

The Latest Data Shows Iran's Trade With Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Excluding Crude Oil Exports, Has Reached 89.02m Tons Worth \$54.32b

IRAN NEWS

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Its Latest Report Announced the Significant \$141b Increase in Iran's GDP in 2022 and Ranked the Country as the World's 22nd Largest Economy in 2022

VOL. XXIX, No. 7743 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SATURDAY APRIL 15, 2023 - FARVARDIN 26, 1402

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U.S., Allies Urged to Lift Sanctions on Afghanistan

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign ministers of Iran, China, Pakistan and Russia have urged the United States and its allies to accept their responsibility vis-à-vis the ongoing difficult situation in Afghanistan, immediately lift all unilateral sanctions against the war-ravaged country, and release its frozen assets.

The foreign ministers of the regional quartet issued a joint statement on Thursday following their unofficial meeting in Uzbekistan's city of Samarkand, within the framework of a ministerial conference of Afghanistan's neighboring countries.

According to the statement, the four foreign ministers stressed the importance of respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, expressing their support for the principle of "Afghan ownership and Afghan leadership" to determine the political and development path of the country.

They said all members of the international community would benefit from a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, a country that should be a venue for international cooperation instead of geopolitical competitions.

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Oil Minister in Venezuela To Boost Energy Ties

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Oil Minister Javad Owji has traveled to Venezuela to discuss ways to "strengthen energy relations" between the two friendly nations, according to the Latin American country's foreign ministry.

In a statement, the ministry said Owji will meet Venezuelan officials and visit the facilities belonging to the state-run energy firm PDVSA.

"The delegation will be in Caracas until April 14, maintaining intense work schedule, which includes meetings and visits to PDVSA facilities, as well as meetings with government authorities," the statement read.

Owji has already met with his Venezuelan counterpart, Pedro Rafael Tellechea, who also heads PDVSA, a source at the firm told Reuters, adding that the Iranian oil minister plans to visit the El Palito refinery.

Iran and Venezuela, both subject to illegal U.S. sanctions, signed a 20-year cooperation deal last June during a state visit by President Nicolas Maduro to Tehran. The document covered the energy sector, among other areas of cooperation.

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Millions of Iranians, Muslims Across World Mark Quds Day



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

Millions of Iranians and Muslims across the world took part in the International Quds Day rallies across Iran and other Muslim countries to show their solidarity with the oppressed Palestinian people and condemn Israeli atrocities and acts of aggression against Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The rallies in Iran, organized by the Islamic Propagation Coordination Council (IPCC), started at 10 a.m. local time (0630 GMT) in Tehran and other cities across the country on Friday.

People taking part in the rallies intend to communicate to the world the deplorable situation of the Palestinians and condemn Israeli atrocities which have intensified this year, especially since the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan.

Ten routes have been designated for the rallies throughout the Iranian capital, where people from all walks of life are heading to the iconic Enqelab (revolution) Square.

Every year on the last Friday of Ramadan, worldwide rallies are held to support the Palestinian people's resistance against Israel and the struggle to liberate their territories, which have been occupied by Israel for decades.

The annual event is seen as an opportunity for freedom-seeking people across the world, regardless of faith, to voice their support for the Palestinian cause and vent their anger against the apartheid regime in Tel Aviv, which has occupied Palestinian territories since 1967.

The International Quds Day is among the legacies of the late founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini, who is revered as a spiritual leader by Muslims across the world. Back in 1979, shortly after leading an Islamic Revolution which toppled the US-backed Shah of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini named the last Friday of the fasting month of Ramadan the Quds Day.

In Tehran and addressing the participants in the rally Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said International Quds Day revealed the criminal face of the child-killing Zionist regime in front of the people of the world.

He said that the initiative of Imam Khomeini (RA) in appointing International Quds Day has turned the issue of Palestine into a popular and global issue in the world.

International Quds Day is among the legacies of the late founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini, who is revered as a spiritual leader by Muslims across the world.

Today, thanks to Quds Day, all Muslims can say that Al-Quds is the capital of all Palestine and Palestine is the capital of the Islamic world, he added.

Qalibaf also noted that terrorism exists in the essence of this regime.

Describing the Zionist regime as the number one enemy of the Islamic world and humanity, Ghalibaf said that this enemy sought to show Iran and the Resistance as a threat to Islamic countries.

The Zionists sought to create conflict in the Islamic world and tried to create differences between Islamic countries, and they tried to present themselves as peace seekers and Iran as a problem in the Islamic world, but the Leader of the Islamic Revolution thwarted such a plot in a wise manner, he said.

In order to counter this conspiracy, the Leader put brotherhood between Shiites and Sunnis on agenda and made efforts to bring the Islamic world closer together, Qalibaf added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he hailed the achievements of the Palestinian Resistance Front against the occupation regime and said today, Resistance, is not only passive but prepared to counter Zionists.

Referring to movements of Takfiri and ISIL terrorists sponsored by the US and Zionist regime in the region, Qalibaf said that the Resistance Front and Martyr Soleimani did not allow such enemies an opportunity to harm the Islamic world.

IRGC Holds Naval Parades in Solidarity With Palestinians

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy has staged maritime parades in Iran's northern and southern territorial waters to demonstrate unflinching support for Palestinians as well their legitimate cause, and to condemn the Israeli regime's brutal and heinous crimes against the oppressed nation.

IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali-Reza Tangsiri said on Thursday that sailors are attending the drills in the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Sea of Oman to show solidarity with the people of Palestine.

He stated that the parades are being held simultaneously in a number of ports across the Muslim world, including in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq and elsewhere in East Asia.

Rear Admiral Tangsiri noted that more than 2,700 vessels of the IRGC Navy as well as the Basij volunteer force are partaking in the parades to voice support for the Palestinian cause and Intifada (popular uprising).

"Nowadays, people in 120 countries are hoisting the Palestinian national flag in defense of Palestine. Even people in European states and Britain are running up the flag of oppressed Palestinians. Although Palestine and the Palestinians are oppressed, they are robust as they are connected to God. The extent of popular support for these oppressed people is unprecedented," he stated.

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Jobless Rate at 9.7% In Quarter to March

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Figures by the Iranian government's statistics agency show the country's jobless rate rose 0.3% in the quarter to March 20 compared to the same period last year to reach 9.7%.

The Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) said in a report published on Wednesday that the number of people in employment in Iran had reached 23.436 million in the three months to March, up by 263,000 from the same quarter in 2022.

The SCI said the share of people classed as economically active - either in work or looking for it - rose to 40.5% from 40.4% reported in the quarter to March last year.

Youth joblessness remained elevated at 24.2% in the March quarter, up 1.18% year on year, while unemployment rate among the Iranian population of 18-35 year olds rose 0.8% to 17.4% over the same period, showed the figures.

The SCI said the Iranian services sector had accounted for 53.7% of all jobs in the country over the quarter to late March, adding that employment rate at manufacturing and agriculture sectors had reached 33.2% and 13%, respectively.

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Russia Reportedly Swaps Fuel to Iran

LONDON (Dispatches) - A report citing industry sources have confirmed statements by Iranian and Russian authorities suggesting the two countries have been involved in an agreement to swap oil products supplies.

The report by the Reuters news agency published said that Russia had started to supply significant volumes of fuel to Iran by rail under a swap arrangement that is aimed at undermining Western sanctions on the two countries.

The report quoted two sources familiar with the export data as saying that Russia had supplied up to 30,000 metric tons of gasoline and diesel to Iran in February and March.

The sources said the shipments were supplied by rail from Russia via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Iran, adding that some gasoline cargoes were then re-exported by truck from Iran to neighboring countries, including Iraq.

The report confirms statements by Russian and Iranian authorities in recent months suggesting the two countries have expanded their energy cooperation to offset the impacts of Western sanctions on their economies.

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Israel Crimes Against Palestinians Violate All Norms of Int'l Law

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran says Israel's crimes against Palestinians violate all norms of international law, calling for urgent global action to stop the regime's criminal acts.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian made the comments in a message to the UN Secretary-General, the Head of the Islamic Cooperation Organization and foreign ministers of Islamic countries.

The top Iranian diplomat slammed "the criminal actions of the Zionist regime against the Palestinian nation, including assassinations, killings, arresting people and destroying their property," and added that Tehran considered them "as contrary to the principles and standards of international law and human rights, and emphasized that Iran condemns these violent and barbaric actions of the Israeli regime against the Palestinian nation and depriving them of their inherent rights, including the right to life, the right to self-determination, the right to livelihood, and the right to work."

He noted that these "are clear examples of gross violations of human rights and racist policies."

Amirabdollahian denounced the silence and inaction of the international community regarding Israeli violation of Palestinians' rights.

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West Seeks to Prolong War in Ukraine

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani has categorically dismissed the recent allegations by the American publication that Iran is negotiating with Russia and China to purchase some materials with military use.

In an exclusive interview with IRNA, Kanaani said the purpose of such news is to prolong the war in Ukraine.

He added that the purpose of releasing such clumsy news is to keep the minds away from sending Western weapons to Ukraine in order to pursue its strategic goals by prolonging the war in the country.

President Urges Muslim States to Form United Front Against Israel

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi called on the Islamic countries to form a united front in order to stop the Zionist regime's criminal acts against Palestinians.

Raisi made the remarks in a phone call with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday on the eve of International Quds Day.

International Quds Day was designated by Imam Khomeini, the late founder of the Islamic Republic. It is marked annually across the world on the last Friday of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. This year, the event falls on April 14.

Raisi expressed deep concern over the latest developments in the occupied territories, especially the Zionist regime's desecration of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

Referring to the friendly and long-standing relations between the two countries, the Iranian president expressed hope that the mutual ties will expand further, especially in the economic and energy fields.

Raisi said that the policy of strengthening relations with neighbors and developing relations with Islamic countries is one of the basic objectives of the Iranian government.



Sharif, for his part, strongly condemned Israel's crimes, saying his country will remain a permanent supporter of the Palestinian people.

He also expressed hope that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation would take steps to establish a united front to prevent the continuation of the Israeli regime's crimes.

Sharif added that Pakistan appreciates the efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran for forging regional peace and stability.

In addition, the Pakistani PM congratulated Iran on the revival of Tehran-Riyadh diplomatic relations.

Sharif also expressed his country's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations with Iran in all areas of mutual interest, especially trade energy cooperation security and regional stability.

IRISL to Participate in TransRussia 2023 Exhibition



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line Group (IRISL) is to participate in the International TransRussia Exhibition which will be held in Moscow on April 17-19 with the participation of countries active in transportation and logistics.

Over 400 companies from 22 countries will attend the exhibition, which creates a unique and golden opportunity for Iran to boost its interactions with other countries within the framework of the North-South Corridor. Companies from China, Finland, Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Turkey, the UAE, UK, the U.S., Belarus, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Serbia plus the host country Russia are to participate in the event.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines along with some other Iranian companies active in the field of transport and logistics will have a strong presence in the exhibition.

The TransRussia Exhibition comprises 12 various sectors including logistic services, forwarding, road, rail, air, sea transport, ports, terminals, e-commerce.

The 27th edition of the International Exhibition of Transport and Logistics Services, Equipment and Warehousing Technologies will be held in Moscow on April 17-19, 2023.

TransRussia is Russia's largest exhibition for transport and logistics services, warehouse equipment and technologies and chief meeting point for the transport & logistics industry, as well as a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions, and a place to discuss the largest industry issues. Traditionally, the exhibition supported by the Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation, the State Duma Committee on Transport and Construction, the Federal Service for Supervision of Transport and other state bodies.

Tehran, Riyadh Confer on Reopening Diplomatic Missions

TEHRAN (IP) - The head of the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran met and discussed with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia for the reopening of Iran's diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia.

Hassan Zarnegar Abarghoi, the head of the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the reopening of Iran's political offices in Saudi Arabia, on Wednesday, April 12, 2023, upon arriving in Riyadh, met with Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Abdul Majid bin Rashid Al-Samari, and discussed ways to facilitate the reopening of the Islamic Republic of Iran's diplomatic missions.

In this meeting, the deputy foreign minister of Saudi Arabia welcomed the presence of the Iranian delegation in Riyadh and Jeddah and announced the full readiness of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide necessary assistance.

In this meeting, he appreciated the facilitation and acceleration of affairs and Iran's warm welcome to the Saudi delegation.

The Saudi Arabia's reopening delegation will be in Tehran from Saturday (today) and will leave for Mashhad.

Anti-Iran Sanctions Threatening Turkey Too

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The newly-appointed ambassador of Turkey to Tehran, Professor Hicabi Kirlangic, met with Iranian officials, saying that the measures are also "threatening" his country as they prevent higher trade exchanges between the two sides.



As the two neighboring countries, Iran and Turkey should have a greater volume of trade transactions, but the current conditions are preventing that, the ambassador said in an interview with the Persian service of Turkey's Anadolu news agency.

The sanctions imposed on Iran have increased pressure and do not allow trade affairs to move forward easily, Kirlangic said, according to the interview released on Tuesday.

He added the sanctions against Iran, which are not fair, should be removed so that Tehran and Ankara can have better economic ties.

The anti-Iran sanctions have been imposed by the Western states, particularly the US, mainly over the country's nuclear energy program, targeting Iran's economy.

Leader's Representative Visits Achievements of Persian Gulf Star Refinery

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Representative of Supreme Leader to Hormozgan Province and Friday Leader of the province Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Ebadi visited the Persian Gulf Star Refinery and got acquainted with the biggest achievements of the refinery and hailed it.

During the visit, Hojjatoleslam Ebadi said that the Supreme Leader has a special view regarding this refinery and has said Persian Gulf Star Refinery has foiled the plots of enemies in imposing gasoline sanctions on Iran. He also said that this refinery launched by the young Iranian experts and prevented crude oil sales. He reiterated that enemies are very sensitive about self-sufficiency in the country and this refinery which was founded based on the domestic capacities is at the target of the enemies. He also hailed the knowledge superiority of the group which

thwarted enemies' plots and called it an appreciable achievement. He also predicted a bright outlook ahead of Persian Gulf Star Oil Company and its refinery and said several parts of this group needs to progress and urged all to work for preventing crude sale of oil.

He then said that Persian Gulf Star Refinery is the flagship of the national industry. Meanwhile in the meeting the CEO of Persian Gulf Star Oil Company Mr. Alireza Jafarpour briefed Hojjatoleslam Ebadi of the latest achievements of the group which were hailed by Ebadi.



Tehran, Tashkent Discuss Bilateral Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian and Uzbek foreign ministers in a meeting in Samarkand discussed bilateral relations and regional developments on Thursday evening.

The meeting was held on the sidelines of Afghanistan Neighboring Countries' Foreign Ministers meeting.

During the meeting, the Iranian and Uzbek foreign ministers discussed mutual cooperation in different areas.

The sides also touched on the most important regional and international developments.

Amirabdollahian appreciated Uzbekistan's professionally excellent hosting of the 4th Meeting of Afghanistan Neighboring Countries' Foreign Ministers and their hospitality for the Iranian diplomatic delegation in that meeting and said that the two countries' comprehensive relations, especially in the economic, transportations and logistical fields are of great importance.

The top Iranian diplomat referred to the historically-old bilateral relations and said that the existing capacities for their improvement are quite a lot, especially keeping in mind the strong will of the highest-ranking officials of the two countries.

He said that the need for coordinating at the two countries' foreign ministerial level for exchange of high-ranking delegations is necessary.

The Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Bakhtiar Saidov, too, in the meeting appreciated his Iranian counterpart's acceptance of his invitation to attend the meeting along with the Iranian diplomatic delegation in Uzbekistan's historical Samarkand city.

Focusing on the latest status of bilateral political, economic and trade cooperation, as well as transportations, and delegation exchange at high-ranking level, the two countries' foreign ministers spoke in detail in this phone talk.

Internet Available to Over 91% of Iran's Villages

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's telecoms minister Issa Zarepour says more than 91% of Iranian villages with a population of over 20 households have access to the internet via the country's domestic network.

Zarepour said in a post on his account in the local social media platform Bale on Thursday that internet had been made available to some 3,425 villages across Iran since the current administration took office in August 2020.

"Considering this number of new villages, the statistics on linking villages of above 20 households to the National Information Network (NIN) has increased from 80% in the start of the administration to 91%," said the minister.

Iran is working fast to expand the NIN as part of efforts to make internet safer, faster and more reliable. The government has encouraged local services and platforms to move their data and servers to the NIN.

Zarepour said many of the villages that were connected to high-speed internet in Iran over the past two years were located in hard-to-reach areas, making it more difficult and more expensive for the government to supply the infrastructure needed for the network.

Azerbaijani Official Calls Iran Important Neighbor for Baku Diplomacy, Dialogue Only Way out of Regional, Global Challenges

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Elchin Amirbayov, an advisor to the vice president of the Republic of Azerbaijan (file photo)

Azerbaijan's government has underlined the significance of diplomacy with the Islamic Republic of Iran and described Tehran as an "important neighbor" for Baku amid efforts by the two sides to iron out differences. Elchin Amirbayov, an advisor to the vice president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in remarks on Tuesday, underlined the need for bolstering ties with Tehran following talks between the two sides at various levels in past week.

"It is important for us that Iran, which is an important neighbor in terms of magnitude and history, remain a good neighbor," he remarked.

Amirbayov pointed to Azeri speakers in Iran and said there are about 20 to 30 million people of Azeri descent in Iran, adding that despite differences in the viewpoints of Tehran and Baku, good relations between the two countries are of great importance.

"The most important issue is to maintain peace with Iran and to establish stability in the region," the Azerbaijani official stressed.

TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister says his country views diplomacy and dialogue as the only viable solution to current regional and global challenges.

Hossein Amirabdollahian made the remarks in a phone conversation with his Japanese counterpart Hayashi Yoshimasa on Wednesday, in which the two top diplomats discussed bilateral, regional and global issues.

According to a statement issued by Iran's foreign ministry, Amirabdollahian expressed Tehran's commitment to further deepen ties with Japan, which has a long-established history.

The Japanese foreign minister, for his part, said friendly relations between Tehran and Tokyo were of high importance, the statement noted.

The two top diplomats also discussed ongoing efforts aimed at the revival of the nuclear deal, known officially as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The talks to revive the deal, underway since April 2021 in Vienna, remain stalled since last August due to the policy of procrastination and foot-dragging adopted by the Joe Biden administration in Washington.

Yoshimasa also said he is pleased with the "positive trend" of cooperation between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), referring to recent meetings between the IAEA officials and Iranian authorities to streamline cooperation.

The ministers also exchanged views on the conflict in Ukraine, and the top Iranian diplomat reiterated Tehran's opposition to the year-long war.

CEO of Hormozgan Steel Company:

Continuation of Record-Breaking, Producing New Products in Year of “Inflation Control and Production Growth”



You mentioned the special attention of HOSCO to knowledge. What measures have been taken in this field?

Innovation is one of the factors that can give competitive power to economic enterprises. One of the important actions of Hormozgan Steel Company is that it has established a continuous relationship with academic and knowledge-based centers and this relationship has been formed in a practical way. Due to establishing this good relationship between HOSCO and knowledge-based centers, such as science and technology parks and universities of Hormozgan Province, the company managed to solve a number of its challenges and bottlenecks regarding production and processes. Even considering the importance of innovation and knowledge-based issues, HOSCO is present as a major shareholder with a 30% participation share and a permanent representative in the research and technology fund of Hormozgan Province. This fund was formed as a financial institution in the innovation ecosystem with the aim of helping commercialize technological and innovative products and services in line with the development of the knowledge-based economy in the form of providing facilities, venture investments and issuing guarantees. Fortunately, we will not have any restrictions on financing and accepting projects, and we will always support knowledge-based projects and companies focused on solving the problems of the steel industry.

The steel industry passed a fluctuating year in 1401. How did HOSCO perform in terms of sales or exports?

The problems of global markets, especially price reduction and sanctions, did not make Hormozgan Steel withdraw from the market, and the existence of these problems actually determined the company's determination to sell more products in the domestic market and export markets; So that despite all the restrictions, in 1401 we managed to sell one million and 551 thousand tons of slab as a final product in the domestic and export markets, of which 835 thousand tons were sold in the domestic market and another 715 thousand tons were exported to the world markets. It is noteworthy that the overall sales of the company showed a growth of 9% compared to the same period last year. In addition, compared to last year, the amount of export was 19% and the domestic sale was about 13 thousand tons more. In this way, HOSCO has been able to go against the flow of the market and succeed in selling its products. Last year, Hormozgan Steel Co. succeeded in earning 10,218 billion tomans in export markets and 12,376 billion tomans in domestic markets and earned a total of 22,709 billion tomans, which shows a 2.5 percent growth compared to the preceding year 1400. This success was achieved while sometimes we saw a 30-40% drop in domestic and global prices, which is considered a significant success in the current market conditions.

What important successes has Hormozgan Steel Company achieved in recent years? In what fields were these successes and how were they achieved?

What distinguishes an organization from other competitors, in addition to producing high-quality products and selling them in domestic and international markets, is achieving significant success in all fields. tons, that is, more than 20% of the nominal capacity in the field of metallurgy, setting a monthly record in the field of sponge iron production, setting several records for daily metallurgy production, reducing energy consumption, reducing emergency stops, reducing graphite electrode consumption, reducing refractory consumption, setting records 99.95% of smelting production in accordance with the analytical order, reducing the time of discharge to the discharge of the furnace, etc. have been the most important successes of Hormozgan Steel in the field of operation. However, one of the important successes of Hormozgan Steel in the field of production has been recording the casting speed record of 1.6 meters per minute, which is the highest record of slab casting in the country. In other fields, HOSCO also managed to win honors such as the title of the best supplier of the Commodity Exchange, receiving a three-star commendation award for the excellence of education and human resources development in the 9th Human Capital Education and Development Conference, the championship of the Hormozgan Steel Co. beach football team in the world labor competition, winning the title The top project in the National Productivity Festival, the championship of the Hormozgan Steel basketball team in the second division league and promotion to the first division, winning the title of the top safety ranking in the southeast of the country, the championship of the six-member football team participating in the international competition of labor companies, receiving the certificate of top management from the national summit Customer-oriented management, receiving recognition of a leading figure from the National Conference for Promoting Professional Ethics and Promoting Responsibility, receiving a management statue and Oscar at the nationwide meeting of one hundred meritorious managers of the year, receiving a top brand statue at the National Consumers' Chosen Badge Summit, receiving a special statue from the 4th Hatem Festival, The statue of the 19th edition of the Public Relations Symposium, the statue of the "National Brand, National Trust" national summit, the bronze statue of the second conference and the sixth national assessment of digital transformation, etc.

What do you know about the importance of implementing company developmental plans? What is the current status of these plans?

Hormozgan Province is considered one of the regions with high potential for the development of the steel industry in the country, and in the upstream documents, especially the comprehensive steel plan and the vision document of 1404, this importance has been emphasized with the production of 10 million tons of steel in Hormozgan Province. Therefore, we at Hormozgan Steel have considered development as one of our basic goals and strategies. Hormozgan Steel produces the best steel in the country, but it should be noted that in today's world of steel industry, it is no longer possible to be satisfied with only one specific product. Especially since both in our country and in neighboring countries, the steel industry is developing at a high speed; therefore, we cannot stand still and watch the progress of other economic enterprises, and it is necessary to move along with the countries' steel industry. Therefore, we have put the implementation of several development plans on the agenda. Development is like injecting fresh blood into the arteries of an organization or a manufacturing company. In fact, if sustainable development is not included in a group's main plans, that organization will gradually decline and stagnation will rule over it. As a result, development plans are an integral part of an organization's plans. Development creates dynamism and vitality in the organization, and companies that do not pay attention to development,

due to the immobility and routine of the organization, after a while, will have a weaker presence in the highly competitive market of the world, and finally, bankruptcy and permanent closure is a crisis that intensifies. They will be. In HOSCO, over a hundred quantitative and qualitative and infrastructure plans have been defined in the last few years, and we were able to bring many of them to the operational stage. This shows that Hormozgan Steel is a dynamic company in terms of project implementation. In 1400, we broke grounds for several large development projects worth about 10 thousand billion tomans. Currently, Hormozgan Steel is studying big plans such as increasing the capacity of the steelmaking unit from the current 1.5 million tons to 3.2 million tons and building a hot product production unit. In addition, the plan for the third module of ironmaking with a capacity of 900 thousand tons, the construction of industrial gases unit No. 3 with a capacity of 10 thousand normal cubic meters and the plan to increase the capacity of sponge iron storage silos with a capacity of 28 thousand tons are on the agenda. In addition, with the participation of other companies, we have started the construction of an iron mega module in Setareh Simin Hormuz, with a capacity of 1.72 million tons, and increased the lime production capacity in the Stone and Steel Company. Meanwhile, we have considered projects such as building a new natural gas station and increasing the production capacity of electric arc furnaces through the installation of Sidewall Lance. Even produce alloy grades by installing new furnaces. By producing these special products, we will be able to gain new markets in addition to creating added value. In addition, in the hot product production plan, we will also complete one stage of our production cycle and products with much higher added value will be produced in Hormozgan Steel. Meanwhile, the advantage of Hormozgan Steel is that it is close to the consumption markets. For example, many ports such as Shahid Rajaei and Bahonar are located in Hormozgan Province; therefore, we can have a good market for steel sheet in marine industries, such as container and shipbuilding, which are also active in this province. To these things, we can add the development of the gas industry, considering the lack of gas in the country and the need to develop this industry, we definitely need to produce steel sheets and pipes in the future for the development of the gas industry. Therefore, in order to gain a share of this market, we must speed up the development. Development is the pulse of the organization in the competitive market.

What challenges are there regarding the implementation of development plans?

Hormozgan Steel was able to set significant records in terms of production, and even despite severe energy restrictions, it achieved the highest production rate recorded in its history; but unfortunately, the situation of energy supply in winter for the steel industry has not been favorable and this has overshadowed the continuation of Hormozgan steel breaking records. The steel industry is a bit ambiguous; therefore, if these projects are implemented, the main challenge will be their energy supply. Considering the lack of energy, the steel industry rolled up its sleeves and last year was responsible for the construction of about 11,000 megawatts of new capacity for the country's electricity, which Hormozgan Steel also contributed to. The coordination of Mobarakeh Steel Holding as the parent company is in charge of building a part of this capacity. However, there are challenges in the way of implementing this project, such as the feed rate of the power plant and the electricity delivery ratio from the grid. Investing in energy is not the duty of the steel industry. In this regard, the government can use the power of the private sector as an investor in the field of electricity and gas, and in this way, the necessary incentives for the presence of the private sector should be considered. Although the steel industry has good profitability, its main task is production in the steel chain and value creation in this field; therefore, investment in the field of energy imposes only side costs on the steel industry from the definite profit. One of the distinctive features of Hormozgan Steel has been the social responsibility of this company. What measures has the company taken in this field in 1401?

Steel industries must serve their society and employees, and Hormozgan Steel has proven this many times. One of the most important measures we did at the beginning of our responsibility was participation in the Ikram Orphans and Mohsenin project with the aim of supporting 10,000 orphans and non-orphans covered by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee of Hormozgan Province. In addition, there have been measures such as financial and non-financial support and assistance to charity centers such as the Bint al-Nabi (PBUH) Orphan Care Center and the Habib Ibn Mazahir Bandar Abbas Center for the Mentally Handicapped. Sending more than 1,500 tons of liquid oxygen to hospitals in the province, distribution of 10 million masks in hospitals, mourning delegations in the decade of Muharram, and helping the Ministry of Health to plan a national awareness campaign to fight against Corona, among other actions of Hormozgan Steel in the field of action including social responsibilities. Among these cases, we can mention helping to build Mahdiya in Bandar Abbas city and also rebuilding the mosque of Hazrat Abulfazl (AS). Another important action in the field of social responsibility was Hormozgan Steel's contribution to the important project of water supply to 148 villages through the provision of pipes for this project, as well as the construction of a 12-class school in the town of the Prophet (PBUH) and the construction of a health center, among other important actions of Steel Hormozgan has been in this field. In the last two years, Hormozgan Steel has been with the honorable people of Hormozgan during natural disasters by donating 1,200 tent sheets and shelters during earthquakes and floods. The role of this company has been in the development of sports activities. Considering the role of sports in creating youth and the lack of sports facilities in Hormozgan Province, Hormozgan Steel has made it one of its missions to support sports in the province. Currently, this company has supported 35 different teams and about 1000 athletes under its support umbrella.

Final words?

In recent years, Hormozgan Steel has shown that it is a dynamic and lively company, and none of the domestic and international obstacles and challenges can prevent the progress of this company. The industrial development of Hormozgan Province is one of the macroeconomic goals and according to the plan to achieve the production of 10 million tons of steel in this province, we intend to become one of the top brands by implementing development plans in addition to increasing production, producing special products and completing the value-added chain. To become the steel industry of the country and the world.

In the past Iranian calendar year 1401, when the national steel industry faced with restrictions on energy supply, few people thought that steel industries could increase their production or even reach pre-restrictions level but the jihadi employees of Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) had a brilliant performance by surpassing the nominal capacity of the company and by setting record of producing 1,538,293 tons of steel. In this context, Ataollah Maroufkhani, CEO of Hormozgan Steel Company, in an interview explained the achievements of the company in 1401 and Hormozgan Steel Company's plan for the new year. The full text as follows:

In your opinion, what was the condition of the steel industry in 1401? What developments did we see in this industry this year?

Despite the vision drawn for the country's steel industry in the Vision 1404, we see that this industry, in addition to the challenges it has faced in the field of infrastructure such as transportation and supply of raw materials, has faced the challenge of lack of electricity in the last few years. Summer season and gas in winter season, which has always been considered an advantage for this industry in the country, have been encountered and unfortunately these restrictions have increased year by year. In 1401, due to the excessive heat of the air, severe electricity restrictions started from the end of spring and continued until the beginning of September. In winter, the severe cold caused a shortage of gas in the country's steel industries and led to a large part of the production capacities remaining empty. Although the world price of steel increased at the beginning of last year due to the war between Russia and Ukraine, and this could provide a good opportunity for exporters in this field, we saw that export duties were imposed on steel exporters and faced challenges for producers. However, after the export duties were canceled, the global markets showed their other side and we faced a sharp decrease in global steel prices, which also affected the steel industry of our country. However, none of these restrictions prevented Hormozgan Steel from performing amazingly, and we were able to witness the growth and brilliance of the company both in production and in sales and exports, and among the examples of this growth, we can mention the setting of monthly and annual production records. The employees of the company proved that obstacles are not only a threat but also an opportunity to achieve more success in the way of raising the name of the country. Obstacles that, like a launch pad, made colleagues more sympathetic and coherent to achieve goals. Fortunately, Hormozgan Steel was able to improve its annual production record with multiple monthly and daily record breaking after two years. Explain about this. Despite all the limitations and challenges, in 1401 we were able to record 5 monthly production records with the double efforts of all colleagues in different departments, of which 4 records were achieved consecutively from September to December. In the months when we did not face electricity or gas restrictions, we were able to produce more than our nominal monthly capacity of 125,000 tons, i.e. more than 150,000 tons of slab, which is the highest production rate among steel manufacturers in the country. Another record of HOSCO is the casting speed of 1.6 meters per minute, which is considered the best casting record of this product in the country. Finally, we managed to exceed the nominal capacity and set a new chapter in the life of the company by breaking the record in the annual production of one million and 538,293 tons, and in this way, HOSCO is named the second producer of slab in the country after Mobarakeh Steel Company.

How did HOSCO achieve these records?

What gives strength to a production unit is close coordination and cooperation among all organizational units. When each and every employee is familiar with the organization's goals and plans and is familiar with their duties and performs them and serves as a team, there will be no doubt in the success of the economic enterprise. In Hormozgan Steel Company, coordination has been established in such a way that the organizational units are closely related to each other. To these cases, the support of the parent company, Mobarakeh Steel Group, and the CEO of this company should be added to HOSCO and its actions, especially in the field of raw material supply, sales, and development plans. According to the order of the Supreme Leader and choosing the slogan of the year "Production; Knowledge-based job creation" by him, Hormozgan Steel Company decided to realize this slogan and in this way, it put the use of local knowledge in all aspects of its work at the top of its agenda. The increase in production and continuous record breaking in the company shows that we have adopted a correct knowledge plan and strategy. One of the most important measures we took in this regard was paying attention to the plans that increase production and provide more productivity. For example, planning and preparing equipment in production lines, providing high-quality and timely raw materials, increasing the depth of the furnace, which has caused a sharp reduction in the hot refractory repairs of the furnace, i.e. floor construction and banking, and improving production parameters such as reducing power on time, reducing metal charging, increasing Efficiency, reduction of electrode consumption rate and reduction of refractory consumption rate have been among the factors influencing the acquisition of recent records. To them, we should add the proposal of "Hormozgan Steel electric arc furnace slag processing" which is considered one of the unique innovations of HOSCO employees and experts, especially it was very important in improving production and keeping records.

Canada, South Korea Eye Intelligence-Sharing Pact

OTTAWA (Dispatches) - Canada and South Korea plan to launch talks on an information security agreement to facilitate intelligence-sharing and promote security ties, a Canadian government source said.

Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly will make the announcement during an official trip to Seoul this week, said the source, who requested anonymity on the grounds they were not authorized to speak publicly about the plan.

The proposed agreement would allow for intelligence-sharing and greater levels of defense cooperation and enable Canadian firms to bet on some procurement contracts.



Norway Expels 15 Russian Intelligence Officers

OSLO (Dispatches) - Norway is expelling 15 Russian embassy officials that the foreign ministry said were intelligence officers operating under the cover of diplomatic positions, the latest such expulsion by a Western nation since Moscow invaded Ukraine.

The Russian embassy in Oslo told Reuters Norway's decision was "another extremely unfriendly step, which will see a response". Some 40 Russian diplomats are currently accredited in Oslo, so the expulsions amount to more than a third of their number. It is the latest instance of a Western country expelling Russian diplomats since Moscow launched its full-scale war against Ukraine last year. So far this year, Estonia, the Netherlands and Austria have also expelled Russian diplomats.



Russia Claims Bakhmut Surrounded, Kyiv Says Holding On



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia said it had cut off Ukrainian forces inside Bakhmut, while Kyiv insisted supply lines were still open into the town, scene of the most brutal battle of the war.

AFP was unable to verify the status on the ground in the eastern town, which has turned into the longest and bloodiest fight since Russia invaded Ukraine last year.

Russian troops have been battling since last summer to capture the town, which had a pre-war population of 70,000, and whose fall would now mostly present a symbolic victory for Russia.

The Russian army said its airborne troops were "blocking the transfer of Ukrainian army reserves to the city and the possibility of retreat for enemy units."

It also said that Wagner mercenary units were advancing in Bakhmut.

But the Ukrainian army told AFP it had communication with its troops inside Bakhmut and was able to send them munitions. "This does not correspond to reality," Sergiy Cherevaty, spokesman for Ukraine's eastern forces said, referring to Russia's claims.

"We are able to... deliver food products, ammunition, medicines, all that is necessary, and also to recover our wounded." The Ukrainian general staff nevertheless acknowledged a "difficult" situation in Bakhmut.

But even as Russian forces say they are getting closer to the town, some residents of nearby areas have no plans to leave. "I've got nowhere to go. I can't afford to leave," 71-year-old Vira Petrova told AFP in the village of Kalynivka, several kilometres west of Bakhmut.

"If my home is destroyed. I'll live in my basement," she added, not flinching after each boom.

Petrova gestured to artillery damage to her home, explaining why she was no longer afraid of the war creeping nearer.

"We've already been shelled. Half the kitchen roof was destroyed. Our neighbour's roof was destroyed. We're used to it," she said.

Her street, lined with cherry blossom trees and abandoned one-storey homes, has only around two dozen residents remaining -- a fraction of those who once called it home.

The Kremlin is looking to present a triumph at home as the offensive drags on for a second year.

Adding confusion to the situation on the ground, Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of Russian paramilitary outfit Wagner, also cast doubt on Moscow's claims, saying it was "too early" to talk about Russian forces encircling Bakhmut.

"The Ukrainian Armed Forces continue to deploy reserves and transfer them," Prigozhin's press office said on social media.

"The hardest, bloodiest battles are going on, so it's too early to talk about the complete encirclement of Bakhmut".

Tensions between the Kremlin-linked businessman and Russia's army have emerged during the battle for Bakhmut.

Both Russia and Ukraine have conceded big losses in Bakhmut, with neither giving numbers.

Recent days have suggested Russian forces are making some gains, after months of Kyiv and Moscow wearing each other down.

Kyiv has said the battle for the town is key to holding back Russian forces along the entire eastern front. Experts say that the salt mining town's political importance has surpassed any military significance as the battle drags on.

Several Russian war correspondents have made visits to Bakhmut this week, publishing images of a city of ruins.

North Korea Launches New Type of Ballistic Missile

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea fired a new model of long-range ballistic missile, South Korea said, triggering a scare in northern Japan where residents were told to take cover, though there turned out to be no danger.

A South Korean military official said the missile appeared to have been a new weapon displayed at recent North Korean military parades, and possibly used solid fuel.

North Korea has been working to build more solid-fuel missiles, which are easier to store and transport, and can be launched with almost no warning or preparation time.

The missile flew about 1,000 km (620 miles), South Korea's military said, calling it a "grave provocation". The official said the missile's maximum altitude was lower than 6,000 km, the apogee of some of last year's record-breaking tests.

"So far we assess that they fired a new type of ballistic missile with an intermediate or intercontinental range," the official said. "We're still analysing details like the trajectory, altitude and range, with the possibility that it carried a solid-fuel propellant."

The South Korean military said it was on high alert and coordinating closely with its main ally, the United States, which "strongly condemned" what the White House said in a statement was a long-range ballistic missile test.

Sudan's Army Says Paramilitary Mobilization Risks Confrontation

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Sudan's army on Thursday warned of a risk of confrontation after a powerful paramilitary group began mobilizing, in a sign of growing strains between the rival forces and a potential complication in moves to restore civilian rule.

The mobilization by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo represented a "clear violation of law," the army said in a rare comment on a dispute that has hampered a planned transition to democracy.

"These movements and deployments happened without the agreement of the leadership of the armed forces or even coordination with it," the army spokesman said.

"Their continuation will lead to more tension and divisions that could lead to insecurity in the country."

The RSF is a powerful paramilitary force which emerged from militias involved in the conflict in Darfur which broke out 20 years ago, and has been accused of widespread human rights abuses.

It joined with the military to overthrow long-ruling strongman Omar Hassan al-Bashir in a coup in 2019. The two forces then carried out another coup in October 2021.

Three former rebel leaders who now have government roles said they had reached out to army general Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, in an attempt to mediate.

"We found both sides to be responsive, and we call upon them to display a patriotic spirit, and make every concession that will prevent bloodshed and help achieve comprehensive national agreement," said Malik Agar, Jibril Ibrahim, and Minni Minawi.

Dagalo is now deputy leader of Sudan's ruling military council. But he has recently pulled away from the military and found common ground with a civilian political alliance.

French Unions Rally Supporters to the Streets

PARIS (Dispatches) - Union activists barged into the Paris headquarters of luxury goods company LVMH, saying the French government should shelve plans to make people work longer for their pension and tax the rich more instead.

In a 12th day of nationwide protests since mid-January, striking workers also disrupted garbage collection in Paris and blocked river traffic on part of the Rhine river in eastern France.

"You're looking for money to finance pensions? Take it from the pockets of billionaires," said Sud Rail union leader Fabien Villedieu, as the LVMH headquarters filled with red smoke from flares. The protesters then left peacefully.

Trade unions urged a show of force on the streets a day before the Constitutional Council's ruling on the legality of the bill that will raise the state pension age by two years to 64.

If the Council gives its approval, possibly with some caveats, the government will be entitled to promulgate the law, and will hope this will eventually put an end to protests, which have at times turned violent, and coalesced widespread anger against Macron.

But protesters said they would keep up the fight if the Council gave a green light.

"We don't want to work until 64," 50-year-old teacher Kathy Brochard said at the Paris rally.

Protesters want the bill withdrawn - or subjected to a referendum. "We still hope that, at some point, someone in high places will decide to abandon this law, sit around a table and look at pension funding differently," 52-year-old postal service worker Francis Bourget said at the Paris rally.

The industrial action has lost some steam and the protests have rallied thinner crowds in recent weeks compared with turnouts of more than a million seen earlier in the movement.

But unions remained defiant. "This is certainly not the last day of the strike," Sophie Binet, the new leader of the hard-left CGT union, said at blockade of an incinerator outside Paris.

Macron and his government argue the new law is needed to ensure that France's generous pension system does not go bust.

Unions say this can be done by other means.

Macron has said he will organise a meeting with unions after the Council's decision to work on other proposals -- an initiative union leaders say will be short-lived if he is not ready to discuss withdrawing the pension legislation.

"After three months of mobilisation, I would lie if I told you that there is no fatigue. We are tired, but a mobilisation is like a marathon," Sud Rail's Villedieu said. "We won't give up."



Colombian Armed Groups, Gangs Have 17,600 Members

BOGOTA (Dispatches) - More than 17,600 people are members of the four major armed groups and 23 gangs with which the Colombian government hopes to reach peace or surrender deals, two security agency reports seen by Reuters show.

The newly updated figures, which have not been reported before, are an effort to understand the current composition of the groups, security sources said.

The new figures are higher than that of previous official estimates, but are also a fundamental check on the groups' own membership claims, which are often inflated, said the sources.

They said the reports, which were compiled by the armed forces, will be shared with President Gustavo Petro and his defense minister at a coming security meeting.

Petro has promised to end Colombia's six-decade conflict, which has killed at least 450,000, through peace deals or surrender agreements, which would see criminal groups receive reduced jail sentences in exchange for information and disarmament.

Senator and security expert Ariel Avila, who has seen preliminary figures from the reports, told Reuters that it was important to ensure that those who received the benefits of such deals were truly members of armed groups.

"Intelligence reports serve for the art of war, but on issues of peace they serve to avoid gatecrashers," he said.

According to the reports, many of those counted as armed group or gang members do not usually carry weapons themselves, but are part of support networks that provide combatants with supplies, ferry communications, share intelligence, or even plant bombs.

The leftist National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels - already in peace negotiations with the government - are the largest of the armed groups.

Of the ELN's 5,850 members, 2,900 are combatants, while 2,950 are part of its support network, showed one report, marked as "secret" and compiled using information gathered through March 31.

A third round of talks between the ELN and the government is set to begin shortly in Cuba, with conversations expected to focus on a potential bilateral ceasefire.

The next largest group, according to the reports, is the Clan del Golfo - founded by former right-wing paramilitaries and also known as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces - with 4,060 members, 1,620 of whom are combatants.



Alibaba To Roll Out Generative AI Across Apps

SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - Alibaba Group Holding Ltd today showed off its generative AI model — its version of the tech that powers chatbot sensation ChatGPT — and said it would be integrated into all of the company's apps in the near future.

The unveiling, which came on the heels of the launch of a slew of new AI products by SenseTime this week, was swiftly followed by the government's publication of draft rules outlining how generative AI services should be managed.

In a filmed demonstration, the AI large language model, named Tongyi Qianwen which means "truth from a thousand questions", drafted invitation letters, planned trip itineraries and advised shoppers on types of makeup to purchase.

Tongyi Qianwen will initially be integrated into DingTalk, Alibaba's workplace messaging app and can be used to summarise meeting notes, write emails and draft business proposals. It will also be added to Tmall Genie, Alibaba's voice assistant.

The technology "will bring about big changes to the way we produce, the way we work and the way we live our lives," CEO Daniel Zhang told the livestreamed event.

AI models like Tongyi Qianwen are "the big picture for making AI more popular in the future," he added. The Chinese internet giant's cloud unit plans to open up Tongyi Qianwen to clients so they can build their own customised large language models and began registrations on Friday.

The draft rules published by the Cyberspace Administration of China said the country supported the technology's innovation and popularisation but content generated had to adhere to "core socialist values" as well as to laws on data security and personal information protection.

Those who fall foul of the rules could face fines or criminal investigation, it added. The proposed rules, open for public comment until May 10, come as governments around the world are looking at how best to regulate generative AI technology, which has sparked much concern about its ethical implications as well as its impact on national security, jobs and education.

Italy last month temporarily banned ChatGPT — the chatbot sensation developed by Microsoft-backed OpenAI that has sparked the run of companies developing similar products.

Elon Musk and a group of artificial intelligence experts and industry executives have also called for a six-month pause in developing systems more powerful than OpenAI's newly launched GPT-4, in an open letter citing potential risks to society.

Charlie Chai, an analyst from 86Research, said Beijing's new rules would potentially slow down progress "in exchange for a more orderly and socially responsible deployment of the technology".

They would also set up obstacles for foreign companies looking to provide AI services in the country, benefiting domestic companies, he added.

Search engine Baidu's Ernie chatbot — one of several AI models or chatbots revealed or teased by Chinese companies — declined to answer questions on such topics or asked to change the subject when quizzed by Reuters last month. The bot remains open only to trial users at the moment.

Shares in Alibaba rose 1 per cent in Hong Kong trade. Shares in SenseTime, whose new products include an AI chatbot called SenseChat, initially surged but were later flat.



Easy, Tiger: Study Maps Big Cats' Personalities

LONDON (Dispatches) - Ask any pet owner if their beloved companion has a personality and you'll most often get an emphatic "yes". But now tiger researchers can nod along too—a study published Wednesday reveals that the world's largest felines have individual character traits.

The behavior of the 248 Siberian tigers observed through a personality test showed that the endangered cats had unique traits influencing both their success in reproduction and survival, researchers reported in the journal Royal Society Open Science.

"We found that tigers are very individual, and that people who've worked with them and know them well see their individual personalities," co-author Rosalind Arden of the London School of Economics told AFP.

The study adapted a commonly used human personality test to explore tiger traits such as confidence, sincerity, bullying and savagery in two separate populations of tigers held in semi-captivity in China. Questionnaires with a list of 70 personality indicators were filled out by veterinarians and feeders who work with the tigers on a daily basis.

The combined results found that both tiger populations displayed characteristics that fell into two overarching personality categories: majesty and steadiness.

Tigers scoring higher for "majesty" were healthier, preyed more on live animals, and ate and mated more. They were also "regarded by their human raters as having higher group status among tigers," the study said.

But being collaborative and gentler had its evolutionary benefits too: "steady" tigers were shown to be gentler, more sincere and more loving.

Such traits may play a role in the unusual length of time—two to three years—that tiger cubs remain with their mothers.

The study found very few sex-related differences in tigers' personalities, however, and father tigers have also been observed taking part in raising their young.

"It's pleasant to see that you don't have to be dominant, fierce, competitive and aggressive in order to succeed as a tiger," said Arden. Similar studies illuminating the personality and mental abilities of primates have helped humanise them, Arden said.

"There is evidence that it does, in fact, improve animal welfare and conservation," she added. Siberian tigers are endangered due to poaching and habitat loss. Only around 500 remain living in the wild.



Snapchat Is Again Turning to AI for Its Newest Feature

SAN FRANCISCO (Dispatches) - Snapchat is making artificial intelligence tools a key part of its latest strategy. The social network now allows some users to use AI to change the background of their image.

The prospect of integrating artificial intelligence into their product offering is appealing to many companies, including Snapchat. The social network has decided to incorporate a special tool to allow users to change the background of their

profile photo by formulating various prompts.

Social networking expert Ahmed Ghanem unveiled this new option via screenshots posted on his Twitter account. But be aware that only subscribers to Snapchat+, the premium version of the social network, can access it.

The Snapchat+ subscription is available costs US\$3.99 per month and offers access to exclusive features as well as some new features being tested by the company.



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Petronas to Restart Gas Pipeline Operations by Q1 2024

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Malaysia's national oil company Petroliaam Nasional Berhad aims to restart a gas pipeline currently under force majeure by the first quarter of 2024, a senior company executive said. "Our plan is to complete the work by Q1 2024," said Shamsairi Ibrahim, vice president of LNG marketing and trading at the company, known as Petronas. The facility's restart is subject to approval from local authorities, he said.

In October, Petronas declared a force majeure on gas supply to Malaysia LNG Dua due to a pipeline leak caused by soil movement at its Sabah-Sarawak Gas Pipeline.



IMF Says Public Debt Is Growing Faster Than Pre-COVID Projections

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Public debt is higher and growing faster than projected before the COVID-19 pandemic, driven mainly by the United States and China, the world's two largest economies, the International Monetary Fund's top fiscal expert said.

Sixty percent of countries are projected to see their public debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratios decline through 2028 after COVID-related surges, but a significant number of large economies, including Brazil, China and the United States, are seeing rapid growth in their debt-to-GDP ratios.

Vitor Gaspar, director of the IMF's Fiscal Affairs Department, said global public debt soared to almost 100% of GDP in 2020 before posting its steepest drop in 70 years by 2022, although it remained about 8 percentage points above the pre-pandemic level.

Rather than normalizing, the ratio was expected to start rising again this year, hitting 99.6% of GDP in 2028, the last year of the IMF's forecast horizon, he said.

"There are a significant number of large advanced economies, large emerging market economies, where the public debt-to-GDP ratio is projected to grow fast and this list of countries includes Brazil, China, Japan, South Africa, Turkey, United States, and United Kingdom," Gaspar told Reuters. "And the dominant influence comes from the two largest economies."

By contrast, in low-income developing countries, the debt ratio increase during the pandemic was very moderate, and it is now expected to drop to levels forecast before the pandemic in coming years, he said. Tighter budgetary constraints and rising food insecurity had stalled poverty reduction and hampered further progress toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the IMF said in its Fiscal Monitor report.

Going forward, all countries should closely align their fiscal and monetary policies to combat inflation and build buffers that could be used in the event of crisis, Gaspar said, noting that countries without sufficient buffers suffered longer and deeper recessions in the event of a crisis.

The IMF's report warned that risks were high, and reducing debt vulnerabilities should be an "overriding priority," especially in low-income developing countries where 39 countries were already in or near debt distress.

It said recent banking problems in the United States and Switzerland had heightened risks of an expanding financial crisis, which would put even more pressure on public sector balance sheets if governments were called in to help.

To guard against further and worsening problems, regulators should consider strengthening crisis management frameworks and their regimes for dealing with troubled institutions.

"Among the worst possible crises, are crises where you have a financial crisis simultaneously with a sovereign debt crisis, and that is something labeled as the doom loop," Gaspar said. "Doom loops must be avoided."

As long as financial risks were contained, the fight against inflation was the biggest priority, he said, adding that tighter fiscal policy could also curb demand, reducing the need for more aggressive interest rate increases.

U.S. Consumer Prices Rise Moderately in March

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. consumer prices barely rose in March as the cost of gasoline declined, but stubbornly high rents kept underlying inflation pressures simmering, likely ensuring that the Federal Reserve will raise interest rates again next month.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) climbed 0.1% last month after advancing 0.4% in February, the Labor Department said. In the 12 months through March, the CPI increased 5.0%, the smallest year-on-year gain since May 2021. The CPI rose 6.0% on a year-on-year basis in February.

The annual CPI peaked at 9.1% in June, which was the biggest increase since November 1981, and is subsiding as last year's large rises drop out of the calculation. Inflation by all measures remains more than double the Fed's 2% target.

Gasoline prices are likely to rebound in the months ahead after Saudi Arabia and other OPEC+ oil producers early this month announced further oil output cuts.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the CPI gaining 0.2% and advancing 5.2% year-on-year.

The inflation data came on the heels of last Friday's employment report, which showed a solid pace of job growth in March and the unemployment rate falling back to 3.5%.

Persistently high inflation, labor market tightness and signs that financial market stress, wrought by last month's collapse of two regional banks, is easing should allow the Fed to continue prioritizing restoring price stability.

Financial markets are leaning toward the U.S. central bank increasing rates by another 25 basis points at the May 2-3 policy meeting, according to CME Group's FedWatch tool.

The Fed last month raised its benchmark overnight interest rate by a quarter of a percentage point, but indicated it was on the verge of pausing further rate increases in a nod to the financial market turmoil. It has hiked its policy rate by 475 basis points since last March from the near-zero level to the current 4.75%-5.00% range.

Excluding the volatile food and energy components, the CPI increased 0.4% last month after rising 0.5% in February. Sticky rents continued to drive the so-called core CPI.

With independent measures showing rents on a downward trajectory, however, housing inflation is expected to start subsiding in the second half. The rent measures in the CPI tend to lag the independent gauges.



India's March Retail Inflation Eases

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India's annual retail inflation for March eased below the central bank's upper tolerance level for the first time this year, as food prices softened.

Annual retail inflation eased to 5.66% in March from 6.44% in the previous month, government data showed. The Reserve Bank of India targets a range of 2%-6%.

A Reuters poll of 39 economists had forecast an annual inflation rate of 5.80% in March.

The March consumer price index (CPI) inflation came a week after the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) maintained a surprise status quo on interest rates. However, Governor Shaktikanta Das said that "it is a pause, not a pivot".

"The decline in March inflation was on expected lines and was due to a strong base effect, which will be even stronger in April 2023. The good part of the inflation number is the reversal of an increasing trend of nine months of rising cereals and products inflation. It appears that government interventions have helped in arresting the increasing inflation of cereals and products. However, the impact of unseasonal rains and the likely impact of monsoons may give some temporary shocks to inflation.

"Inflation in the near term is likely to be lower than 6% due to the base effect. This will give some solace to monetary authorities. We, therefore, believe that the growth-inflation dynamics at the current juncture do not warrant further rate hikes at present. However, the RBI will continue to monitor inflationary trends and should a situation arise, it may take necessary action."

Turkish Exports to U.S. Up 2.5% in Q1 to Reach \$3B

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's exports to the United States reached \$2.97 billion (TL 57.2 billion) in the first quarter of 2023, according to data from the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM).

This represents a 2.5% increase compared to the same period last year.

Turkey's total exports reached \$61.59 billion in the year's first three months.

The U.S. was the second-largest trading partner for Turkey during this period, accounting for 5.46% of the country's total exports.

The chemical and product exports to the U.S. reached \$278.5 million in the first quarter of 2023, making it the top destination for these exports.

These exports were made from 68 cities across Turkey, with Istanbul accounting for the largest share, followed by western Izmir province, capital Ankara, southeastern Gaziantep, and northwestern Bursa.

In the first quarter, companies in Istanbul achieved \$1.22 billion in export sales to the U.S., while those in Izmir exported goods worth \$281.8 million.

TIM Chairperson Mustafa Gültepe said the U.S. is the world's largest importing country, with \$2.9 trillion in imports in 2022. Therefore, despite the geographical distance, the U.S. market is significant in Turkey's exports.

Gültepe noted that Turkey's exports to the U.S. had increased by 2.5 times over the past decade, while foreign trade volume had increased by 1.6 times. He added that there had been a notable increase in exports to the U.S. since 2020, with the country ranking second in terms of Turkey's most exported countries in 2022 with \$9 billion.

This marks the highest annual value of exports to the U.S. for Turkey.

"This significant increase in exports to the U.S. reflects Turkey's growing competitiveness in the global market and its strong trade relations with the U.S.," said Gültepe.

Gültepe noted that the effects of the anticipated global trade contraction were visible in the U.S. market.

Despite this, he said the U.S. maintained its position as Turkey's second-largest export market in the year's first quarter.

Looking at the sectors that performed well in the first quarter, chemical materials topped the list with \$279 million in exports to the U.S., Gültepe said, noting that the automotive industry followed this with \$259 million, jewelry with \$223 million, and ready-made clothing and clothing products with \$215 million.

China to Drop Demand for Development Bank Debt Restructuring Losses

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - China is expected to drop its demand for multilateral development banks to share losses alongside other creditors in sovereign debt restructurings for poor nations, removing a major roadblock to debt relief, a source familiar with the plans said.

The development is expected at a high-level sovereign debt roundtable on Wednesday on the sidelines of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund Spring meetings in Washington.

Beijing would no longer insist multilateral lenders take "haircuts" on loans to poor countries, the source said on Tuesday, while the IMF and World Bank agreed to ensure their debt sustainability analyses of countries undergoing debt restructurings would be made available to Chinese authorities earlier in the process.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva at an event during the meetings confirmed that the Fund had agreed to provide earlier debt sustainability information to creditors so they could better prepare for restructurings. She also said the World Bank was being asked to show how it could be a net positive provider of financing and concessional loans.

The IMF, World Bank and the U.S. Treasury have argued to Beijing that such concessional loans to debt-distressed countries were the equivalent of taking principal losses on loans.

"I'm so far optimistic. I hope to remain optimistic after tomorrow when we are meeting," Georgieva told the Bretton Woods Committee event. She added that an April 3 deputies meeting for the sovereign debt roundtable went well.

Georgieva's comments echoed optimism earlier from U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen that China would agree on certain technical aspects of debt restructuring for poor countries.

"I've been encouraged by China's willingness to provide specific assurances with respect to Sri Lanka. I regard that as a positive sign," Yellen told a news briefing at the start of the spring meetings.

Charles Robertson, global chief economist with Renaissance Capital, said the agreement would be significant for emerging nations struggling with debt.

"If China's now prepared to accept the exemption for multilateral development banks, debt restructuring can happen quicker, or get back to the speed it used to be," Robertson told Reuters. He added that earlier access to the debt sustainability information was significant for China.

"It should give them more influence and power - more chance to determine the eventual look of the debt restructuring."

Pakistanis Living Abroad Sent \$2.5b Home in March



ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Responding to the cash-strapped government's appeal for more hard currency remittances, Pakistanis living abroad have sent \$2.5 billion home in March, the country's central bank said.

The sum represents a 27.4% increase compared to February and is the highest in seven past months, according to a tweet by the State Bank of Pakistan. Officials said the announcement offered some hope for improving Pakistan's ailing economy. The remittances came mainly from Pakistanis living in the United States, Britain and the Middle East.

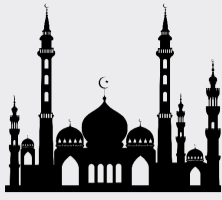
Pakistan is grappling with one of its worst economic crises, exacerbated by last summer's devastating floods that killed 1,739 people, destroyed 2 million homes and caused \$30 billion in damages.

The impoverished country has also been hit by a wave of violence, which prompted top political and military leaders last week to order new operations against the Pakistani Taliban. This militant group is separate but allied with the Afghan Taliban. The Pakistani Taliban have stepped up attacks on security forces since unilaterally ending a cease-fire with the government last November.

In an overnight attack, the militant group shot and killed two police officers in Quetta, the capital of southwestern Baluchistan province, police said Monday. One of the assailants was also killed when police returned fire. The provincial chief minister, Abdul Qudoos Bizenjo, condemned the attack. In a statement, the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the shooting.

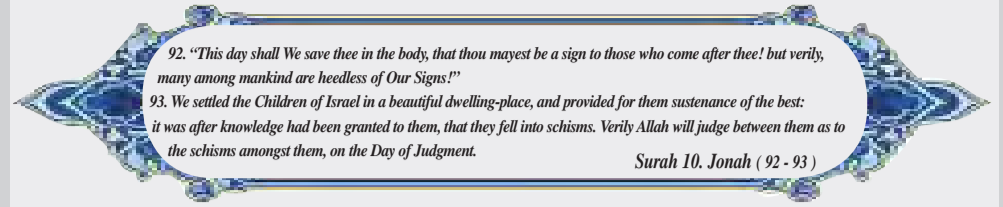
Pakistan is in the final phase of talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to secure a crucial installment of a \$1.1 billion loan from a \$6 billion bailout package. Since December, the tranche has been on hold over Pakistan's failure to meet the terms of a previous deal signed in 2019 by then-Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Economists fear a failure to get the IMF loan would spark inflation. About 21% of Pakistan's 220 million people live in poverty.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:04
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:55
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:08
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:30



Deadliest First Quarter for Central Med Migrants Since 2017

GENEVA (Dispatches) - January to March 2023 was the deadliest first quarter for migrants crossing the central Mediterranean since 2017, the United Nations said Wednesday, with 441 lives lost attempting to reach Europe.

The UN's International Organization for Migration said delays in state-led search and rescue (SAR) operations were a factor in several fatal incidents in the perilous crossing from north Africa.

And the IOM said the 441 known deaths in the first three months of the year was likely an undercount of the true number.

"The persisting humanitarian crisis in the central Mediterranean is intolerable," said IOM chief Antonio Vitorino.

"With more than 20,000 deaths recorded on this route since 2014, I fear that these deaths have been normalised," he added.

"States must respond. Delays and gaps in state-led SAR are costing human lives."

The IOM said delays in such rescues were a factor in at least six incidents so far this year, leading to the deaths of at least 127 people.

"The complete absence of response to a seventh case claimed the lives of at least 73 migrants," it said in a statement, adding that non-governmental organisations' search and rescue efforts have markedly diminished in recent months.

"Over the Easter weekend, 3,000 migrants reached Italy, bringing the total number of arrivals so far this year to 31,192 people," the IOM said.

The UN agency's Missing Migrants Project is also investigating several reports of cases in which boats were reported missing, where there are no records of survivors, no remains and no SAR operations.

The fates of more than 300 people aboard those vessels remain unclear, the organisation said.

"Saving lives at sea is a legal obligation for states," said Vitorino.

"We need to see proactive, state-led coordination in search-and-rescue efforts. Guided by the spirit of responsibility sharing and solidarity, we call on states to work together and work to reduce loss of life along migration routes."

The IOM said the situation in the central Mediterranean reinforced the need for



predictable state-led SAR, putting an end to the "ad hoc response" since the end of the Italian navy's Operation Mare Nostrum in 2014.

Countries needed to support the life-saving efforts of NGOs and end the "criminalisation, obstruction and deterrence" of those who do come to the rescue, it said.

"All maritime vessels, including commercial ships, have a legal obligation to provide rescue to boats in distress," it added.

The agency also called for tougher action to dismantle criminal smuggling networks and to prosecute those responsible for "profiting from the desperation of migrants and refugees by facilitating dangerous journeys".

Even as the IOM released its findings, the Tunisian coastguard said Wednesday that 10 migrants had drowned off the coast after their boat was wrecked in the Mediterranean.

"Seventy-two migrants were rescued and 10 bodies recovered after Tuesday's shipwreck" off Tunisia's second city of Sfax, spokesman Houssein Jebabli said, adding that the dead were all from sub-Saharan Africa.

Global Progress on Phasing Out Coal in 2022 Weighed Down by China



LONDON (Dispatches) - Despite the energy crisis sparked by the Ukraine war, a phasing out of coal continued across the world in 2022, according to a new report by the NGO Global Energy Monitor. Everywhere except China, where new coal production capacity under development increased, offsetting the gains in the rest of the world.

With the spring comes a rare bit of good news in the fight against climate change. In a study published this week, Global Energy Monitor, a San Francisco-based NGO, reported that in 2022, global efforts to phase out coal, one of the most climate-damaging energy sources, continued. The "coal comeback" fears, sparked by the fallout and disruptions of last year's Russian invasion of Ukraine, did not come to pass in the end.

That's the good news. Now for the bad: China bucked the global trend. Worse, China's new coal plant additions last year offset the coal plant shutdowns in the rest of the world.

In its annual report on coal production, "Boom and Bust Coal 2023", Global Energy Monitor recorded progress everywhere in the world - except China. The number of coal-fired power plants in operation has decreased worldwide and these include retiring or converting coal plants in countries such as Peru and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

According to the study, no new coal-fired projects are under consideration in the European Union, North America or North Africa. In the Middle East, the report noted that the Tabas plant under construction in Iran could be "the region's last new coal plant".

The US tops the list of good performers: its coal-fired power generation fell by 13.5 gigawatts (GW). That's half of the global decline, estimated at 26 GW by 2022.

The EU, on the other hand, recorded a decrease of only 2.2 GW. This is a low figure compared to 2021, when it reached a record retirement of 14.6 GW.

The gas crisis sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted seven countries to authorise the restarting or operation of coal-fired power plants. These include Germany and Austria, as well as the Netherlands, which reversed a law limiting the operation of power plants to 35% of their capacity.

France, on the other hand, restarted production at the Emile-Huchet power plant in the eastern Moselle region. In total, 26 coal-fired power plants in the EU that were already shut down or scheduled to be closed finally operated during the winter, according to Global Energy Monitor figures.

Nearly 90,000 People Pardoned by Judiciary Following Leader's Amnesty

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Nearly 90,000 people have been pardoned following Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei's landmark mass amnesty decree on the occasion of the 44th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in February, a judiciary official said.

Sadeq Rahimi, deputy head of the Iranian judiciary, made the announcement on Wednesday, as cited by the Mizan news agency. On February 5, Ayatollah Khamenei in a decree agreed to a request by Iran's judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i to pardon or commute the sentences of a significant number of inmates.

The mass amnesty was issued as the country was marking the 44th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which put an end to the reign of the US-backed Pahlavi regime in the

country in 1979 and also coincided with the birthday anniversary of the first Shia Imam, Imam Ali (AS).

By the decree, Ayatollah Khamenei pardoned or commuted the sentences of a large number of Iranian prisoners arrested during the recent foreign-backed riots in the country.

According to reports, a significant number of prisoners have been released as part of the decree while officials are continuing to examine the cases of prisoners.

The mass amnesty, however, comes with certain conditions as it does not apply to those convicted on charges of spying for foreign intelligence agencies, those having affiliation with groups hostile to the Islamic Republic as well as those held on serious security-related charges.

Tehran, Islamabad Directly Affected by the Events in Afghanistan

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has said that Iran and Pakistan are directly affected by the events in Afghanistan, which has made it necessary more than ever to strengthen the cooperation between the two countries.

Amirabdollahian made the remarks in a meeting with Hina Rabbani, Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, on the sidelines of the fourth foreign ministerial meeting of Afghanistan's neighboring states with the participation of Iran and six other countries in the Uzbek city of Samarkand on Thursday.

Referring to the position Pakistan in Iran's foreign policy, he added that within the framework of neighborhood policy, Islamabad is one of the priorities in the foreign policy of the current Iranian government.

He also emphasized the need to pursue and operationalize previous agreements between the two countries.

Rabbani, for her part, outlined her country's vision on regional cooperation, expressing the importance of utilizing mutual economic potentials. The two sides also reviewed the issues of cross border cooperation, trade expansion, economic collaboration, holding security consular committees, following the agreements of the Joint Economic Commission and mutual meetings of high level.

The commander of the IRGC Navy said the parades convey this message to the child-killing Tel Aviv regime that oppressed Palestinians are not left alone, and that the glory of supporting the nation enhances every year.

Since the start of the holy month of Ramadan, the Israeli regime has imposed strict restrictions on the entry and exit of Palestinians to and from the gates of al-Aqsa Mosque. Amid heightened tensions with Palestinian worshippers, Israeli settlers also press ahead with their frequent incursions and provocative rituals at the holy site.

The resistance movements in Gaza and elsewhere have vowed to confront the Israeli regime on multiple fronts.

On April 6, at least 30 rockets were reportedly launched from southern Lebanon into the Israeli-occupied territories in retaliation for the Israeli aggression against al-Aqsa. Resistance fighters based in Gaza also fired several rockets toward the occupied territories.

He called for immediate action against such violations and an end to the daily crimes of Israel against Palestinians.

The top diplomat stressed the need for immediate and effective action by the international community and Islamic governments "to support the oppressed people of Palestine, to stop the daily crimes of the Zionists, and also to urgently discuss the current situation in Palestine in the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and other responsible international institutions."

The foreign minister called for the return of Palestinian refugees and the determination of the future Palestinian political system through a referendum. The remarks were made ahead of International Quds Day on Friday.

U.S., Allies...

FROM PAGE 1

The ministers voiced their concern over the security situation in Afghanistan, saying all terrorist groups based in the country, including Daesh, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Jaish ul-Adl pose a serious threat to regional and international security.

They called on Afghan officials to take effective measures to improve the security, safety and legitimate rights of its citizens and institutions outside the country.

The ministers voiced their strong objection to the re-establishment of military bases inside Afghanistan, which would not be useful for regional peace and stability, and called on Afghan officials to maintain cordial foreign relations, observe international law, and co-exist peacefully with other countries.

The four ministers expressed their readiness to support Afghanistan's reconstruction, trade and economic exchanges, and investment in cooperation with regional states. They also called on the international community to send more humanitarian aid to the country.

The second quadrilateral meeting of Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan on Afghanistan in Samarkand was held on the sidelines of the fourth meeting of Afghanistan's neighboring countries.

Foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan - Hossein Amirabdollahian, Sergei Lavrov, Qin Gang and Hina Rabbani Khar, respectively - took part in the meeting.

The first quadrilateral meeting was held on September 16, 2022, on the sidelines of the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the Tajikistani capital Dushanbe.

Meanwhile, Iran's foreign minister expressed concern over terrorism, extremism and the U.S.' wrong policies on the continuation of terrorism and insecurity in Afghanistan, saying, "Afghanistan, today, needs regional cooperation and solutions more than the intervention of the West, the US and those players who have spread poverty and instability in this important country in the region for more than two decades."

Amirabdollahian added that the US and its allies, as occupying forces, are responsible for their actions in Afghanistan over the past two decades and, as members of the United Nations, they should be held accountable for the ongoing situation in the country.

The top Iranian diplomat strongly advised the de-facto Taliban government in Kabul to fulfill its commitment and establish a comprehensive government with the participation of all Afghan ethnic groups.

He also highlighted the importance of putting an end to tensions in Afghanistan's border areas with its neighboring states.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 following the September 11 attacks, despite the fact that no Afghan national was involved in the attacks. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans died in the US war of aggression on the country.

American forces had occupied the country for two decades on the pretext of fighting against the Taliban. But as the U.S. forces left Afghanistan, the Taliban took over the capital Kabul with lightning speed in August 2021, weakened by continued foreign occupation.

Oil Minister...

FROM PAGE 1

Venezuela, which has the world's largest crude reserves, has struggled in recent years to produce enough gasoline and diesel due to refinery outages as a result of US bans and a political turmoil which also has its roots in Washington.

Tehran has strengthened ties with Caracas, providing crude and condensate as well as parts and feedstock for Venezuela's aging 1.3 million barrel per day (bpd) refining network. It has also overseen a project to modernize the largest refining complex in Venezuela.

Jobless Rate...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran has been posting relatively low unemployment figures since the country emerged from the coronavirus pandemic nearly two years ago.

That comes as the country has introduced a series of economic diversification programs in recent years to tackle the impacts of U.S. sanctions on its oil exports revenues.

Experts say the policy has led to increased number of jobs in the Iranian manufacturing and agriculture sectors.

Russia Reportedly...

FROM PAGE 1

Swap arrangements enables Russia to export its crude oil, natural gas and oil products to countries in the region via Iran while helping Iran to boost energy supplies to its northern region.

Iran has been under U.S. sanctions since 2018 when Washington decided to pull out of an international deal on Iran's nuclear program. The US and allies in Europe imposed rounds of sanctions on Russia since the start of war in Ukraine more than a year ago. Both Moscow and Tehran have cast the sanction, which mainly target their energy sectors, as illegal and unjustified.

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ISSN 1024-6053
P.O. Box: 15875-8551
Address: No 13, Pajouhesh St.,
Golestan II St, Golestan St.Marzdaran
Blvd., Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
Printed by: Entekhab-e Rasaneh
Distributed by:
Cities of Iran Cultural and
Artistic Institute
Managing Director: Fereydoon Taherpour Asl

Japan Wants to Host Rugby World Cup Again in 2035

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan wants to host the World Cup again as early as 2035, the country's rugby union chief said, potentially bringing it back to Asia for a second time. Japan became the first country outside rugby's traditional heartlands to stage the tournament in 2019, when the host nation stunned Ireland and Scotland to reach the quarter-finals. Japan Rugby Football Union chairman Kensuke Iwabuchi said that he had told governing body World Rugby that Japan wants to host the men's World Cup in 2035 and the women's event in 2037.

Tottenham, Brighton Charged by FA for Touchline Confrontation

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham Hotspur and Brighton & Hove Albion have been charged over a mass confrontation on the touchline during Saturday's Premier League match, the Football Association said. Spurs caretaker manager Christian Stellini and Brighton coach Roberto De Zerbi were sent off in the 58th minute following a brawl involving both benches. "It's alleged that both clubs failed to ensure their technical area occupants conducted themselves in an orderly fashion and/or do not behave in a way which is improper," the FA said in a statement.

LaVine Sinks Raptors, Thunder Roll Pelicans

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Zach LaVine inspired a fightback as the Chicago Bulls eliminated the Toronto Raptors from the NBA play-in tournament, while rising Australian star Josh Giddey helped the Oklahoma City Thunder end the New Orleans Pelicans' season. LaVine finished with 39 points -- 30 of them scored after half-time -- in a 109-105 road victory for the Bulls, who will now face Miami on Friday with the eighth seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs up for grabs.

LaVine and former Toronto star DeMar DeRozan showed superb composure down the stretch as Chicago recovered from a 19-point third-quarter deficit to snatch a win that left Toronto's Scotiabank Arena in stunned silence.

DeRozan finished with 23 points while Nikola Vucevic finished with 14 points, 13 rebounds and four assists.

Chicago coach Billy Donovan hailed LaVine's role in the comeback as "extraordinary." "He was phenomenal," Donovan said. "What he did in that third quarter and going into the fourth quarter -- it would have been very difficult for us to have won that game had he not done that."

"His performance was extraordinary. It gave us life, and it gave us hope...he had that mentality where he was going to do whatever he had to get us back in the game."

Toronto, who looked to be in complete control for long periods of the game, were left ruing a litany of missed free throws.

The Raptors shot only 18-of-36 from the foul line, a 50 percent success rate which was in stark contrast to the Bulls, who made 18 of their 22 free throws.

"That's a lot of misses," Toronto coach Nick Nurse said afterwards. "We left a lot of points on the floor there for sure."

"Okay, you're not going to make them all. But if you miss more than 10 free throws in a game, it's hard to win."

Bayern's Mane and Sane Reportedly Clashed After Man City Defeat

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich forwards Sadio Mane and Leroy Sane had a physical altercation in the dressing room after the 3-0 loss to Manchester City in the Champions League, German media reported.

According to Bild, Sky Germany and a number of other media sources, the two players clashed after the match and needed to be separated by teammates.

Bild reported that former City winger Sane was hit in the face by the Senegal international, suffering a cut lip.

Bayern declined requests to comment on the altercation on Wednesday.

Bild reported the clash started in the dying stages of Bayern's loss in Manchester on Tuesday, with footage showing the two arguing on the pitch.

The loss was Bayern's biggest Champions League defeat since 2017.

The six-time European champions now have little hope of turning over the deficit in yesterday's return leg in Munich to make it to the semi-finals.

Lewandowski Hopes To Play With Messi Next Season at Barca

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Barcelona striker Robert Lewandowski would love Lionel Messi to return to the Catalan club from Paris Saint-Germain this summer, he said.

The 35-year-old Argentine World Cup winner left Barca in 2021 when the club could not afford to renew his contract and his PSG deal expires in June.

Amid whistles from PSG supporters who see Messi as a symbol of the club's mistakes in chasing star signings instead of building a competitive team, Barcelona are openly courting the forward.

"Messi belongs to Barca and if he returns it would be something incredible," said Lewandowski. "We know that his place is here, in Barcelona. I don't know what will happen, but I hope that next season we can play together."

Messi is the club's all-time top goalscorer and many consider him the best player in the history of football.



That gave Toronto a 58-47 lead at half-time, and the Raptors kept up their scoring momentum early in the second half, extending their lead to 19 points as Chicago's offense sputtered.

But the pendulum swung back in the visitors' favor once LaVine found his range, and as Chicago's defensive fine-tuning stifled the Raptors, the Bulls began to steadily whittle away the deficit.

A Pat Beverley three-pointer put Chicago ahead for the first time in the second half at 98-95 and Toronto were never able to get back in front thereafter.

In the other game, Oklahoma City's youthful line-up showed tremendous poise under pressure to grind out a 123-118 victory over the Pelicans in New Orleans.

That result means the Thunder will face the Minnesota Timberwolves on Friday with the chance to advance into the playoffs, while the Pelicans are now eliminated.

The Melbourne-born Giddey -- still only 20 -- produced a stunning performance with 31 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the oldest member of the Thunder starting line-up at 24, also came up big with 32 points, while the 23-year-old Lu Dort finished with 27 points.

It was another remarkable display by Oklahoma City, whose starting line-up had an average age of just over 21. The game was also Giddey's first experience of high-pressure postseason basketball.

"It was pretty much everything I expected," Giddey told ESPN afterwards. "A loud crowd, a hostile environment. As a kid you grow up wanting to be in these type of moments."

"I'm glad we came out of here with a win and we move on to the next one."

Gilgeous-Alexander said Oklahoma City's young squad had developed poise under pressure after being "battle-tested" throughout the regular season.

Giddey was already looking ahead to Friday's date in Minneapolis.



Murray Says Focus Must Be On Ukraine War

MONTE CARLO (Dispatches) - The war in Ukraine and the plight of its tennis players must be at the forefront of discussions at Wimbledon, not the Grand Slam's decision to reverse its ban on Russian and Belarusian players, former world number one Andy Murray said.

Wimbledon was the only Grand Slam to ban competitors from Russia and its ally Belarus in 2022 after the invasion, which Moscow calls a "special operation", but has said they could return as neutrals this year.

"What's really important is to continue to talk about what's happening in Ukraine now, not focusing on a few tennis players and a few athletes who may or may not be able to play major sporting events," Murray told the Tennis Majors website.

"It's a difficult decision for Wimbledon. The rest of sport had gone in a completely different direction to them, which made it hard. But I don't think this should be so much about that."

"It's distracting a little bit from actually what's taking place. You don't want that to happen. You want the actual issue to be at the forefront of all of these discussions."

Several Ukrainian players have spoken about how difficult it is to continue competing while their country is at war.

Firmino Agrees to Join Real Madrid



The reports will come as a blow to Jürgen Klopp and his coaching staff, who are said to be keen to try and persuade Firmino to stay for at least one more year. The 31 year old has lost

LONDON (Dispatches) - Roberto Firmino will reportedly join Real Madrid on a free transfer when his current terms with Liverpool expire at the end of June.

Spanish outlet El Nacional write that Los Blancos are keen to take the Brazilian striker on a Bosman, in a deal which mirrors their 1999 capture of Steve McManaman, another Reds favourite who rejected fresh terms at Anfield to move to the Spanish capital.

some of the stamina that made him such an important cog in Klopp's gegenpressing system of years gone by, but retains the intelligence and composure to cause top teams problems.

Liverpool are in a transitional phase right now, with the club currently eighth in the Premier League table and likely to miss out on Champions League football next term. Klopp's side have been criticised for their lack of dynamism all year, with an ageing squad in desperate need of refreshment. Fans are calling on the German coach to let some of his stalwarts leave in order to make way for the next generation.

Having said that, Klopp is thought to be weary of dismantling his squad too quickly, and he sees Firmino as an important dressing room presence, whose performance levels could alleviate pressure on incoming players. The Reds boss already saw key man Sadio Mane leave in 2021 and is loath to see another member of the once feared Mane-Firmino-Salah trident go.

Real Madrid Earn Solid Lead On Chelsea

MADRID (Dispatches) - Karim Benzema and Marco Asensio struck for Real Madrid as they dominated 10-man Chelsea and opened up a 2-0 Champions League quarter-final first leg lead.

The record 14-time winners and reigning champions eased to a comfortable win against Frank Lampard's side, who had Ben Chilwell sent off in the second half for pulling down Rodrygo Goes as he ran through on goal.

Benzema netted from close range after 21 minutes after Kepa Arrizabalaga tipped a Vinicius Junior effort into his path.

Despite controlling the game, Madrid had to wait until the 74th minute for their second, with Asensio drilling home from the edge of the box after a short corner routine.

In a battle between the last two Champions League winners, Madrid demonstrated their strength with an impressive display, while Chelsea showed why they are struggling in 11th in the Premier League.

"We are satisfied with the result, for the performance but it's not over yet, we have to fight, to sacrifice for another 90 minutes at Stamford Bridge," said Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti.

"We are satisfied only for tonight, it's not over yet. We know Chelsea will try to (give) everything next week."

Ancelotti, who coached Lampard at Chelsea between 2009-2011, relied on veteran midfielders Toni Kroos and Luka Modric to pull the strings.

Lampard, in his second game at the helm since replacing Graham Potter last week, threw Thiago Silva and N'Golo Kante straight into the starting line-up after injury worries.



Medvedev Sets Up Zverev Clash In Monte Carlo

MONTE CARLO (Dispatches) - Daniil Medvedev cruised through his first match of the year on clay, defeating Italian wild card Lorenzo Sonego 6-3, 6-2 at the Monte Carlo Masters to set up a meeting with Alexander Zverev.

Medvedev broke Sonego at the first attempt and then twice more in the second set to reel off his 25th win in his past 26 tour-level matches.

"Every match is a struggle (on clay), but I have had some good matches on clay," said Medvedev. "I managed to play good against a very strong player on clay."

"It's completely different on clay, but confidence is confidence," the third seed added.

"It's about winning matches, because it is always two players that play, and one is going to win... I hope to bring this confidence even further."

Medvedev earned his tour-leading 30th victory of the season and will face Zverev in the last 16 -- a first meeting between the pair on clay. "We've had some tough matches," said Medvedev, who has won seven of 13 previous matches against Zverev.

Zverev is still finding his way back after tearing ankle ligaments in the French Open semi-finals last year against Rafael Nadal.

Following a difficult first-round tie against the dangerous Alexander Bublik, he beat Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut 6-4, 6-4.

"I saw him (Zverev) in the first two matches, he seemed to be in good shape. I'm just going to have to be at my best," said Medvedev.



Casper Ruud, coming off a title in Estoril last weekend, kicked off his Monte Carlo campaign with a 7-5, 7-6 (7/1) win over Botic van de Zandschulp.