

Biogas Power Plant of Units 5 and 6 of South Tehran Wastewater Treatment Plant With Possibility of Generating 15m Kilowatt Hours of Electricity Was Put Into Operation In the Presence of Energy Minister

IRAN NEWS

TEDPIX, the Main Index of Tehran Stock Exchange, Gained 36,147 Points to 2.325million on Tuesday As Reported, Over 24.166b Securities Worth 167.186 Trillion Rials (About \$398m) Were Traded

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Annual Non-Oil Export Up 10%

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN- The value of Iran's non-oil export rose 10 percent in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20), the spokesman of Trade Development Committee of the Iranian House of Industry, Mining, and Trade announced.

Ruhollah Latifi said that 122.056 million tons of non-oil commodities worth \$53.166 billion were exported in the previous year.

China with the purchase of \$14.584 billion of commodities (no change), Iraq with \$10.238 billion (15 percent growth), Turkey with \$7.459 billion (23 percent growth), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with \$5.767 billion (28 percent growth), and India with \$2.146 billion (18 percent growth) were the first five export destinations of Iranian goods in 1401, the official stated.

Latifi further announced that 37.18 million tons of non-oil commodities valued at \$59.655 billion were imported to the country during the past year, with a 10 percent drop in weight, and a 13 percent rise in worth, year on year.

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Tehran, Caracas Highlight Oil Ties During Visit

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Iran will continue to spend on Venezuelan oil, petrochemical and natural gas projects, based on agreements the Middle Eastern country's oil minister Javad Owji signed during a visit to Caracas last week.

Owji's trip came in the wake of turmoil at state-owned Venezuela's PdV, after a corruption probe into up to \$23bn in missing cryptocurrency led to the arrests of more than 20 people and the resignation of oil minister Tarek El Aissami.

Owji signed new initial agreements to develop oil and natural gas fields in Venezuela, overhaul refineries and continue oil trading, Iran state media said on 16 April. This follows a 20-year strategic agreement the two countries — which Iran says have both been "hit by illegal US sanctions" — signed in June. The office of newly installed oil minister and PdV president Rafael Tellechea did not confirm the visit and Venezuela state media did not cover it.

Owji met only with deputy foreign affairs ministers and PdV vice president of international affairs Ronny Romero, according to the Venezuela foreign affairs office.

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Iran to Destroy Tel Aviv, Haifa in Case of Slightest Israeli Action



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi strongly warns the apartheid Israeli regime against taking even the slightest action against the Islamic Republic, saying Iran will react to such a move with "destruction of Haifa and Tel Aviv."

Raisi made the remarks while addressing a parade to mark National Army Day in Tehran on Tuesday, when he said the Iranian Army's capabilities are based on domestic know-how.

"The enemies, especially the Zionist regime (Israel), have received this message that the slightest move against the country will evoke a severe response from the armed forces and will be accompanied by the destruction of Haifa and Tel Aviv," he added. He also said the message of Iran's Army and Armed Forces to the US troops is that they must leave the region as soon as possible.

"The extra-regional and American forces should leave the region as soon as possible because it is in their own interest and in the interest of the region," the Iranian president said.

"The presence of foreign forces threatens regional security but our armed forces provide security wherever they are present in the region," he added.

He noted that the Iranian Armed Forces have resisted terrorists and improved security in the region, while foreign forces only pose a threat to the regional states.

The Iranian Armed Forces' power is beneficial to the security of the region and "it is no secret to anyone that our armed forces have protected the territorial integrity and security of the countries in the region," he said.

He reiterated that the presence of foreign troops, Americans in particular, would never protect the integrity of the Persian Gulf region.

He said the brave and heroic Iranian army has taken the lead from the armies of the regional countries in various fields of science and technology and everyone acknowledges this fact.

The Iranian chief executive said the country's army has turned into a strong fortress against anti-revolutionary elements, Takfiri groups, and thugs, adding that it is in charge of safeguarding Iran's borders and protecting national interests and security in the oceans.

Raisi, who also serves as head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), emphasized that the National Army Day conveys the message of peace and friendship to regional countries. He noted that Iran's sky is among the most secure in the region, adding, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's Army creates opportunities for the country from all threats and shortcomings."

The Iranian chief executive also vowed to equip the Army with state-of-the-art technologies.

The National 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.

Meanwhile during the parade, the Islamic Republic of Iran Army units unveiled a broad range of advanced gear such as homegrown missiles, tanks, armored vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles, radar systems and air defense missile systems in a military parade marking the National Army Day.

Four divisions of the Iranian Army, namely the Ground Force, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Air Defense, held military parades in the presence of President Raisi in Tehran.

Among the major achievements put on display during the parade was Mohajer-6 drone, which is capable of carrying guided bombs and sophisticated surveillance equipment. It has already been used in combat by the Iranian Armed Forces.

Iran's first wide-body unmanned combat aerial vehicle, Kaman 22, was also unveiled, along with Iranian suicide drones such as Arash, Kian and Karrar, which could be flown from both ground and offshore launchers.

Kaman 22 is said to have a range of approximately 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) and can carry 300 kilograms of explosives.

Qader (Capable) medium-range anti-ship cruise missile, laser-guided air-to-ground Sattar missile, Fakour-90 (Thoughtful-90) air-to-air missile, Qaem surface-to-air missile, and Shafagh precision-guided missile, which has a range of 20 kilometers, were displayed as well.

The Army's air defense division unveiled several domestically-developed missile systems, including Damavand strategic and long-range system used for downing various aircraft as well as cruise and ballistic missiles, Nasser 40 navigation assistant radar system, Majid short-range and low-altitude air defense system, Nawab medium-range surface-to-air missile (SAM) system, Mersad mid-range air defense system, Khordad 15 surface-to-air missile system, and Talaash (Endeavor) long-range mobile surface-to-air missile system.

The Army also put on display Kian 600, Kian 700 and Kian 800 super heavy tank transporters, Zulfiqar and Tiam main battle tanks, Seraj artillery system which is equipped with a 35-millimeter cannon and uses both a radar and a new optical system to detect and destroy small flying objects, Matla' al-Fajr VHF 3D radar, Kavosh precision approach radar, and 900-kilogram Qased (Messenger) smart bomb.

Iranian military experts and technicians have in recent years made great headways in manufacturing a broad range of indigenous equipment, making the armed forces self-sufficient in the arms sphere.

Iran maintains that its military power poses no threat to the regional countries, saying that the Islamic Republic's defense doctrine is entirely based on deterrence.

No Compromise on Hirmand River Water Right

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's foreign minister says the country has raised the issue of its water right with respect to the border river of Hirmand, also known as Helmand, with the acting Taliban government of Afghanistan.

Hossein Amirabdollahian made the remark in a Monday tweet in reference to his recent meeting with the Taliban-run Afghan government's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mottaqi.

"During my recent negotiations with Mr. Mottaqi ... in the city of Samarkand, we put strong emphasis on the issue of Iran's water right to the Hirmand River," Amirabdollahian said.

He added that the Afghan side has also stressed its commitment to Iran's water right and the two sides "agreed to take immediate measures" in this regard.

"We will not compromise on Iran's water right," the top Iranian diplomat concluded.

Iran and Afghanistan have been locked in a protracted water dispute, which has prevented them from realizing the vast potential of bilateral trade ties.

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Iran Praises Syrian Nation's Heroic Sacrifices

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman has hailed the heroic sacrifices made by the Syrian nation in defending their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, saying that Tehran is confident that Damascus will regain its influential and strategic role in the West Asia region.

"In recent years, Syria has endured numerous Western plots and witnessed the rise of terror outfits. It has lost a large number of its nationals, who sacrificed their blood for the honor and dignity of the homeland, and in defense of its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity," Nasser Kan'ani told correspondent of Syria's official news agency SANA in Tehran on Monday.

He added, "The sacrifices made by Syrian people in the face of international terrorism and in confronting the multilateral conspiracies against the security, stability and sovereignty of their country are unrivaled, and deserve to be recorded in history."

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Oman Satisfied with Progress Of Iran Gas Export Project

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Oman's minister of energy expressed his satisfaction with the progress of Iran's gas pipeline construction project for exporting gas to the Sultanate of Oman.

Two weeks ago, Chief Executive of Iran Gas Engineering and Development Company Reza Noshadi had announced the construction operation of Minab to Kooh Mobarak Pipeline near Jask aimed at the export of Iranian gas to Oman in the current year.

The contract for the construction of the gas pipeline project, which would be 400km long, was signed in 2013 for a period of 15 years in order to pump about 28 million cubic meters of gas from Iran to Oman.

A couple of days ago, Oman's Minister of Energy and Minerals Salim Al Aufi in an interview with an Oman daily said that Tehran and Muscat have agreed to set up a technical team for investigating the progress of Iran's gas pipeline project to the Sultanate.

The minister hailed Iran's unflinching effort to complete the construction of this giant project.

The Iranian-Omani Gas Pipeline Project originated in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by the two countries' oil ministers in 2013. Progress cooled off but the effort was renewed in 2016. However, the project was halted due to US pressure on Oman to find a different gas supplier after Washington withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in 2018.

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Footage of Russian Su-35 Jet Flying in Tehran Fake

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iranian media say footage circulating of what's said to be an advanced Russian-made Sukhoi-35 fighter jet flying in the skies of Tehran is "fake and fabricated."

Tasnim News Agency reported on Tuesday that recently, footage has emerged on social media of what appears to be a Sukhoi-35 over the International Mehrabad Airport in western Tehran.

The video, however, turned out to be fake after its authenticity was examined, the report added. Last year, Iran reached a deal with Russia on the purchase of cutting-edge Sukhoi-35 warplanes.

Iran Eyes Closer Trade Ties with Bangladesh

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Reaffirming his administration's resolve to broaden ties with Muslim countries, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi called for the expansion of economic and trade relations with Bangladesh.

In a telephone conversation with Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina on Monday, Raisi stressed the need for convergence and unanimity of the Islamic countries in supporting Palestine and condemning the aggressions of the Zionist regime, especially the brutal Israeli actions in Al-Aqsa Mosque and against the fasting Palestinian people.

Congratulating the government and the Muslim nation of Bangladesh on Eid-al-Fitr, Raisi said the foreign policy of Iran is based on the development and strengthening of relations with the countries of the world, especially the Islamic countries.

He also expressed hope for good relations between Iran and Bangladesh, especially the promotion of economic and commercial cooperation.

Raisi called for convergence and consensus among Muslim countries to support Palestine and condemn the Zionist regime's acts of aggression against Palestinians.



"Convergence and consensus among Muslim countries in support of the issue of Palestine and condemnation of the Zionist regime's acts of aggression, especially the savage measures of this regime at al-Aqsa Mosque and against Palestinian worshippers, is very important and necessary," Iran's president said in the phone call with Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina, for her part, strongly condemned the criminal actions of the Zionist regime against the Palestinian people, adding, "Supporting the oppressed people of Palestine and condemning the aggressions of the Zionist regime is the fixed position of the government and the people of Bangladesh."

Highlighting the importance of developing relations with Iran, she emphasized on strengthening these relations, especially in the commercial and economic fields and regional cooperation.

FM Discusses Issues With Belgian, Omani Counterparts on Phone



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian on Monday night held separate phone calls with his Belgian and Omani counterparts, discussing issues of mutual interest with them.

Amirabdollahian and Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Labbib discussed Tehran-Brussels relations and consular issues.

Both foreign ministers stressed the importance of finding constructive solutions to help bilateral ties develop further.

The top Iranian diplomat also discussed relations with Oman in a phone call with the country's Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi.

They discussed key regional and international issues as well, according to a press release by the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

Gov't Has No Plans to Change Energy Prices

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The government spokesman says that President Ebrahim Raisi's administration has no plans to change energy prices.

Speaking in his weekly presser, Ali Bahadori Jahromi said: "The government does not have a price plan in the field of energy. One of the main axes in this field is fuel smuggling. The Ministry of Petroleum is looking to improve the procedures one by one. Everyone should try to use personal fuel cards."

"The general rule is the change of managers, management evaluations, and special events which are considered the routine of the administration, but the administration does not intend to make any changes in the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Trade," he added. The spokesman said: "The president's meetings with different groups have been held so far, nine meetings have been held, and the president will have two more meetings in total."

He added: "The main focus of the president's meetings in the holy month of Ramadan in the fields of economics, entrepreneurship, and elites has been to pay attention to the concerns of activists in the field."

Bahadri Jahormi said: "The upcoming visit of the president is the fourth trip from the second period to Khuzestan."

Elsewhere he stated: "The growth rate of industry, trade and mining has grown significantly during Fatemi Amin's tenure. The Ministry of Industry, Mining and Trade has a very wide range of fields of activity, of which the automobile is considered a small part, and the thread of growth of industry, trade and mining has grown significantly during Fatemi Amin's tenure."

He added: "To evaluate the performance of this ministry, it is not possible to look at only one department, most of the issues are related to the automobile issue, for which different factors should be considered. Regardless of the automobile field, this ministry has a wide range of activities, the growth of GDP in the first nine months of last Iranian year was 5.1%. In the field of industry, the average quarterly growth rate has been 4.2%, which is more than two and a half times compared to the 11th and 12th governments, and the volume of foreign trade has also increased compared to before. We saw a significant decrease in producer inflation."

Regarding the government's measures to reduce inflation, Bahadri Jahormi said: "The disease of inflation has been blamed on Iran's economy, and we have been suffering from inflation for many years, so temporary treatments will not be enough and the roots of this problem must be eliminated, part of these roots are imbalances in the budget that curbing it was on the agenda of the government last year, and with the budget amendment bill, we are trying to eliminate the possible imbalances in this year's budget as well."



Iran Wants Nothing But Security, Comfort for Regional States

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran wishes nothing but security and comfort for the regional states, the chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said, expressing Iran's support for Muslim countries.

Addressing reporters on the sidelines of the ceremony of Army Day on Tuesday, Major General Hossein Salami said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran wishes nothing but security and comfort for the countries of the region."

Referring to the military parade of Iran's Army forces, General Salami noted that this parade



conveys the message to the neighbors that Iran supports Muslim nations and will not leave them alone in difficult situations.

"Iran has always been in peace and tranquility with neighboring countries and its agenda is maintaining peace, comfort, and security," he said.

Pointing to Iran's privileged position in the region and its unparalleled defense power in the region and the world, he noted, "Iran is the anchor of stability and security in the region and tries to use its defense power for peace and tranquility in the region."

Pakistan Navy Commander Stresses Expanding Cooperation With Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) - Expressing his satisfaction with the level of bilateral interactions with Iran, especially in the field of maritime security, the commander of the Pakistan Navy emphasized the need to further deepen bilateral cooperation.

The Chief of Naval Staff of Pakistan Admiral Muhammad Amjad Khan Niazi on Monday in Islamabad held talks with Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini, the Iranian ambassador to Pakistan on the relations between the two countries, including the cooperation between the naval forces.

In the meeting, some officials of the headquarters of the Pakistan Navy, as well as Colonel Mustafa Ghanbarpour, the military attaché of Iran in Pakistan, were attending.

While reviewing the latest developments in maritime security in the region, the two sides emphasized increasing bilateral cooperation in that field.

The Iranian ambassador, for his part, said, "There are many potentials for the development of relations between the two countries, especially in the field of maritime security and the exchange of visits by both sides' delegations, which should be employed."

Cooperation between Iran and Pakistan in the fields of military, defense and maritime security has increased in recent years, and the exchanges of visits by high-level delegations between the two countries have increased.

Meanwhile during a meeting with Hosseini, Seyed Naveed Gamar expressed his appreciation for efforts to facilitate bilateral trade and economic relations between the two countries.

Gamar emphasized the need to increase trade and investment between Pakistan and Iran, stating that the current volume of business is not at the expected level.

Hosseini also praised Pakistan's Minister of Commerce for his efforts, which led to a 15 percent increase in trade between the two countries for the first time.

He expressed hope that the upcoming opening of the Pishin-Mand border market will further boost trade between Iran and Pakistan.



Record-Breaking Contributions at School Building Charity Festival

TEHRAN (IP) - The 24th School Building Charity Festival was held in Tehran on Monday, marking a special occasion to honor the generosity of school builder benefactors in the province.

The festival was aimed at both recognizing the valuable contributions of existing benefactors and attracting new ones to help with school building efforts in Tehran. The event was significant due to its role in expanding the culture of public participation and emphasizing the importance of continuing this important cultural movement.

The 24th School Building Charity Festival of Tehran Province took place on Monday, April 17, 2023. According to reports, the previous year saw 93 schools consisting of 890 classes put into operation, with 30 percent of funding coming from school builder benefactors.

The upcoming Iranian year, 1402, is expected to see the construction of 86 new schools in Tehran Province. At the festival, Hamidreza Khan Mohammadi, the head of the country's school renovation organization, announced plans to open ten thousand classrooms in the current year.

In addition, Naser Ghaffari, the head of the school building benefactors' society, stated that the benefactors' contributions have reached 8,000 billion Tomans this year, double that of last year, according to the charity festivals that have been held.

Overall, the festival served as a reminder of the importance of community involvement in education and the positive impact that can result from charitable contributions towards school building efforts.

Iran Moves up 7 Places to 53 In Global Innovation Index

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A latest report by the World Intellectual Property Organization shows that the Islamic Republic of Iran's ranking in the Global Innovation Index (GII) has improved from 60th in 2021 to 53th in 2022, an Iranian official has said.

Hassan Babaei, Head of the Deeds and Properties Registration Organization of Iran, made the remarks on Tuesday during a meeting to review the performance of Iran's Intellectual Property Center over the past Iranian year (ended in March 20, 2023).

The official said that Iran had made considerable progress in terms of innovation over the past year despite the fact that it was among the world's lower middle-income countries.

Iran had moved up seven places to 60 in the GI ranking in 2021.

Downing Ukrainian Plane Was Human Error

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of the Tehran Judiciary Organization of the Armed Forces Ali Eftekhari says that Iran's air defense system was not defective when it downed a Ukrainian plane in January 2020, adding that the tragedy occurred due to a human error.

In an interview with Iranian television late on Monday, Eftekhari said that it was not possible for the operator of the system at night to distinguish whether the Ukrainian aircraft was an airliner or a military plane.

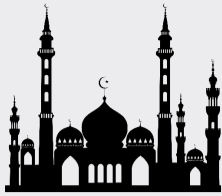
Tensions escalated in the region after the United States assassinated the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and former commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes along with their companions by targeting their vehicles outside Baghdad International Airport on 3 January 2020 at the direct order from former US President Donald Trump. Amid heightened tension, IRGC Aviation accidentally shot down a Ukrainian plane near Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKA) on January 8, 2020, mistaking it for a missile.

Ukraine's passenger plane was reportedly moving very close to a sensitive military location belonging to the IRGC. All 176 aboard the plane were killed.

Eftekhari added that the case of the Ukrainian plane had complicated and numerous technical aspects.

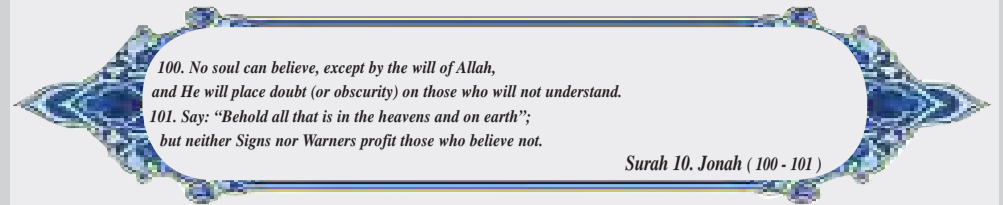
He added that there were several errors in the process of the downing of the plane, adding that during the investigation it became clear that Iran's air defense system was not defective.

On Sunday, a military court in Iran delivered a verdict to those who were involved in the downing of the Ukrainian passenger plane in 2020.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:03
■ Evening (Maghreb)	18:59
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	03:55
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	05:26



Setting Up Joint Free Zones with Neighbors on Agenda

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Establishing joint free zones with neighboring countries is atop the agenda in the current administration of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, an official said.

Deputy Head of Secretariat of the Supreme Council of Free Industrial and Special Economic Zones for Economic Affairs Ahmad Jamali said that the Secretariat has considered the establishment of free zones with neighboring countries as its legal obligation, aimed at production growth and more productivity from abundant capacities and potentials existing in the country.

Accordingly, Iran submitted its request to the officials of 18 neighboring states for the establishment of joint free zones, and all of these countries welcomed the proposal, he stated.

To date, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Syria, Iraq and Turkey have agreed with Iran's proposal of setting up joint free zones, he added.

Negotiations have been held with the Russian Federation regarding the establishment of joint free zones, he said, adding that expert-level sessions both in-person and via videoconference have been held between officials of the two countries and it was agreed to set up joint free zones between the Moscow-Lotus Metropolises Special Economic zones and the Chabahar and Anzali free zones.

The establishment of joint free zones among Caspian Sea littoral states is another measure taken into consideration, Jamali added.

The decision for establishing the mentioned zone was made during the two countries' fifth Joint Economic Committee meeting in Baghdad.

Underlining the fact that three of Iran's major free zones are located near the Iraqi border, Jamali noted that along with the joint zone, these four free trade zones can



play a significant role in boosting the trade exchanges between the two countries.

The establishment of free trade zones (FTZs) in Iran dates back to the Iranian calendar year 1368 (March 1989 - March 1990) following the fall in the country's oil income in the preceding year which prompted the government to promote non-oil exports.

The first two free trade zones of Iran were established in the south of the country. The first one was Kish Free Trade Zone established in 1368 on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf and the second one was Qeshm Free Trade Zone established the year after on Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz.

Some five other free trade zones have been also established in the country since then, including Chabahar in southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan Province, Arvand in southwestern Khuzestan Province, Anzali in northern Gilan Province, Aras in East-Azərbayjan Province and Maku in West-Azərbayjan Province, both in the northwest of the country.

The development of existing free trade zones and the establishment of new FTZs has become one of the major economic approaches of the Iranian government.

In last December, the secretary of the Free Zones High Council said that this council is seeking to modify the country's free trade zones (FTZ) comprehensive law.

Speaking in a TV program, Abdolmaleki said, "The good news for the entrepreneurs of the regions, both the current ones and those who, God willing, will soon join us, is that we are looking for the modification of the so-called comprehensive law."

ICCIMA to Host Iran-Kazakhstan Business Forum on April 25

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Concurrent with visit of Kazakhstan Prime Minister to Tehran, Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mine and Agriculture (ICCIMA) is to hold the Iran-Kazakhstan Business Forum on Tuesday, April 25.



According to the reports, the ICCIMA will host economic officials and activists of both countries where the business activists will have time for B2B meetings for broadening cooperation.

Representatives of 20 Kazakh companies are to attend the forum as they are from different fields like light industries, agriculture and food industries, electronic industries, chemical industries, pharmaceutical industry, construction materials production and oil and gas industries.

The Kazakh trade delegation will be headed by Kazakh Prime Minister Alihan Smayilov and some of trade officials of the country will also accompany the delegation.

Organ Transplants Hit Record High in Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA)- More than 35,000 organ transplants were conducted in Iran last year (ended March 20, 2023), hitting an all-time record, according to official data.

Deputy health minister Saeed Karimi said that 35,010 patients in need of organs underwent transplantation surgeries in hospitals across the country in the Iranian calendar year 1401.

Of those, the largest number was kidney transplants with 2,430 patients, a 16% increase from before the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by liver transplants with 893 successful surgeries, he noted.

"These are the most unprecedented annual numbers in the history of transplants in the country," Karimi pointed out.

Brain-dead donations (PMP) also increased by 12.2 percent compared to the year before, the deputy health minister said.

An organ transplant is a life-saving procedure that is typically performed after an organ is donated following a brain or cardiac death.

Brain death is an irreversible condition when all brain activity ceases and therefore the patient cannot regain consciousness and is usually only able to breathe through a ventilator.

First Home-Made 16-Valve Engine Unveiled

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's second largest carmaker SAIPA has unveiled its first 16-valve engine which it plans to mount on a replacement to a discontinued joint model with RENAULT some five years after the French company left the Iranian market because of U.S. sanctions.

The ME16 engine was unveiled on Monday in a ceremony attended by Iran's industry minister Reza Fatemi Amin.

The minister said the engine will enable SAIPA to resume production of model that will replace Sanderio, a popular joint model with Renault which was discontinued in 2018 after Renault's withdrawal from Iran.

He said initial agreements had been reached with a Russian carmaker to manufacture the new P90 model in the country under a different brand.

The ME16 is based on PSA Peugeot's EC5 engine which has been upgraded several times in Iran over the past decades.

The new 4-cylinder engine is capable of delivering 113-115 hp of power and 145-150 pf of torque, according to technicians in SAIPA.

It will mostly rely on domestic companies for its parts as reports said some 69 Iranian parts makers will contribute to the manufacturing process of ME16.



Significant Rise in Oil, Gas Wells Pipeline Length, Construction

TEHRAN (MNA) - The length of oil and gas wells pipelines as well as the pipeline construction operation increased in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20), an official with the National Iranian Drilling Company (NIDC) announced.

Borzou Torabi Raki said that the number of oil and gas wells pipeline building operations increased by 10 percent and the length of the built pipelines increased by 22 percent in the previous year.

He said that 403 operations were carried out in an area of 712,615 meters in 1401, while the figures were 365 operations in an area of 558,157 meters in 1400.

As previously announced by Masoud Afshar, the deputy head of NIDC for drilling operation, the company dug and completed the digging operation of 99 oil and gas wells during the past Iranian calendar year.

According to Afshar, the drilled wells consisted of 15 development, five exploratory, and 79 workover ones.

He said that 77 of the mentioned wells were drilled in the operational zone of the National Iranian South Oil Company (NISOC), eight wells were drilled in the fields under the supervision of the Iranian Offshore Oil Company (IOOC), eight in the fields under the operation of the Petroleum Engineering and Development Company (PEDEC), two wells in the framework of project, and four in the operational zone of the drilling management department of National Iranian Oil company (NIOC).

Over 67,000 meters of drilling were conducted for drilling the mentioned wells, the official announced, and noted, "Comprehensive planning has been done to speed up the drilling operations and it is expected that with the reconstruction and modernization of the drilling machines and equipment, in the current year we will see the use of more drilling machines of the company in the oil-rich areas of the country."

Stating that 63 of the 73 light, heavy and extra heavy drilling rigs in the company's fleet are in operation or being moved, he put the number of rigs being moved at 20.

The NIDC managing director has declared the company's infrastructure improvement in line with the programs of the Oil Ministry as the most important achievement of NIDC in the past year.

IRISL Has Strategic View to Iran-Russia Trade Cooperation

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line Group (IRISL) says the group in line with the policies of the current government on importance of broadening historical trade relation between Iran and Russia has done precise planning and beside the launch of North-South Corridor, has pursued seriously expansion of its fleet in the Caspian Sea and it has on its agenda.

Concurrent with the beginning of TransRussia Exhibition in Moscow, the CEO of IRISL Mr. Mohammad Reza Modarres Khiabani said that IRISL as the custodian of the North-South Corridor has taken some strategic actions for broadening trade via this corridor, stipulating that the volume of trade exchange via this corridor has increased considerably comparing to last year and before the revival of this corridor.

He termed IRISL's \$10m investment in Russian Port of Solnyanka as the turning point in expansion of the North-South Corridor.

Modarres Khiabani further said that IRISL moves ahead with a strategic plan and view in line with broadening



historical trade relation of Iran and Russia and termed Russ the historic neighbor and partner.

He added that the big market of Russia is a great and suitable potential for activities of Iranian traders and IRISL is ready to enact these potentials more than ever. He expressed hope Iranian traders would take advantage of the current opportunity for broadening trade with Russia.

He then pointed to the presence of IRIB in the TransRussia Exhibition and termed it an opportunity for materializing the strategy of developing transport corridors of the country considering the trade opportunities of the region and the group seriously pursues it.

The 27th TransRussia Exhibition opened in Russia on Monday and it will wrap up on Wednesday. 400 companies from 22 countries like Iran, China, Kazakhstan, Belarus, India, Finland, Turkey, South Korea and the UAE have participated in this event and IRISL has its own pavilion in the exhibition.

The international exhibition TransRussia is the largest logistics exhibition in Russia.

Iran World's Third Largest Honey Producer in 2022

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran became the third-largest honey producer in the world with exports to 22 countries in 2022. Latest data by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) show that Iran was the third largest producer of honey in the world in 2022.

FAO figures covered in a Monday report by the IRIB News showed that Iranian bee farmers had produced some 77,000 metric tons (mt) of honey last year, down by 3.75% from 2021. The output put Iran just behind China and Turkey in the global ranking of largest honey producers in 2022, according to the figures.

The FAO described the honey produced in Iran as the best in the world in terms of quality which it said was due to the country's natural resources and its plant diversity, according to the IRIB News report. Figures by Iran Chamber of Commerce show Iran supplied some \$5.6 million worth of honey to 22 countries around the world last year.

Honey exports from Iran are expected to at least double this year amid plans to supply 2,000 mt of the product to China under a contract signed between the two countries last year. Authorities said in February that honey exports to China will give Iranian producers an opportunity to market their products in other East Asian countries.

FAO data on honey production in Iran come as figures by Iran's agriculture ministry released in April last year showed that annual output of honey in the country had reached 111,000 mt.

The figures showed that Iran had the fifth largest honey bee population in the world last year with some 11 million colonies in nearly 100,000 farms.

Gas Production at South Pars Up by 6%

TEHRAN (IRNA) - South Pars Gas Complex (SPGC) produced 17.2 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas over the winter, an increase of 6% compared to the quarter to late March 2022, according to SPGC's deputy managing director Hossein Shamshiri.

Shamshiri said on Tuesday that about 80% of Iran's gas needs over the winter had been supplied by the SPGC, adding that reliability of gas production in the company rose by 2% to 100% year on year in the calendar year to late March.

He added that exports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from South Pars increased by 40% in the three months to late March compared to the same previous period.

Merkel Given Germany's Top Honor Despite Criticism

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Former chancellor Angela Merkel received Germany's highest honor despite facing continued criticism of her legacy since leaving office, especially over her policy towards Moscow.

Merkel, who led Europe's biggest economy from 2005 to 2021, was presented with the special class Grand Cross by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Monday evening. The longtime leader thanked her family and several former aides for supporting her through her years in power, recalling "many very, very good experiences".

"People often say what a snake pit politics is. I may say that I would not have survived if it were not for the other side of politics, and that is why I have always been able to enjoy it," she said.



Kremlin Critic Kara-Murza Jailed for 25 Years

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia sentenced Kremlin critic Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in jail on charges including treason over criticism of the Ukraine offensive.

His high-profile trial is the latest in a string of cases against opposition voices in Russia, in a crackdown that has intensified since President Vladimir Putin sent troops to Ukraine last year.

Kara-Murza, 41, was found guilty of treason, spreading "false" information about the Russian army and being affiliated with an "undesirable organisation", according to an AFP journalist present in the Moscow court.



S. Korea, U.S., Japan Hold Drills



SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea, the United States and Japan staged joint naval missile defense exercises to improve responses to North Korean threats, as Pyongyang accused Washington of ramping up "nuclear blackmail" with military drills.

The three nations agreed at talks in Washington on Friday to hold regular missile defense and anti-submarine exercises in their efforts to boost diplomatic and military cooperation.

North Korea tested a new solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on Friday that experts say would ease the way for missile launches with little warning, part of an increase in its military activities in recent weeks.

Hours after the trilateral exercises, Ri Pyong Chol, vice president of the North Korean ruling party's Central Military Commission, issued a statement criticising the U.S. for calling a U.N. Security Council meeting over its ICBM test.

The North's weapons development was a self-defensive measure of defence against the U.S., Ri said. He accused Washington of raising regional tensions "to the brink of explosion" with military drills simulating a "pre-emptive nuclear strike and an all-out war" against the North.

The recent deployment of U.S. strategic bombers was "clear evidence that the U.S. nuclear threat and blackmail against us has reached a level that cannot be overlooked", Ri said.

"If the U.S. ignores our repeated warnings and continues actions that endanger the security environment of the Korean peninsula, we will take necessary action so that it feels a clearer security crisis and insurmountable threat," he added.

Monday's drills in international waters between Korea and Japan bring together South Korea's 7,600-tonne Aegis destroyer Yulgok Yi I, the U.S. guided-missile destroyer Benfold, and Japan's Atago destroyer, also equipped with Aegis radar systems.

The effort focuses on mastering response procedures, from detection and tracking to information-sharing, by creating a virtual target in a scenario featuring a North Korean ballistic missile provocation, the South's navy said.

"It is an opportunity to strengthen trilateral security cooperation against North Korea's escalating nuclear and missile threats," Captain Kim Ki-young of the South Korean destroyer said in a statement.

This would solidify the navy's capability and posture to respond to ballistic missiles, he added.

Japan's defense ministry said the exercises promote trilateral cooperation on regional security challenges, and demonstrate the three countries' strong commitment to secure a free and open international order based on the rule of law.

Pyongyang has threatened "more practical and offensive" action as South Korean and U.S. forces have performed annual springtime exercises since March, some involving Japan, which the North has described as a rehearsal for nuclear war.

Separately, the air forces of South Korea and the United States are set to begin drills on Monday for a 12-day run.

Also on Monday, South Korea and Japan resumed "two-plus-two" talks of senior diplomatic and security officials in Seoul after a five-year halt, as their ties thaw after a years-long feud over issues of wartime history.

They share views on North Korea and regional issues, while agreeing to improve understanding of each other's policies and foster security cooperation in a "forward-looking" way, Seoul's foreign and defence ministries said in a joint statement after the meeting.

Sudan Rival Forces Battle in Capital

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Sudan's battling factions both claimed to have made gains as continued violence cut power and water in the capital, and the U.N. envoy to Sudan said the two sides showed no signs of being willing to negotiate.

The rupture between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has killed at least 185 people and injured more than 1,800, said U.N. envoy Volker Perthes amid airstrikes and fighting in Khartoum and strife across Sudan. Their deadly power struggle has derailed a shift to civilian rule and raised fears of a wider conflict.

Smoke hung over the capital, and residents reported a clamour of airstrikes, artillery fire and shooting that shut hospitals in a city unused to violence.

"The two sides who are fighting are not giving the impression that they want mediation for a peace between them right away," Perthes told reporters by videolink from Khartoum.

He said the sides had agreed a three-hour humanitarian truce. But for a second consecutive day fighting continued despite the promises of calm, according to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya TV reporters broadcasting from Khartoum.

The fighting in Khartoum and its adjoining sister

cities of Omdurman and Bahri since Saturday is the worst in decades and risks tearing Sudan between two military factions that had shared power during a rocky political transition.

Army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan heads a ruling council installed after a 2021 coup and the 2019 ousting of veteran leader Omar Bashir during mass protests. RSF leader General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, is his deputy.

Under an internationally backed transition plan, the RSF was shortly due to merge with the army. Burhan on Monday branded the RSF a rebel group and ordered it be dissolved as the two sides exchanged bitter accusations.

In comments to Sky News, Burhan said he was secure in a presidential guesthouse within the defence ministry compound.

RSF leader Hemedti, whose whereabouts since Saturday were unknown, called the army chief "a radical Islamist who is bombing civilians from the air".

Continued violence could destabilise a volatile region and play into competition for influence there between Russia and the United States, and between regional powers that have courted different actors in Sudan.



Macron Defends Pension Reform, Regrets No Consensus

PARIS (Dispatches) - President Emmanuel Macron staunchly defended his widely unpopular pension reform but said he regretted that no consensus had been found on the change.

Addressing France for the first time since signing the reform into law over the weekend, Macron said he understood the "anger" felt by the French over the raising of the retirement age.

Macron signed the legislation early Saturday, just hours after its banner change to hike the retirement age from 62 to 64 had been validated by the constitutional court, prompting accusations he was smuggling the law through in the dead of night.

After three months of protests and strikes, the left and unions have vowed not to give in and warned of mass protests on the May 1 Labour Day.

Polls have consistently recorded a majority of French opposed to the reform, which the government rammed through parliament using a controversial mechanism to avoid a vote.

Speaking from the Elysee Palace, Macron defended the reform as "necessary" and insisted "doing nothing" was not a solution.

"Has this reform been accepted? Obviously not. And despite months of consultations, no consensus could be found and I regret it." Noting the protests that have raged against the reform, he added: "No one, especially not me, can remain deaf to this demand for social justice."

"The answer can be neither in rigidity, nor in extremism," said the president, adding his "door will always be open" to talks with the unions. Macron's personal popularity ratings have eroded with some analysts suggesting he has given a head st

Unions have meanwhile spurned an invitation to the Elysee for talks. Opponents from across the board after Macron's speech said it had only reinforced concerns about how the reform was handled.

"He chose to turn his back on the French and ignore their suffering," said far-right figurehead and former presidential candidate Marine Le Pen.

"We need Russia to agree with a very simple fact: it has to stop the war and withdraw from the territory of Ukraine. This will give space to diplomacy."

Offers to mediate in the Ukraine-Russia conflict have multiplied in recent weeks.

On Sunday in Abu Dhabi, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said he had discussed joint mediation with China and the United Arab Emirates, and accused the United States and Europe of prolonging the conflict.

On Saturday, French President Emmanuel Macron's office said in a statement he had "discussed the next steps in the organisation of a peace summit" with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky.

In 2021 and 2022 Iraq mediated several rounds of talks between officials from regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Last month, Riyadh and Tehran announced in China that they would be resuming diplomatic ties severed in 2016.

Ukraine Skeptical Over Efforts to End War With Russia

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Ukraine's foreign minister cast doubts on efforts to bring about peace in his country's war with Russia, saying during a visit to Iraq that Moscow "wants war".

The visit by Dmytro Kuleba is the first trip to Baghdad by a Ukrainian foreign minister in 11 years.

It comes after Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited the Iraqi capital in February, a year after Russia invaded its neighbor.

At a joint press conference, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said Baghdad was ready to "help the two parties to first reach a ceasefire, then to start discussions".

However, Kuleba appeared doubtful that peace efforts would succeed.

"Russia is seeking war. And this is the biggest impediment, the biggest hurdle on the way to peace," he told reporters.

"You don't behave like this when you want peace. So whatever Russian officials are saying... today Russia wants war," Kuleba said.

"We need Russia to agree with a very simple fact: it has to stop the war and withdraw from the territory of Ukraine. This will give space to diplomacy."

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U.S. Warship Sails Through Taiwan Strait

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - A U.S. warship sailed through the waters separating Taiwan and mainland China, the U.S. Navy said, days after Beijing staged war games around the self-ruled island.

Led by the United States, multiple Western navies regularly conduct "freedom of navigation operations" to assert the international status of regional waterways such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

The USS Milius guided-missile destroyer "conducted a routine Taiwan Strait transit April 16 (local time) through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law", the U.S. Navy said in a statement.

"The ship transited through a corridor in the Strait that is beyond the territorial sea of any coastal State."

This was the first such U.S. operation through the waterway since January.

The U.S. 7th Fleet shared images Monday on Twitter of crew looking out into the strait, one of the most crucial waterways in the world for international shipping.

China said on Monday it had tracked a US warship through the Taiwan Strait, adding that the United States had "hyped up" the transit.

Colonel Shi Yi, a Chinese military spokesman, said troops in the area "remain on a high level of alert at all times and will resolutely defend national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability".

China claims Taiwan as its territory and has vowed to bring the island under its control one day. It also claims the entire Taiwan Strait as its territorial waters.

Taiwan's defense ministry said on Monday that during the vessel's transit, its military had "closely monitored the dynamics in our surrounding sea and airspace, and the situation was normal".

China launched three days of military exercises around Taiwan on April 8, simulating targeted strikes and a blockade of the island.

The drills were in response to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's recent visit to the United States, where she met with Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy.

Beijing bristles at any official contact between Taipei and foreign governments.



Unsound Climate Studies Sneak Into Print



PARIS (Dispatches) - Misleading studies sowing doubt about climate change are getting into peer-reviewed journals, scientists warn, citing recent papers linked to a lawsuit in Germany whose authors denied conflicts of interest.

Observers have long questioned the growing number of research journals that take fees from eager academics but often publish their work without rigorous review.

Biased authors, they say, are taking advantage of an overloaded assessment system, undermining the scientific evidence that provides the bedrock for climate action.

"The recent explosion of so-called 'predatory journals' is creating problems that are pro-actively explored by climate sceptics," said Carl Schleussner, a scientist at research group Climate Analytics.

"It opens the door to those who want to willingly get dubious research out there."

One study denied that human-driven warming was to blame for the melting of a Peruvian glacier and consequent flood risk.

Two of its authors are former executives of RWE, a German energy company targeted by a lawsuit over the glacier, and both are prominent climate contrarians.

Their study appeared in November 2022 in the Journal of South American Earth Sciences, which is owned by the major Dutch publisher Elsevier.

Like many others, the journal charges authors for submissions, which are then supposed to be vetted by qualified experts before being published.

The paper attacked the findings of an earlier study by scientists at Oxford University that a plaintiff in the Peruvian case — a local farmer who says RWE's carbon emissions contributed to warming — is citing as evidence.

Nathan Stansell, a palaeoclimatologist at Northern Illinois University, is one of the scientists whose work was cited in the German-led paper.

The paper was "fraught with misinformation, mischaracterisations and bias," he told AFP.

It presented a "debunked argument that since it was warm in medieval times, then there was nothing alarming about recent warming.

"The bulk of the paleoclimate community recognises that the groups trying to spread this fallacy cannot compete with sound scientific data."

Two other scientists cited in the study, Ben Marzeion of the University of Bremen and Jorge Strelin of Cordoba University in Argentina, also told AFP their work was misused.

Strelin said a graphic in the study, drawing on one used in his own work, omitted data showing the sharp retreat of one glacier over recent decades.

The two ex-RWE men, lead author and geologist Sebastian Luening and chemist-turned-politician Fritz Vahrenholt, did not respond to AFP's requests to comment. The author of the Oxford study, Rupert Stuart-Smith, submitted to the journal a formal scientific rebuttal of Luening's paper, contesting its use of certain data and detailing what he called "inaccurate or misleading assertions."

Elsevier communications executive Andrew Davis told AFP the journal's editors "did not detect unethical behaviors and it is their belief that the two research groups simply did not agree with each other."

But the publisher acknowledged the failure to include a disclosure of the authors' links to RWE in the study.

The disclosure did appear in a preliminary "pre-proof" of the paper but disappeared from the version published in November 2022.

Microsoft's Bid to Buy Games Giant Faces Triple Anti-Trust Threat



BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - Depending on which side you're on, tech giant Microsoft is either the hero fighting to bring some of the most popular video games to more people, or the villain on the brink of killing competition in the sector.

The Xbox-owner has embarked on a campaign to convince all three EU, UK and US regulators to back its \$69 billion bid to take over Activision Blizzard, owner of hit games "Candy Crush" and "Call Of Duty".

The effort to create the world's third largest gaming company by revenue was launched last year but the company must now address concerns from all three regulators that if it takes control of such market-leading games it could stifle competition.

Sony, which produces the bestselling PlayStation console, says the deal will give Microsoft the power to limit rivals' access to the popular franchise. Microsoft argues it would not make financial sense for it to do so.

And the toughest authority to convince could be the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), which in February issued preliminary findings that the takeover could harm competition and consumer choice.

The British market is smaller than that of the United States or the European Union, but if the CMA blocks the Activision Blizzard takeover, Microsoft would probably have to back down.

Microsoft would have to comply since removing all of its products from British users would mean losing a huge market, Anne Witt, a professor of anti-trust law at EDHEC business school in France, told AFP.

"It is unthinkable that Microsoft would completely withdraw from the UK. It's not only video games, it's Windows," Witt said, referring to Microsoft's globally dominant PC operating system.

Witt pointed to the UK regulator's recent decision to order Facebook owner Meta to sell animated graphics startup Giphy, ruling that the deal would harm competition.

"The CMA is the first competition agency ever to have prohibited a big tech acquisition," Witt said AFP.

If the CMA takes a harder line than Brussels on the Microsoft and Activision Blizzard deal, it would mark the first time since Brexit that the UK regulator has differed from the EU in such a major case.

But deep-pocketed Microsoft could appeal to the competition appeals tribunal, where experts say they have a real chance of winning.

And Microsoft appeared to get a reprieve last month when the CMA narrowed the scope of its probe to cloud gaming -- agreeing with Microsoft that if the firm made "Call of Duty" exclusive to the Xbox console it "would be significantly loss-making".

The CMA is expected to rule by April 26, while the EU is due to decide by May 22, so there is space for them to diverge from each other -- or for either to disagree with the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

"It's possible for the UK and EU and then even the FTC, to say that it is anti-competitive," said Eleanor Fox, a professor at New York University law school.

"And it's possible to have divergence on what is the right remedy, whether you stop the whole thing or whether you allow Microsoft to make certain promises."

The case is emblematic of regulators' newly focused attitude towards big tech companies, and Witt said the British regulator seems to be taking on a leadership role among its peers.

The European Commission is expected to be an easier hurdle than Britain.

During Microsoft executive Brad Smith's visit to Brussels, he appeared confident the EU would rubber stamp the acquisition after the company showed evidence of its deals with cloud gaming service providers.



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Gazprombank Deepens Ties With Indian Banks

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Russia's Gazprombank has expanded its links with banks in India to expedite trade between the two countries in national currencies, a key executive told Reuters on Monday, as Russia this year has become the biggest supplier of oil to India. Trade between India and Russia has surged since the West imposed sanctions against Russia for its invasion last year of Ukraine, which has altered flows of oil and other goods. "We worked hard to establish our level of partnership with Indian banks and our representatives here worked hard," Elena Borisenko, deputy chairman of the board of management of Gazprombank, told Reuters on the sidelines of an India-Russia business dialogue event in New Delhi on Monday.



China Central Bank Boosts Liquidity Support With Roll Over of Medium-Term Loans

SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - China's central bank bolstered liquidity support for the economy as it rolled over maturing medium-term policy loans with higher cash offerings for the fifth month on Monday, while keeping the interest rate unchanged as expected. The slightly higher fund injection would help replenish liquidity gaps created by upcoming tax payments by banks and companies, as policymakers look to inject momentum to the economic recovery.

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) said it was keeping the rate on 170 billion yuan (\$24.75 billion) worth of one-year medium-term lending facility (MLF) loans to some financial institutions unchanged at 2.75% from the previous operation. Monday's operation was aimed at keeping "banking system liquidity reasonably ample," the central bank said in an online statement.

In a Reuters poll of 29 market watchers conducted last week, all participants expected no change to the MLF rate, while 23 forecast fund offerings would exceed maturity.

With 150 billion yuan worth of MLF loans set to expire this month, the operation resulted in a net 20 billion yuan of fresh fund injection into the banking system. Higher cash offerings could help banks tide over the quarterly tax payment period in mid-April, with some brokerages estimating as much as 1.7 trillion yuan could be withdrawn from the banking system.

Some market analysts and traders said stronger-than-expected economic data including exports, credit growth and narrowing contraction in property investments suggested that the recovery from the COVID-19 slump is on track and lowered the chances for an interest rate cut.

"The PBOC probably won't feel the need to add to broad-based easing, particularly given that credit demand is already recovering," economists at Capital Economics said in a note.

"It cut the reserve requirement ratio (RRR) in March, but our read was that that move was about offering relief to banks, whose profit margins have been under pressure."

China is due to report its first-quarter gross domestic product (GDP) and activity indicators on Tuesday.

The PBOC cut banks' reserve requirement ratio (RRR) for the first time this year in March. It pledged to maintain ample liquidity, stabilise growth and focus on expanding domestic demand in its latest quarterly meeting of its monetary policy committee.

The PBOC also injected 20 billion yuan through seven-day reverse repos while keeping the borrowing cost unchanged at 2.00%, it said in an online statement.

UAE, Brazil Seal Deals Worth \$2.5b for Sustainable Aviation Fuel

DUBAI (Dispatches) - UAE's state-owned investment firm Mubadala Capital inked a deal to invest \$2.5 billion in Brazil over the next 10 years to build a sustainable aviation fuel and kerosene plant in the northeastern state of Bahia.

The company announced that the investment would be made through Acelen, Mubadala's arm in Brazil, to start production in 2026.

Work on the new project is set to start in January 2024. It will produce 1 billion liters of hydrotreated vegetable oil per year, a diesel-like fuel made without fossil resources.

The project aims to reinforce Brazil's role as a strategic provider of renewable fuels by capitalizing on its natural resources as the country already has a unit that produces soy-based biodiesel which was acquired by Mubadala in 2021.

Acelen anticipates that all of its renewable fuel production will be exported as there is still no regulation in the Brazilian market that makes domestic sales possible.

The agreement came within a framework of signings between Brazil's President Luiz da Silva and UAE's President Mohammed bin Zayed during their meeting in Abu Dhabi.

The two countries have been keen to facilitate trade, investment, and tourism exchange as growth and relations strengthen between the two governments.

UAE's Minister of Economy Abdullah Al-Marri said that the Emirati-Brazilian partnerships are based on solid foundations of friendship and respect with mutual interests. "The total non-oil foreign trade for the year 2022 between the UAE and Brazil crossed the \$4 billion mark, a growth of 32 percent from more than \$3 billion in 2021," he stated.

He added that despite the significant investments and cooperation between the two countries there are still vast untapped opportunities in the sustainability space.

The UAE is due to host the COP28 UN climate talks later this year, and Brazil is a candidate to host the 2025 edition.

The countries said they had agreed to work together to "encourage ambitious climate action" from the rest of the world.



Saudi Arabia Transfers More Aramco Oil Shares To Wealth Fund

RIYADH (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia has put a second four-percent chunk of shares of the Aramco energy giant, worth tens of billions of dollars, under the control of the country's sovereign wealth fund, state media said.



The move underscores Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's campaign to use the Persian Gulf kingdom's vast energy resources to open up the economy under his "Vision 2030" domestic reform agenda.

The official Saudi Press Agency said the shares had been transferred to Sanabil Investments, a firm controlled by the kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF), one of the world's biggest sovereign wealth funds with more than \$620 billion in assets.

Last year, four percent of Aramco shares, estimated at the time to be worth \$80 billion, were transferred directly to PIF.

The latest shares are worth nearly \$80 billion, based on the current market capitalisation of Aramco, one of the world's most valuable companies.

Prince Mohammed, the kingdom's de facto ruler, "indicated that the transfer of part of the state's shares in Saudi Aramco is a continuation of Saudi Arabia's long-term initiatives to boost and diversify the national economy and expand investment opportunities," the report said.

"The transfer will also solidify PIF's strong financial position and credit rating," it added, noting Riyadh still owns 90 percent of Aramco's shares.

Sanabil's investments "include venture, growth capital and small buyouts", according to its website. Aramco and its assets were once kept under vice-like government control, off-limits to outside investment.

But under Prince Mohammed the kingdom has shown readiness to cede some of that control. The oil giant sold 1.7 percent of its shares on the Saudi bourse in December 2019, generating \$29.4 billion in the world's biggest initial public offering.

The firm, which reported record profits totalling \$161.1 billion last year, has pledged to achieve "operational net-zero" carbon emissions by 2050.

That applies to emissions that are produced directly by Aramco's industrial sites, but not the CO2 produced when clients burn Saudi oil in their cars, power plants and furnaces.

Aramco CEO Amin Nasser and other top Saudi officials have simultaneously called for further investment in fossil fuels to ensure global energy security.

The PIF has made high-profile investments in firms including Uber and Disney, and its so-called mega-projects -- centrepieces of Prince Mohammed's reform agenda -- include Neom, a \$500 billion futuristic megacity under construction in the Saudi desert.

The crown prince has said he wants the fund to have one trillion dollars in assets by the end of 2025.

Australia Nears Wide-Ranging Shake Up of Its Central Bank

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Australia's Treasurer on Monday said he was close to announcing details of a wide-ranging review into the country's central bank which would require legal changes for some steps, underlining the scope of the shake-up.

Treasurer Jim Chalmers said the independent review had provided 51 recommendations for changing how the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) operates and formulates policy.

Chalmers has already consulted on the proposals with RBA Governor Philip Lowe and will be meeting with opposition lawmakers with the aim of releasing the government's response to the review this week.

"There are some recommendations which would require legislative change," Chalmers told a media conference. "There are some that would require the governor and the board to change the way that they go about things at the bank."

Lowe's future has been under a cloud since telling Australian borrowers late in 2021 that interest rates were unlikely to rise until 2024.

Instead, inflation surged past expectations and forced the bank to start hiking in May last year, having now lifted rates by 350 basis points to 3.6%.

Lowe's current seven-year term ends in September and there is speculation it will not be extended as it was with his two predecessors. The review is expected to have recommended changes to the RBA's policy making board, which currently consists of two RBA staff, the Treasury secretary and six business people.

Risks to Financial Stability in Malaysia Remain Modest

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Fitch Solutions Country Risk and Industry Research has maintained its forecast for credit growth in Malaysia to slow slightly to 4.3% year-on-year (y-o-y) in 2023, from 4.5% in 2022, due to a weaker economic outlook and higher borrowing costs.

In a report, the firm said Malaysian banks on aggregate are likely to remain on a stable footing despite potential negative spillovers from banking stresses in the US and Europe due to robust liquidity and capital buffers, as well as

a much less restrictive monetary environment.

It said asset quality had also remained fairly stable, despite the phasing out of support measures, and we are not expecting a significant deterioration in the months ahead.

"At Fitch Solutions, we believe that downside risks to Malaysia's financial stability remain modest, and that banks remain well positioned to support financial intermediation, despite potential negative spillovers from banking stresses in the US and Europe.

"Importantly, banks have strong capital and liquidity buffers, while asset quality has remained fairly stable, despite the expiration of pandemic relief measures.

"The rate hiking cycle in Malaysia has also been much more gradual and modest than in other parts of the world, as inflation has been more subdued, and we expect interest rates to peak soon," it said.

Overall, Fitch Solutions is forecasting credit growth in Malaysia to slow only slightly to 4.3% y-o-y in 2023, versus 4.5% in 2022.

The firm said the banking system's strong liquidity coverage and loan-to-deposit ratios will continue to underpin financial stability in Malaysia.

It said the latest data showed that the liquidity coverage ratio rose to 152.7% in November 2022, from 147.1% in January, which is much higher than the minimum requirement of 100%, which also implied a higher margin of safety.

Meanwhile, it said the loan-to-deposit ratio had been relatively stable, staying within the range of 85-90% since 2014, with the latest figure coming in at 86.4%.

Fitch Solutions said Malaysian banks are also well capitalised with the aggregate banking system capital ratio coming in at 18.5% in February 2023, as compared with an average of 18.3% in 2022.

"This was significantly higher than the regulatory minimum of 10.5% (an 8.0% total capital ratio and a 2.5% capital conservation buffer), resulting in an excess capital buffer of RM135.0 billion.

India, Russia in Talks On Free Trade Deal



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India and Russia are discussing a free trade agreement, ministers said on Monday, a move that would further deepen bilateral commercial ties that have flourished since war broke out in Ukraine.

India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar told an event in New Delhi his government was in "advance agreement" on a trade treaty that Russia's Trade and Industry Minister Denis Manturov said would bring a guarantee of bilateral investment.

India has not explicitly criticised Russia's invasion of Ukraine - which Moscow describes as a "special military operation" - and has called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue.

Russia, a traditional defence equipment supplier, also displaced Iraq last month to become India's top supplier of crude oil. Overall Indian imports from Russia increased almost fourfold to \$46.33 billion in the year to March 31. Moscow was looking to increase machinery imports from India to improve the trade balance, Manturov said.

"We need to find a niche in the products which India can replace," he told reporters on the sidelines of the event. "In civilian projects, we need as wide cooperation as it was before the sanctions."

Reuters reported in November that Russia was potentially seeking to import more than 500 products from India for key sectors including cars, aircraft and trains, as western sanctions undermine Moscow's ability to keep core industries operating.

India too aims to narrow its growing trade deficit with Russia, which has been India's largest supplier of military equipment for decades and is the fourth-biggest market for Indian pharmaceuticals.

Jaishankar said Indian business could benefit from Russian technology and that New Delhi was working to iron out payments, certification and logistics issues.

Iranian Film Wins WRPN Women's Int'l Festival

KERMANSHAH (IRNA) - The short film 'Knife, Chocolate' directed by Hooshmand Varai has won the 'Exceptional Merit' award at WRPN Women's International Film Festival, said Head of Iranian Youth Cinema Society of Kermanshah Province Kamran Rezaei. Rezaei said that the festival, which is about female filmmakers or films with women's concerns, is held in Delaware, U.S. He added that the movie narrates the story of the end of an abnormal family and is against gender discrimination. He noted that Varai had earlier received an honorary diploma from an experimental short film in Iran as well as awards from Italy, Saint Petersburg, Russia; Belgrade, Serbia; Zurich, Switzerland; Istanbul, Turkey; Nairobi, Kenya; and Mumbai festivals.



Europe's Most Powerful Nuclear Reactor Kicks Off in Finland

HELSINKI (Dispatches) - Finland's much-delayed and costly new nuclear reactor, Europe's most powerful by production capacity, has completed a test phase lasting over a year and started regular output, boosting the Nordic country's electricity self-sufficiency significantly.

The Olkiluoto 3 reactor, which has 1,600-megawatt capacity, was connected into the Finnish national power grid in March 2022 and kicked off regular production on Sunday. Operator Teollisuuden Voima, or TVO, tweeted that "Olkiluoto 3 is now ready" after a delay of 14 years from the original plan.

It will help Finland to achieve its carbon neutrality targets and increase energy security at a time when European countries have cut oil, gas and other power supplies from Russia, Finland's neighbor.

"The production of Olkiluoto 3 stabilizes the price of electricity and plays an important role in the Finnish green transition," said TVO President and CEO Jarmo Tanhua in a statement. The company added that "the electricity production volume of Europe's largest nuclear power plant unit is a significant addition to clean, domestic production."

Construction of Olkiluoto 3 began in 2005 and was to be completed four years later. However, the project was plagued by several technological problems that led to lawsuits. The last time a new nuclear reactor was commissioned in Finland was over 40 years ago.

The Olkiluoto 3 is western Europe's first new reactor in more than 15 years. It is the first new-generation EPR, or European Pressurized Reactor, plant to have gone online in Europe. It was developed in a joint venture between France's Areva and Germany's Siemens.

Primarily due to safety concerns, nuclear power remains a controversial issue in Europe. The launch of the Finnish reactor coincides with Germany's move to shut down its last remaining three nuclear plants on Saturday.



Experts have put Olkiluoto 3's final price tag at some 11 billion euros (\$12 billion) — almost three times what was initially estimated. Finland now has five nuclear reactors in two power plants located on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Combined, they cover more than 40% of the nation's electricity demand.

The conservative National Coalition Party, or NCP, which won Finland's April 2 general election, wants to increase the share of energy that the country of 5.5 million gets from nuclear power still further.

NCP leader Petteri Orpo, Finland's likely new prime minister, said during the election campaign that the new Cabinet should make nuclear power "the cornerstone of the government's energy policy."

At China's Largest Trade Fair, Exporters Worry About World Economy



GUANGZHOU (Dispatches) - Chinese exporters exhibiting their products at the country's largest trade fair said the weak global economy was hurting their businesses, with many freezing investments and some cutting labor costs in response.

The subdued mood at the Canton Fair in the southern city of Guangzhou suggests China's unexpected jump in exports in March may have reflected exporters catching up with orders delayed last year by COVID curbs rather than renewed economic strength.

The first major trade event since China abruptly dropped COVID restrictions and re-opened its borders comes as sharply higher borrowing costs in the United States and Europe hit demand for Chinese-made goods.

Kris Lin, a representative from Christmas light producer Taizhou Hangjie Lamps, said this year's orders so far are down 30% from last year.

"The difficulties last year came from logistics and production disruptions but the local government helped solve the problems. That's an internal issue. Now we have external problems. We can't solve those," Lin said.

"This year will be the hardest for us," he said, with higher electricity costs caused by the war in Ukraine reducing demand for his decorations even further.

Lin said the company cannot afford to sell at lower prices, but it may look to reduce labor costs. The firm relies on contract workers who get released in September to October after the delivery of Christmas orders.

"If orders are weak this year, I will set my workers free earlier."

Huang Qinqin, sales director at Zhong Shan Shi Limaton Electronics, a producer of exhaust fans, has similar thoughts on cutting costs after orders halved in the first quarter.

"In our factory, workers come to work when there are orders," Huang said. This used to mean working overtime even on weekends, but it is more common this year for workers to take weekends off, she said.

A producer of shaving devices from the eastern city of Ningbo, who asked to remain anonymous to unveil future plans, said the firm had already laid off workers and will lower prices in coming months if orders don't improve.

The worsening outlook for workers in the manufacturing industries will raise concerns among policymakers, who target 12 million new jobs across China this year, up from last year's goal of 11 million. Dozens of Chinese suppliers told Reuters they did not intend to spend much on improving production lines this year given the weak demand.

What Are E-Fuels, and Can They Help Make Cars CO2-Free?

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany has declared last-minute opposition to a landmark European Union law to end sales of CO2-emitting cars in 2035, demanding that sales be allowed of new cars with internal combustion engines after that date if they run on e-fuels.

The EU rules would require all new cars sold from 2035 to have zero CO2 emissions, making it effectively impossible to sell new fossil fuel-powered cars.

The law - which Germany, alongside a majority of EU countries and lawmakers, previously supported - would not ban internal combustion engines (ICEs).

But it is seen as a death knell for the technology because of a dearth of options that could enable ICE cars to operate without producing CO2.

Here's what you need to know.

E-fuels, like e-kerosene, e-methane, or e-methanol, are made by synthesizing captured CO2 emissions and hydrogen produced using renewable or CO2-free electricity.

The fuels release CO2 into the atmosphere when used in an engine. But the idea is that those emissions are equal to the amount taken out of the atmosphere to produce the fuel - making it CO2-neutral overall.

Germany and Italy want clearer assurances from the EU that sales of new ICE cars can continue beyond 2035, if they run on CO2-neutral fuels.

Most major carmakers are betting on battery-electric vehicles - a technology that is already widely available - as the main route to cut CO2 emissions from passenger cars.

But suppliers and oil majors defend e-fuels, as well as a number of carmakers who don't want their vehicles weighed down by heavy batteries.

E-fuels are not yet produced at scale. The world's first commercial plant opened in Chile in 2021, backed by Porsche and aiming to produce 550 million liters per year. Other planned plants include Norway's Norsk e-Fuel, due to begin producing in 2024 with a focus on aviation fuel.

E-fuels can be used in today's ICE vehicles and transported via existing fossil fuel logistics networks - good news for ICE component makers and companies which transport petrol and diesel.

Supporters say e-fuels offer a route to cut the CO2 emissions of our existing passenger car fleet, without replacing every vehicle with an electric one.

Critics highlight that manufacturing e-fuels is very expensive and energy-intensive. Using e-fuels in an ICE car requires about five times more renewable electricity than running a battery-electric vehicle, according to a 2021 paper in the Nature Climate Change journal.

Some policymakers also argue that e-fuels should be reserved for hard-to-decarbonise sectors such as



shipping and aviation - which, unlike passenger cars, cannot easily run on electric batteries.

Days before the final vote on the EU law, which was scheduled for March 7, German Transport Minister Volker Wissing called into question Germany's support for it.

That has put one of Europe's core climate change policies on hold - and surprised other policymakers, because EU countries and lawmakers had already agreed the law last year.

Alongside Germany and Italy, countries including the Czech Republic and Poland have expressed concerns about the law, raising the possibility of enough support to block it.

But other EU lawmakers and diplomats warn that allowing one country to torpedo an already-agreed law would endanger other carefully negotiated deals on EU policies.

Free Democratic Party member Wissing said the use of e-fuels should remain possible after 2035, and a promised European Commission proposal on this was still missing.

In response, the European Commission has drafted a proposal, seen by Reuters, to allow carmakers to register new cars in the EU that can run on climate neutral e-fuels only. That could be a first step towards allowing their sale after 2035.

The draft proposal said vehicles must use technology that would prevent the car from starting if it used non-carbon-neutral fuels.

The International Council on Clean Transportation said it was doubtful technologies would be able to sense whether a vehicle is operating on pure e-fuels or a blend with fossil fuels - since e-fuels have very similar properties to the fossil fuels they are designed to replace.

An EU official told Reuters any new proposal would be made only after countries approve the combustion engine phaseout. Germany's Transport Ministry said it was examining the draft proposal.

Big auto component suppliers in Germany such as Bosch, ZF and Mahle are members of the eFuel Alliance, an industry lobby group, as are oil and gas majors from ExxonMobil to Repsol.

Carmakers such as Piech, Porsche and Mazda are broadly supportive of the technology. Porsche holds a stake in e-fuel producer HIF Global.

BMW has invested \$12.5 million in e-fuel startup Prometheus Fuels, while also investing billions in battery-electric technology.

Other carmakers including Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz are betting on battery-electric vehicles to decarbonise. Volvo and Ford this week urged EU countries not to row back on the 2035 phaseout of new petrol and diesel cars.

Merck to Buy Prometheus Biosciences for About \$11b

LONDON (Dispatches) - Merck & Co said it will buy Prometheus Biosciences Inc for about \$10.8 billion, picking up a promising experimental treatment for ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease and building up its presence in immunology.

Merck will pay \$200 per share for the California-based biotechnology company that specializes in treatments for autoimmune diseases. That represents a 75% premium to the \$114.01 closing price for Prometheus shares on Friday.

"This is allowing us to move into immunology in a strong way and will allow us sustainable growth, we think, well into the 2030s given the long patent life," Merck Chief Executive Robert Davis said in an interview.

Annual Non-Oil...

FROM PAGE 1

The UAE with sales of \$18.395 billion (11 percent growth), China with \$15.744 billion (24 percent growth), Turkey with \$6.99 billion (15 percent growth), India with \$2.019 billion (80 percent growth), and Germany with \$2.019 billion (five percent growth), were the first five countries supplying goods to Iran in 1401, he stated.

The official went on to say that the country's non-oil trade reached 159.236 million tons worth \$112.821 billion in the previous year, with an 11.2 percent growth year on year.

The value of Iran's non-oil trade rose 38 percent in the Iranian year 1400, according to the former head of Islamic Republic of Iran's Customs Administration (IRICA).

Alireza Moqadasi put the country's non-oil trade at 162 million tons worth \$100 billion in that year.

He said that Iran exported 122 million tons of non-oil products worth \$48 billion in 1400, which was \$14 billion (41 percent) more than the figure for the preceding year.

Tehran, Caracas...

FROM PAGE 1

Despite the U.S. late last year easing some sanctions to allow U.S. major Chevron to export crude from the country, the visit emphasized Iran and Venezuela's continuing partnership.

"That is a solid relationship ... despite the fall of TEA [El Aissami]," said managing director of consultancy Gas Energy Latin America, Antero Alvarado.

Venezuela is under pressure to increase its gasoline output from the current 90,000 b/d, according to PdV figures seen by Alvarado. That barely covers Venezuela's demand, as evidenced by gasoline shortages even in Venezuela's Maracaibo oil-producing region, according to residents there. Venezuela's regional partner Cuba has complained of declining shipments that help sustain the island nation's economy.

In early March, Cuba complained to Russia's Rosneft head Igor Sechin about the lack of crude and other shipments. Sechin visited Caracas immediately after, asking Caracas to boost production in meetings that were part of El Aissami's last public appearance before his resignation.

No Compromise on...

FROM PAGE 1

At the heart of the dispute is the Hilmand River, which originates in the Hindu Kush Mountains near Kabul and flows 700 miles (1,126 kilometers) south before flowing into Hamoun wetlands, located in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province.

The two countries signed a water-sharing accord on the Hilmand River in 1973, under which Afghanistan pledged to deliver an average of 820 million cubic meters of water per annum to Iran.

Iran has repeatedly criticized Afghanistan for failing to honor the agreement in letter and spirit.

Iran Praises Syrian...

FROM PAGE 1

"Nowadays we are witnessing a national unity between the Syrian government and nation, one of the results of which was the restoration of diplomatic ties between Damascus and other Arab countries," Kanaani pointed out.

He also expressed Iran's optimism and confidence that Syria, thanks to its capabilities and political insight, will be able to reconstruct what has been demolished by Takfiri terrorists and regain its influential and strategic role in the region.

Berlin Patients Use Ping-Pong To Ease Parkinson's Pain

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Luci Krippner's eyes never leave the little white ball as her arms loosen up. When she plays ping-pong like today in Berlin, she can forget for a while that she has Parkinson's disease.

"I train sometimes for three hours without realizing I'm tired. It's great," said the 69-year-old pensioner. She has lived since 2015 with the neurodegenerative illness that impacts her ability to move.

Krippner said playing table tennis reduces tremors and eases her pain. "And at night I sleep better," she added over the din of bouncing plastic balls.

Since last year, Krippner has been training twice a week with a dozen members of the "Ping Pong Parkinson" association, which promotes what it calls the therapeutic virtues of the discipline.

On April 11, World Parkinson's Day, the players were all in, relentlessly pounding the ball across the short net. "I need less of my medication when I play regularly," said coach Andreas Moroff, 54.

Wearing a "Team Germany" shirt, he checked from time to time that everyone was feeling well.

"When you're playing table tennis, you don't think about your Parkinson's," Moroff said.

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Rins Wins in Texas Grand Prix

JUSTIN (Dispatches) - Alex Rins won a crash-hit Grand Prix of the Americas in Austin after MotoGP world champion Francesco 'Pecco' Bagnaia, the sprint winner, fell while leading from pole position.

The Spaniard's surprise victory on a clear afternoon in Texas was a first for the LCR Honda team since Britain's Cal Crutchlow in Argentina in 2018. It was also the first by any Honda rider other than compatriot and six times MotoGP champion Marc Marquez, who was absent this time due to injury, since Crutchlow's win.

Fitzpatrick Clinches Heritage Win

MIAMI (Dispatches) - England's Matt Fitzpatrick beat defending champion Jordan Spieth in a thrilling sudden-death playoff to win the PGA's RBC Heritage tournament.

The pair, who played in the same group in the final round, both ended regulation play on 17-under 267 after Spieth shot 66 and Fitzpatrick 68 at Harbour Town on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

It took until the third hole of the playoff for a champion to be decided when Fitzpatrick produced a brilliant 9-iron approach shot on the par-4 18th and made a simple birdie putt to win.

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SPORTS

WEDNESDAY APRIL 19, 2023

Heat Best Bucks In Injury-Riddled Game 1

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jimmy Butler had 35 points and 11 assists, and the visiting Miami Heat defeated the Milwaukee Bucks -- who played most of the game without Giannis Antetokounmpo -- 130-117 in Game 1 of an Eastern Conference first-round playoff series.

Bam Adebayo scored 22 points for the eighth-seeded Heat, who were playing less than 48 hours after qualifying for the playoffs by beating Chicago in a play-in elimination game. Kevin Love had 18 points, Caleb Martin and Gabe Vincent added 15 apiece and Tyler Herro scored 12 before being sidelined for good in the second quarter because of a broken right hand.

Antetokounmpo suffered a lower back contusion when he fell to the floor in the first quarter. He stayed in the game for a bit before going to the locker room and returned briefly early in the second quarter before leaving the game for good. He finished with six points and three rebounds in 11 minutes. Khris Middleton led Milwaukee with 33 points. Bobby Portis had 21 points, while Jrue Holiday added 16 points and 16 assists.

Adebayo and Martin both converted three-point plays, Love made two 3-pointers and Duncan Robinson added a late trey to help Miami score 24 points in the final 4:49 of the third quarter to open a 102-88 lead heading into the fourth. Milwaukee closed within eight points five times in the fourth quarter but didn't get any closer.

Lakers 128, Grizzlies 112

Rui Hachimura came off the bench to score a team-high 29 points, LeBron James and Anthony Davis both posted double-doubles and seventh-seeded Los Angeles scored a road win over No. 2 seed Memphis to spark the Lakers to a 1-0 series lead.

In his sixth career playoff game, Hachimura erupted for a playoff career high in scoring by shooting 11-for-14, including 5 of 6 from beyond the 3-point arc. All five of his made 3-pointers came in the second half. He was one of four Lakers to score at least 21 points, joined by Austin Reaves with 23. Davis added 22 points and James scored 21.

Los Angeles used two big runs in the fourth quarter to take command, the latter a game-ending 15-0 outburst three minutes after Memphis All-Star Ja Morant went to the locker room with a hand injury. Memphis played the final 5:48 without Morant, who finished with 18 points.

Hurts Becomes NFL's Top-Paid Player With Eagles Extension

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Philadelphia quarterback Jalen Hurts, who led the Eagles into last season's Super Bowl, became the NFL's highest-paid player on Monday after agreeing to a five-year contract extension worth \$255 million.

The Eagles locked up the 24-year-old signal caller through the 2028 campaign with a deal that, according to the NFL's website, has \$179.304 million in guaranteed money and the first no-trade clause in team history.

Hurts went 14-1 as a starter last season, completing 66.5% of his passes for 3,701 yards and 22 touchdowns and rushing 165 times for 760 yards and 13 touchdowns.

After the Eagles' 2020 NFL Draft pick led routs of the New York Giants and San Francisco in the playoffs, Philadelphia lost the Super Bowl 38-35 to Kansas City despite Hurts throwing for 304 yards and a touchdown and rushing for Super Bowl records by a quarterback of 70 yards and three touchdowns.

While the Hurts-Eagles deal is the NFL's biggest ever in average annual value, Deshaun Watson's \$230 million contract with Cleveland last year remains the largest in terms of guaranteed money and the 10-year deal for \$450 million Patrick Mahomes signed with Kansas City in 2020 remains the largest in total payout.

Hurts can earn an additional \$15 million in contract incentives to boost his total above \$275 million in the deal, including \$4.3 million he would have been paid in the final year of his original rookie contract.

With a \$23.294 million signing bonus, Hurts is set to make \$64 million in the first season of the new deal.

"The thing with Jalen I'm so optimistic about is he's just got this incredible... passion for being phenomenal," Eagles chairman Jeffrey Lurie said earlier this month at the NFL annual meeting in Arizona.

"You see that in the great ones. You can define them by their obsession with detail and work ethic.

"I think the future is so great for him. Honestly, I don't know if I've ever met somebody that mature at age 24."



Clippers 115, Suns 110

Kawhi Leonard poured in 38 points during his first playoff game in 22 months to lead Los Angeles past host Phoenix in Game 1 of their Western Conference first-round series.

Leonard was 13 of 24 from the field and added five rebounds and five assists in his first postseason contest since tearing the ACL in his right knee against the Utah Jazz in June 2021. Eric Gordon added 19 points for the fifth-seeded Clippers.

Kevin Durant had 27 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds in his first playoff game for the fourth-seeded Suns. It marked the first time Phoenix lost in nine games with Durant on the court. Devin Booker scored 26 points, Torrey Craig added 22 and Deandre Ayton had 18 points and eight rebounds for the Suns.

Nuggets 109, Timberwolves 80

Jamal Murray had 24 points, eight rebounds and eight assists, Nikola Jokic finished with 13 points and 14 rebounds and host Denver routed Minnesota in Game 1 of their first-round Western Conference playoff series.

Michael Porter Jr. had 18 points and 11 rebounds, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored 15 points, Bruce Brown added 14 points and Aaron Gordon had 13 points for the top-seeded Nuggets.

Anthony Edwards scored 18 points, Karl-Anthony Towns had 11 points and 10 rebounds, Jaylen Nowell scored 12 points, Kyle Anderson added 11 and Rudy Gobert finished with 13 rebounds for Minnesota.



Arsenal Must Stop Squandering Points

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal must maintain the intensity for a full 90 minutes if they are to challenge for the Premier League title, forward Gabriel Jesus said after they squandered a two-goal lead in 2-2 draw at West Ham United.

Arsenal were rampant early on and looked well placed to restore their six-point cushion over Manchester City after Jesus tapped home in the seventh minute and Martin Odegaard doubled their lead with a volley three minutes later.

However, Arsenal then lost their momentum and the hosts fought back through Said Benrahma and Jarrod Bowen. Bukayo Saka missed a second-half penalty for Arsenal, who lead Manchester City by four points but have played a game more.

Arsenal also let a 2-0 lead slip against Liverpool earlier this month and Jesus told the club's website they had to stop letting opponents off the hook.

"Once again, the three points were in our hands," he said. "The game is 90 minutes, it's not 20, in this case, today, 30 minutes. As a team, we have to raise the level and come back to our principles.

"We know our strength, we know what we can do. Where we want to attack the opponent, in the first 10 to 20 minutes we did so good, after that we dropped our level and that obviously cannot happen if you want to fight for the title."

Arsenal host Southampton on Friday before travelling to second-placed City on April 26.

Chebet, Obiri Dominate Boston Marathon



BOSTON (Dispatches) - Evans Chebet and Hellen Obiri stormed to victory in the men's and women's races at the Boston Marathon to complete a third straight Kenyan double in the 127th edition of the long distance-running showpiece.

In rainy, cool conditions, defending men's champion Chebet upstaged world record-holder Eliud Kipchoge to become the first man to defend the Boston title since Robert Kipkoech Cheruiyot's 2006-2008 hat trick.

Chebet finished in a time of 2hr 5min 54sec, with Tanzania's Gabriel Geay second in 2:06:04, and Chebet's training partner and fellow Kenyan Benson Kipruto third in 2:06:04.

But there was disappointment for two-time Olympic champion Kipchoge, widely regarded as the greatest marathon runner of all time, who had been who had been bidding to add the Boston crown to previous marathon victories in Berlin, Tokyo, London and Chicago.

Kenyan icon Kipchoge trailed home sixth in 2:09:23, around three-and-half-minutes adrift of Chebet.

The 38-year-old had looked perfectly poised through the opening and mid-stages of the

race but was broken after a bold attack by Geay at around the 19-mile mark. As the pack gave chase to Geay, Kipchoge was rapidly left behind and was soon nearly 100 meters off the pace.

Geay remained in the lead through 24 miles in a leading trio alongside Chebet and Kipruto. But Chebet and Kipruto kicked on in the final two miles and Chebet led with a mile to go before pulling away to retain his crown.

"I'm happy because I know this course very well," Chebet told ESPN following his win. "I won last year, and now I've won this year -- so maybe next year I'll come back again."

While Chebet was able to draw on his experience from last year to master Monday's course, Obiri pulled off a stunning victory in the women's event in what was only her second ever marathon.

The 33-year-old has spent most of her career racing over shorter distances, winning two world championship gold medals in 2017 and 2019 over 5,000m, as well as silvers over the same distance at the 2016 and 2020 Olympics.

Obiri, who only raced a marathon for the first time in New York last November where she placed sixth, kept her composure in a hard-fought race to win in 2hr 21min 38sec. Ethiopia's Amane Beriso was second in 2:21:50 while Israel's Lonah Salpetier took third in 2:21:57.

Rublev Wins Monte Carlo Title

MONACO (Dispatches) - Andrey Rublev made the most of Holger Rune's nerves to win a see-saw Monte Carlo final 5-7 6-2 7-5, as the Russian's talent was finally rewarded with a Masters title.

The fifth seed stayed composed when it mattered to eventually run down his 19-year-old opponent and claim the most prestigious title of his career.

Rublev, 25, was 4-1 down in the decider but ground his way back into the contest to prevail on his second match point with an ace at a sun-drenched Monte Carlo Country Club.

It was Rublev's third attempt in a Masters final after failing at the final hurdle here in Monte Carlo and in Cincinnati in 2021.

"I don't know what to say, I'm just happy, I struggled so much to get this title," said Rublev.

Rune, who burst into the limelight at last year's French Open when he reached the quarter-finals, ended nearly three hours to beat Italian Jannik Sinner in the semi-finals. Rublev also needed three sets to beat American Taylor Fritz, and fatigue was a factor in Sunday's showdown.



Barcelona Have Not Cheated

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Barcelona president Joan Laporta insisted his club never tried to cheat amid investigations into payments made to a former refereeing chief.

In a two-hour news conference, he said there was a smear campaign against Barcelona and the head of La Liga for backing the case against the Catalan club, who are top of the league.

"Obviously referees were not bought and there was no attempt to influence their decisions," he told reporters gathered at the club's Camp Nou stadium.

"Barcelona has never done anything with the aim or intention of adulterating the competition in order to gain a sporting advantage."

Last month Spanish prosecutors charged the Catalan club with corruption after payments of more than 7.3 million euros (\$7.8 million) to a company owned by a former refereeing chief were uncovered earlier this year. Barcelona say they paid Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira, the former referee and ex-vice president of the refereeing committee of the Spanish football federation (CTA) between 1994 and 2018, for reports and advice related to refereeing.

