

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei Will Lead the Eid al-Fitr Prayer at Imam Khomeini Mosalla Of the Iranian Capital Tehran

IRAN NEWS

TEDPIX, the Main index of Tehran Stock Exchange, Gained 74,023 Points to 2.253m on Saturday as Reported, Over 23.628b Securities Worth 245.564 Trillion Rials (About \$584.67m) Were Traded

VOL. XXIX, No. 7744 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

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U.S. Too Weak in Region to Militarily Support Israel

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The United States is not in a position to support Israel, spokesman of the Revolutionary Guard said in reaction to statements that Israel can act alone against Iran.

Ramezan Sharif was quoted by Fars news website Saturday said Israel has repeatedly issued similar statements, but he has one message and that is: The situation of the Americans in the region is such that they cannot support the Zionists.

Israel has long threatened that if the Islamic Republic gets close to obtaining a nuclear weapon it will use all methods including a direct military attack to prevent it. President Joe Biden has also vowed not to allow the Iranian regime to produce nuclear weapons, with "all options on the table."

Sharif also said that "The Americans seem to be trying not to fall into the lap of the Zionists, because they know that if Zionists take action against us our in-kind retaliation will engulf the bases of those supporting them." *See Page 7*

IRGC Test-Fired Latest Anti-Tank Missile

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Islamic Republic of Iran says the ground forces of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has successfully test-fired its newest missile Sadid 365.

Ali Kouhestani, Head of IRGC Ground Forces Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization, said in an interview with Tasnim news agency on Saturday that "Sadid 365 is a guided anti-armor missile with a range of 8 kilometers, which is capable of destroying all kinds of armored equipment."

"This optically guided missile is highly accurate in hitting the target, and with the ability to attack from above, it can also pass through the active defense systems and destroy them," added Kouhestani.

The description is similar to the capabilities of the U.S. Javelin anti-tank weapon.

In the top attack mode, the missile is required to climb sharply after launch and travel at a certain altitude, then plunge on top of the target. In this method, unlike the conventional methods, the missile travels a ballistic path to hit the target. *See Page 7*

Tehran Slams West's Double Standards About Human Rights

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Vice-President of the Judiciary for International Affairs and the Secretary General of Iran's High Council for Human Rights Kazem Gharibabadi has criticized international mechanisms for not taking a position regarding the deterioration of human rights situations in Western countries.

In a letter to "Volker Türk", the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Gharibabadi noted, "The world suffers from fundamental challenges and dilemmas regarding human rights, mainly caused by the actions of countries that claim to be defending human rights and see themselves in the position of making demands from others and being immune from any criticism and responsibility. The responsibility of the international human rights mechanisms in such conditions is fundamental to support and promote human rights, which must be fulfilled by respecting independence, impartiality, professionalism, and non-selectivity. Adopting politically-motivated and selective approaches does a great disservice and is detrimental to human rights, and erodes public trust in human rights mechanisms."

He draws Commissioner's attention to "some situations over the last six months in several countries regarding the right to freedom of assembly and of association", noting, "France regularly witnesses massive public demonstrations in protest against the government's policies. In some cases, up to two million people participated in the protests. Instead of listening to the protesters' demands and trying to improve the situation, the French government resorts to large-scale violence to deal with the gatherings. Using anti-riot equipment, assaulting people, and arresting thousands of protesters are only part of the countermeasures adopted by the French government."

"Having banned environmental rallies since 2019, Britain has introduced amendments to the Public Order Bill to increase police powers to deal with protesters at rallies. Referred to as the 'repression bill', the Public Order Bill, on the one hand, causes a significant and unprecedented increase in the powers of the police force to impose undue restrictions on peaceful protests; and on the other, it criminalizes assemblies under the pretext of deprivation of public comfort and provides a sentence of up to 10 years of imprisonment. This should also be noted that most recently, aroused by the systematic Islamophobia and anti-Islamism in the UK, a British racist set fire to a Muslim while leaving a mosque in Birmingham," he added.

Gharibabadi also noted, "Following a sit-in protest in Germany, the German Minister of the Interior took to Twitter and said, 'Blocking escape routes puts lives at risk. We saw that in a terrible way in Berlin. The police have my full support for a crackdown.'" On the other hand, over 3,000 German police and security forces arrested hundreds of political opponents under the pretext of plotting to stage a coup d'état. Arresting these people - who only sought to bring changes in the German political system gun-free and without closing the street and killing the police - on suspicion of subversion and restricting any support for them on social networks is considered suppression of freedom of expression and opinion. In yet another move, the German government seeks to pass a law that will expel its opponents from all government jobs under the pretext of extremism." *See Page 7*

Continued Israeli Violence Will Only Bolster Palestinian Resistance

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian says continuation of the Israeli regime's violence against the Palestinian people will only boost their unity and resolve to resist the occupiers of their homeland.

Amirabdollahian wrote an article in the Lebanese newspaper Al Akhbar on the occasion of International Quds Day, the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, during which Muslim nations hold demonstrations to express support for the oppressed Palestinian people.

He said the Israeli occupiers continue their daily criminal acts by killing, capturing and suppressing the Palestinian women, children and youths, desecrating the al-Aqsa Mosque frequently, and destroying the houses of the true owners of the Palestinian land.

However, the top Iranian diplomat said, "We are witnessing the objective signs of a multi-layered crisis and internal insecurity of the occupying regime of al-Quds on the one hand, and increasing strength and cohesion of the Palestinian people and resistance groups in addition to stronger support and solidarity of Muslim and freedom-seeking countries and nations for the Palestinian cause on the other hand."

The internal situation inside Israel shows that hope has been shattered and despair about the future and survival of Israel is spreading, he noted.

He said the new Palestinian generation, inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, has turned every part of the Palestinian land into a scene of resistance and brave and strong battle against state-of-the-art military equipment of the Zionist occupiers. *See Page 7*

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Now Quds Is Not Alone

On Friday as the last Friday of the Holy month of Ramadhan, Muslims and many freedom and justice seekers in the world held rallies in support of innocent Palestinian people and marked the Quds Day and once again showed their solidarity with Palestine and this time they showed that Quds and Palestinians are not alone and the liberation of the first qibla of Muslims is imminent.

Quds Day, officially known as International Quds Day is an annual pro-Palestinian event held on the last Friday of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan to express support for Palestinians and oppose Israel and Zionism and it was initiated by the Late Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, the Founder of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, on August 7, 1979.

Since then the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the flag-bearer of commemorating the day by holding rallies in support of Palestinians and Quds and gradually other Muslim nations and even justice and freedom seekers worldwide have joined the camp in support of Palestinians and liberation of the occupied lands and Al-Aqsa Mosque from the claws of Israelis.

But this year the Quds Day was held while the world equation has changed in favor of Palestine and it seems the rallies are working and people worldwide are getting aware of the atrocities of the Zionists against the Palestinians and liberation of the occupied land is gradually coming true in case Muslims in the world remain united.

Iranians as previous years held massive rallies to show that they have not forgotten the principles of the Islamic Revolution and support of Palestine against the Zionists despite negative propagation of the enemies.

This year's rallies come amid simmering tensions in the occupied Palestinian territories and attacks on worshippers in the al-Aqsa Mosque. However, demonstrators in Tehran said Israel is on the verge of destruction as it is facing growing resistance from Palestinians.

Demonstrators in Tehran also demanded the liberation of Palestine and called on countries across the world to boycott the Israeli regime.

Iranians once again showed their unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. By taking to the streets every year, they let Palestinians know that they are not alone in their fight against the occupiers of their lands. *See Page 7*

Sultan of Oman Being Scheduled to Visit Tehran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Plannings are underway for the visit of the Sultan of Oman to Iran, The Director-General of the Iranian Foreign Ministry for the Persian Gulf Affairs Alireza Enayati says.

Alireza Enayati touched upon several regional issues. Referring to the visits of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Oman and Qatar with the aim of expanding Iran's interactions with regional countries, Enayati cited that the Emir of Qatar also paid a visit to Iran last year, and planning for the visit of the King of Oman to Tehran is on the agenda. He expressed hope that the visit will take place soon.

Speaking of Iran-UAE relations, the senior Iranian diplomat stressed that the exchange of delegations and dialogue between Iranian and UAE officials is going on, adding, "Iran's Foreign Minister has invited the UAE's Foreign Minister to visit Tehran and we hope that these meetings can strengthen the relations between the two countries."

He also announced that the UAE has invited President Raisi to take part in the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference. The conference is slated to be held in Dubai.

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Iran, Denmark Discuss Developing Bilateral Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his Danish counterpart Lars Lokke Rasmussen in a phone call on Friday reviewed developing bilateral relations.

The two sides explored ways to promote bilateral relations. They also discussed the latest regional and international developments. Consular affairs were among other topics discussed by the two sides.

During recent riots and unrests in Iran, Denmark had summoned Iran's Ambassador and Tehran reacting to this interventionist move summoned Danish Envoy to Tehran.

Activity of Foreign Platform Hinges on Establishing Office in Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a meeting with student activists, President Ebrahim Raisi answered some doubts about the government's corporate governance, the government's plan to discipline the country's monetary and banking system, liquidation of assets, the promise to build 4 million housing units, the lack of coordination between the positions of some government officials, appointments, filtering, the issue of chastity and hijab, and the provincial trips of government.

A group of activists and representatives of student organizations of universities across the country had a friendly meeting with Raisi on Friday evening in the presence of the Ministers of Science, Research and Technology and Health and Medical Education, Vice-President for Executive Affairs, President's Chief of Staff and Government Spokesman along with Iftar banquet.

In this meeting, while honoring the International Quds Day and praising and appreciating the enthusiastic and magnificent presence of the people of Iran and the free people of the world in the protests on this day, Raisi praised the role of committed, faithful and revolutionary students in neutralizing the plot of the enemies in the riots of the fall of last year to close down universities and said, "Student movements defeated the enemy in their plans for disrupting the scientific atmosphere of the country by keeping the flag of knowledge enhancement and demanding hoisted".

Raisi considered the acquisition of scientific authority of the country's universities as one of the honors of Islamic Iran, but he stressed that the country's scientific community should not be satisfied with this level of progress and should make more efforts to increase knowledge, train efficient human resources and participate in solving the country's problems.



The President then listened to the words of a number of representatives of student organizations, explaining the state of the country at the time of taking over the office from the previous administration and some measures and achievements of the administration in the field of economy, including the implementation of the subsidy popularization plan, a 20% reduction in the inflation rate in the first 6 months, among others.

Raisi also described stopping the rapid growth of liquidity and even decreasing the growth of liquidity, reaching 4% economic growth after a decade of economic growth close to zero, fulfilling the promise of creating one million jobs last year, significant growth in the number and volume of companies' activities and knowledge-based production, allocating tens of billions of toman for the implementation of laws and projects such as the rating of teachers after a 13-year hiatus, and many more as the other achievements of the Popular Administration.

The President continued to reply some questions and doubts of the representatives of student organizations about the suspicion of the government's corporate governance, the government's plan to discipline the monetary and banking system of the country, productivity, the promise of building 4 million housing units, the lack of coordination of the positions of some government officials, appointments, filtering, the issue of chastity and hijab, and provincial trips of the government.

The President also talked about the doubts raised about the government's corporate governance, saying, "The government considers investment and the creation of economic enterprises useful, but corporate governance is harmful, and it is not approved by the government for executive bodies and banks, and cases of violations have been and will be dealt with".

Saudi Technical Delegation in Mashhad to Open Consulate

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A technical delegation from Saudi Arabia has traveled to Mashhad, a northeastern Iranian city, to visit the Saudi Consulate General and review ways to reopen it.

The Saudi delegation visited its diplomatic places and embassy in Tehran in the past few days and traveled to Mashhad on Friday (April 14).

Nasser bin Awad Al-Ghannoum, the head of the Saudi delegation, appreciated the officials of the Iranian Foreign Ministry in Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province, for their warm welcome.

The Saudi official expressed hope that the revival of ties between Riyadh and Tehran would lead to further cooperation among regional countries and bring about prosperity to the region.

In the past few days, Iran and Saudi Arabia exchanged delegations to review the process of reopening their diplomatic missions.

On March 10, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia issued a joint statement in Beijing announcing that Tehran and Riyadh would resume their diplomatic relations after seven years of tension.

Over 2.6m Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Week

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 2,664,651 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$599m on its physical market.



According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,214,941 tons of commodities valued at more than \$376m.

On this floor the IME sold 1,283,861 tons of cement, 429,000 tons of iron ore, 339,870 tons of steel, 132,600 tons of sponge iron, 26,800 tons of zinc, 6,550 tons of copper, 6,400 tons of aluminum, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 60 tons of precious metals concentrate.

Furthermore, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 437,421 tons of commodities worth nearly \$220m.

Commodities traded on this floor included 123,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 105,591 tons of bitumen, 103,996 tons of polymeric products, 45,494 tons of chemicals, 43,000 tons of lube cut, 9,900 tons of sulfur, 5,196 tons of base oil, 1,014 tons of petroleum products, 240 tons of gas feedstocks and 150 tons of insulation.

The IME also traded within the same week 12,290 tons of commodities on its side market.

Iran's Renewable Power Capacity Ups by 0.9% in March

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The capacity of Iran's renewable power generations increased by 0.9% in the calendar month to late March 2023 compared to the previous month.

According to the latest statistics announced by Iran's Ministry of Energy, the capacity of Iran's wind power plants reached 354.89 megawatts (MW) while solar power capacity in the country increased to 449.55 MW in late March 2023.

The figures showed that total capacity of renewables in Iran, including from small hydroelectric and biomass plants, reached 1,038.03 megawatts in March, an increase of 0.9% compared to the calendar month to late February.

Iran, Kazakhstan Presidents Talk on Phone



TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Ebrahim Raisi while referring to the initiative presented by Iran to hold an emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) said that only Islamic unity and solidarity can block the path for Zionists' further atrocities and criminal acts.

President Raisi made the remarks in his Friday evening phone talk with Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

"While we are witnessing the inaction of the international community against the crimes and aggression of the Zionist Regime, only the decisive message of the unity and solidarity of Muslims can prevent the spread of these aggressions," President Raisi said.

The Iranian president congratulated the month of Ramadan to President Tokayev and said, "Various issues of the Islamic world, especially the aggression and insult by the Zionist Regime to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Gaza and Lebanon, demand that Islamic countries deal with these aggressive actions through more consultations and cooperation."

President Raisi called Kazakhstan a close neighbor and friend of Iran, and said, "In terms of transportation, Iran is the best option for Kazakhstan's fast access and safe transit to open waters."

President Tokayev thanked President Raisi for his call and congratulated him on the month of Ramadan, saying, "I completely agree with your Excellency that Muslim countries should solve the problems of the Islamic world by strengthening cooperation and expanding mutual consultations."

Iran, Azerbaijan FMs Hold Phone Call for Third Time in a Week

TEHRAN (IP) - Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan for the third time in a week had a telephone conversation about the latest developments in bilateral relations.

Hossein Amirabdollahian and Jeyhun Bayramov, the foreign ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, discussed the latest developments in bilateral relations over the phone tonight (Friday), 25 April, for the third time in a week.

In this round of talks, the two foreign ministers emphasized the follow-up of bilateral agreements between the two countries.

Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan Foreign Ministers, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Jeyhun Bayramov, held an extensive conversation during two rounds of telephone calls this week in which the developments in the bilateral relations between Baku and Tehran, some regional issues were discussed.

In these direct and transparent talks, existing problems, misunderstandings and solutions to overcome the current situation were discussed; also the two sides emphasized mutual respect for good neighborliness, each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Referring to the conspiracy of the Zionist regime against the unity, security and progress of the countries of the region, Amirabdollahian said that only the enemies benefit from the existence of divisions among the countries of the region.

Israeli Collapse Imminent as New Life Breathed Into Palestine

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says the Israeli regime's collapse is imminent as the regime faces several crises and "a new life" breathed into Palestinian resistance.

"The Zionist regime has decayed and is close to collapse," Major General Hossein Salami said on Friday while addressing the International Quds Day rallies in Isfahan, central Iran.

"The first sign of this regime's decline is that there is no established political system inside the regime," he maintained.

Describing Arab normalization with Israeli as a "source of shame", Salami said those states that have done so "regret" the decision as they understood that they "cannot rely on a support that has been eaten from inside by termites ... and will soon break down."

He was referring to the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords, according to which the Israeli regime normalized diplomatic relations with United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco in 2020.

The regime is facing several major crises, including isolation in foreign policy, internal instability, domestic

protests, and inefficient government, stressed the Iranian commander.

"A new life has been breathed into the Palestinian movement," he highlighted.

"Operations are carried out in the West Bank and Tel Aviv and a regime that has encircled itself with walls like an appalling garrison and is equipped with the most modern security systems that cannot prevent delivery of arms to West Bank and operations of Palestinian fighters."

Al-Quds has pushed its way to freedom and Palestinians, who were defending themselves until months ago, are now eyeing to retake their occupied homes and land, he said, adding, "This reality is close today."

According to the divine tradition, oppressors will not remain and the "dagger that the US and the UK have put in the body of the Muslim Ummah" will not create deeper wounds, stressed Salami.

"Divine promises are close and we are very close to victory and any move of the Zionist regime is a starting point for their immediate collapse before they can imagine," he said.

President Raisi's Upcoming Visit to Saudi Arabia to Boost Bilateral Ties

TEHRAN (IP) - The Director-General of Iran's Foreign Ministry Office for Persian Gulf Affairs emphasized the importance of the upcoming visit of the President of Iran to Saudi Arabia in expanding the relations between the two countries.

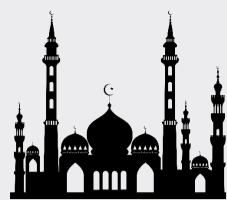
In recent days, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the mediation of China, agreed to resume bilateral diplomatic relations after seven years.

Following this agreement, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian met and talked with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan in Beijing. Based on the agreements between Tehran and Riyadh, Director-General of Iran's Foreign Ministry Office for Persian Gulf Affairs, Alireza Enayati, stated: "Iran's permanent mission in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia will operate at full capacity, and the upcoming trip of the President of Iran to

Saudi Arabia Ebrahim Raisi will have significant effects on bilateral as well as regional and extra-regional relations."

Enayati further described the latest developments in Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and a number of other southern countries along the Persian Gulf, including Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, and announced the news that planning for the visit of the Sultan of Oman to Iran is underway and said: "The UAE has invited the President of Iran to participate in the World Climate Summit that will be held in this country this year (2023)."

He added: "In relation to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Saudi Arabia as the host government has obligations, and the Saudis have always emphasized that as the host government, they adhere to their commitments in relation to this organization and its members."



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:04
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:56
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:00
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:29

94. If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee: the Truth hath indeed come to thee from thy Lord: so be in no wise of those in doubt.

95. Nor be of those who reject the signs of Allah, or thou shalt be of those who perish.

Surah 10. Jonah (94 - 95)

Gas Swap Registers 358% Growth Last Year

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran registered "huge volumes" of gas swap in the previous Iranian calendar year of 1401 (ended March 20, 2023), showing a 358 percent hike as compared to the last year's corresponding period, the chief executive of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) said.

Speaking in an interview with Fars News Agency on Saturday, Majid Chegeni stated that Iran's gas export volume also showed a 10 percent rise in the previous year.

The deputy oil minister pointed to the performance of his company in the field of natural gas trade and added that the export of natural gas registered a 10 and 79 percent growth in 2022 in terms of volume and value respectively as compared to a year earlier.

The amount of swapped gas has registered a 358 and 530 percent hike in 2022 in terms of volume and value respectively as compared to the same period of last year, Chegeni highlighted.

The NIGC imported natural gas from Turkmenistan under a swap deal inked with SOCAR Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2022, he said, adding, "While increasing natural gas trade with Turkmenistan, the NIGC succeeded in restoring gas import from Turkmenistan into the country.

This huge volume of natural is swapped from Turkmenistan to the Republic of Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, he noted.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the deputy oil minister referred to the export of byproducts of natural gas and noted that Iran's export of Liquefied Petroleum Gas



(LPG) registered a 32 and 57 percent hike in terms of volume and value respectively as compared to 2021.

It is expected that the volume of gas imported from Turkmenistan under the gas swap deal inked with SOCAR Company would increase more than 70 percent in 2023 as compared to a year earlier, the NIGC chief highlighted.

Back in November 2022, an Oilprice.com report stated that Iran has been ramping up its natural gas production with the aim of increasing exports to global markets as the demand in Europe for natural gas is surging ahead of winter.

"Iran last week made it clear that it is ramping up its gas production operations at the supergiant South Pars natural gas field, with a focus on its controversial Phase 11," the report read.

South Pars gas field, which Iran shares with Qatar in the Persian Gulf water, is divided into 24 standard phases of development in the first stage. Most of the phases are fully operational at the moment.

The huge offshore field covers an area of 9,700 square kilometers, 3,700 square kilometers of which are in Iran's territorial waters in the Persian Gulf. The remaining 6,000 square kilometers, called North Dome, are situated in Qatar's territorial waters.

MAPNA Group Sets Outlook In First Meeting of Year



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The first meeting of the new Iranian calendar year 1402 of MAPNA Group convened with the presence of the CEO, managers and staff of the group where the outlook of the group for the New Year was depicted.

In this sincere meeting, the CEO of the group Mr. Abbas Aliabadi reviewed the turning points of activities and achievements of the group in the past year and felicitated the New Year and holy month of Ramadhan.

He then pointed to the slogan of the current year, inflation control and production growth, and said that the reason behind economic slogans chosen for the years is the importance of this field and the necessity for concentration on it and removing hurdles and economic challenges and termed very significant the role of MAPNA Group in this field as a big economic enterprise which can play considerable role for the public to take advantage of it.

Aliabadi then pointed to this issue that in August the group will celebrate its 30th anniversary and said that sustainability and development of MAPNA Group in the past three decades has been source of honor and pride, adding that the road of MAPNA Group kick started as an apparatus to solve an issue and it will lead to creating future.

He then pointed to some of the important achievements of the group last year and pointed to the successful exploitation of the mobile system for testing jet engine which was conducted for the first time in the Middle East by MAPNA Group. He added that this project was in fact a big and important achievement and honor which was attained by the experts of the group.

He then said that the group is moving towards new and innovative businesses and achievements as well as paying attention to exports especially to countries with suitable capacities in the Latin America as well as the region and this is one of the effective strategies of MAPNA Group in its future outlook.

Aliabadi then said that the group will seek agility and improving the productivity of its human forces as well as reducing its costs in the current year.

Iran Export to India Rises 91%



TEHRAN (MNA) - The value of Iran's export to India rose 91% in the first two months of 2023, as compared to the same period of time in 2022, according to the data released by the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The Indian ministry put the worth of Iran's exports to India at \$134 million in January-February 2023, while the figure was \$70 million in the same time span of 2022, IRIB reported.

India's 2-month export to Iran fell 34 percent year on year.

The two countries' value of trade dropped 13 percent to \$358 million in the first two months of this year from \$412 million in the first two months of the past year.

Based on the data previously released by the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the value of Iran's export to India increased by 60 percent in 2022 as compared to the preceding year.

The Indian ministry put the worth of Iran's exports to India at \$653 million in 2022, while the figure was \$409 million in 2021.

As reported, petroleum products have been the major goods imported by India from Iran in the said months.

According to the mentioned data, the value of trade between Iran and India reached \$2.5 billion in 2022, rising 48 percent from \$1.693 billion in 2021.

During January-December 2022, India's export to Iran also increased by 44 percent to stand at \$1.847 billion, while the figure was \$1.284 billion in 2021.

Rice was India's major product exported to Iran in the said period during which the country shipped \$1.098 billion worth of rice to the Islamic Republic.

In late May 2022, the Iranian ambassador to India said that Iran and India are trying to diversify the channels of payments to expand bilateral trade.

Iran Planning to Export \$10b Worth of Copper Annually

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The head of the Iran Copper Association said that achieving an annual export of \$10 billion worth of copper is 'feasible'.

Bahram Shakouri made the remarks in an interview with IRNA on Saturday and noted that developing the copper industry and supporting the development projects in this sector can generate \$10 billion worth of foreign currency for the country.

Stating that copper is a metal has a very bright future, he added that by employing new innovative methods, the use of copper mineral will increase by fourfold by 2050.

Today, huge investment has been made in the field of exploration and processing of copper and this issue should be taken into more serious consideration in the country, he highlighted.

Shakouri called on the concerned officials to take effective steps in line with materializing the objectives of the copper sector in the country in collaboration with the private sector.

Iran, Saudi Arabia Direct Flights to Be Established Soon

TEHRAN (MNA) - Negotiations are underway between Iran and Saudi Arabia for resuming direct flights between the two Muslim countries.

The chairman of the Iranian Air Travel and Tourism Offices announced Saudi Arabia will establish direct flights to Iran and resume and facilitate travel soon.

Referring to the Tehran-Riyadh agreement to resume relations and diplomatic ties, Hormatollah Rafiei said, "After the signing of the joint statement, the two sides held good meetings to discuss establishing direct flights

between the two countries."

According to Rafiei, initial negotiations and agreements were made regarding the establishment of direct flights between some cities in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It seems that the Saudi side is very serious and determined on implementing this issue, he said.

Establishing a direct flight from Dammam to Mashhad and Tehran was one of the topics of these negotiations, he also said, adding that it is likely that this direct flight will be established soon.

Oil Sector's Annual Economic Growth Up 15.4%

TEHRAN (Shana) - The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) report showed a 15.4 percent economic growth in the country's oil sector in the previous Iranian year, which ended on March 20, 2023, said the administration's economic spokesman.

Announcing the growth in a press conference, Seyyed Ehsan Khandouzi pointed to statistics and macroeconomic indicators and added, "Last Year, we managed to handle the government's budget and financial affairs without borrowing from CBI while last year's construction budget witnessed an increase."

Based on the CBI report, he continued, the non-oil economic growth rate in the previous year stood at 4.5 percent and hit 5.3 percent if the oil sector's growth is calculated.

The oil sector's annual economic growth was 15.4 percent, reiterated the spokesperson, adding the industrial sector had an 8.4 percent growth.

Elaborating on the country's imports and exports during the yearlong period, Khandouzi said, "China, Iraq, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and India were respectively the main target markets for exporting Iranian-made products."

Iran Mulls Opening New Border Crossing With Iraq

ILAM (IRNA) - Deputy Governor of Ilam Province for political and security affairs said that the consultations for Chilat Border Crossing to start work have begun to facilitate Arbaeen pilgrims' movements.

Considering the fact that Ilam Province is the nearest and the most important passage for pilgrims to enter Iraq during the Arbaeen ritual, the activity of the Chilat border point is necessary for Arbaeen pilgrims, Hassan Bahramnia said addressing the Arbaeen headquarter meeting.

He also called for increasing the number of gates due to the large number of pilgrims and hot weather.

Arbaeen marks the 40th day of martyrdom of Imam Hossein (AS), the third Imam of Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) Infallible Household and 72 of his companions in 680 AD in a land in modern Iraq after they refused to pledge allegiance to the tyrant Yazid.

Every year, Muslim pilgrims from across the world flock to Iraq in the weeks leading to Arbaeen and walk toward Karbala.

Message of CEO of HOSCO On Human Resources Day



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DEWSK

TEHRAN - The CEO of Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) Ataollah Maroufkhani in a message felicitated human resources day.

In his message, Me. Maroufkhani pointed to the remarks of Supreme Leader who considers human resources, capital and tool as the main tools required by the domestic production and Iran is among the countries with highest number of experts and engineers and therefore the country has no problem in terms of human resources.

He went on to say that human resources as the most important and valuable capital in any organization plays key role in development and empowering and improving productivity and it is natural that blossom of any organization first depends on motivation, knowledge, commitment, capability, training and experience of human forces and it is a pleasure that Hormozgan Steel Company as one of the most successful industrial units of the country enjoys having expert, committed and efficient human capitals and the company owes its successes and brilliant achievements to the prudence and sincere efforts of its human forces.

Maroufkhani then felicitated the day to all of the workers and staff of the company and expressed his sincere thanks to them.

Domestic Wheat Purchases Expected to Reach 8.5m Tons

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Ministry of Agriculture expects to purchase 8 to 8.5 million tons of guaranteed wheat yields from domestic farmers this year.

According to the estimates, it is expected that between 8 and 8.5 million tons of guaranteed wheat yields will be purchased from the total wheat cultivation area of the country, the head of wheat farming of the agriculture ministry Sohrab Sohrabi said.

Sohrabi said the total irrigated wheat cultivation area under contract has reached 1.55 million hectares this year, from 250,000 hectares last year, showing a 6-fold increase.

Death Toll Climbs to at Least 170 in Myanmar Junta Attack

BANGKOK (Dispatches) - The death toll from an air strike on a central Myanmar village rose to an estimated 171 victims, according to a team member involved in cremating bodies and media reports.

Myanmar has been in crisis since the military toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government in a February 2021 coup, with an estimated 3,200 civilians killed as part of the junta's crackdown on dissent.

There is no official death toll from Tuesday morning's strike on Pazi Gyi village in the central Sagaing region, although military authorities confirmed they had carried out an operation in the area. A villager involved in cremating the bodies, who asked not to be identified to protect his safety, said on Friday his team had revised its death count up to 171 from 130 a day earlier.



Magnitude 7.0 Earthquake Hits Indonesia

JAKARTA (Dispatches)- A strong 7.0-magnitude earthquake was recorded in the sea north of the main Indonesian island of Java, the US Geological Survey (USGS) said, with no immediate reports of damage or casualties.

The quake struck at 4:55 pm local time (0955 GMT), the USGS said, with Indonesia's geological agency ruling out a tsunami after the epicentre was detected at a depth of 594 kilometres (370 miles).

Indonesia experiences frequent quakes due to its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", an arc of intense seismic activity that stretches from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.



Europe Presses Tough Taiwan Stance



LONDON (Dispatches) - European foreign policy officials urged China not to use force over Taiwan, taking a tough stance against Beijing's threats over the democratically governed island, after comments by French President Emmanuel Macron were perceived as weak.

China in recent days has held intense military drills around Taiwan, which it claims as its own, and has never renounced the use of force to bring the island under its control.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, addressing the issue at a press conference in Beijing alongside her Chinese counterpart Qin Gang, said any attempt by China to control Taiwan would be unacceptable and would have serious repercussions for Europe.

EU foreign policy chief Joseph Borrell echoed her remarks in a statement prepared for a speech due to be delivered in Beijing at the Center for China and Globalization think tank on Friday that had to be cancelled after he caught COVID-19.

"A military escalation in the Taiwan Strait, through which ... 50% of world trade goes every day, would be a horror scenario for the entire world," said Baerbock, adding it would have "inevitable repercussions" for European interests.

In interviews published after his trip to China last week, which was meant to showcase European unity on China policy, Macron cautioned against being drawn into a crisis over Taiwan driven by an "American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction".

While many of the remarks were not new, the timing of their publication, and their bluntness, annoyed many Western officials.

"The European Union's position (on Taiwan) is consistent and clear," Borrell said in his remarks. "Any attempt to change the status quo by force would be unacceptable."

Borrell also said Europe's future relationship with China depended on it trying to use its influence to find a political solution to the Ukraine crisis.

"It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the European Union to maintain a relationship of trust with China, which I would like to see, if China does not contribute to the search for a political solution based on Russia's withdrawal from the Ukrainian territory," Borrell said.

"Neutrality in the face of the violation of international law is not credible," Borrell said, adding an appeal for Chinese President Xi Jinping to speak to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and for China to provide more humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Xi has met Russian President Vladimir Putin twice but not spoken with Zelenskiy since Russia invaded Ukraine in what Moscow calls a "special military operation" in February 2022.

China stated its opposition to attacks on civilians and on nuclear facilities in a position paper on Ukraine published in February, but it has refrained from openly criticizing Russia.

"President Xi's visit to Moscow has demonstrated that no other country has a bigger influence on Russia than China," said Baerbock.

"It is good that China has signalled to get engaged in finding a solution. But I have to say clearly that I wonder why China so far has not asked the aggressor Russia to stop the war. We all know President Putin has the opportunity to do so any time he wants to."

Poland's prime minister warned earlier this week that Ukraine's defeat may embolden China to invade Taiwan.

Baerbock and Borrell also spoke about the risks of being too dependent economically on China, in line with comments made by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a speech last month on the eve of her China visit.

Macron Secures Pension Victory But Gloom Deepens in France

PARIS (Dispatches) - President Emmanuel Macron looks to have won his battle to push through widely unpopular pension reform, but many experts and historians believe he has deepened the gloom enveloping French democracy.

France's constitutional court approved the core parts of Macron's pension reform on Friday, paving the way for the centrist head of state to sign into law a hike in the retirement age to 64 from its current level of 62.

But the manner in which the legislation has been passed -- in the face of opposition from two out of three voters, trade unions, and a majority of MPs in the National Assembly -- has dismayed even previously sympathetic observers.

Pierre Rosanvallon, a highly respected sociologist and historian, issued a striking warning in early April that Macron needed to restore the legitimacy of his presidential office in the eyes of voters.

"Without this, the time of revolutions could come back, or else there will be an accumulation of toxic disaffection which will open the way for far-right populism," the centre-left thinker told Liberation newspaper.

Political historian Jean Garrigues also wrote that it was "all of our institutional foundations, all of our political figures which are discredited" by the way the reform had been passed.

"The link between our citizens and their national representatives has been stretched further in this crisis, as it was during the Yellow Vests," Garrigues wrote in Le Monde newspaper, referring to fierce anti-Macron protests in 2018. Criticism has focused in particular on how the president's minority government rammed the legislation through parliament on March 16 without a vote.

The move -- legal but controversial -- came after other constitutional measures were used to keep parliamentary debate to a minimum, deepening the sense of outrage felt by protesters who have taken to the streets almost every week since January.

The sometimes violent protests peaked at 1.28 million people on March 7, according to official statistics, the biggest in a generation. "This protest movement will leave a mark in the history our country, through its size and the new people who have joined in," the leader of the moderate CFDT union, Laurent Berger, told reporters as he marched -- for the 12th time since January -- on Thursday.

By deploying U.S. strategic assets with increased frequency and intensity, the two countries will continue demonstrating our strong alliance's will that we will never tolerate any nuclear attack from North Korea," the ministry said in a statement.

South Korea's defence ministry said North Korea was still developing the weapon, and that it needed more time and effort to master the technology, indicating that Pyongyang might carry out more tests.

North Korean state media outlet KCNA released photos of Kim watching the launch, accompanied by his wife, sister and daughter, and the missile covered in camouflage nets on a mobile launcher. A state media video showed the Hwasong-18 missile blasting off from a launch tube, creating a cloud of smoke. The development of the Hwasong-18 will "extensively reform the strategic deterrence components of the DPRK, radically promote the effectiveness of its nuclear counterattack posture and bring about a change in the practicality of its offensive military strategy," KCNA said, using the initials of the country's official name.

South Korea and the U.S. air forces staged drills hours after the report, involving American B-52H bombers that joined F-35A, F-15 and F-16 fighter jets, Seoul's defense ministry said.

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Man Suspected of Leaking Secret U.S. Documents Appears in Court

BOSTON (Dispatches) - A 21-year-old member of the U.S. Air National Guard accused of leaking top secret military intelligence records online made his initial appearance before a federal judge in Boston on Friday to face charges he unlawfully copied and transmitted classified materials.

Jack Douglas Teixeira of North Dighton, Massachusetts, who was arrested by heavily armed FBI agents at his home on Thursday, appeared in a crowded federal court wearing a brown khaki jumpsuit.

At the hearing, Boston's top federal national security prosecutor, Nadine Pellegrini, requested that Teixeira be detained pending trial, and a detention hearing was set for Wednesday. The court appointed a public defender to represent Teixeira.

The leaked classified documents at the heart of the investigation were posted online on a social media website in March and perhaps earlier, but news of their existence did not come to light until it was reported by the New York Times last week.

It is believed to be the most serious security breach since more than 700,000 documents, videos and diplomatic cables appeared on the WikiLeaks website in 2010. In the WikiLeaks case, the leaker - U.S. Army Private First Class Chelsea Manning - was sentenced to 35 years in prison. Democratic President

Barack Obama later commuted her sentence.

U.S. officials are still assessing the damage done by the leaks, which included records showing purported details of Ukrainian military vulnerabilities and embarrassed Washington by revealing its spying on allies.

In a criminal complaint made public on Friday, Teixeira was charged with unlawfully copying and transmitting classified defense records. Each offense can carry up to 10 years in prison.

He was also charged with another offense which makes it a crime for an employee of the United States to knowingly remove classified records to an unauthorized location.

For now, Teixeira faces three charges in connection with just one leaked document: a classified record which described the status of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and included details about troop movements on a particular date.

Experts expect the charges against him will only grow, as investigators examine each document he uploaded, confirm its classification status and decide which ones could be disclosed to a jury without gravely damaging national security.

The number of times he separately uploaded and transmitted each document could also be a factor in how many charges he will face.



Ukrainians Said to Pull Back In Bakhmut as Moscow Launches New Push

NEAR BAKHMUT (Dispatches)

- Ukrainian troops have been forced to withdraw from some parts of Bakhmut in the face of a renewed Russian assault on the ruined battlefield city, Britain said, with Moscow pressing to achieve a victory before Ukraine's expected counteroffensive.

Ukrainian officials say Russia has been drawing down troops from other areas on the front for a major push on Bakhmut, which Moscow has been trying to capture for nine months to reenergize the all-out invasion it launched more than a year ago.

Western countries have in the past pointed to acrimony between the Russian defence ministry (MoD) and the country's main mercenary force Wagner as a major Russian weakness.

"Russia has re-energized its assault on the Donetsk Oblast town of Bakhmut as forces of the Russian MoD and Wagner Group have improved co-operation," Britain's military said in a daily briefing note.

"Ukrainian forces face significant resupply issues but have made orderly withdrawals from the positions they have been forced to concede," it said. Near Bakhmut, soldiers from a Ukrainian artillery unit were loading shells into a Soviet-era howitzer and firing towards the front line, where they said Russia had massed its foot soldiers.

"Our target in that direction is mostly infantry. There is a big concentration of the Russian Federation's 'human factor,'" said Dmytro, the artillery unit's 44-year-old commander. The gun thundered as the unit blasted three shells, the first to find range, the second to adjust aim.

"The third one is finishing off. Most likely, I hope, the infantry they spotted was eliminated."

Bakhmut, which held around 70,000 people before the war, has been Russia's main target in a massive winter offensive that has so far yielded scant gains despite infantry ground combat of an intensity unseen in Europe since World War Two.

Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar said Russian commanders had redirected troops to Bakhmut from other areas.

"The enemy is using its most professional units there and resorting to a significant amount of artillery and aviation," she wrote on the Telegram messaging app.



How Japan's Big Plans For a Hydrogen Society Fell Flat



TOKYO (Dispatches) - It was once touted as a miracle solution to Japan's energy problems: creating a "hydrogen society" by sharply ramping up use of the fuel for vehicles, industry and housing.

But the country's plan to expand its hydrogen market and slash greenhouse emissions has suffered delays and criticism over the fuel's green credentials.

As G7 climate ministers meet this weekend in the northern Japanese city of Sapporo, here are some key points about the strategy:

In 2017, Japan became the first country to devise a national strategy for hydrogen power, aiming to drastically scale up its use by 2030.

The colourless, odourless gas is an exciting prospect on paper. It can be produced, stored and transported in large quantities, and does not emit carbon dioxide when burned. These qualities are attractive to Japan, which is heavily reliant on fossil fuel imports.

Most of its nuclear reactors are still offline after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, and the nation set a goal two and a half years ago of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

Hydrogen-powered fuel cell vehicles, which Japanese automakers helped pioneer, were a key part of the original plan.

The government had hoped for 40,000 of these cars to be on the road by 2020, and 800,000 by 2030. But by the end of last year, just 7,700 units had been sold in the country since 2014.

Despite subsidies for buyers, they remain "very expensive", even compared to battery-powered electric cars, Kentaro Tamura, a Japan-based expert at the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), told AFP.

Hydrogen refuelling stations have high installation and upkeep costs, and are rare in comparison to charging spots for electric vehicles, Tamura added.

The results have been better but still modest in housing -- the other major area initially earmarked for hydrogen expansion.

A residential fuel cell program called "Enefarm" was meant to equip 5.3 million Japanese homes by 2030. It uses gas to create hydrogen that reacts with oxygen from the air to generate electricity and heat water.

But by the end of 2022, just 465,000 systems had been installed, far short of the government's target of 1.4 million by 2020.

Price is a key factor here too, Tamura said, with installation costs "very high compared with alternative technologies like heat pumps".

Energy experts were sceptical of Japan's hydrogen strategy from the start, because it was launched without creating a reliable supply chain for environmentally friendly "green" hydrogen, produced from renewable energy sources.

Instead, Japan opted for so-called "grey" hydrogen, made using greenhouse gas-emitting coal, petrol or gas, and "blue" hydrogen, which also comes from fossil fuels but with the carbon emissions captured and stored.

In the meantime, countries such as China and some European nations have moved faster on green hydrogen, which remains rare and expensive but is key to decarbonisation, the Japanese Renewable Energy Institute think-tank says.

In March, Tokyo agreed to spend \$1.6 billion on an ambitious but controversial venture in Australia to produce liquid hydrogen from lignite coal and export it to Japan.

But critics say the project's "blue" hydrogen claims are based on carbon capture technology that does not yet exist.

Twitter Working on AI Despite Musk Call For Global Pause



SAN FRANCISCO (Dispatches) - Elon Musk is advancing an artificial intelligence project at Twitter despite recently calling for an overall pause in developing such technology, US media reports said.

Musk has bought thousands of powerful, costly computing processors and hired AI engineering talent, Insider reported, while another tech-focused outlet, the Information, said the entrepreneur has floated the idea of starting a rival to ChatGPT.

Meanwhile, Musk has slashed staff at Twitter as part of dramatic cost cutting since his \$44 billion takeover of the San Francisco firm late last year.

The Insider report came less than two weeks after Musk joined experts in signing a letter calling for a hiatus in the development of AI.

The open letter, published on the website of the Musk-funded Future of Life Institute, urged a six-month pause in development of powerful AI systems.

The billionaire Tesla boss and other luminaries wrote that "AI systems with human-competitive intelligence can pose profound risks to society and humanity."

The signatories, who included academics and tech titans like Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, argued that the pause should be used to bolster regulation and ensure the systems were safe.

Critics however called the letter a "hot mess" of "AI hype" that even misrepresented an academic paper. Musk's fledgling AI project at Twitter was said in the Insider report to involve training a language model to create written content.

Generative AI could also be put to work as a search or advertising tool, but it remained unclear what Musk intended its purpose to be at Twitter, the report said.

Twitter replied to a request for comment with a poop emoji, which has become its practice under Musk. Big tech companies like Google, Meta and Microsoft have spent years working on AI systems -- previously known as machine learning or big data -- to help with translations, search and targeted advertising.

But late last year San Francisco firm OpenAI supercharged the interest in AI when it launched ChatGPT, a bot that can generate screeds of natural language text from a short prompt.

Musk cofounded OpenAI but left the company in 2018.

Microsoft has since announced it is investing billions of dollars in OpenAI and put its technology to work in its Bing internet search service.

Wind and Solar Hit Record 12% of Global Power Generation Last Year

LONDON (Dispatches) - Wind and solar energy represented a record 12% of global electricity generation last year, up from 10% in 2021, a report on Wednesday found.

Ember studied power sector data from 78 countries in its annual global electricity review, representing 93% of global power demand.

The report by climate and energy independent think tank Ember said last year could have marked peak emissions from the power sector, which is the largest source of planet-warming carbon dioxide (CO2) worldwide.

It concluded that all renewable energy sources and nuclear power combined represented a 39% share of global generation last year, with solar's share rising by 24% and wind by 17% from the previous year.



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Turkish Private Sector's Foreign Debt at \$158b in February

ANKARA (Dispatches) - The Turkish private sector's foreign debt totaled \$158 billion as of February, down \$1.4 billion from the end of 2022, the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) said Thursday. Long-term loans amounted to \$149.3 billion, down \$1.7 billion, while short-term loans — excluding trade credits—were \$8.7 billion, up \$271 million, over the same period. Financial institutions' share of long-term loans was at 34.5%, while non-financial institutions' share was at 65.5%; these figures were 73.9% and 26.1%, respectively, for short-term loans. Some 61.3% of long-term loans were in the U.S. dollar, followed by the euro (34.7%), Turkish lira (1.9%), and other currencies (2.1%).



Most Asian Markets Drop After Recession Warning, Rate Hike Seen

HONG KONG (Dispatches) - Asian markets mostly fell today after minutes from the Federal Reserve's most recent policy meeting showed officials saw a U.S. recession at the end of the year, while inflation data could not temper expectations of another interest rate hike.

A smaller-than-forecast rise in prices last month provided some much-needed hope to investors that a year of monetary tightening was finally showing results, but analysts said the details showed there was still some way to go.

The five-percent rise in the March consumer price index was the lowest since May 2021 but core inflation, which excludes food and energy prices, accelerated to 5.6 per cent from 5.5 per cent the previous month.

The reading came after Friday's jobs report showed another healthy increase in recruitment and helped reinforce expectations the Fed will hike rates in May, for the tenth time in just over a year.

Traders await the release of wholesale inflation later in the day, and first-quarter earnings Friday from top banks including JPMorgan and Citibank.

Wall Street swung after the release but turned negative towards the end of the day after the Fed minutes, which highlighted concerns about the impact of last month's banking crisis, in which three US lenders went under and Credit Suisse was taken over.

"The staff's projection at the time of the March meeting included a mild recession starting later this year, with a recovery over the subsequent two years," according to the minutes of the Fed policy meeting, where rates were lifted by 25 basis points.

They also said "some additional policy firming may be appropriate" to help bring inflation down to the Fed's target of two per cent.

In light of the banking turmoil, officials "commented that recent developments in the banking sector were likely to result in tighter credit conditions for households and businesses and to weigh on economic activity, hiring and inflation" but the extent of the effects was uncertain.

Edward Moya at OANDA said: "The initial stock market rally was rightfully faded as inflation is still too high and as rate cut bets are still aggressively getting priced in. Investors also might not necessarily want to aggressively pile into risky assets before the big banks kickoff earnings season."

In early Asian trade, Hong Kong was dragged by sharp losses in the tech sector after the Financial Times reported that Japan's SoftBank was looking to unload a majority of its holdings in Alibaba. The ecommerce giant fell more than five per cent at one point, while rival JD.com was off around four per cent.

There were also losses in Sydney, Singapore, Wellington, Taipei, Manila and Jakarta, though Tokyo, Shanghai and Seoul ticked slightly higher.

Oil prices inched lower, but held most of Wednesday's two-per cent rally fuelled by a drop in US inventories and supply issues from Iraqi Kurdistan.

The two main contracts are now sitting around levels not seen since November, while traders are awaiting an outlook update from OPEC later in the day.

ECB Policymakers Converging on 25-bps Rate Hike in May

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - European Central Bank policymakers are converging on a 25 basis point interest rate hike in May, even if other options remain on the table and the debate is not yet settled, according to five sources with direct knowledge of the discussion.

The ECB has raised rates by at least 50 basis points each at six successive meetings -- the fastest pace on record -- to fight stubbornly high inflation. But a host of factors now support the case for increased caution, the sources, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

Uncertainty remains high after last month's financial sector volatility and past rate hikes have yet to work their way through the economy, so less is needed because past moves are still taking hold, the sources said.

They added that the peak in rates is now in sight and that this "last mile" is safer to navigate in smaller steps. Another argument put forward for gradualism was that the ECB's deposit rate, now at 3%, is at a level which restricts growth.

The sources said the debate was still open and the outlook could still change - especially on April inflation data and the ECB's quarterly bank lending survey, both of which are due just two days before the May 4 meeting.

An ECB spokesman declined to comment.

Some of the sources said they would prefer the ECB not to provide any guidance about its June move, the same way it is keeping its options open now, so that policymakers would have a free hand in acting on the new economic projections due then.

The sources said that some are advocating no change in May - mostly the same Southern European policymakers who did not support last month's 50 basis point increase, while others - also a small group - argue for another 50 basis point hike.

So far only few policymakers have publicly commented on the possible size of the ECB's next move.

Klaas Knot of the Netherlands said it was unclear whether 50 basis points would be needed or if 25 was enough. Slovakia's Peter Kazimir said the ECB could perhaps slow down the pace of its increases while Austria's Robert Holzmann meanwhile backed another 50 basis point move.

Markets currently price 25 basis point hikes each in May and June, while a third such increase is fully priced in by September. The sources reasoned that rate hikes are needed because overall inflation remains too high and core inflation - stripped of volatile food and energy prices - could rise for several more months, thus making any pause the wrong signal to send.



Malaysia Seen as Emerging Data Center Hub in Asia

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - RHB Investment Bank Bhd sees Malaysia as an emerging data center (DC) hub in Asia, with "accelerated capacity plant-up and hyper scalars making landfall," coupled with supportive pro-business policies to attract and retain DC investors.

Malaysia's large pool of knowledge and skilled workers portends a significant competitive advantage in catalysing greater foreign direct investments, which is crucial for the DC space, it added.

"The unity government under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is committed to further accelerate digital adoption in the country, which augurs well for the domestic DC industry," the research house said in a note.

It pointed out that the positive outlook of the industry was also supported by the New Investment Policy unveiled by the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (Miti) in October 2022, in which the government looks to boost high value job opportunities.

"Aside from Amazon Web Services and Microsoft, which have committed to set up cloud regions in the country, the likes of global DC names such as GDS, Equinix, and Yondr Group are pouring in significant capital to construct their maiden facilities in the country," it noted.

"Investment ideas in the DC fold naturally gravitate towards the traditional fixed line telcos, given that DCs were lynchpin assets for enterprise-related services and solutions that complement the vast submarine cable assets owned.

U.S. Inflation Slows in March But Remains Above Fed Target

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - U.S. consumer inflation slowed in March, according to data released, but remained well above the Federal Reserve's target despite numerous interest rate hikes over the last year.

The rate of inflation year-over-year fell to 5.0 per cent last month from 6.0 per cent in February, the smallest 12-month increase since May 2021, according to the Bureau of Labour Statistics.

The report showed a 0.1 per cent increase in

March over the prior month on a seasonally adjusted basis, much lower than the 0.4 percent reading in February and below analyst expectations as well.

Although greeted by President Joe Biden as a sign of progress, several commentators noted the inflation rate is far above the U.S. central bank's two per cent target, adding that inflation remained elevated when food and energy costs were stripped out.

"The good news is that inflation continues to trend down, with prices increasing at their slowest pace since April 2021," said Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData Retail.

"However, this is not a complete win as prices are still going up," Saunders added. "This means many households continue to make choices about what and how to buy in order to balance their budgets. Inflationary behaviors are still prevalent among Americans."

Analysts still expect the Fed to hike interest rates again next month, albeit by just a quarter percentage point, smaller than several recent increases.

Chief among the contributors to the milder inflation number was a significant drop in energy prices, offset by higher costs for housing. Price hikes also accelerated in new vehicles and medical care commodities.

Food prices were flat in March, with prices for meats, poultry and fish falling, while cereals, bakery products and non-alcoholic beverages climbed.

Biden, pointing to the drop in gasoline and grocery prices, said the data "shows continued progress in our fight against inflation," according to a White House statement.

"While inflation is still too high, this progress means more breathing room for hard-working Americans," Biden said.

After years of anaemic pricing pressure in the United States and other major economies, inflation roared back to life, beginning in 2021.

G7 Finance Leaders Pledge Financial Stability, Supply Chain Diversity

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Group of Seven (G7) finance leaders pledged to take action to maintain the stability of the global financial system after recent banking turmoil and to give low- and middle-income countries a bigger role in diversifying supply chains to make them more resilient.

Their communique did not mention China by name, but the supply chain language fit in with "friend-shoring" efforts by industrial democracies to work with each other to become less reliant on the Asian manufacturing powerhouse for battery minerals, semiconductors and other strategic goods.

"We commit to jointly empowering low- and middle-income countries to play bigger roles in supply chains through mutually beneficial cooperation by combining finance, knowledge, and partnership, which will help contribute to sustainable development and enhance supply chain resilience globally," the G7 finance ministers and central bank governors said in the statement.

The finance chiefs, meeting on the sidelines of International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in Washington, said they had discussed recent financial sector developments after the failure of two U.S. banks and the forced sale of troubled global lender Credit Suisse.

Shunichi Suzuki, the finance minister of G7 host Japan, said that stability had returned to the financial system after strong action by policymakers.

"We will continue to closely monitor financial sector developments and stand ready to take appropriate actions to maintain the stability and resilience of the global financial system," the G7 finance leaders said.

The ministers said that supply chains needed to achieve both efficiency and resilience, helping to maintain macroeconomic stability and make economies more sustainable. The statement cited the need to diversify the "highly concentrated" supply chains for clean energy technologies.

"In this endeavor, we will stand firm to protect our shared values, while preserving economic efficiency by upholding the free, fair and rules-based multilateral system and international cooperation," the G7 finance leaders said, using language often used to exclude China and other autocratic regimes.

Suzuki said the language was not specifically aimed at China, but added that the G7 group views a high concentration of supply chains in a single country was not desirable, noting that many supply chains were highly concentrated in China.

IMF Slashes Pakistan's Growth Outlook to 0.5%



ISLAMABAD (AP) - The International Monetary Fund has slashed the growth outlook for cash-strapped Pakistan, forecasting the South Asian country's fragile economy will grow just 0.5% this year, down from 6% in 2022.

The data on Pakistan's ailing economy was released by the IMF, when it unveiled its World Economic Outlook report in Washington. On Wednesday, Pakistan and IMF officials held a crucial round of talks for the release of a key tranche of a \$6 billion bailout package loan to Islamabad.

The IMF also forecast 27% inflation in the impoverished Islamic nation for 2023.

The global lender warned that unemployment will continue to rise in Pakistan. The country is struggling to avoid a default as it recovers from destruction caused by last summer's floods, which killed 1,739 people and caused \$30 billion in damages.

The coalition government of Pakistan's Prime Minister Shabbaz Sharif is in talks with the IMF to receive a key tranche of a \$6 billion bailout package signed in 2019 by Sharif's predecessor Imran Khan. Sharif's government in recent weeks slashed subsidies and raised taxes to comply with the bailout terms and secure the release of the \$1.2 billion portion of the deal that's been stalled since December.

But those measures resulted in increases in the price of food, gas and power in Pakistan.

Pakistan's Finance Minister Ishaq Dar held a virtual round of talks with IMF and World Bank officials, the government said, adding that in the talks, IMF official Jihad Azour expressed confidence that a staff-level agreement would soon be signed for the release of the \$1.2 billion tranche.

Azour urged Pakistan, which has been in talks with the IMF since December on the release of the tranche, to continue reforms in various sectors under an agreed-on roadmap.

Iran Medicinal Herbs Exports Exceed \$600m

TEHRAN (MNA) – Official figures indicate that the value of the exports of medicinal plants and herbal herbs have exceeded 660 million dollars in recent years.

More than 8,000 different types of plants grow in Iran, about 450 species of which are medicinal plants whose exports can generate lots of income for the country.

Iran is a country capable of cultivating and producing medicinal plants due to its favored climate conditions. The great progress of Iranians in the production of these products lays the ground for generating lots of revenues in the country's economy.

According to the available statistics, currently, about 90% of medicinal plants are produced within the country.



Inflation Trumps Financial Risks as Central Bank Tightening Set to Continue

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Despite broad warnings about the economic risks posed by recent stress in the banking sector, global monetary policymakers are keeping their focus squarely on inflation and the need to continue raising interest rates to tame it.

The call for caution has come from top officials at the International Monetary Fund who are worried about a global crack-up, from bond markets flashing recession signals, and from policymakers themselves who say they are monitoring the details of banking data and the mood of industry executives for signs of trouble.

Still, three of the world's four major central banks at this point are on track to raise interest rates when they next meet, a step U.S. markets bet will set the stage for cuts in borrowing costs soon after as recession arrives.

In their latest World Economic Outlook, IMF officials on Tuesday trimmed their forecast for world growth, but said there were "plausible" scenarios, flowing from the recent failures of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank in the U.S. and the forced merger of Credit Suisse, that could cut growth even deeper, while more serious banking problems and tighter credit could leave the global economy stalled altogether.

In contrast, monetary policymakers, even in the wake of the recent financial stress, seem primed to do more to combat high inflation that they still view as the greater risk. "The onus remains on ensuring enough monetary tightening is delivered to 'see the job through' and sustainably return inflation to target," Huw Pill, the Bank of England's chief economist, said last week, warning that inflation risks were "skewed significantly to the upside."

Though headline inflation in the United Kingdom was set to drop from above 10%, the highest rate in the developed world, Pill said the "potential persistence of domestically generated inflation" remained a barrier to reaching the 2% target.

A similar dilemma is emerging in Europe and the U.S., parts of the world that share a 2% inflation goal and a sense that the underlying pace of price increases has gotten stuck at a level much higher than that.

The outlier remains Japan, where long-stagnant inflation and wage growth are only now showing budding signs of change. Bank of Japan Governor Kazuo Ueda, in his inaugural news conference on Monday, stressed the need to keep an ultra-loose monetary policy to help sustainably achieve a 2% inflation target.

International economic officials gathering in Washington this week for the IMF and World Bank spring meetings can take some comfort that pandemic-era risks are continuing to diminish.

The COVID-19 health crisis has eased, with commerce largely back to normal. What seemed an incipient global recession just months ago has given way to continued, if slow, growth, even in the euro zone where output had seemed on the verge of shrinking.

An aggressive year of central bank rate hikes hasn't yet "broken" any of the economies involved, with the U.S. unemployment rate at 3.5%, near its lowest level since the late 1960s. Even if borrowing costs are set to move higher, the current tightening cycle is likely nearing its end as officials zero in on a level they feel is adequately restrictive to pull inflation into line.

Still, that terminal rate remains unclear, and the end of synchronized tightening by the Fed, BoE and European Central Bank doesn't mean tight monetary policy is going away. Far from it. Central bankers have begun to concede a key point: A normalizing global economy won't foster an easy return to the pre-pandemic era's low inflation trends.

Developments that policymakers thought would get them far along that road, such as the repair of global supply chains, have taken place as expected. But the help in lowering inflation has been less than anticipated, largely confined to slowing price increases for goods. Price pressures for services have shown little moderation.



In Europe, after dodging recession and weathering a winter with lower-than-anticipated energy prices despite the war in Ukraine, inflation concerns have moved from the oil-driven headline rate to an array of "core" prices that keep rising.

Wages, services and food are driving price growth to the point that the ECB's attention has shifted almost entirely to underlying inflation on fears that rapid price growth is at risk of getting stuck above target.

Philip Lane, the ECB's normally cautious chief economist, even put multiple rate hikes on the table as core inflation ticked up to a record-high 5.7% last month. Overall inflation is almost 4 percentage points below its October peak.

"Under our baseline scenario, in order to make sure inflation comes down to 2%, more hikes will be needed," Lane was quoted as saying by the German newspaper Die Zeit on March 29.

A U.S. measure often cited by Fed officials, the "trimmed mean" inflation rate excluding goods with the largest and smallest price movements, has shown little improvement, moving from 4.75% in August to just 4.59% in February.

The U.S. central bank is expected to increase its benchmark overnight interest rate by another quarter of a percentage point next month, and signal whether more hikes may be warranted. The U.S. labor market remains strong, with inflation now focused in sectors that are both the most labor-intensive and, by some research, the least sensitive to higher rates - bad news for the Fed, and a dynamic that may drive rates higher.

TD Securities macro strategists Jan Groen and Oscar Munoz recently concluded that some of the pandemic-era inflation had become "entrenched," with the U.S. personal consumption expenditures price index, excluding food and energy costs, likely to get lodged at a rate around 3%.

If that "core" PCE rate, which is closely monitored by the Fed, is as persistent as thought, they wrote, the U.S. central bank will "have to choose between its inflation target or aggressive easing" to deal with an eventual rise in the unemployment rate.

The likely outcome, they said, is that interest rates will remain higher than anticipated as inflation continues to be the priority.

The IMF's chief economist, Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, contends that focus is correctly placed given financial stability risks appear for now to have subsided.

Now Quds...

FROM PAGE 1

Every year when Quds Day is approaching, the Zionist forces get headache and step up security measures against the Palestinians but Palestinian people give no heed to bullets and force of the Zionists and hold the rallies and even gather at Al-Aqsa Mosque to show the Zionists they are determined to take back the occupied lands from the claws of the Zionists and it will happen sooner or later but it is just a matter of time.

Israel is currently facing collapse from both inside and outside and it will make easier the task of the Palestinians to take back their lands but Palestinians need more support from Muslims worldwide especially from Arab and Muslim governments otherwise the Zionist regime is emboldened to commit more crimes through normalization of ties with Arab states.

Israel is getting more isolated in the world and Arab governments should not help this regime to survive and normalization of ties with this blood-sucking regime will be a serious threat even for the future of their own governments.

Quds Day is a launch-pad for awakening of Muslims and justice seeking people in the world and especially for the Muslim countries for support of Palestine and it seems marking this day is working and more people in the world are now joining the anti-Israel camp, and the struggle for freedom of Palestine and Quds is getting momentum and the full collapse of Israel is imminent as today we see that the Zionists cannot easily attack the Palestinians and they get due responses from the Palestinians and the Resistance Forces.

The Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has always reiterated its full support for liberation of Palestine and Quds and this has been one of the pillars of the Islamic Revolution doctrine and Ayatollah Khamenei has reiterated that Israel will collapse in less than 25 years and the Islamic Republic of Iran will do its best in all fields to accelerate this collapse and destruction, and the countdown has started and it is just a matter of time but Muslims are sure that they will soon say their prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque, their first qibla, after liberation of the mosque and the lands. Inshallah.



U.S. Too Weak...

FROM PAGE 1

IRGC's spokesman went on to say that Israeli statements about attacking Iran without American help stem from U.S. messages that they are not able to assist Israel as the case was in the past and "are not ready to enter a battle [knowing] where it would end."

Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi speaking in Tehran on the Quds Day reiterated that the liberation of Quds (Jerusalem) is imminent; "Closer than you can imagine," adding that "the normalization of relations with regional states [such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain] has not brought and will not bring security for the Zionist regime."

IRGC Test-Fired...

FROM PAGE 1

The method is more effective because usually the top armor of the tank is the weakest part, and it is easier to penetrate it.

Last week, Kouhestani said that the IRGC has developed its latest suicide drone known as the Meraj 532, that will be used by the ground forces with a one-way range of 450km.

In July 2021, the IRGC unveiled the ground-launched version of Almas anti-tank missile, a top attack weapon that can hit targets within a range of 8 kilometers.

The IRGC had already developed the air-launched version of Almas missile fired by the Ababil-III drones.

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

China out of UN's Wildlife Survey for Pandemic Controls

HANOI (Dispatches) - China is not participating in a United Nations project to survey Asian wet markets and other facilities at high risk of spreading infectious diseases from wild animals to humans, despite long-running talks with Beijing, a UN official told Reuters.

China's hesitancy to join the UN project involving other Asian nations may compound frustration by

global researchers who have been pressing Beijing to share information about the origins of COVID-19, as they seek to prevent future pandemics due to zoonotic, or animal-to-human, disease transmission.

Four Asian countries - China, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos - were initially selected for the survey by the scientific advisory committee of the project, called the Safety across

Asia For the global Environment (SAFE), because they host multiple facilities presenting risks of animal-to-human disease transmission, the UN official said.

The selection for the project, launched in July 2021, was also made after major wildlife trafficking cases were detected, investigated and prosecuted in those countries, which increased zoonotic risks, the official said.

Tehran Slams...

FROM PAGE 1

Referring to the recent riots in Iran, the Secretary General of Iran's High Council for Human Rights added, "Egged on by incitement and backing of particular States, media outlets and terrorist groups, the recent gatherings in the Islamic Republic of Iran deviated from their peaceful nature and morphed into riots, causing violations of the fundamental rights of citizens, including but not limited to the right to personal liberty and security, the right to freedom of movement as well as the right to health and safety. On the contrary, the Islamic Republic of Iran took a responsible policy, and established an investigative committee to launch inquiries into the possible physical and financial damages and the violations of the rights of all parties. Nevertheless, in a politically-motivated move, the West and the United States exploited the Human Rights Council and held a special session to establish a so-called mechanism to investigate the recent riots in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Your Excellency also issued several one-sided letters and statements in this short

period of time, and the spokesperson of your office also adopted several positions."

"This is despite the fact that most European countries have been the scene of protests over the past months. Albeit demonstrations and protests in European countries were utterly peaceful, they were suppressed and dispersed with the most severe attacks by law enforcement forces. The same countries that consider themselves supporters of the rioters in Iran are - both in law and in practice - committing the most heinous crimes to systematically violate the right to peaceful assembly," the official said.

"I would like an answer to the following question: Why didn't the High Commissioner and his Office take a position regarding the deteriorating human rights situations in the aforementioned countries?! The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is expected to perform its duties in a professional and non-selective manner. Public opinion is still awaiting an appropriate reaction," Gharibabadi concluded.

Continued Israeli Violence...

FROM PAGE 1

The Iranian foreign minister said the Palestinian people understand the Israeli regime's "totalitarian and terrorist" nature and are now more coherent and united than ever before to forget the disgraceful reconciliation deals, which have only provoked the aggressive and usurping nature of Israelis.

He said the Palestinian people have a resolve to achieve their legitimate rights, liberate their homeland and protect their sanctities and values through resistance. Increasing awareness of the Palestinian people and disclosure of gaps and differences among the occupying forces has revealed the true entity of the fake Israeli regime, he said.

"The world witnesses that public hatred towards the Zionist regime has passed the borders of Palestine and Muslim countries and justice seekers

and free people across the world have become aware of the [regime's] apartheid and criminal nature which breaches human rights and poses a threat to regional and global peace and security," Amirabdollahian stated.

It has been proved that Israel's occupying and expansionist nature is incompatible with stability, security and peace in the region, he said, adding that the Tel Aviv regime pursues constant efforts to sow discord and incite enmity, conflict and war among Muslim countries in order to maintain its own security and survival. The top Iranian diplomat stressed that the new developments in Palestine and the occupied territories revealed the miscalculations of some states in establishing official relations with the Israeli regime.

He reiterated that the Islamic Republic's democratic solution is based on holding

a referendum with the participation of all genuine Palestinians, including Muslims, Christians and Jews, in order to form a Palestinian state from sea to river.

Amirabdollahian said Iran's initiative, whose details have been registered in the United Nations Secretariat, can be a fair and peaceful way to put an end to the tragedy of Palestine as the oldest and most painful crisis in modern history.

The Iranian foreign minister said that for many reasons, it is necessary to continue to consider Palestine as the main issue of the Muslim world, stressing the need to support the Palestinian people's struggle and resistance against Israel until the complete liberation of Palestine and al-Quds as well as the return of all the refugees to their homeland. He expressed hope that the world would soon witness the liberation of the first qibla of Muslims from the Israeli occupiers.

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WTA to Resume Tournaments In China This Year

LONDON (Dispatches) - The Women's Tennis Association will resume operations in China this year, it said, ending a stance taken in 2021 to suspend tournaments in the country due to concerns over the safety of former doubles number one Peng Shuai.
The WTA had received widespread praise for suspending its tournaments in the country after Peng said in a now deleted 2021 social media post that a senior former Chinese government official had sexually assaulted her.

Liverpool Fined for Player Conduct in Loss to Man City

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool have been fined 37,500 pounds (\$46,908.75) by the Football Association after their players surrounded the referee during this month's 4-1 Premier League defeat at Manchester City.
Several Liverpool players crowded around referee Simon Hooper as they pleaded for him to show City midfielder Rodri a second yellow card for a challenge on Cody Gakpo.
"The club admitted failing to ensure that its players conducted themselves in an orderly fashion and do not behave in a way which is improper," the FA said in a statement on Friday.

Tsitsipas' Title Defense Ended By Fritz in Monte Carlo

MONTE CARLO (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas' bid for a third consecutive Monte Carlo Masters title was ended after a straight-sets loss to American Taylor Fritz in the quarter-finals.

Second seed Tsitsipas was on a 12-match winning streak in the principality but slumped to a 6-2, 6-4 loss in only 70 minutes.

Fritz will face Russian Andrey Rublev in the last four as he attempts to reach the final of a clay-court event for the first time.

"I thought my level today was very high. I think I played a very good match. Beating him here gives me a lot of confidence," Fritz said.

"It has given me the reassurance I need to know I can play well on clay.

"I seemed to play well on the big points. I took my chances."

Fritz's win was his first against Tsitsipas after three previous defeats by the Greek, including a five-set thriller at the Australian Open last year.

The world number 10 — who reached a career-high ranking of fifth earlier this year — is into his third Masters semi-final, with the other two both coming at Indian Wells where he won the 2022 title.

Australian Open runner-up Tsitsipas had been the favourite to win the tournament after Novak Djokovic's shock last-16 exit at the hands of Lorenzo Musetti.

But he made a poor start against Fritz, falling 4-0 behind in the opening set and was never able to change the momentum.

Eighth seed Fritz secured the crucial break in the ninth game of the second set and served out the victory.

"I just seemed off. My serve was not working very well today, and against opponents like Taylor, you have to serve well," said Tsitsipas.

"I was aware of that during the match. I just couldn't find the rhythm."

Tsitsipas has struggled for form and with a shoulder injury since his loss to Djokovic in the Australian Open final.



Meanwhile Medvedev beat Alexander Zverev to book a spot in the quarter-finals, while world number one Djokovic was stunned by Musetti in the third round of Monte Carlo Masters.

Djokovic's quest for a record-extending 39th Masters trophy was prolonged after falling to a 4-6 7-5 6-4 defeat at the hands of Musetti.

Djokovic's last meeting with the Italian on clay was a gruelling Roland Garros clash in 2021, in which he battled back from two sets down to win, but this time it was Musetti that claimed a comeback victory in windy conditions.

Both players struggled on their serve in a contest littered with 15 breaks of serve, but Djokovic appeared to have the match in hand as he comfortably took the first set.

However, Musetti refused to go down without a fight and the Italian stepped on the gas in the second set to level the topsy-turvy encounter.

Not even a lengthy halt in play due to rain could dampen Musetti's momentum, and the 21-year-old once again took advantage of a weak serving performance from Djokovic to break and take the win.

Nadal out of Barcelona in Fresh French Open Blow



MONTE CARLO (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal's preparation for a tilt at a record-extending 15th French Open title suffered a further blow when he announced Friday his withdrawal from the ATP Barcelona tournament.

The 36-year-old Spaniard said he had still not recovered full fitness from the hip flexor injury he sustained in the Australian Open in January and which saw him miss this week's Monte Carlo Open.

"I am still not ready and so I continue my preparation process for the return to competition," he tweeted.

The Barcelona tournament starts on Saturday and the French Open on May 28.

Nadal said it hurt him to miss Barcelona. "Barcelona is a special tournament for me because it is my club by adoption and because playing at home is always a unique feeling," he said.

The 22-time Grand Slam singles champion -- he shares the record with Novak Djokovic -- had originally thought he would be out for up to two months.

Rybakina, Krejckikova Shine in Billie Jean King Cup Openers

ASTANA (Dispatches) - Grand Slam champions Elena Rybakina and Barbora Krejckikova comfortably won their opening matches to help Kazakhstan and the Czech Republic take 2-0 leads in their Billie Jean King Cup Qualifiers.

Kazakhstan stamped their authority over Poland on clay at home, taking full advantage of world number one Iga Swiatek's absence due to injury as Yulia Putintseva stunned Magda Linette 7-5 6-3 before Rybakina doubled their advantage.

The reigning Wimbledon champion fired nine aces and won three out of six breakpoints in her 6-3 6-4 victory over Weronika Falkowska to put Kazakhstan in full control ahead of the final day's action.

The best-of-five qualifiers will feature two singles matches on Friday and two reverse singles matches tomorrow along with a doubles rubber.

"Magda is a rather difficult player so it'll be a difficult match," Rybakina said, looking ahead to her clash with Linette.

"I hope today's match will allow me to feel more confident tomorrow. I'll prepare and hope that I'll be able to win."

Czech Republic's former Roland Garros runner-up Marketa Vondrousova beat Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk 6-2 6-1 in the Turkish city of Antalya where the teams are playing due to the war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion of its neighbour.

Krejckikova, the 2021 French Open champion, then eased past Ukraine's Katarina Zavatska 6-4 6-3.

The 27-year-old, who said she has been supporting the people of Ukraine during the conflict, also pledged her earnings from the Qualifiers to the people of Turkey affected by the devastating earthquake in February.

Spain led Mexico 2-0 after Sara Sorribes Tormo thrashed Fernanda Contreras Gomez 6-0 6-0 before Nuria Parrizas Diaz beat Renata Zarazua 6-4 6-3.

The United States, who have won more titles than any other nation in the competition with 18, face Austria while Britain meet France, Italy play Slovakia and Canada take on Belgium.

Ten Hag Plays Down Martinez Injury Fears



"I cannot tell what it is, but is not an Achilles," the Dutchman told reporters. "I have spoken with him and he is okay and he is calm."

United were leading 2-0 late in the game at Old Trafford, but had to settle for a 2-2 draw after conceding two own goals.

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag tried to stay positive about the injury suffered by defender Lisandro Martinez during the 2-2 Europa League draw with Sevilla today.

There was speculation Martinez had suffered a serious Achilles injury which would end his season.

The draw was not the only disappointment. Martinez joined a list of injured players including striker Marcus Rashford, defender Luke Shaw and Martinez's fellow centre back Raphael Varane who had to be replaced at halftime against Sevilla.

"We have seen Licha Martinez drop out after a moment," Ten Hag told MUTV. "There was no opponent involved so it doesn't look that great but we have to wait. The medical staff have to do their job, to give the right diagnosis.

"I think (it is) an injury (that means) he will not play on Sunday," Ten Hag added, referring to United's Premier League game at Nottingham Forest. "I cannot say what the diagnosis (is). I prefer to wait and to know what it is."

Rashford, who has contributed 28 goals and eight assists this season, is expected to miss a couple of weeks due a groin injury.

United became only the second English side to score two own goals in a single match in a major European competition. Chelsea were the first, in 2019 against Ten Hag's Ajax Amsterdam.

Galtier Deeply Shocked by Racism Accusations

PARIS (Dispatches) - Paris Saint-Germain coach Christophe Galtier said he was "deeply shocked" by accusations that he made racist remarks about players when he was coaching Ligue 1 club Nice last season.

"I am deeply shocked by the remarks attributed to me and which have been relayed by some in an irresponsible way, which hurt me deeply," Galtier said at a press conference.

The 56-year-old has denied making racist and Islamophobic remarks following allegations which surfaced in an email apparently sent by the former Nice sporting director Julien Fournier and which have been reported by various French media.

The message, which AFP has not been able to verify, was reportedly sent by Fournier to Dave Brailsford, the former head of British Cycling and now Director of Sport at chemicals giant Ineos, the owners of Nice.

"I was brought up on a state housing estate and in a multicultural environment with shared values and respect for other people, whatever their origins, colour or religion," Galtier added.

"I cannot accept having my name tarnished in this way. I have therefore decided to take legal action against anyone who tries to damage my reputation."

Galtier was speaking shortly after the public prosecutor in the southern French city of Nice announced that a preliminary investigation had been opened into possible "racial or religious discrimination".

Nice prosecutor Xavier Bonhomme told AFP that police searches were being carried out at the club's offices.



Premier League To Withdraw Gambling Sponsorships

LONDON (Dispatches) - Premier League clubs have collectively agreed to stop featuring gambling sponsorships on the front of football kits from the 2026-27 season, the English top-flight league said yesterday.

Eight of the 20 clubs in the league currently have betting companies as shirt sponsors, including Newcastle United (Fun88), West Ham United (Betway) and Everton (Stake.com).

The UK government is expected to publish a white paper — a proposal for future legislation — on gambling regulation.

According to a report in The Times, ministers have signalled that the white paper will not include shirt sponsorship restrictions if the voluntary agreement was reached. The report added that sleeve deals are still permitted.

"Premier League clubs have today collectively agreed to withdraw gambling sponsorship from the front of clubs' matchday shirts..." the league said in a statement.

"The announcement follows an extensive consultation involving the league, its clubs and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as part of the government's ongoing review of current gambling legislation.

"To assist clubs with their transition away from shirt-front gambling sponsorship, the collective agreement will begin at the end of the 2025/26 season."

The Premier League added that it was working with other sports on "the development of a new code for responsible gambling sponsorship".

Britain's Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer welcomed the Premier League's announcement.

"The vast majority of adults gamble safely but we have to recognise that footballers are role models who have enormous influence on young people. We want to work with institutions like the Premier League to do the right thing for young fans," Frazer said.

