeing all Iraqi oil exports.

Oil exports are the key revenue source for both the federal and regional governments and their management has long been a sensitive topic in relations.

The government of war-scarred Iraq is betting on earning around \$70 per barrel in its budget calculations for the next three years and has been irritated to see the autonomous region go it alone by exporting its oil via Turkey.

The Kurdistan government sees Baghdad as trying to profit from the region's resources while dragging its feet on paying the salaries of Kurdish civil servants and other funds for its regional public sector.

Persian Gulf Analyst Yesar Al-Maleki, of the Middle East Economic Survey (MEES), said the deal aimed "first and foremost" at quickly re-starting exports to Turkey.

"But it also presents an opportunity for Baghdad to finally be involved in Iraqi Kurdistan's oil sector" and should also allow Kurdistan "to accrue higher revenues" in future.

Maleki hailed the deal as a "breakthrough for the two PMs" that could help both sides draft the new energy law and "resolve the existing historic disputes once and for all".

Sales of Kurdistan crude will be managed from now by the State Oil Marketing Organization, a federal government official and a Kurdish official told AFP.

A joint committee formed by the federal and regional governments will supervise the export process, they added.

Revenues will be paid into an account under the control of the Kurdish government which will be overseen by Baghdad, they said.

The halt to exports through a pipeline to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan had left foreign oil firms with nowhere to pump Kurdish oil.

Rising Consumer Prices in Mexico Eased to a 17-Month Low

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) -Mexico's annual inflation slowed in March by more than expected to 6.85%, the lowest rate in nearly 1-1/2 years, although core price pressures remained elevated, data from national statistics agency INEGI showed.

The March reading was the lowest since October 2021, and came in slightly below the consensus forecast of 6.90%, as determined by a Reuters poll.

February's inflation rate stood at 7.62%.

Still, core inflation, which strips out volatile food and energy prices, slowed to 8.09% from 8.29% the previous month.

"Core inflation was impacted by the high readings in services, driven by the seasonal increase in airfares and tourism packages, and food services," Goldman Sachs (NYSE:GS) economist Alberto Ramos wrote in a research note.

Easing inflation for processed food prices also marked a positive sign, Bank of Mexico Deputy Governor Jonathan Heath wrote Wednesday on Twitter, but the category remains the "most concerning" given an annual rate of 12.69% and the impact of processed food prices on household spending.

Heath also expressed concern about rising inflation for "other services," a core inflation category that includes a broad range of services like medical consultations and car repair and which reached a peak annual rate of 7.73% in March.

Month-over-month, Mexico's headline consumer price index rose by 0.27% in March, just under the 0.31% forecast in a Reuters poll.

The latest data came hours before heads of state from 11 Latin American and Caribbean countries met virtually to discuss a regional anti-inflation roadmap.

The participating leaders, including the presidents of Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, agreed to outline new measures to fight rising prices and facilitate regional trade, Mexico's government said Wednesday, adding that a high-level anti-inflation summit was agreed to be held in Mexico May 6-7.

Last week, Mexico's central bank hiked its key interest rate to 11.25%, but moderating the pace of its tightening cycle.

Banxico has raised rates by 725 basis points since its rate-hiking cycle started in June 2021 to combat inflation.



German Banks Hit by Wave of Complaints From Savers

FRANKFURT (Dispatches) - Complaints from consumers about banks and other financial firms in Germany rose by a fifth last year, official data shows, as regulators flex their muscles to shore up trust in the sector.

BaFin, Germany's financial watchdog, has been increasing its focus on consumer protection in the wake of the collapse of Wirecard, the blue-chip payment company that folded in an accounting scandal.

It received 15,000 complaints from consumers in Europe's largest economy about their banks and other financial service providers last year, up from 12,500 in 2021 and a fourth consecutive year of sharp increases.

Gripes include long processing times for account closures, changes to terms and conditions, and shrinking branch networks, according to officials, bankers and consumer protection advocates.

The figures, reported by Reuters for the first time, will be made public in an annual report in May.

"It cannot be that financial institutions are doing well because they treat their customers badly," Chan-Jae Yoo, a BaFin official, said in an interview.

Deutsche Kreditwirtschaft, an umbrella organization that lobbies for German finance, said German banks are "extremely stable and robust" and confidence remains "high" and "unaffected" by recent turmoil stemming from the collapse of lenders in the United States and Switzerland.

But a survey last year by YouGov showed that degree of trust in Germany's financial sector, essential for promoting wider financial stability and attracting capital to support economic growth, was below the global average, lagging the likes of Canada, Australia and major Asian markets.

Turkey Logs Record Exports of \$23.6b in March

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's exports leapt to a monthly record in March, official data highlighted on Tuesday, bouncing back from a brief fallout after devastating earthquakes that struck the southeastern region a month earlier.

Outbound shipments rose 4.4% year-over-year to \$23.6 billion (TL 453.82 billion) in March, Trade Minister Mehmet Mus said at a press briefing in Istanbul while announcing preliminary trade figures.

Imports, on the other hand, jumped 4.2% from a year ago to \$32.1 billion, Mus said, with the overall trade volume jumping 4.3% to \$55.7 billion.

These pushed the foreign trade deficit up 3.7% to \$8.57 billion, according to Turkish Exporters' Assembly (TIM) figures.

Outbound shipments had dropped after two quakes on Feb. 6, which also severely hit neighboring Syria, along with aftershocks killed more than 50,000 people and flattened hundreds of thousands of buildings besides inflicting severe infrastructural damage.

The disaster severely impacted 11 key agricultural provinces affecting 15.73 million people and more than 20% of the country's food production, according to the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The region accounts for nearly 15% of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) and contributes to almost 20% of the country's agrifood exports.

Mus said the share of the southeastern provinces in Turkey's exports stood at 8.6% in 2022, stressing that the negative impact of the disaster on shipments continued in March, with a decrease.

The exports to imports coverage ratio came in at 73.4% with an annual increase of 0.1 points in March, and 85.4%, with a decrease of 9.3 points when energy data was excluded.

Mus said they predict that production activities and exports in the provinces affected by the earthquakes will continue to recover in the forthcoming period.

"Despite negativities caused by the earthquakes in production and supply, our exports increased by 4.4% in March to \$23.6 billion. This figure is the highest monthly export figure of all time."

Energy imports in March totaled \$6 billion, a decrease of 28.6% compared to the same period a year ago, TIM data suggested. Unprocessed gold imports totaled \$1.7 billion last month, Mus said.

Rolling 12-month energy imports totaled \$93.1 billion, down by about \$2.4 billion compared to the previous month, according to the data.

Astana International Forum: Behind Pipelines

ASTANA (Astana Times) - The Astana International Forum will take place in the capital of Kazakhstan this June. At this dynamic gathering, energy and climate will be key topics for discussion.

For Kazakhstan, the energy sector development is a highly relevant issue, touching on the country's economic survival. Kazakhstan is a leading energy producer in the region, with vast oil and gas resources located in the western part of the country. According to the latest BP estimates, Kazakhstan has 30 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. Almost 80 percent of the Kazakh oil output is exported and is currently being supplied to international, mostly European, markets.

Kazakhstan has been an oil producer since 1911. Although the country did not begin extracting significant levels of oil until the 1960s and 1970s, during the Soviet era, it was the second-largest republic in terms of possession of oil reserves and the second-largest oil producer among the Soviet republics. In the Soviet bloc, only Russia had a greater oil share. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's reliance on oil has become vital for the country's survival as an independent country. In 2003, Kazakhstan exceeded 1 million barrels a day in oil production for the first time. This staggering success was partly due to the country's ability to attract large foreign direct investment inflows to support the oil industry.

From the early days of the country's independence, oil and gas industries have helped support Kazakhstan's development and allowed it to maintain decent living standards for its population. Thirty-one years later, the oil and gas sector is still "responsible" for the country's stable development, accounting for more than a third of Kazakhstan's GDP.

The majority of Kazakhstan's oil wealth comes from three giant oil fields: Tengiz, Karachaganak, and Kashagan. Tengiz, named for the Kazakh word for "sea," was discovered by Soviet geologists in 1979 in a "remote, windblown steppe on the northeast shore of the Caspian," as the Washington

Post once put it. Today Tengiz is the world's deepest-producing oilfield. According to Chevron's official website, Tengiz is also the largest "single-trap producing reservoir."

On April 6, it will be thirty years since the American company Chevron, then the fifth-largest private oil company in the world, signed a forty-year contract with the Kazakh government to develop the Tengiz field in western Kazakhstan. Today Chevron holds 50 percent of Tengizchevroil, a joint company that was created in 1993 to operate the Tengiz oil field and the nearby Korolev oil field. These two oil fields have a lucrative amount of recoverable crude oil reserves estimated in the range of 890 million to 1.3 billion tons (7.1 to 10.9 billion barrels). In 2016, the company decided to proceed with an expansion project at Tengiz, to bring overall production up to 850,000 barrels a day. According to the latest updates, the expanded production facilities will begin operating in 2024.

India Pauses Rate Hikes In Surprise Decision



MUMBAI (Dispatches) - The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) surprised markets by holding its key repo rate steady after six consecutive hikes, saying it was closely monitoring the impact of recent global financial turbulence on the economy.

The central bank said its policy stance remains focused on "withdrawal of accommodation", signalling it could consider further rate hikes if necessary, but a number of economists now expect the central bank to remain on hold.

"It is a pause, not a pivot," RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said at a media conference after the monetary policy announcement. The monetary policy committee (MPC), comprising three members from the central bank and three external members, retained the key lending rate or the repo rate at 6.50%.

Most analysts had expected one final 25 basis point hike in the RBI's current tightening cycle, which has seen it raise the repo rate by a total 250 bps since May last year.

"We expect the RBI to maintain an extended pause and evaluate the lagged impact of previous rate hikes and global uncertainties on growth-inflation dynamics," said Upasna Bhardwaj, chief economist at Kotak Mahindra Bank. Some other central banks, including in Canada, Australia and Indonesia, have similarly paused, while the U.S. Federal Reserve, Bank of England and the European Central Bank have indicated they may pause, to assess the impact of past hikes and banking sector turmoil on growth and inflation.

"We have to be extremely prudent in our actions," Das said in his statement. While the central bank has taken the decision to pause rate hikes in light of global macroeconomic and financial conditions, "our job is not yet finished and the war against inflation has to continue", Das said, reiterating the resolve to bring inflation back within the central bank's target band of 2%-6%.

Exports From Khosravi Customs to Iraq Grown by 16%

KERMANSHAH (IP) - The head of the Kermanshah Customs Supervision Department said: "Export of goods from Khosravi Customs has grown by 16% last year."

Ali Asghar Abbaszadeh said: "Last year, more than 1.9 million tons of goods with a value of nearly 794 million dollars were exported to Iraq from Khosravi Customs, which compared to the same period of the previous year, has grown 16% in value and 21 the percentage in weight." According to Abbas-Zadeh, rebar, iron, tiles, ceramics, building stones, disposable containers, and construction pipes have been among the most important export items to Iraq.



Why Did OPEC Cut Oil Production? Key Reasons Explained

LONDON (Reuters) - OPEC and its allies, including Russia, agreed on Sunday to widen crude oil production cuts to 3.66 million barrels per day (bpd) or 3.7% of global demand.

The surprise announcement helped push up prices by \$5 per barrel to above \$85 per barrel.

Here are the main reasons why OPEC+ is cutting output:

CONCERNS ABOUT WEAK GLOBAL DEMAND

Saudi Arabia has said voluntary output cuts of 1.66 million bpd on top of the existing 2 million bpd cuts were made as a precautionary measure aimed at supporting market stability.

Russian deputy prime minister Alexander Novak said the Western banking crisis was one of the reasons behind the cut as well as "interference with market dynamics", a Russian expression to describe a Western price cap on Russian oil.

Fears of a fresh banking crisis over the past month have led investors to sell out of risk assets such as commodities with oil prices falling to near \$70 per barrel from near an all-time high of \$139 in March 2022.

A global recession could lead to lower oil prices. Redburn research said the size of the latest cut was probably overdone unless OPEC feared a major global recession.

PUNISHING SPECULATORS

The cut will also punish oil short sellers or those who bet on oil price declines.

Back in 2020, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman warned traders against betting heavily in the oil market, saying he would try to make the market jumpy and promising that those who gamble on the oil price would be "ouching like hell".

Prior to the latest cut, hedge funds had reduced their net position in U.S. benchmark WTI oil to just 56 million barrels by March 21, the lowest since February 2016.

Their bullish long positions outnumbered bearish short ones by a ratio of just 1.39:1, the lowest since August 2016.

"The latest cut would hurt those who bet against oil really badly," said a source familiar with OPEC+ thinking.

SEEKING HIGHER PRICES

Many analysts said OPEC+ was keen to put a floor under oil prices at \$80 per barrel while UBS and Rystad predicted a jump back to \$100.

However, excessively high oil prices represent a risk for OPEC+ as they speed up inflation, including for goods the group needs to purchase.

They also encourage speedier production gains from non-OPEC members and investments in alternative sources of energy.



Goldman Sachs said OPEC's power has increased in recent years as U.S. shale responses to higher prices have become slower and smaller, in part because of pressure on investors to stop funding fossil fuel projects.

TENSIONS WITH WASHINGTON

Washington has called the latest move by OPEC+ inadvisable.

The West has repeatedly criticised OPEC for manipulating prices and siding with Russia despite the war in Ukraine.

The United States is considering passing legislation known as NOPEC, which would allow the seizure of OPEC's assets on U.S. territory in the event market collusion is proved.

OPEC+ has criticised the International Energy Agency, the West's energy watchdog in which the United States is the biggest financial donor, for releasing oil stocks last year, a move it said was necessary to bring down prices amid fears sanctions would disrupt Russian supply.

The IEA's prediction never materialised though, prompting OPEC+ sources to say it was politically driven and designed to help boost U.S. President Joe Biden's ratings.

The United States, which released most stocks, said it would buy back some oil in 2023 but later ruled it out.

JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs said the U.S. decision not to buy back oil for reserves might have contributed to the move to cut output.

WHO Says Infertility Affects 1 in 6 Globally, Calls for More Consistent Data

GENEVA (Dispatches) - About one in six adults globally have experienced infertility at least once in their life, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in a report on Monday, urging countries to actively collect more consistent data on the disease.



The report analyzed existing studies conducted from 1990 to 2021 and showed that about 17.5% of adults across the world were affected by the inability to have a child. WHO officials said the report takes into account several research approaches.

"The sheer proportion of people affected show the need to widen access to fertility care and ensure this issue is no longer sidelined in health research and policy," said the U.N. health agency's chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The WHO defines infertility as a disease of the male or female reproductive system that is defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.

There was no evidence of increasing rates of infertility between 1990 and 2021, the global health agency's unit head for Contraception and Fertility Care, James Kiarie, told journalists on a call.

"Based on the data we have, we cannot say that infertility is increasing or constant ... the jury's still out on that question," he said, citing that data so far has been mixed and inconsistent.

The report highlights the need for countries to collect and share consistent data on infertility, separated by age and cause, as well as information on those who need fertility care.

Soaring Inflation Wallops Cubans Already Battling Shortages

HAVANA (Dispatches) - Cuban retiree Xiomara Castellanos gets a monthly pension equivalent to \$13.80. A carton of 30 eggs in the inflation-battered country costs \$14.10 -- almost four times more than two years ago.

"It is hitting us hard, very hard," the 80-year-old told AFP of inflation that officially reached 39 percent last year, but is likely much, much higher.

In 2021, the one-party communist government moved to end parallel currencies in Cuba, phasing out a convertible peso that was pegged to the dollar, leaving only the regular, weaker peso, or CUP.

Since then, the currency has fallen from 24 to an official rate of 120 to the dollar. On the black market the rate is 180.

To compensate for the currency devaluation, the government two years ago raised all salaries and pensions by 450 percent.

But then, "prices... exploded and salaries did not follow," Castellanos told AFP.

According to official figures, inflation -- which has several countries in Latin America and elsewhere in its grips -- reached 70 percent in import-dependent Cuba in 2021 and 39 percent in 2022.

But Pavel Vidal, a Cuban economist with the Javeriana University of Cali in Colombia, said real inflation was five to six times higher.

"Real inflation in 2022 exceeded 200 percent, one of the highest in the world," Vidal said, citing his own calculations.

Before 2021, said Vidal, there was no such thing as a consumer price index in Cuba, making



comparisons difficult.

But from GDP figures one could infer inflation was the highest in Cuban history, he said.

Like many Cubans, Castellanos depends heavily on the "libreta" -- a ration book with which one can buy basics like rice, beans

and bread at subsidized price.

You buy what you get; the choice is severely limited.

For the equivalent of \$1.42 in CUP, Castellanos can get 3.1 kilograms (seven pounds) of rice, a half-liter of oil, seven eggs, 1.3 kg of black beans, 2.7 kg of chicken and a packet of coffee for the month at a dedicated subsidized store.

If you want anything else, the next point of call is a state-run supermarket, where they charge much higher prices and in dollars much-needed for the public coffers.

The last resort are the many small privately-owned stores that have popped up since the government in 2021 authorized small and medium businesses. At one of these in Havana, a kilogram of milk powder costs about \$14.

Cubans can withdraw dollars from the bank but in limited quantities, meaning that black market dealers can charge a premium.

And while for consumers the exchange rate is 120 to 180, state enterprises which make up 85 percent of the economy get a rate of 24 -- a measure to ease the pain of high import prices.

Cuban economist Omar Everleny Perez has worked out that a couple needs \$113 per month to cover basic food requirements on top of what can be obtained with the "libreta."

U.S. Dismisses Reports...

FROM PAGE 1

The Axios report also said that Israeli officials told the Biden team that Iran would be threading on dangerous ground that could lead to an Israeli military strike if it enriches above the 60-percent level.

However, spokesperson Patel said, "Rumors about nuclear diplomacy tend to seldom be accurate." This is basically the same response given to Axios before it published its report, which does not categorically deny the report but tries to categorize it as a rumor that could be inaccurate.

Nearly 18 months of indirect talks with Iran to revive the 2015 nuclear accord, the JCPOA, reached a deadlock in September, and the administration since then has insisted that continuing the talks is not on its agenda.

U.S., Europe in...

FROM PAGE 1

He regarded the weakening of faith and religiosity of women as another one of the targets aimed against Iran and pointed out the effective role that women played in the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the stages after it.

"Westerners have no pity for Iranian women nor do they have any respect for their rights. Rather, they have a grudge against Iranian women and falsely present themselves as supporters of freedom and women's rights," the Leader said.

"The West isn't worthy of being the ones to talk about human rights at all. They are the enemies of humankind!" Ayatollah Khamenei underlined.

"We saw their human rights in Daesh (ISIL or ISIS), when they burned people alive or sunk them in water and drowned them before everyone's eyes. We saw (their human rights) in their support of the MEK terrorists and in their support of Saddam Hussein and their crimes against Gaza and the Palestinians," he underscored.

He argued that the West's support for the assassination and killing of religious youth in the streets of Tehran is another example of the falsity of their claim of supporting human rights.

"Our most virtuous youths, such as Arman Aliverdi and Ruhollah Ajamian were killed by torture and via Western media incitement and training," he added.

The Leader emphasized the need to recognize the enemy as well as their goals, strategies and targets.

"Understanding the dimensions of the enemy's soft war is a requirement for everyone, but it is most essential for those who are active in the cultural and artistic fields so that they can prevent themselves from getting influenced by it, and to make others aware of the enemy's onslaught," he stated.

During the meeting, Ayatollah Khamenei expressed his satisfaction with the expansion of poetry in Iran, labeling it as an influential, lasting medium. Referring to the universality and irreplaceable importance of poetry in different periods throughout the history of the Islamic world, the Leader stated, "One of the distinguished features of Persian poetry is the production of epistemic and spiritual capital, which is crystallized in the peaks of Persian poetry and the wise and enlightening poems of prominent poets such as Ferdowsi, Nizami, Rumi, Saadi and Hafez."

Ayatollah Khamenei pointed out that the capital and essence of Persian poetry has always been preserved even in the most difficult conditions of Iran's history, such as during the period where the country was invaded by the Mongols.

"Of course, today's Mongols, that is, the West, have different appearances and forms of the onslaught. In addition to the dark history of their crimes during the colonial period, they have also been invasive during our era, by equipping rabid dogs like Saddam with all kinds of weapons, especially chemical weapons, to attack Iran, or by means of sanctions after that," the Leader said.

Tehran Had Extensive...

FROM PAGE 1

Shamkhani had traveled to Moscow to attend a regional summit on Afghanistan. The former navy commander, who leads Iran's Supreme National Security Council, then reached a deal in early March in Beijing with his Saudi counterpart Mousaad bin Mohammed Al-Aiban to revive diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Shamkhani also traveled to Abu Dhabi and Baghdad last month in visits that many said were aimed at boosting Iran's economic ties with its two Arab neighbors.

UNSC Urged to...

FROM PAGE 1

He reiterated that Iran will not hesitate to take the necessary measures, in accordance with international law and the UN Charter, to "respond decisively to any threat or attack posed by the Israeli regime and to defend its security and national interests, as well as to protect its people."

The Iranian envoy noted that the Israeli regime's terrorist attacks on the Syrian capital Damascus and its suburbs on March 31 led to the martyrdom of the two Iranian advisers and the tragic loss of innocent civilian lives as well as severe damage to the infrastructure of the Arab country.

He maintained that the heinous crime once again illustrated the Israeli regime's ongoing aggression and flagrant violation of international law on Syrian territory.

He slammed the inaction of the international community, particularly the UN Security Council, in dealing with Israel's constant acts of aggression against Syria, which has enabled the Tel Aviv regime to act with impunity.

"Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected, and actions that undermine them must not be tolerated," Iravani added.

Chinese Private...

FROM PAGE 1

Oil Minister Javad Oji has recently said that a new record high will be reached in the country's oil export in the current Iranian calendar year.

The country's oil export in 1401 was 83 million barrels more than that of 1400, and 190 million barrels more than the export in 1399, the minister announced.

Underlining that now oil export has reached the highest figure in the last two years, the official said, "Considering that the Oil Ministry is one of the main providers of the country's foreign currency; in the 13th government, despite the tightening of cruel sanctions, fortunately, thanks to the grace of God and the efforts of our colleagues in the country's oil and gas industries, there are good records in the field of exporting crude oil, gas condensate, and petroleum and petrochemical products." Despite the negative impacts of the U.S. sanctions, Iran has been ramping up its oil production and exports over the past few months.

In his remarks in November 2022, President Raisi highlighted the failure of the enemy's policy of maximum pressure, saying the country's oil export has reached the pre-sanction levels. Back in January, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) in a report put Iran's average oil production in 2022 at 2.54 million bpd, 140,000 bpd more than the previous year.

Iran's oil production in 2021 was about 2.4 million bpd.

Mickelson Happy To Be Back

Augusta (Dispatches) - Three-time champion Phil Mickelson, who missed the Masters in 2022 for the first time in 28 years as part of a self-imposed hiatus from the sport, said yesterday he is thrilled to be back at Augusta National and that his reception has been wonderful. Mickelson missed the first two majors of 2022, including his title defense at the PGA Championship, as he stepped away from competition amid a backlash over comments he made about the Saudi-backed LIV Golf circuit, where he resumed his career last June.

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Asian Cup Confirmed for Jan-Feb Slot in Qatar Next Year

Qatar (Dispatches) - The next edition of the Asian Cup will be held in Qatar from January 12 to February 10 in 2024, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) confirmed. The quadrennial continental championship was awarded to China in 2019 but the world's most populous country relinquished the rights this year as it pursued a zero-Covid policy. Qatar, which hosted the men's World Cup finals last year, was then named the host after the Gulf state was preferred to bids from South Korea and Indonesia.

Benzema's Hat-Trick Shocks Barcelona

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Karim Benzema struck a hat-trick as Real Madrid thrashed arch-rivals and league leaders Barcelona 4-0 to reach the Copa del Rey final in stunning fashion.

Barca, bidding for a fourth successive Clasico victory this season, looked set for the final having edged a 1-0 win in the first leg of the semi-final in Madrid last month.

But after dominating the early stages of the second leg they fell apart in unlikely fashion to lose 4-1 on aggregate with Benzema becoming the first Real player to score a hat-trick in a Clasico at the Nou Camp since Ferenc Puskas in 1963.

Vinicius Jr gave Real the lead in first-half stoppage time following a lightning counter-attack and the semi-final was turned on its head when Benzema stroked a shot into the corner five minutes into the second half from a Luka Modric pass.

Eight minutes later Vinicius was fouled in the area and Benzema thumped his penalty past Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

With jeers echoing around the Nou Camp, Barcelona tried to respond but it was Real Madrid who looked the more likely to add to their tally with Benzema unstoppable.

In the 80th minute he was again set up by Vinicius to complete his second hat-trick in a matter of days having also hit a treble in the 6-0 destruction of Real Valladolid.

Real will fancy their chances of winning the trophy for a 20th time when they face Osasuna in the final after they beat Athletic Bilbao 2-1 on aggregate on Tuesday.

"It was a complete match. If you don't make it complete, you can't win 0-4 here," Ancelotti said.

"In the first half we had difficulties but the first goal changes the dynamics of the whole match.

"It's a game in which personality and experience is a very important aspect. We mixed the energy of Rodrygo, Valverde and Camavinga with the experience of Vini, Modric, Kroos. They played a spectacular game."



After suffering at the hands of Barcelona this season, it was a spectacular riposte by Ancelotti's side as Real beat Barca by at least a four-goal margin for the first time since 1995.

Real are a distant second behind Barca in La Liga having lost 2-1 to their bitter rival last month. But while the title may be gone, they regained bragging rights in style.

There was no hint of what was to come on Wednesday as Barcelona looked in the mood to kill the tie with Thibaut Courtois thwarting the hosts on a number of occasions.

It was from one Courtois save to deny Robert Lewandowski that the tie turned in an instant.

Real broke forward at pace and Vinicius exchanged passes with Benzema before his shot crept over the line despite the efforts of defender Ronald Araujo to keep it out.

Five minutes after the break Modric glided in from the right and rolled a pass to Benzema to send a precise finish into the corner. Xavi's Barcelona were in tatters minutes later when Vinicius was fouled and Benzema exacted punishment.

Tempers flared with players from both sides getting involved in skirmishes but Benzema had the last laugh to complete a magical night for Real and one Barca will want to forget.

"Congratulations to Real Madrid, who had a great second half," Barca coach Xavi, who was booked in the first half, said. "If you show Madrid mercy, they don't show you mercy.

"It will be hard to sleep, as I am from Barcelona and many of the squad are. But tomorrow, we think about Girona."



LONDON (Dispatches) - Frank Lampard has agreed to take over as Chelsea's interim manager, The Times newspaper reported, as club owners Todd Boehly and Behdad Eghbali continue their search for a candidate to replace Graham Potter.

Potter was dismissed on Sunday after a string of poor results left the team 11th in the Premier League. Bruno Saltor, who was part of the coaching set up under Potter, took over for Tuesday's 0-0 home draw with Liverpool.

Lampard, who was coach of Everton until January, will return to familiar surroundings at Stamford Bridge, where he was adored by Chelsea fans as the heart and soul of the club's midfield during a trophy-laden 13 years as a player - before a much less successful spell as manager from 2019-2021.

The 44-year-old, Chelsea's all-time top scorer with 211 goals, was sacked in January, 2021 after 84 matches in charge.

The former England international will be tasked with getting as much as he can out of what remains of Chelsea's season after they spent almost 300 million pounds in the January transfer window.

Argentina Back on Top of FIFA Rankings

LONDON (Dispatches) - World champions Argentina dethroned Brazil and returned to the top of the FIFA rankings on Thursday after a six-year gap.

Argentina, who won last year's World Cup in Qatar by beating France in the final, achieved the No. 1 spot after Lionel Scaloni's side beat Panama 2-0 and Curacao 7-0 in friendlies.

France moved up one place to second after a 4-0 win over the Netherlands and 1-0 victory in Ireland in Euro 2024 qualifiers, while Brazil slipped to third after losing 2-1 away to Morocco in a friendly.

Belgium remained fourth, England were fifth followed by the Netherlands in sixth, Croatia seventh and Italy eighth. Portugal and Spain completed the top 10.

The Central African Republic were the biggest movers in the latest rankings, jumping 10 places to 122nd.

Lazio Shares Plunge Amid Capital Gains Probe

MILAN (Dispatches) - Shares of Italian Serie A soccer club Lazio fell sharply a day after the launch of an investigation into allegations of false accounting on capital gains from players' transfer deals.

The stock plunged more than 8% on rumors of possible sporting penalties, a Milan-based trader told Reuters.

Italy's tax police on Wednesday searched and seized evidence from the headquarters of the Rome-based club, prosecutors in the town of Tivoli, near Rome, said in a statement.

Lazio said in a statement it was confident that "any misunderstandings or doubts" related to the alleged illicit actions would be cleared up quickly.

The offices of fellow Serie A club Salernitana, which used to be owned by Lazio chairman Claudio Lotito, were also searched as part of the Tivoli investigation.

Klaassen Injured by Object Thrown From Stands



AMSTERDAM (Dispatches) - Ajax Amsterdam's Davy Klaassen suffered a head injury when he was hit by an object thrown from the stands, causing a lengthy delay, before his team edged bitter rivals Feyenoord in Rotterdam to book a place in the Dutch Cup final.

After Klaassen put Ajax 2-1 up, a confrontation between rival players near the corner flag set off a commotion, during which the Netherlands midfielder was hit on the head, seemingly by a cigarette lighter.

Ajax players walked off the field, followed by those of Feyenoord, whose assistant coach John de Wolf later came out to berate home supporters before the game got back underway.

He used the public address system to ask Feyenoord fans to "use your common sense". The incident forced the game to be halted for 28 minutes and Klaassen had to be substituted shortly after the game resumed, gesturing that he was suffering from dizziness.

"I had a throbbing feeling around the wound and I also had trouble focussing, so I could have stayed on the pitch but that was not going to help me nor the team," Klaassen told the Ajax website.

"It was hard... you don't want to let it get to you but sometimes you have to put your pride aside and do what's best for the team."

Police said a 32-year-old man had been arrested and the incident was being investigated.

Rashford Fires Man United Into Top Four

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Marcus Rashford scored the only goal with a brilliant half-volley as Manchester United beat Brentford 1-0 in the Premier League at Old Trafford on Wednesday to climb back into the top four.

The victory was a perfect response following a disappointing 2-0 defeat by Newcastle United on Sunday and lifted the Red Devils to 53 points, three ahead of fifth-placed Tottenham Hotspur and level with the Magpies in third.

United started brightly, forcing a series of corners and free kicks as Brentford pulled their outfield players behind the ball to try to close down space, and when the breakthrough came in the 27th minute it was from another set-piece.

A Brentford clearance from a corner only made it as far as winger Antony on the edge of the box. He lofted it towards the head of Marcel Sabitzer, and Rashford met the Austrian's bouncing knockdown with a sumptuous half-volley that gave David Raya no chance to register his 28th goal of the season.

David De Gea almost gave Brentford a lifeline early in the second half when his loose attempt at a clearance cannoned into the onrushing Ivan Toney, but luckily for the United keeper the ball bounced to safety.

De Gea was called into action again in the 67th minute when substitute Kevin Schade collected a pass from Toney and ran at him, but the keeper stood firm to deflect the shot.

Manchester United could have sealed the game in the 80th minute as Rashford broke down the left and squared to Fred, but the Brazilian blazed the ball high over the bar with the goal at his mercy.

Brentford poured forward in the closing stages, but the closest they came to scoring was an audacious attempt at a chip from Toney that drifted harmlessly over the bar as the home side held on.

Looking for a top-four finish that will give them a crack at Champions League football next season, Rashford said consistency would be key for United as the Premier League heads into its final phase.



Bucks Beat Bulls, Clinch Top Seed In East

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Bobby Portis scored 27 points and grabbed 13 rebounds and Brook Lopez added 26 points as the short-handed Milwaukee Bucks took down the visiting Chicago Bulls 105-92 to clinch the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs.

Milwaukee also got 20 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds from Jrue Holiday, the only member of the Bucks' Big Three to play for a majority of the night. Giannis Antetokounmpo was ruled out due to a sore right knee after warming up, and Khris Middleton left early in the first half because of a right knee ailment.

Chicago was led by Nikola Vucevic with 21 points and 11 rebounds. DeMar DeRozan did not score a single point until the fourth quarter, finishing the game with eight points on 3-of-12 shooting. Zach LaVine also struggled, putting up 13 points on 5-of-17 shooting.

Milwaukee earned its third win in a row while Chicago, which is headed to the Eastern Conference play-in tournament, dropped its second straight.

Meanwhile Herbert Jones Jr. scored a career-high 35 points and host New Orleans Pelicans overcame a 19-point deficit over Memphis Grizzlies and a blown six-point lead in the final 11 seconds of regulation to clinch a spot in the Western Conference play-in tournament with a 138-131 victory against Memphis.

CJ McCollum added 31 points and 10 rebounds, Trey Murphy III scored 30 points and Brandon Ingram had 24 for the Pelicans, who are assured of no worse than the No. 9 seed.

Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 40 points, including two free throws in the final second to force overtime, Dillon Brooks added 25, Desmond Bane had 24 and Tyus Jones had 13 points and 12 assists to lead the Grizzlies, who played without seven players, including Ja Morant and Jalen Irvin.

Kyrie Irving hit three late 3-pointers and teamed with Luka Doncic and Tim Hardaway Jr. for 84 points, helping host Dallas Mavericks move into a tie for 10th place in the Western Conference with a 123-119 victory over Sacramento. Kings.

