

In a Message to his Syrian Counterpart Bashar al-Assad, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi Felicitated Syria's National Day And Hailed the Country for Its History-Making Resistance

IRAN NEWS

The Commander of the Iranian Army Air Force Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi Said That as Many As 40 Fighter Jets Will Be Flown In Tehran Sky in the Upcoming Army Day Aerial Parade (Today)

VOL. XXIX, No. 7746 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

TUESDAY APRIL 18, 2023 - FARVARDIN 29, 1402

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IRGC, Army Work Hand in Hand To Frustrate Enemies

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has highlighted the integrity of the Iranian Armed Forces, saying the elite military force, together with the Army, will continue to frustrate the country's enemies.

Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks on Monday in a message sent to Iran's Army Chief Commander Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi to congratulate him on National Army Day.

"There is no doubt that the perceived threats from the camp of malicious and adventurous enemies against Islamic Iran are endless," Salami wrote.

He noted the country's Armed Forces along with the security and intelligence institutions have worked hand in hand to challenge the anti-Iran strategies and policies pursued by the arrogant powers and the Zionists and disrupted their calculations.

"By God's grace and in compliance with the wise instructions of ... Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the Army and the IRGC - as powerful arms of the great Iranian nation - will continue to shine in the frontline of guarding the revolution as well as religious, revolutionary and national values and driving the avowed enemies of this holy land to despair."

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U.S. No Longer Known as Superpower



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry says the unipolar world order has ceased to exist as new powers are emerging, stressing that the US government is faced with a shrinking sphere of influence and depleting power.

"A unipolar world does not exist anymore, and the United States is not known as a superpower any longer. Of course, it can be viewed as a power; but actually not as a superpower," Nasser Kanaani told reporters during a weekly press briefing in Tehran on Monday.

"In light of the Islamic Republic's capabilities, as well as the shift in the balance of power both at regional and international levels, the [Iranian] administration has tried to unlock all such potentials in order to secure the interests of the Iranian nation, foster regional convergence as a fairly comprehensive approach towards common interests, and help de-escalate regional conflicts," he said.

He added Iran has time and again reiterated that it will not limit its foreign policy to one specific geographical region or certain political bloc.

"We will continue to forge and cement friendly relations with all the countries that are willing to adopt the same approach on the basis of mutual respect, reciprocity and common interests."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Kanaani stated that Iran hopes for the technical cooperation between the Islamic Republic and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to continue, and for the outstanding issues in the country's nuclear program to be resolved.

The top Iranian diplomat highlighted that IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi paid a visit to Tehran in March, as a result of which technical delegations were exchanged, representatives of the world nuclear body traveled to Iran and technical talks were held within the framework of the agreement reached between the two sides and declared officially.

"The talks are ongoing as per the agreement. This is a technical path. Should the technical path not get overshadowed by political issues and stances, we hope for the process of cooperation between Iran and the IAEA to maintain, and for positive steps toward resolution of the outstanding technical issues to be taken."

Touching on diplomatic relations between Iran and neighboring Azerbaijan, Kanaani stated that the Israeli regime is an implacable enemy to relations between the two Muslim neighboring countries and is seeking to foment discord in order to reap its own benefits.

Azerbaijan's government has underlined the significance of diplomacy with the Islamic Republic of Iran and described Tehran as an "important neighbor" for Baku.

"Since the Zionist regime's so-called national security and survival strategies are anchored in creating and stoking instability and insecurity across the [West Asia] region and in the Muslim world, its mischief will not be exclusively directed at Tehran-Baku ties."

"Iran lays great emphasis on the principle of good neighborliness, and gives special focus on friendly relations on the basis of mutual respect and common interests," he said.

Referring to the fourth meeting of Afghanistan's neighboring countries held with the participation of foreign ministers and officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Russia, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan in Samarkand, Kan'ani said that Iran will make efforts to improve the security conditions in Afghanistan through regional frameworks and multilateral meetings.

Iran's policy in this regard is conscious and intelligent, and it is in the interests of the people of Afghanistan and Iran's security, he noted.

Tehran, Riyadh Plan to Reopen Diplomatic Missions by May 9

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Authorities from Saudi Arabia and Iran are consulting and cooperating to pave the way for the reopening of their respective diplomatic missions, an Iranian diplomat said.

Director General of Iran's Foreign Ministry Office for Persian Gulf Affairs Alireza Enayati said that the Islamic Republic is hosting a delegation from Saudi Arabia, adding that the Saudi diplomats visited Tehran and then traveled to the holy city of Mashhad on Friday with the aim of inspecting their consulate in the city.

As said before, they are going to return to Riyadh and then another Saudi delegation will visit Iran to discuss the issue of reopening their embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad, he noted.

The restoration of diplomatic ties between the two countries has already been declared, and we are seeking to pave the way for make the diplomatic missions back on track, he said, hoping that the Saudi embassy and consulate would be reopened in Iran before May 9, which is the two-month time limit.

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ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Human Rights Just a Game for the West

Western countries for centuries have claimed they have been defenders of the human rights and human values but they have actually been the violators of the human rights when it comes to what is happening in their own lands.

The West especially its leading countries like the U.S., UK and France have been major violators of the human rights in recent decades and unfortunately other Western countries have copied their lords and have gone the same path that the big Western countries have gone.

Unfortunately the West has a double standard view regarding the human rights issue and it is an ardent defender of human rights issue when it comes to other countries but it ignores what is going in their own countries.

We have not yet forgotten the reaction of Western countries regarding to the riots in countries like Iran, Venezuela and some other independent countries and at the same time they acted indifferently to what has happened in Israel and France that protesters have been confronted with force.

On Saturday Iran's vice-president of the judiciary for international affairs criticized international mechanisms for failing to take a position regarding the deteriorating human rights situation in Western countries, saying international rights bodies are duty-bound to support and promote the key issue across the world.

In a Saturday letter to Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kazem Gharibabadi said the world suffers from fundamental challenges and dilemmas regarding human rights which are mainly caused by those 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," said Gharibabadi, who also served as the Secretary General of Iran's High Council for Human Rights.

He warned of adopting "politically-motivated and selective" approaches that does a great disservice and is detrimental to human rights, and erodes public trust in human rights mechanisms.

He drew the commissioner's attention to situations in several countries, including France, Britain and Germany, over the last six months regarding the "right to freedom of assembly and of association."

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Iran, Turkey Invited to Baghdad to Discuss Water

ERBIL (Dispatches) - Water levels in the Tigris River should improve in the next few days as Iraq continues to negotiate the vital water file with neighbours Turkey and Iran, the minister of water resources said on Sunday.

"Meetings and work are continuing with the Iranian and Turkish sides in regard to Iraq's water share," Minister Aoun Diab told Iraqi state media. Baghdad has invited Iran to attend the third Baghdad water conference next month and they expect a Turkish technical delegation to visit soon to work on implementing a recent agreement struck between their countries.

Turkey has built large dams on both Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, leading to a significant decrease in the flow of the shared rivers. A visit by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani to Turkey in March saw measurable success after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed to double the amount of water released from dams on the Tigris River for a period of one month to relieve Iraq's distress.

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Iran to Supply China With First Honey Shipment

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An official says Iran will soon send a shipment of honey to China, which itself is the world's top honey producer.

"This is a very good opportunity to strengthen the position of Iran's honey in the world markets," Touraj Saremi, the head of Iran's beekeeping development plan, told Fars news agency.

The shipment will come in the wake of President Ebrahim Raisi's landmark visit to China in February, which resulted in the signing of several agreements. Iran's Minister of Agriculture Javad Sa'adatnejad was part of the delegation, who signed a document for exports of Iranian products, including honey, to China.

Normally, China makes about 500,000 tons of honey a year, or about a quarter of global output. It exports more than 100,000 tons to places like Europe and the United States. However, a coronavirus outbreak and the subsequent stringent measures to curb the virus have taken their toll on the country's beekeepers.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Iran holds the third rank in the world in terms of honey production after China and Turkey.

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Trade Minister to Be Impeached in Majlis

TEHRAN (IP) - Majlis lawmakers are firmly planning to impeach the country's Industry, Mine, and Trade Minister, Reza Fatemi-amin. A member of Presiding Board of the Iranian Parliament, Mohammad Rashidi announced on Monday: "In accordance with Article 201 of the Internal Regulations of the Parliament, which was submitted to the Presiding Board with the signatures of 40 representatives, Fatemi-amin will be impeached." He stressed: "According to Article 223 of the Parliament's Internal Regulations, Iran's Industry, Mine, and Trade Minister, Fatemi-amin, is required to appear in the open chamber of the Parliament within 10 days and provide justifiable explanations to defend himself."

Muslim States Urged to Confront Israel's Brutality

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says Muslim countries must cement unity and confront Israel's savagery against the oppressed Palestinian people.

"Muslim nations demand that statesmen confront the crimes of the Zionist regime (Israel) towards the oppressed Palestinian people," Raisi said in a meeting with Hicabi Kirlangıç, Turkey's new ambassador to Tehran, on Sunday.

"Therefore, it is necessary for Muslim countries to be more coordinated in standing up against the Israeli brutality."

Over the past months, Israel has ramped up attacks on Palestinian towns and cities throughout the occupied territories. As a result of these attacks, dozens of Palestinians have lost their lives and many others have been arrested.

Most of the raids have focused on Nablus and Jenin, where Israeli forces have been



trying to stifle a growing Palestinian resistance against occupation.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Raisi pointed to deep-rooted relations between Iran and Turkey and said, "Despite efforts by the ill-wishers, we must rely on the religious and cultural commonalities and work for the deepening and expansion of relations among Muslim states countries in various fields."

The new Turkish ambassador, who submitted his credentials to President Raisi, said his country enjoys cordial relations with Iran. He vowed to make his utmost efforts to improve bilateral cooperation and increase exchanges and interactions between the two sides.

Martyr Soleimani's Role In U.S. Defeat Unequaled

TEHRAN (IP) - The tweeter account of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei called Martyr Qasem Soleimani's role in the U.S. defeat in its attack on Afghanistan and Iraq "truly unequalled."

The tweeter account of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei reads that big powers are behind all the warmongering in the world.

"Who are the instigators of the wars in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, & #Sudan? It is the agents of the Arrogant Powers who start a conflict to reap benefits elsewhere ... like the wars instigated by the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan", the tweet added.

The tweet further stated: "The defeat of the U.S. in both their attack on Afghanistan and their attack on Iraq led to an expansion of the Islamic Republic's strategic depth."

Finally referring to the fact that the immense strength of the Islamic Revolution was the reason for the U.S. defeat, Martyr Soleimani's role in this regard was referred to be truly unequalled.

10 Military Staff Get Jail Sentences Over Ukraine Plane Downing

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An Iranian court has issued a verdict for 10 members of the country's Armed Forces who were involved in the 2020 accidental downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane in the skies over the capital, Tehran.

The Mizan news agency of Iran's Judiciary announced on Sunday that the court found 10 people guilty in the deadly incident, with the main defendant being sentenced to 13 years in prison while nine others received terms of one to three years.

The prime suspect, Mizan said, is a defense system commander who "mistook" Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 (PS752/AUI752) for a cruise missile and shot the plane twice in contravention of to the order of the commanding center.

The website added that the commander's action in leading the downing of the plane "was due to his ignorance of the situation and his misplaced belief that the discovered target was hostile."

The other persons who have been found guilty by the court are the personnel of the Army's air defense post.

Mizan stressed that the verdict was issued after more than three years and a total of 20 trial hearings in a lengthy judicial process in which 117 plaintiffs filed their lawsuits, 55 of the plaintiffs spoke and read out their complaints in the court sessions, and 20 lawyers represented the plaintiffs and presented their complaints and relevant evidence.

"Examining this case has been one of the most important, sensitive, and complex judicial processes in the last few years of the country," the Judiciary-affiliated website said.

The verdict issued in the case is preliminary and can be appealed within 20 days.

Mizan underlined that for each victim of the tragic incident, a sum of 150,000 dollars or its equivalent in Euros has been considered as reparations, which is independent of judicial proceedings and will be awarded to their families.

President Welcomes Creating a Youth Council

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a meeting with teenagers and students, while listening to their views, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi welcomed their suggestions for "creating a youth council", "establishing a think tank for teenagers" and "finding talent for students to study in their favorite fields" and gave the necessary instructions in this regard to the relevant authorities.

A group of teenagers and students of the 80s had a meeting with President Raisi on Sunday evening in a friendly environment with the Acting Minister of Education, the Assistant to the President for Popularization of the Government, the Scientific and Technological and Executive Vice-Presidents, as well as the Vice-President for Communications and Information of the President's Office and the Head of the Government's Information Council taking part, and expressed their opinions and views on various issues.

After hearing the explicit words of the teenagers and students present in this meeting, the President described teenagers and students as the country's assets and future builders and added, "Spending money for the growth and excellence of students in schools and research institutes is an investment for the future prosperity of the country and the government has seriously put the organization of young scholars on the agenda and is following it up".

Emphasizing the government's support for those who have gained positions in science Olympiads, Ayatollah Raisi described medallists and even participants in the Olympiads to bring pride for the country, and referring to the speed of the growth of science and technology in the world, and said, "The development and pervasiveness of technology in the world today requires trainers and teachers of the education system to be updated according to the growth of technology".

In response to the comments of one of the medal winning students with disabilities in the world sports arena about the lack of attention to the disabled medal winners, the President said, "People with disabilities should receive double marks due to their efforts, and if they have not received proper attention in previous years for any reason, we have to fulfill it urgently and honor them".

Raisi also tasked the welfare organization to devise the necessary measures to facilitate the education and employment of people with disabilities in cooperation with the relevant institutions, including the Ministry of Education, the Supreme Youth Council, and the Executive Vice President, and to provide opportunities for them to participate in cultural and sports fields.

"Establishing the Youth Council", "Establishing a brainstorming room to take advantage of the views and opinions of teenagers and students in the administration of the country's affairs" and "Talenting for students to study in their favorite fields" were among the points raised in the statements of those present at the meeting, which were welcomed by the President, and he gave the necessary orders to the relevant authorities in this regard.

In another part of his speech, Raisi also emphasized Jihad of Explanation and stated, "Resolving the mental knots of youth and teenagers is a very serious task that must be taken into consideration in schools and universities so that a doubt does not become an unsolvable problem".

Gov't Approves Free Infertility Insurance

various measures have been put in place in order to reduce abortion rates, including the launching of the national safe fertility system. The system is meant to protect healthy fetuses. The spokesperson for the Health Ministry added that some specific guidelines have also been announced regarding the distribution of abortion medicines, which have been removed from the market.

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian Health Ministry has announced that abortion has been criminalized in the country.

A spokesperson for the ministry added that

According to this report, infertility treatment centers are to set up in universities of medical sciences which are tasked with caring for the health of pregnant mothers.

All these centers will provide free infertility insurance coverage for people.

Scientists say low population growth rate has potential to lead shortage of workforce and further economic woes. The decreasing rates of fertility coupled with high life expectancy are leading to an aging population in Iran, which could potentially lead to grave economic crises in the country in the next decades. Figures show that nearly 11% of Iranians — about 5.3 million out of the current total population of 84 million — are now over 60 years old.

Iran Calls for Coordinated Efforts To Tackle Afghan Narcotic Problem

TEHRAN (IRNA) - An Iranian anti-narcotics official has urged regional and ultra-regional states to take practical steps in fighting drug smuggling in Afghanistan.

Mohammad Masoud Zahedian, deputy chief of the Iranian anti-narcotics police, told IRNA on Sunday that the enhancement of the fight against drug smuggling in Afghanistan is very vital; so, regional countries should prioritize the effort and ultra-regional states should also take steps in this respect.

He noted that the formation of the required infrastructure in Afghanistan to pursue the issue can pave the way for international cooperation in this regard, adding that the war-stricken country has been producing traditional narcotics for a long period, but the invasion of the state from the onset of the 21st century ended up in 51 percent hike in drug production in that country, which shows lack of responsibility by the occupying countries.

"The Islamic Republic has tried to take the responsibility of promoting awareness in different international communities along with confronting and fighting drug smuggling, which paved the ground for security in other nations," Zahedian argued.

Zahedian also pointed to Iran's performance in the fight against drug smuggling after the victory of the Islamic Revolution with the sacrifice of more than 3,800 martyrs and 12,000 disabled veterans, adding that Iran's viewpoints on this issue have always been determined at the international community, and even the European states and the United States consider Iran as an exemplary country in dealing with the drug smuggling.

Tehran to Host 14th Iran Petrochemical Forum

TEHRAN (MNA) - Tehran will host the 14th edition of Iran Petrochemical Forum (IPF) at the IRIB International Conference Hall on May 1-2.

As reported, this edition of the event will be held with the approach of completing value chain in the petrochemical industry.

As stated by the planning and development director of National Petrochemical Company (NPC), the 14th Iran Petrochemical Forum is a suitable ground for cooperation between active domestic and foreign companies so that the latest developments, plans and new investment opportunities for the development of the country's petrochemical industry are provided to the participants.

Hassan Abbas-Zadeh said during this international event, a large number of specialized meetings will be held, and a strategic meeting is dedicated to the members of the BRICS countries (five leading economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) with the aim of examining the future cooperation of the Iranian petrochemical industry in the markets of the BRICS member countries, highlighting that for the first time, member countries of the BRICS group will attend the international conference of the Iranian petrochemical industry.

Other important event of this conference is the holding of special meetings with the presence of ambassadors and political and commercial representatives of Iran in order to examine the development of energy diplomacy, empowering the petrochemical industry with the aim of preventing crude sales (selling final products instead), and self-sufficiency in this industry, the NPC director further noted.

The petrochemical industry plays a crucial role in Iran's non-oil economy, as petrochemical export is the second-largest source of revenue for the country after crude oil. Petrochemical exports already constitute nearly 33 percent of the country's non-oil exports.

Iran to Be Self-Sufficient in Petcoke by 2026

BANDAR ABBAS (IRNA) - The managing director of Bandar Abbas Oil Refinery (BAOR) in southern Iran has announced at a press conference that the country will be self-sufficient in producing petroleum coke within three years.

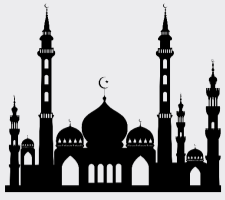
Elaborating on the process of production of petcoke in this oil refining company, Hashem Namvar Haqiqi said on Sunday evening that Iran is the seventh country to have developed a technology for manufacturing petroleum coke, aka sponge coke.

The plan to produce petroleum coke is a part of the three-phase project to enhance the quality of the product of the BAOR, the official said, adding that each phase of the plan is being implemented separately.

He went on to say that 2.2 million euros have been allocated for implementation of the plan.

According to the industrial official, the plan has created 8,000 direct job opportunities since the beginning of its construction and when launched, it will employ over 2,500 individuals.





PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:03
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:58
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	03:57
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:26

98. Why was there not a single township (among those We warned), which believed, - so its faith should have profited it, - except the people of Jonah? When they believed, We removed from them the penalty of ignominy in the life of the present, and permitted them to enjoy (their life) for a while.
99. If it had been thy Lord's will, they would all have believed, - all who are on earth! wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!
Surah 10. Jonah (98 - 99)

Iran Eyes \$1b Annual Trade With Saudi Arabia

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Following the restoration of political relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran aims to have \$1 billion annual trade with the Arab country in the short term and promoting it to \$2 billion in the medium term, an official claimed.

Director General of West Asia Department of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPOI) Farzad Piltan made the remarks in an interview with Mehr News Agency and stated that the value of the two countries' trade exchanges was about \$800 million over the previous years with the balance of trade in favor of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the early 2010s, the volume of trade exchange between Iran and Saudi Arabia faced a declining trend and bilateral trade reached about \$200 million and then, the relations between the two countries declined considerably after the severance of diplomatic ties, he added.

After the recent thaw in relations between the two neighboring countries, achieving \$1 billion trade with Saudi Arabia in the short term and also \$2 billion in the medium term have been on agenda based on the current and previous capacities of the two countries, Piltan noted.

He said Iran and Saudi Arabia enjoy high potentials and capabilities to promote their bilateral ties, particularly in the economic field.

In addition to importing and exporting goods, the two countries enjoy high potentials to cooperate with each other in the field of investment, joint industrial production and implementation of technical and engineering projects, etc., he stated.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he referred to the Iran-Saudi Arabia Joint Economic Commission meetings and pointed out that the 7th meeting of the Commission was held in Riyadh in 2005.



Turning to the revival of 20 cooperation documents inked between the two countries, he said suitable ways have been paved for the two countries with the possibility of updating and revising about 20 cooperation documents in the field of development of trade infrastructures.

Piltan reiterated many capacities for broadening trade cooperation between Tehran and Riyadh and pointed to some of them like exporting iron products, dried fruits, cement and saffron, adding that Iran can import mineral and chemical fertilizers, poly ethylene and textile products from Saudi Arabia.

He went on to say that both countries can resume cooperation in the field of investment, joint industrial production and implementing the technical and engineering services projects.

Piltan also noted that with restoration of diplomatic ties and holding the joint commission, there will possibility for upgrading and reviewing some 20 documents of cooperation which had been signed between the two countries in the past.

He stated that there will be a chance for Iran to participate in Saudi Arabia's 2030 Outlook plan as the Arab country wants to improve its ranking position in the world in terms of competitiveness from 25 to 10 by 2030.

Piltan went on to say that due to Iran's need to foreign investment, attracting investment from Saudi Arabia in the free and special economic zones as well as attracting tourists will good opportunities for Iran for advancing its own strategic plans for development.

Germany Suspends Cooperation With Iran in Field of Exhibition

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action of Germany decided to suspend its cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the field of exhibitions as of January 2023.



According to Iran Chamber of Commerce website, the German ministry suspended foreign investment tool and commercial formats of Iran and Germany as of January 2023.

The suspension covers export credits and investment guarantees, talks between Iran and Germany in the field of energy, management educational programs and foreign exhibitions.

Iranian, Italian Universities To Exchange Professors, Students

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU) and the Italy's University of Padua have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to continue exchanging professors and students.

To develop international scientific cooperation and to strengthen training courses, the two universities inked an MOU to exchange faculty members and students, IRNA reported.

ATU and the University of Padua have been closely cooperating since December 2017 by signing a memorandum of understanding and exchange professor and student agreements.

After five years and with the expiry of the MOU, the authorities of the two universities reviewed the records of the cooperation, called for the extension of the MoU and existing contracts, and extended the cooperation documents for another five years.

Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU) is an Iranian public university, specializing in the areas of humanities and social sciences.

The University of Padua is an Italian university located in the city of Padua, region of Veneto, northern Italy. It is one of Europe's oldest and most prestigious seats of learning. As a multi-disciplinary institute of higher education, the University aims to provide its students with professional training and a solid cultural background.

Housing Prices Rose Ten-Fold Within Past Five Years

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - An expert at the Iranian parliament has warned that housing prices have increased ten-fold in the past five years.

Ali Farnam, an expert at the research center of the Iranian parliament said that housing starts declined between 2018 and 2022 as Iran was hit by US sanctions and its economy declined.

According to him, the increase in the price of construction materials, wages and the like all contributed to the price hike.

He further emphasized that house builders in Iran are not very interested in new construction because 80% of builders are now worried about selling what they already have, as people cannot afford new homes.

The average price of one square meter (11 sq feet) of housing in Tehran is around 600 million rials (\$1,200), but the monthly minimum wage (without benefits) is around \$120.

Donyaye Eghtesad (World of Economy) daily said in a report last week that in the first days of Iranian new year (starting March 21), the number of newly built units offered for sale increased slightly, but the housing market transactions did not return to normal.

Iran-Azerbaijan Rail Trade, Transit Surge by 60%

TEHRAN (MNA) - A total of 571,146 tons of goods were transported between Iran and Azerbaijan through the Astara Railroad Terminal. According to Gholamhossein Valadi, a local rail official, a total of 571,146 tons of goods were transported between Iran and Azerbaijan through the Astara Railroad Terminal in the fiscal 2022-23 in terms of export, import and transit, registering a 60% rise compared with 355,977 tons in the fiscal 2021-22.

Railroad exports to Azerbaijan stood at 199,151 tons during the period, registering a 10% rise compared with 182,054 tons in the previous year.

Citrus fruits, cement, chemicals, tiles and food were the main exported commodities, the news portal of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development reported.

A total of 152,000 tons of goods were imported via railroad through the terminal during the same period, while rail transit volume hit 220,000 tons.

The main transited and imported products were wood, cotton, paper and grain.

Iran to Manufacture Discontinued Renault Sandro

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Chief Executive Officer of the Iranian automaker SAIPA Mohammad Ali Teimouri said that the Iranian Sandro will enter the market by late December.

Addressing the inauguration ceremony of the ME16 engine, Teimouri said that with the new line launched, 600 engines will be added to the daily production.

He added that 92% of the ME16 engine has been made domestically.

This line is the most modern engine production line in Iran, he said, adding that 60% of the line is automated.

Referring to nine new Iranian products, Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade of the Islamic Republic of Iran Reza Fatemi Amin said that Sandro is now in the stage of ordering parts and standard approval.

Negotiations have also been made for opening one production line in Russia.

According to SAIPA, Sandro will enter the Russian market with the name "Cadila", he noted.

Iran to Enhance Constructive Ties with UN Habitat

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The secretary of the national committee of the UN Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) said Iran's interaction with the UN-Habitat will be 'fruitful and constructive'.

Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development and the Secretary of the National Committee of the UN Human Settlements Program Arman Khoursand, in a message to the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2023, emphasized the constructive relationship of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the UN-Habitat.

Stressing that the amicable ties between Iran and the UN-Habitat have witnessed significant progress, he stated that Iran is in a region facing natural hazards such as earthquakes, climatic changes, droughts and the problem of refugees.

"We welcome sharing the fruitful experiences in this



field and getting the innovative approaches by the UN-Habitat and other international bodies to deal with these problems," Khoursand added.

Despite the shortage of infrastructures and vulnerability to natural hazards, two-thirds of the country's population lives in urban areas, he said, adding that the government of Iran is working on a giant project for easing problems facing the vulnerable strata of society.

Accordingly, Iran eagerly intends to expand interaction with the UN-Habitat optimally, the secretary highlighted.

Given the adaptation of the current year's slogan of the UN-Habitat regarding the provision of housing for vulnerable strata of society and the objective of the National Housing Movement Plan in Iran, the country will establish fruitful and constructive interaction with the UN-Habitat, he added.

Iran, Senegal to Cooperate in Book Translation and Publication

TEHRAN (INBA) - In a meeting, Iran's Cultural Attaché to Senegal and the director of the press center of Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar discussed methods of cooperation between the two countries in book translation and publication.

Iran's Cultural Attaché to Senegal Alireza Vazin attended the press center of Cheikh Anta Diop University where he met the new director of the publishing center Papa Moussa Samba and held a discussion with him.

In that meeting, Vazin introduced the capabilities of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization as well as the Cultural Attaché of Iran for joint productions in terms of articles and books.

Samba for his part welcomed the proposal of joint production and said: "This university press was established in 1991 to promote research and publication of scientific and educational works. It is responsible for the executive tasks and monitoring the publishing policy of the university.

"This university press has three academic publications on theater review, Almanac of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities, as well as sociology, anthropology, and psychology," he added.

Cheikh Anta Diop University (French: Université Cheikh Anta Diop or UCAD), also known as the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar is a university named after the Senegalese physicist, historian and anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop and has an enrollment of over 60,000.

The education system follows the French pattern, with oral and/or written final exams administered at the end of the year. All courses at the university are taught in French, except those in language departments other than French.

Renewables Output Nearly Doubled in March

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Energy Ministry says electricity generation from renewable sources nearly doubled in March compared to February.

Figures released by the Ministry on Sunday showed that the Iranian renewable power sector had produced 121 million kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity in the calendar month to February 20, up by 98.4% from the previous month.

The figures showed that the increase in renewables output had led to a reduction of 68,000 metric tons in emission of greenhouse gases and a cutback on use of 33 million cubic meters of natural gas in Iran's thermal power plants in March.

The Ministry said total renewables generation capacity in Iran reached over 1.038 gigawatts (GW) in the calendar month to late March.

Iran's renewables sector mostly relies on solar, wind and hydroelectric power plants for a bulk of its output.

That comes as renewables still account for a tiny part of overall Iranian electricity generation capacity which was reported at nearly 90 GW in early 2023.

The government has announced plans to increase renewables capacity by 10 times to 10 GW by 2025.

Former Indian Lawmaker and Brother Shot Dead on Live TV

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - A former Indian lawmaker convicted of kidnapping and facing murder and assault charges was shot dead along with his brother in a dramatic attack that was caught live on TV in northern India, officials said.

Atiq Ahmad and his brother Ashraf were under police escort on their way to a medical checkup at a hospital on Saturday night when three men posing as journalists targeted the two brothers from close range in Prayagraj city in Uttar Pradesh state.

The men quickly surrendered to the police after the shooting, with at least one of them chanting "Jai Shri Ram," or "Hail Lord Ram," a slogan that has become a battle cry for Hindu nationalists in their campaign against Muslims.



Jean-Marie Le Pen Hospitalized After Mild Heart Attack

PARIS (Dispatches) - Jean-Marie Le Pen, the veteran leader of the far-right in France, suffered a "mild heart attack" and was taken to hospital on Saturday, a close source said.

"Jean-Marie Le Pen has been hospitalised in a public institution in the Paris region. His family and friends are concerned but calm," the 94-year-old's advisor Lorrain de Saint Affrique said, confirming a story run by Le Point news magazine. Le Pen remains "conscious," he added.

Le Pen, father of current far-right leader Marine Le Pen, has suffered several health issues in recent years. In February 2022, Le Pen senior was hospitalized after suffering a "minor" stroke.



EU Warns Against Unilateral Steps After Poland, Hungary Ban Ukrainian Grain



WARSAW (Dispatches) - Unilateral action on trade by European Union member states is unacceptable, a European Commission spokesperson said on Sunday, after Poland and Hungary announced bans on grain and other food imports from Ukraine to protect the local agricultural sector.

After Russia's invasion blocked some Black Sea ports, large quantities of Ukrainian grain, which is cheaper than that produced in the European Union, ended up staying in Central European states due to logistical bottlenecks, hitting prices and sales for local farmers.

The issue has created a political problem for Poland's ruling nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party in an election year as it has angered people in rural areas where support for PiS is usually high.

"We are aware of Poland and Hungary's announcements regarding the ban on imports of grain and other agricultural products from Ukraine," the spokesperson said in an emailed statement. "In this context, it is important to underline that trade policy is of EU exclusive competence and, therefore, unilateral actions are not acceptable."

"In such challenging times, it is crucial to coordinate and align all decisions within the EU," the statement added. Poland and Hungary have been embroiled in long-running conflicts with Brussels over issues including judicial independence, media freedoms and LGBT rights, and both have had funds withheld due to concerns over the rule of law.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria's Agriculture Minister Yavor Gechev said the country was also considering a ban on Ukrainian grain imports, local agency BTA reported on Sunday.

The Polish ban, which came into effect on Saturday evening, will also apply to the transit of these products through the country, the development and technology minister said on Sunday.

"The ban is full, including the ban on transit through Poland," Waldemar Buda wrote on Twitter, adding that talks would be held with the Ukrainian side to create a system that ensures goods only pass through Poland and do not end up on the local market.

Ukraine's ministry of agrarian policy and food said on Saturday that the Polish ban contradicted existing bilateral agreements on exports, and called for talks to settle the issue. Ukraine's state-run Ukrinform news agency said Ukrainian and Polish ministers are due to meet on Monday in Poland and the transit arrangement would be focused on in the talks.

Poland's Agriculture Minister Robert Telus was quoted as saying on Sunday that the ban was necessary to "open the eyes of the EU to the fact that further decisions are needed that will allow products from Ukraine to go deep into Europe, and not stay in Poland."

Ukraine exports most of its agricultural goods, especially grain, via its Black Sea ports, unblocked in July in line with an agreement between Ukraine, Turkey, Russia and the United Nations.

That accord is scheduled to expire on May 18th and Moscow indicated last week that it may not be extended unless the West removes obstacles to the export of Russian grain and fertilizer.

Around 3 million tons of grain left Ukraine every month via the Black Sea grain corridor while only up to 200,000 tons are moving to European ports through Polish territory, according to the Ukrainian ministry.

Ukraine's farm minister Mykola Solsky said at the weekend that 500,000 to 700,000 tons of various agricultural products cross the Polish border every month, including grain, vegetable oil, sugar, eggs, meat and other products.

Lula Raises Russia War Mediation With China, UAE

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Brazil's president said he had discussed joint mediation for Russia's war in Ukraine with China and the United Arab Emirates, accusing the United States and Europe of prolonging the conflict.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who was wrapping up an official visit to China and the UAE after returning for a third term in office, said the two countries and others should join a "political G20" to try to end the war.

The veteran leftist, who has faced accusations of being overly cosy with Russian President Vladimir Putin, also remarked that the war was caused "by decisions made by two countries".

"President Putin doesn't take any initiatives to stop the war. (President Volodymyr) Zelensky from Ukraine doesn't take any initiatives to stop the war," Lula, speaking through an official translator, told reporters in Abu Dhabi.

"Europe and the US continue to give their way of contribution to continue the war. So they have to sit around the table and say, 'That's enough'." While in China, Lula accused Washington of "encouraging" the war by supplying weapons to Ukraine.

France Seeks to Reassure Taiwan Over Macron's Controversial Remarks

PARIS (Dispatches) - The French parliament is set to send two delegations to visit Taiwan this month after President Emmanuel Macron's controversial remarks on China and Taiwan sparked criticism at home and abroad after his trip to State Visit to Beijing.

On the flight returning from China, where he received a warm welcome, Macron said in an interview published last Sunday by French newspaper Les Echos that Europe should set its own policy on Taiwan to avoid being "followers" of Washington's "agenda" on the subject of the ongoing dispute between Beijing and Taipei.

As his critics circled, the French president has stuck by his remarks, but added that European policy on Taiwan "has not changed" despite the furor over his remarks.

While Macron's comments have won him praise from China, they have also sparked a global outcry with some critics accusing the French president of aligning with China. Others, meanwhile, have deemed Macron's comments as tone deaf and untimely.

Facing mounting pressure over Macron's remarks, French Minister Delegate for Industry Roland Lescure on Saturday sought to reassure Taiwan that French foreign policy regarding Taipei "has not changed" at a bi-annual meeting held in Paris by the Taiwanese Chambers of Commerce.

Meanwhile Taiwan Legislative Yuan Vice President Tsai Chi-Chang who led the Taiwanese delegation to Paris told Taiwanese media outlet Central News Agency (CNA) that relations between France and Taiwan have remained unaffected, but added that "Taiwan plays a crucial role in the global supply chain which includes France thanks to its economic power, so if something happens to Taiwan then France would be impacted [as well]".

Again trying to highlight a positive in relations between the two nations, French Member of Parliament Eric Bothorel, head of a French National Assembly delegation set to visit Taiwan on Sunday, reaffirmed France's support of the democratic nation and pointed to the rare transit of a French Naval vessel through the Taiwan Strait. He went on to say that the delegation's visit also aims to strengthen cooperation and trade between the two countries, CNA reported.



Thousands Turn Out for Anti-Gov't Protest in Prague

PRAGUE (Dispatches) - Thousands of people rallied again in the Czech capital on Sunday to protest high inflation and demand the government's resignation.

It was the second such rally at Prague's Wenceslas Square after one on March 11 that was organized by a new political party known as PRO under an "against the poverty" banner.

The demonstrators, speakers at the protest and the head of the populist group, Jindrich Rajchl, blamed the European Union and the Czech government for soaring inflation and all repeatedly called on the current five-party coalition to resign.

"We want the government's resignation," Rajchl told the crowd. Rajchl, a lawyer by profession, is the former deputy head of the Czech soccer association.

"Resign, resign," the protesters chanted. "We're here to stand by our country," Rajchl said.

His group, whose name in English stands for Law, Respect, Expertise has no seats in parliament.

Rajchl claimed his group was ready to further escalate the protests.

Inflation has been high but on the decline in recent months, dropping to 15% in March, down from 16.7% in February and 17.5% the month before.

The protesters also want the Czech government to stop taking actions that are intended to reduce misinformation and fake news.

Although Rajchl rejected his group is pro-Russia, the protesters condemned the government's stance in Russia's war against Ukraine.

The Czech Republic has staunchly supported the government in Kyiv since Russian troops invaded Ukraine. The country has provided weapons for the Ukrainian military and taken in about 500,000 refugees.

Rajchl called Defense Minister Jana Cernochova, a vocal supporter of the pro-Ukraine stance, "the biggest security risk for our country."

Some people at the rally were signing a petition demanding the country quits NATO.

Protesters were planning to march to the government office later Sunday. Prime Minister Petr Fiala is currently on a trip to Asia.



Sudan's Army Pounds Paramilitary Bases With Air Strikes in Power Struggle

KHARTOUM (Dispatches)

- Sudan's army appeared to gain the upper hand in a bloody power struggle with rival paramilitary forces after blasting its bases with air strikes, witnesses said, and at least 59 civilians were killed including three U.N. workers.

The fighting erupted on Saturday between army units loyal to General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of Sudan's transitional governing Sovereign Council, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, who is deputy head of the council.

It was the first such outbreak since both joined forces to oust veteran Islamist autocrat Omar Hassan al-Bashir in 2019 and was sparked by a disagreement over the integration of the RSF into the military as part of a transition towards civilian rule.

The United States, China, Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the U.N. Security Council, European Union and African Union have appealed for a quick end to the hostilities that threaten to worsen instability in an already volatile wider region.

Efforts by neighbours and regional bodies to end the violence intensified on Sunday. That included an offer by Egypt and South Sudan to mediate between the fighting parties, according to a statement by the Egyptian presidency.

The two rivals have been competing for power as political factions negotiate forming a transitional government after a 2021 military coup. Hemedti's whereabouts were unknown on Sunday but Burhan was inside army headquarters in downtown Khartoum.

Witnesses and residents told Reuters that the army had carried out air strikes on RSF barracks and bases, including in Omdurman across the Nile river from the capital Khartoum, and managed to destroy most of their facilities.

They said the army had also wrested back control over much of Khartoum's presidential palace from the RSF after both sides claimed to control it and other key installations in Khartoum, where heavy artillery and gun battles raged into Sunday.

RSF members remained inside Khartoum international airport besieged by the army but it was holding back from striking them to avoid wreaking major damage, witnesses said.



Ferrari Fever? Classic Cars Roar Into Investment Funds

MILAN (Dispatches) - In 1977, a Ferrari owner offloaded his 1962 250 GTO because his wife complained it was too noisy, recounts Andrea Modena, head of Ferrari's classic car division. It was either her or the car. "Nowadays, I'm not sure the wife would have won out."

Times have indeed changed. In 2018, the same Ferrari model became the most expensive car ever sold when it fetched \$48 million at auction. Last year, that record was flattened by a 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Uhlenhaut Coupé that raced to €135 million.

These kind of megadeals are at the vanguard of billions of dollars of annual spending on classic cars globally in a wave U.S. of investment in this alternative asset.

Vintage cars have risen 185 per cent in value over the past decade, outstripping the growth of luxury rivals wine, watches and art, and ranking second only to rare whiskies, according to Knight Frank's 2023 wealth report.

The market has expanded beyond a comparatively small community of collectors to include investors drawn by the prospect of high returns plus a lack of correlation with mainstream portfolio assets such as stocks and bonds.

"We've been monitoring the market for a long time," said Giorgio Medda, CEO and global head of asset management at Italy's Azimut. "The track record of the past 30 years tells us classic cars have become a financial asset class we want our clients to have in their portfolios."

This year, the asset manager is launching what it describes as the world's first "evergreen" fund to invest in vintage vehicles, and says it'll only bet on cars worth more than €1 million each.

Advised by Alberto Schon, head of Ferrari and Maserati dealer Rosscorsa, the fund says it will pick vehicles with a unique history.

While Azimut's fund will have no end date and can receive new money indefinitely, small Swiss asset manager Hetica Capital launched a €50 million "closed-end" fund in 2021, which it also said was the first of its kind.

The Hetica fund, which is targeting returns of 9 per cent-15 per cent after seven years, has bought a dozen cars so far and aims to get to 30-35 cars by the fifth year, leaving the last two years to sell the vehicles and pay investors.

The plans are bold.

"We've seen more than 100 attempts at setting up funds in the past. Nobody managed to build both a diversified investor base and a diversified car portfolio," said Dietrich Hatlapa, founder of classic car research house Hagi, which supplies the sector data used by Knight Frank.

It's also not a sector for the financially faint-hearted.

Registered in Luxembourg, both the Azimut and Hetica funds have a minimum entry investment bar of €125,000.



"We get loads of calls from people who're looking to invest €1,000-€2,000 euros and we have to turn them down," said Walter Panzeri who runs Hetica's Klassik Fund. Moreover, a small scratch or dent, or a replacement part, can deal a heavy financial blow. For example, replacing just the bumper of a rare vintage car can cost US\$15,000, said Modena.

Running costs for car collections, including hefty storage and insurance fees, could easily amount annually to 5-6 per cent of the portfolio's value, according to Florian Zimmermann, who started buying vintage cars when he worked at Mercedes-Benz and has since built a collection of 300 vehicles with a partner.

"It's getting harder and harder to find the proper mechanics to keep these cars alive. And you have to spend quite an amount of money to keep all these cars in running condition," he said.

Indeed investment funds managing car portfolios can be a money-spinner for the classic car divisions of automakers, which not only provide repairs and parts, but also certify the authenticity of vehicles to take part in shows and competitions.

The certification process alone can cost around €20,000, according to Peter Becker of Mercedes-Benz Classic who said only the carmaker's experts, with access to its archives, could confirm the originality of a classic model.

Nonetheless, the classic car market is expanding as the number of wealthy people also rises; the value of vintage cars grew 25 per cent in 2022, their strongest performance in nine years and second only to art's 29 per cent increase, according to Knight Frank. Classic vehicle insurer Hagerty estimates there are about US\$80 billion collector vehicle transactions a year globally, including all auctions and private sales.

While North America remains the largest market for auctions, with Hagerty recording US\$3.4 billion in auction sales in 2022 versus US\$774 million in 2007, Zimmermann said a growing number of buyers had emerged in recent years in the Middle East, India and China.

The global race to renounce combustion engine cars will only serve to heighten interest in these relics of a vanishing era, say some market players.

"Electrification will favour classic cars," said Cristiano Bolzoni, head of Maserati's vintage car unit Maserati Classiche. "Over time they will become cult objects."

Ferraris are the most prized vintage autos, according to Adolfo Orsi, founder of the Classic Car Auction Yearbook which has been tracking auction sales data since 1990, who described them as "absolutely the blue-chips of this sector".

Gamers in China Are Among the World's Most Addicted



BEIJING (Dispatches) - Around one-third of the world's population plays video games each week, with gamers spending an average of nine hours a week playing games. And China is home to the most addicted gamers, who spend more than 11 hours playing video games on average.

When asked "Which three activities would you say you spend the most time on each week?", 29 per cent of Chinese answered video games, compared to 14 per cent for the global total, according to the survey conducted by YouGov with more than 19,000 people across 18 countries. The next highest percentages of adults who say they spend most of their time playing video games are found in Hong Kong (23 per cent), Indonesia (19 per cent) and Singapore (18 per cent).

China is also the country where gamers play for the greatest number of hours each week: 11.3 hours, while the world average is 8.9 hours. The United States is also above average with 11 hours, followed by Great Britain with 10.2 hours. France is at 7.7 hours per week.

In terms of age, it's 18-24 years olds who are most addicted to video games playing for 9.8 hours. The 25-35 year old spend an average of 9.1 hours each week gaming, ahead of the 35-44 years old (8.9 hours). Men aged 18-24 spend 10.9 hours of their week gaming and men aged 25-34, 9.7 hours.

Among the 12 "media" activities mentioned by the survey, playing video games, whether on a console, PC, or smartphone, is the most cited activity for 31 per cent of respondents, ahead of listening to podcasts (18 per cent) and watching live streaming video online (25 per cent). Far ahead, 64 per cent of the panel cited visiting websites (in a general sense), 57 per cent social media usage and 48 per cent watching streaming video content.



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Argentina Seeks to Issue Up to \$1.2b in Bonds

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Argentine government is in talks to issue two dollar-bonds for up to \$600 million each with separate guarantees from the World Bank and the CAF as collateral, a source from Argentina's Economy Ministry said. The World Bank and CAF-Development Bank of Latin America could not be immediately reached for comment. The operation, which would take place in the coming weeks, would guarantee 60% of the issuance, and the notes would have a maximum maturity of five years, said the ministry source, who asked not to be identified. The intention is to issue two separate bonds, each with its own backing, for up to \$600 million each, the source said. There is no assurance yet that the bonds will be issued.



Africa Needs More Help With Climate Change, Debt and Food Crises

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Africa is struggling with the triple shock of rising debt burdens, an ongoing food crisis and climate change fallout and needs more help from international institutions and wealthy nations to cope, African finance ministers said. Developing African economies were only beginning to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic when Russia's invasion of Ukraine provoked capital market turmoil and an inflation acceleration that sent food prices soaring.

The continent, meanwhile, was already struggling with extreme weather events, including drought, flooding and cyclones, aggravated by climate change.

"African countries are really victims. They really aren't responsible for these devastating effects (of climate change)," Comoros Finance Minister Mze Abdou Mohamed Chanfiou said in a news conference alongside two of his African counterparts during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank spring meetings in Washington. The trio were speaking on behalf of the continent's finance ministers.

"Even if the IMF, the World Bank and our regional institutions have put in place emergency funds, these funds don't really seem sufficient to respond to this."

The IMF created the Resilience and Sustainability Trust (RST) last year to help channel excess IMF Special Drawing Rights reserves from wealthier countries to poor and vulnerable middle-income nations.

The trust aims to provide long-term concessional financing for needs such as climate change adaptation and the transition to cleaner energy sources.

Rwanda, Barbados, Costa Rica, Bangladesh and Jamaica have already reached agreements for loan programs from the facility, and 44 others have expressed interest.

The three African finance ministers urged wealthy countries to step forward to honor their pledges to fund the trust.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Friday that the IMF had already received \$40 billion in pledges for the RST. She added that more pledges had been received on Friday, "meaning that there is a very good likelihood that we can build it even further in terms of financial strength."

The African finance ministers, meanwhile, called for a G20-backed framework aimed at helping countries restructure burdensome debt to go further.

Two African countries - Zambia and Ghana - have already defaulted on their sovereign debt since the start of the pandemic. But while they've signed onto the initiative, it has so far failed to provide relief.

While Africa needs more support to deal with food shortages and high food prices caused by weather phenomena and the war in Ukraine, the ministers said African governments also had their role play.

Sierra Leone Finance Minister Sheku A.F. Bangura, speaking in the same news conference on Saturday, said Africa must leverage its agricultural sector to boost domestic production and reduce its vulnerability to import disruptions.

U.S. Dollar Scarcity Threatens Bolivia's 'Economic Miracle'

LA PAZ (Dispatches) - Sofia Andrade, a lawyer, chose over the past month to withdraw all her dollar savings from the bank as the US currency became scarce on the streets of Bolivia.

"I prefer to have them at home," she said. "I fear they won't let me withdraw them later."

Like her, many Bolivians are withdrawing their dollar deposits or rushing to buy the US currency amid increased concern about Bolivia's economic fragility, a marked change for a country that for more than a decade experienced what many called an "economic miracle" amid strong growth, record exports, low inflation, a fixed exchange rate and subsidized gasoline.

The scarcity of the greenback, which opposition politicians attribute to the Central Bank running out of hard currency reserves and the government blames on speculation, means that for the first time since 2011, a parallel market for the U.S. dollar has emerged that charges slightly more than the official price.

When the shortage began earlier this year, hundreds spent the night outside the Central Bank to buy dollars at the official exchange rate. A new system has now been established to buy the currency online. The physical lines have disappeared, but the problem remains and is reminding Bolivians of past economic woes.

Alicia Meneses, 40, said she had converted her savings into dollars earlier this year, "because I was afraid of getting stuck with the bolivianos like what happened to my dad in the '80s."

She needed some local currency this week and so she changed a bit of her savings back to bolivianos on the black market in downtown La Paz, where she received 7 bolivianos per dollar, slightly more than the official rate of 6.96.



"I've come to change a few dollars because of an emergency," Meneses said.

Leftist President Luis Arce, who was economy minister from 2006 to 2017 during Bolivia's period of bonanza, has tried to calm the waters, insisting there will be no change to the country's managed exchange rate system in which the Central Bank has intervened to keep the local currency's value stable to the U.S. dollar over the past 12 years.

"There will be no devaluation," Arce said this week in what was his first interview with a private television station since taking office in late 2020. "There is no need for it when we have a solid economy that is growing."

IMF Chief Sees Tangible Progress On Debt Issues

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - International Monetary Fund chief Kristalina Georgieva said that debtors and creditors made "tangible progress" on debt restructuring issues this week, but urged countries facing mounting debt problems to seek help earlier in the process.

A new sovereign debt roundtable was helping to accelerate work on debt restructurings, Georgieva told a news conference during the IMF and World Bank spring meetings in Washington. She said participants had reached a common understanding this week of the role multilateral development banks could play, by providing positive net flows to countries in need.

But countries nearing debt distress and their creditors should move forward on reprofiling debt levels before a full restructuring was needed, she said.

"I very much hope that we will take, proactively, steps to prevent the need (for) restructuring by reprofiling debt early, by providing financial support to countries so they can step up economic activities ... and avoid a more massive debt restructuring process," Georgieva said.

"We have to be, of course, prepared, should global conditions worsen. Imagine a further tightening of financial conditions, that increases the burden on these countries," she added. "Please, let's act before the situation becomes dire."

Georgieva said the IMF would continue to work closely with the 20 African countries with heavy debt burdens to avoid getting to the point where restructurings were needed.

Spanish Economy Minister Nadia Calvino, who chairs the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC), the IMF's steering committee, said the week's meetings had been "particularly productive" on the debt front.

Debt roundtable participants - creditor and borrowing countries, as well as private-sector participants and international financial institutions - will reconvene in mid-May for a workshop to discuss how different creditors are treated in a restructuring case.

That has been a big concern for China, the world's largest sovereign creditor, which has been unwilling to accept losses on loans unless private-sector creditors and multilateral development banks shoulder their share of the burden.

Saudi Arabia Launches 4 Special Economic Zones for Boosting Investments



AMMAN (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia launched four special economic zones in Riyadh, Jizan, Ras Al-Khair, and King Abdullah Economic City, north of Jeddah, according to Forbes Middle East.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman highlighted "huge opportunities for the development of the local economy" that the zones will provide in terms of job creation, technology transfer, industry localization, and development of the Saudi business community.

According to bin Salman, who also holds the positions of Prime Minister and Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, the special economic zones consist of logistical and industrial platforms centered on investment, to provide an exceptional investment experience and take advantage of the kingdom's position as a transit gateway to the Middle East and Africa and a link between Eastern and Western markets.

The four zones represent the first stage of a long-term program aimed at attracting international companies, encouraging direct foreign investment, and promoting the growth of future qualitative sectors by creating a high-level infrastructure to support domestic and international investors.

The special economic zones enjoy distinct regulations for economic activities to attract key qualitative investments.

Incentives for companies include competitive tax rates, customs duties exemptions for imports, production inputs, machinery, and raw materials, 100-percent foreign ownership, and the ability to attract top-tier global human resources.

According to the crown prince, Saudi Arabia is seeking to achieve certain goals in the industrial sector. The first is to double the value of industrial exports to 557 billion riyals (\$148.34 billion) by 2030.

Secondly, the kingdom aims to increase the number of factories from 7,206 prior to the introduction of Vision 2030 to 36,000 by 2035.

Saudi Arabia is also working to boost the total value of additional investments in the industrial sector to 1.3 trillion riyals (\$346.21 billion).

IMF Sees BOJ Keeping Negative Rates, Scope for Tweak to Yield Cap

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Bank of Japan is likely to maintain negative short-term interest rates until inflation durably hits 2%, but could allow long-term yields to move more flexibly around its target, a senior International Monetary Fund official said.

The BOJ must maintain policy loose by keeping the short-term policy rate at -0.1%, a view that is shared by its officials, Ranil Salgado, the IMF's Japan mission chief, told a media roundtable in Washington.

But Salgado said it was important that longer-term bond yields, including the 10-year zone the BOJ targets, are allowed to move more flexibly.

"Since March, with difficulties in global banking sector yields have been allowed to move up and down. That's good," as rising long-term yields help ease the strain prolonged low rates inflict on financial institutions' profits, he said.

Under the BOJ's yield curve control (YCC), the central bank sets a -0.1% target for short-term rates and guides the 10-year bond yield around zero as part of efforts to sustainably achieve its 2% inflation target.

"The short-term rate is unlikely to be changed soon" until inflation durably hits the BOJ's 2% target, he said.

Salgado was less sure about the long-term yield target.

"I think they're going to stick to it, but maybe they'll review it in the next few months or so. But I'm not sure," he said, when asked how soon the BOJ could tweak the 10-year yield target.

U.S. Banks May Tighten Lending and Negate Need for More Rate Hikes

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said banks are likely to become more cautious and may tighten lending further in the wake of recent bank failures, possibly negating the need for further Federal Reserve interest rate hikes.

Yellen said in a "Fareed Zakaria GPS" interview that policy actions to stem the systemic threat caused by last month's failures of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank had caused deposit outflows to stabilize, "and

things have been calm," according to a CNN transcript released on Saturday.

"Banks are likely to become somewhat more cautious in this environment," Yellen said in the interview, which is scheduled to air on Sunday. "We already saw some tightening of lending standards in the banking system prior to that episode, and there may be some more to come." She said that would lead to a restriction in credit in the economy that "could be a substitute for further interest rate hikes that the Fed needs to make."

But Yellen said she was not yet seeing anything "dramatic enough or significant enough" in this area to alter her economic outlook.

"So, I think the outlook remains one for moderate growth and (a) continued strong labor market with inflation coming down," she said.

Yellen is far from the only finance official expecting some retrenchment in bank credit as a result of the financial sector upheaval in the last month. Some Fed officials have said the U.S. central bank should adopt a more cautious footing as they expect banks to restrict lending in the months ahead.

Weekly bank balance sheet data published by the Fed has yet to show a material deterioration in bank lending, while also showing that deposit outflows have stabilized in the last two weeks after an initial flood of withdrawals around the time of the SVB and Signature failures in mid-March.

Yellen was asked, in the wake of concerns about the safety of deposits, whether it would be wise to develop a central bank digital currency that would allow U.S. consumers to have accounts directly with the Fed.

"There are important pros ... and there are some cons with such a decision, so it's one that needs to be seriously analyzed, but it could be something that is in Americans' future," Yellen said.

Yellen also told CNN that U.S.-led sanctions and export controls on Russia were depriving it of materials for its war in Ukraine and the \$60-a-barrel price cap on Russian oil imposed by Western countries was turning Moscow's expected budget surpluses into deficits.

“The Lovely Sky” Goes to Zlín Film Festival in Czech

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Iranian animation “The Lovely Sky” will take part at the Zlín Film Festival in the Czech Republic. Zlín Film Festival, also known as the International Film Festival for Children and Youth is scheduled to be held on June 1-7, 2023 in the Czech Republic. Directed by Amir Mehran, the Iranian animation is going to participate in this cinematic event.

An impatient fighter pilot bombs cities every day. He returns to his little girl every night after completing his mission. The girl loves to fly, but the father doesn't fulfill his daughter's dream because of the bitter memory of his wife's death. The war is getting closer every day. A day an incident changes their life, forever, reads the synopsis of this animation movie.



Erdoğan's Election Manifesto Centers on Inflation, Income, Jobs

ANKARA (Dispatches) - An election manifesto by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling party pledges to bring stubborn inflation down to single digits, boost growth and raise income, some of the vital economic promises that are seen as key as Turkey heads to next month's pivotal vote.

The reelection campaign, officially launched on Tuesday, shed light on how Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) plan to shape everything from foreign policy to energy and other economic parameters following the May 14 presidential and parliamentary elections.

Inflation constitutes the most critical challenge, plaguing households and squeezing earnings and savings.

Erdoğan reiterated his party's commitment to tame inflation, stressing the goal to lower it to single digits from the current 50.5%. Nevertheless, the March reading marked a notable regress compared to the peak of 85.5% – a 24-year high – registered last October.

“We will bring inflation back down to single digits and save our country from this problem,” he told a stadium crowd in Ankara.

The government has sought to safeguard households through various measures, significantly raising the minimum wage, lifting state salaries, offering debt relief and hiking pensions for millions.

Others included a cap on rent increases, reduced taxes on utility bills, unveiling a significant housing project for low-income families, and the arrangement that eliminates an age requirement and offers early retirement to millions of citizens in the first stage.

“We will increase the welfare level of our employees, from civil servants to retirees and workers, by always increasing their wages above inflation,” Erdoğan said.

“We will raise the income per capita to \$16,000 (TL 309,090), and then later to higher levels” from around \$10,600, he noted.

His government's economic policies have been centered on a model that was unveiled in 2021 and that prioritizes low interest rates to boost exports, production and investment and creates new jobs. Dubbed the Turkey Economy Model, the program aims to lower inflation by flipping the country's chronic current account deficit to a surplus.

Erdoğan on Tuesday reiterated that investment, production, exports and an eventual current account surplus would drive gross domestic product (GDP).

He said, “We will continue to grow our country with investment, employment, production, exports and a current-account surplus.”

The ruling party's manifesto said the low-rate policy was the main driver of entrepreneurs investing in the real sector and creating jobs.

Last year, the country's central bank cut its benchmark one-week repo rate by 500 basis points to counter an economic slowdown and held it at 9% in December and January.

It trimmed it by another 50 basis points in February to boost industrial production and employment after devastating earthquakes struck the country's southeastern region. However, it left the key policy unchanged last month.

“Our priority in the upcoming period will be to restore our cities which were devastated,” Erdoğan said, adding the government aims to build 650,000 apartments for survivors.



Last week, the president said a team was strengthening economic policies under the coordination of former economic tsar Mehmet Şimşek, who international investors respect well.

“We will improve the investment further with a structure based on a free-market economy integrated with the world,” the manifesto said, aiming for annual growth of 5.5% in 2024-2028 and gross domestic product (GDP) of \$1.5 trillion by the end of end-2028.

“In the coming period, with an annual growth rate of 5.5%, we will increase our national income to \$1.5 trillion and then to our main target of \$2 trillion,” Erdoğan said.

The president said the growth would enable Turkey to create 6 million new jobs in five years, decreasing the unemployment rate to 7% from the current 10%.

“We will continue to attach special importance to the employment of women and youth,” he added.

Erdoğan said they would focus on investment, production and exports “until we reach our goal of bringing our country to a foreign trade volume of \$1 trillion.”

According to the manifesto, the export target by 2028 stands at \$400 billion, up from \$254 billion last year.

Erdoğan also said Turkey would speed up investment and promotion in tourism with a goal of 90 million tourists and \$100 billion in revenue by 2028.

The has seen a complete rebound from the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, as the number of foreign tourists neared a record and income hit an all-time high in 2022.

Foreign visitors hit 44.6 million in 2022, just shy of the peak of 45.1 million in 2019. Tourism revenues jumped to \$46.3 billion last year, blowing past the previous high of \$38.4 billion in 2019.

The government expects foreign arrivals to reach 60 million in 2023 before hitting 90 million in 2028. For the income, it sees it rising to \$56 billion this year and \$100 billion five years from now.

COP28 Head Urges Accessible Global Climate Finance



SAPPORO (Dispatches) - Sultan Al Jaber, president of the COP28 climate talks, called for “available, accessible and affordable” finance for the developing economies most vulnerable to the destructive impacts of a warming planet.

Al Jaber, who is also head of the United Arab Emirates' national oil company, said he had urged G7 climate and environment ministers meeting in Japan this weekend to prioritise support for poorer countries.

“The time has come for us to provide a fair deal for the Global South, especially when it comes to climate finance,” he told AFP on the sidelines of the G7 talks in Sapporo.

“I'm fine with raising ambitions, even going for more ambitious plans and programmes” to fight global warming, he said.

However, to boost trust worldwide “this needs to be equipped and coupled and supported with real, pragmatic, actionable plans enabled by finance that is available, accessible and affordable”.

The choice of Al Jaber, chief executive of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), to head December's COP28 UN climate change conference in Dubai has angered activists who fear it will hold back progress on reducing emissions.

Al Jaber, 49, is also the UAE's minister for industry and advanced technology and founded the government-owned renewable energy company Masdar.

COP27, held in Egypt in November, brought a landmark agreement to create a “loss and damage” fund to cover the costs of the destruction that developing countries face from climate-linked natural disasters.

Floods that covered large swaths of Pakistan last year and drought in East Africa both bear the fingerprint of climate change.

Dozens of Businesses Closed Down in Iran Over Hijab

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Police spokesman says more than a hundred businesses were closed down in the country for failing to observe the Islamic dress code for women – the hijab.

Saeed Montazerolmahdi said that the police enforce the hijab laws in the face of only a minority who ignore the laws. “The officers had to close down and file lawsuits against 137 shops and 18 restaurants and garden halls due to disregarding the previous notices,” he said. It comes months after foreign-backed riots broke out across Iran over the death of Mahsa Amini, who collapsed at a police station in Tehran where she was receiving educational training on observing proper hijab and died in a hospital three days later.

A probe into her death ruled out Western-led allegations that she was beaten by the police.

Meanwhile, Montazerolmahdi also stressed that the police's conduct when dealing with hijab-related offenses will be definitely with “minimum confrontation” and in accordance with the Iranian society and culture.

“We are certain that all citizens support and promote spirituality and normative clothing in the society while following the recommendations of the police and other organizations in charge of public culture in the field of hijab observance,” he added.

Iran to Supply China...

FROM PAGE 1

Saremi, however, said FAO has to update its statistics on Iran which would probably place the country in the second place.

Iran, he said, produced 136,000 tons of honey in 2022, but FAO has cited a much lower figure of 77,000 tons for the year.

Nevertheless, Iran's honey production capacity is even higher due to its plant diversity and natural resources. There are 8000 plant species in Iran, which are three times more than those in the European continent.

Fars in the south and the northwestern provinces of East and West Azarbaijan, Ardabil and Kermanshah account for 65 percent of the country's honey production.

Under a development plan provided by the Animal Science Research Institute of Iran, beekeepers are about to raise average honey production in each colony to 4 kg from 3 kg now.

The most important export destinations for the Iranian honey are China, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Germany, England, Canada, Hong Kong, Australia, and Indonesia, Malaysia, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Beekeeping has a long tradition in Iran, dating back to 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, though apiculture as we know it in its modern and industrial form started in the country around three decades before.

Across the world, demand for honey is growing as awareness about health benefits of the sweet food and the importance of honey bees in the food chain is rising.

Meanwhile, the increasing number of innovations in honey harvesting is driving growth prospects for the global honey food market.

Iran, Turkey...

FROM PAGE 1

“Iraq invited the Turkish delegation to visit it for the purpose of continuing discussions on activating the memorandum of understanding that was previously signed between the two countries in this field, which entered into force and was ratified by Turkish and Iraqi parliamentarians,” said Diab.

Water scarcity is a severe issue in drought-stricken Iraq. The country is the fifth-most vulnerable nation in the world to the effects of climate change, including water and food insecurity, according to the UN. The issue is exacerbated by Turkish and Iranian dams on rivers that flow into Iraq, cutting off the increasingly dry nation from much-needed water.

Tehran, Riyadh Plan to...

FROM PAGE 1

He also said that due to the Hajj pilgrimage, we try to reopen the diplomatic missions in Iran before the important Islamic ritual in order to facilitate issues concerning the Iranian pilgrims.

Touching on the potential simultaneity of the reopening of Saudi and Iranian embassies, he said that this is a technical issue, which has not been decided on yet; however, we may reach a consensus with Saudi Arabia in upcoming negotiations to make a decision on reopening the diplomatic missions simultaneously, but any of the embassies, which is ready to reopen before the two-month threshold, can kick off its job.

Human Rights...

FROM PAGE 1

Pointing to massive public demonstrations in France in protest against the government's policies, the Iranian rights official said, “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.”

Gharibabadi censured the French government for using anti-riot equipment, assaulting people, and arresting thousands of protesters as only part of the countermeasures.

Referring to Britain's introduction of amendments to the Public Order Bill to increase police powers to deal with protesters at rallies, he said the “repression bill” leads to a “significant and unprecedented increase in the powers of the police force to impose undue restrictions on peaceful protests and ... it criminalizes assemblies under the pretext of deprivation of public comfort and provides a sentence of up to 10 years of imprisonment.”

Gharibabadi pointed to a sit-in protest in Germany. He said over 3,000 German police and security forces arrested hundreds of political opponents under the pretext of plotting to stage a coup d'état.

“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.” The top Iranian rights official said most European countries have been the scene of peaceful protests over the past months which were “suppressed and dispersed with the most severe attacks by law enforcement forces.”

Referring to the recent riots in Iran, Gharibabadi said, “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.”

The Iranian vice-president also slammed the West and the United States for pursuing a politically-motivated approach and exploiting the Human Rights Council by establishing a so-called mechanism to investigate the riots in the country.

“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.”

These were just few examples for what is going in the Western countries and one can see that human rights issue has turned into a game to be played by the West when Western states need it to use as a tool to exercise pressure on the independent countries.

Many international bodies have been formed to defend human rights in the world but they remain silent and passive when violation of human rights happen in the Western countries and they are just active against those countries which do not bow to the pressure of the West.

If the international bodies continue the current trend of response to the human rights violation, they will turn into a useless body and human rights will lose its meaning and importance. So the international human rights body are better to take fair and equal action regarding human rights violation if they really are defenders of it because as long as these bodies remain indifferent, human rights violation will continue in the West and only other countries will be the target of these bodies.

IRGC, Army...

FROM PAGE 1

The IRGC chief also noted that the Army has over the past 44 years put the strategy of “permanent strengthening” on its agenda.

The Army, he added, has not contended itself to the progress already made in the defense sector and not overlooked, even for a moment, the threats posed by the enemy's plots.

Army Day, which is celebrated annually on April 18, was established by the founder and first Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1979.

Two months after the fall of the deposed Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Ayatollah Khomeini met with the soldiers of the Armed Forces who had made an invaluable contribution to the victory of the Revolution. A few days later, Ayatollah Khomeini named April 18 “the Army Day,” calling for military parades to exhibit the nation's military preparedness.

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

Fitzpatrick Soars to Lead at PGA Heritage

MIAMI (Dispatches) - Reigning US Open champion Matthew Fitzpatrick of England fired a PGA Tour career-low, eight-under par 63 to seize the lead after the third round of the Heritage tournament.
Fitzpatrick's bogey-free round -- highlighted by holing out for eagle from 149 yards in a fairway bunker at the par-4 third hole -- gave him the 54-hole lead on 14-under 199 at Harbour Town on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Kim Wins LPGA Lotte Championship After Playoff

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Australia's Grace Kim won the LPGA's Lotte Championship after triumphing in a three-woman playoff in Oahu, Hawaii to give the 22-year-old her first tour triumph.
China's Liu Yu held the clubhouse lead on 12-overall 276 but Kim and South Korean Sung Yu-Jin both joined her at the top of the leaderboard after 18 holes after making birdies on the final hole to force the playoff.

Kings Edge Warriors In NBA Playoff Thriller

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - De'Aaron Fox scored 38 points and Malik Monk added 32 off the bench in leading the Sacramento Kings to a 126-123 victory over Golden State for their first NBA playoff triumph in 17 years.

The Kings, who had not reached the post-season since 2006, seized a 1-0 lead over the defending champions in a Western Conference best-of-seven first round series that continues in Sacramento.

In Eastern Conference playoff series openers yesterday, the New York Knicks edged host Cleveland 101-97, Boston routed Atlanta 112-99 and Philadelphia beat Brooklyn 121-101.
Fox made 13-of-27 shots in his playoff debut, 4-of-8 from 3-point range, and 8-of-12 free throws then after the victory pushed the button to send the Kings' laser light -- symbolic of a Kings victory -- from the outside of the arena.

Monk sank 8-of-13 from the floor and 2-of-4 from 3-point range plus all 14 of his free throws. He made two late free throws to create the final margin and Stephen Curry missed a final 3-point shot for the Warriors to force overtime.

Reserve Trey Lyles added 16 points and NBA rebounds leader Domantas Sabonis had 12 points and 16 rebounds for Sacramento.

"Our bench came in and they did a hell of a job tonight, especially Malik and Trey. They ignited us," Fox said.

"We knew we had to go out and be physical -- try not to foul because this is probably the best free throw shooting team in the league -- and get it done on the defensive end and we got some key stops."

Fox caught fire in the second half and Sacramento used a late 7-0 run for a 119-114 lead that put the hosts ahead to stay.

"In the second half, I got into a rhythm, my teammates continued to hit me in my spot and I just did what they want me to do," Fox said.

Curry led Golden State with 30 points while Klay Thompson added 21.

At Cleveland, Jalen Brunson scored 21 of his 27 points in the second half to lead New York's victory while the Cavaliers were led by 38 points from Donovan Mitchell.



A late Brunson miss was rebounded by New York's Julius Randle, who had 19 points and 10 rebounds, and that set up two clinching Knicks free throws by Quentin Grimes.

"They just kept fighting," Brunson said. "We kept our composure. Made plays down the stretch, made a couple of huge stops. We just kept fighting, kept sticking together and stayed poised."

NBA scoring champion Joel Embiid had 26 points while NBA assists champion James Harden added 23 points and 13 assists in the Sixers' romp.

The host Sixers, who led the NBA in 3-point shooting percentage, sank a club playoff record 21 3-pointers in 43 attempts.

"(That) was a good win for us," Harden said. "We'll be watching film. Game two is going to be the toughest game of the series for us. We'll be ready to go."

Cameroonian star Embiid went 7-of-15 from the floor and 11-of-11 from the free throw line. Harden hit 7-of-13 from 3-point range and helped eight Sixers in all make 3-pointers.

"Just finding ways to impact the game possession by possession," said Harden, a former Nets backcourt star.

"It's the playoffs. Things don't go the way you want as much as you want them to. You've got to keep pushing, keep fighting, and I'm happy we got a win."

Lazio's Immobile Suffers Rib, Back Injuries In Car Crash

ROME (Dispatches) - Lazio forward Ciro Immobile is under observation in hospital after he fractured his rib and hurt his back in a car crash in Rome, the Serie A club said.

Italian media reported Immobile, who scored in Lazio's 3-0 win at Spezia on Friday, was involved in an accident after the Italy international's car collided with a tram in Rome.

"Earlier today, following a car accident, footballer Ciro Immobile suffered a spinal distortion injury and a compound fracture of the right XI rib," Lazio said in a statement.

"The condition is currently good. The footballer remains under observation in the emergency medicine department... of the Agostino Gemelli IRCCS University Polyclinic in Rome."

Sky Sport Italy said Immobile was travelling with his two daughters in the car, with the 33-year-old forward telling police that the tram allegedly ran a red light.

Seven others, including tram passengers, were also taken to hospital for checks.

Immobile has scored 10 Serie A goals this season to guide Lazio to second in the standings behind leaders Napoli.

USA Sweep Into BJK Cup Finals With France, Czech Republic

PARIS (Dispatches) - Jessica Pegula sealed victory for the United States over Austria as the record 18-time champions secured their place in the Billie Jean King Cup Finals.

World number three Pegula made quick work of Julia Grabher, winning 6-1, 6-3, to give the heavily favored Americans an unassailable 3-0 lead over Austria in their tie in Delray Beach, Florida.

"I really wanted to clinch today," said Pegula. "It's so much more exciting when you get to guarantee your team through."

It was a second singles victory in 24 hours for Pegula after she followed up Coco Gauff's opening win over Grabher on Friday by defeating Sinja Kraus in straight sets.

Gauff skipped the singles game against Kraus but secured a 4-0 win for the Americans with a doubles victory alongside Caty McNally against Melanie Klaffner and Kraus.

Canada defeated Belgium 3-2 with Leylah Fernandez and Gabriela Dabrowski winning the deciding doubles game with a 6-1, 6-2 victory over Kirsten Flipkens and Greet Minnen.

In the singles games, Minnen beat Katherine Sebov 6-2, 3-6, 6-3, and Fernandez fought back for a 4-6, 7-5, 6-2 win over Ysaline Bonaventure.

The Czech Republic saw off Ukraine 3-1, with Marketa Vondrousova earning the winning point against Katarina Zavatska 6-3, 6-4, after former French Open champion Barbora Krejickova lost 3-6, 6-1, 6-4 to 38th-ranked Marta Kostyuk.

On Friday, 12th-ranked Krejickova eased past Zavatska after 2019 Roland Garros runner-up Vondrousova dispatched Kostyuk.

The matches were played in the Turkish city of Antalya because of the war in Ukraine.

World number five Caroline Garcia sent France through with a 6-1, 6-7 (10/12), 6-1 win over Britain's Harriet Dart in Coventry. Britain, which reached the semi-finals last year, were missing Emma Raducanu, leaving 138th-ranked Dart as their top singles player.

On Friday, Garcia and Alize Cornet had to play almost six hours between them to edge out Katie Boulter 6-7 (2/7), 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/2) and Dart 7-6 (8/6), 7-6 (7/3) respectively.

Bagnaia Dominates GP of the Americas MotoGP Sprint



VR46 Ducati team owned by motorcycling legend Valentino Rossi to retain his lead in the world championship but only by one point now from Bagnaia.

This was the perfect pick-me-up for 'Pecco' who had begun the defence of his world title in impeccable form in Portugal, winning both the sprint and grand prix.

AUSTIN (Dispatches) - World champion Francesco Bagnaia breezed to a comfortable win in the Grand Prix of the Americas MotoGP sprint.

The Ducati rider started from pole at Austin and dominated the 10-lap dash to bounce back from his fall last time out in Argentina.

Alex Rins on the Honda-LCR took second with Jorge Martin on another Ducati in third. Marco Bezzecchi came in sixth for the

But Bezzecchi arrived in Texas with a nine-point championship lead after Bagnaia finished only sixth in the sprint in Argentina, and a lowly 16th in the grand prix itself.

He showed he meant business this weekend when nailing pole with a lap record, and built on that to cross the line over two and a half seconds in front of Rins in the third sprint of the season.

"I had more trouble in Argentina," the 26-year-old smiled.

"I started well, and tried to push, do my pace, to build up a gap. Now I've got to focus on tomorrow, that's going to be harder."

MotoGP introduced the Formula One-style sprint format this year, with the first two editions fast and furious affairs.

The third lacked the thrills and spills of Portimao and Termas de Rio Hondo as Bagnaia and his speedy Ducati proved in a class of their own.

Behind him Martin sliced through the pack to make the podium from 12th on the grid.

Difficult to Rely On Martial Due To Injury Record

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag said forward Anthony Martial's injury issues make it difficult to rely on him but backed the Frenchman to be part of his plans next season.

Martial made his first start since mid-January in Thursday's 2-2 draw with Sevilla in the first leg of the Europa League quarter-final, where he was taken off after the one-hour mark.

Fitness issues have held back the 27-year-old, who has made 18 appearances this season but only 10 of those have been starts.

Asked if he can trust Martial to be part of the squad in the long term, Ten Hag told reporters: "It's difficult to say because the history shows different but I want him to be because he's a great player."

"He definitely has the qualities to play top football. When he's fit, our team plays better."

The Dutch manager described Martial as a versatile player but said he is at his best when leading the front line.

"I think he can play across the front. For me, he's best at centre forward, but he can play in the wide position as well," Ten Hag said.

With Marcus Rashford out with a groin injury, Martial is in line to start in Sunday's Premier League game away to Nottingham Forest.



Saka Penalty Miss Proves Costly For Arsenal

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal blew a two-goal lead for the second game in a row as Bukayo Saka's penalty miss proved crucial in the Premier League leaders' damaging 2-2 draw against West Ham.

Mikel Arteta's side struck twice in the first 10 minutes at the London Stadium thanks to goals from Gabriel Jesus and Martin Odegaard.

But just seven days after squandering a 2-0 advantage in their 2-2 draw at Liverpool, the Gunners again cracked under the pressure of the title race.

Said Benrahma's penalty reduced the deficit for West Ham before the interval and after Saka fired his spot-kick wide early in the second half, Jarrod Bowen volleyed in an equaliser for the struggling hosts.

It was a hammer blow for Arsenal, who sit four points clear of second-placed Manchester City but have ceded the title race momentum to Pep Guardiola's team.

City had closed within three points of the Gunners after beating Leicester 3-1 on Saturday and it is the champions who have the destiny of the title in their hands despite trailing Arsenal for much of the season.

City, who have won their last 10 matches in all competitions, have a game in hand on Arsenal.

With a home game against Arsenal looming on April 26, City know they will lift a fifth title in six seasons if they win their remaining eight matches.

