

The Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Navy Says Iranian Naval Forces Have So Far Seized 35 Ships for Violations Of Maritime Law in the Waters of the Country's Southern Coasts

IRAN NEWS

An English Audiobook Version of "Cell No. 14", the Memoirs of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Will Be Unveiled at Tehran International Book Fair (TIBF) Today

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Iran, Russia Sign Deal on Construction of Strategic Rasht-Astara Railway

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran and Russia signed an agreement on the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway, a strategic transport corridor that connects the existing railways of the two countries and Azerbaijan.

Iranian transport minister Mehrdad Bazrpash and his Russian counterpart Vitaly Savelyev put their signatures on the deal worth \$1.6 billion during a ceremony in Tehran on Wednesday.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and his Russian counterpart oversaw the event in person and via video-link.

The 162-kilometer railway will connect the Iranian city of Rasht, near the Caspian Sea, to Astara on the border with Azerbaijan.

The project, which is aimed at integrating the transport and information routes of Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran and India, is carried out within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Addressing the ceremony, Raisi described the agreement as "an important and strategic step in the direction of Iran-Russia cooperation," adding that it will help boost trade and economy in the region.

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Iran-UK Trade More Than Tripled

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN- The volume of exchanges between Iran and the UK has more than tripled in the post-Brexit era, according to a report by the British Department for Business and Trade published by Iran's state news agency (IRNA) on Wednesday.

The report said that the Iran-UK trade reached a 10-year high of £696 million in 2022 which shows a 72% growth compared to figures reported in 2020 before Britain's exit from the European Union.

The volume of exchanges between the two countries stood at £191 million in 2020 which increased to £405 million in 2021, the report added.

UK's exports of goods and services to Iran totaled £531 million in 2022 which have doubled compared to £265 billion reported in 2021.

Exports of services accounted for £470 million of UK's total exports to Iran in the year under review.

UK's imports from Iran registered an 18% year-on-year growth reaching £165 million in 2022 from £140 million in 2021.

The UK also imported a significant amount of services from Iran as the share of services was £148 million of UK's imports from Iran in 2022.

Hajj Aims to Forge Unity Among Muslims Against Israel, Arrogance



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says the Hajj rituals aim to forge unity among the Islamic Ummah in the face of the Israeli regime and global arrogance.

The Leader made the remarks in a Wednesday meeting with Iranian officials in charge of Hajj pilgrimage affairs and people who will travel to Saudi Arabia's holy cities of Mecca and Medina to perform the annual rituals.

Ayatollah Khamenei said the Hajj pilgrimage is meant to reinforce unity among Muslim nations in the face of profanity, oppression, arrogance, human and non-human idols and all those things that Islam seeks to destroy or confront.

The Leader added that the entire Muslim world must gather and send a message against the Israeli regime.

The influence of arrogant powers is the current issue of the world, the Leader stated, emphasizing that all should demonstrate their power in the face of hegemonic powers.

Ayatollah Khamenei highlighted the issues of taking a correct view toward Hajj and understanding its significance, saying, "Hajj is an international and civilizational issue."

In the case of the absence of the Hajj pilgrimage, the Islamic Ummah would collapse, the Leader cautioned.

He added that Muslims who perform the great annual Hajj rituals should demonstrate their strength in the face of the Israeli regime and arrogant powers and stand firm against the oppressive powers in the world.

Ayatollah Khamenei underlined the importance of clarifying global issues, including the developments in Palestine, saying, "The Hajj time is an appropriate opportunity to become aware of nations and international topics."

The Leader noted that the disclosure of Islam's practical opposition to the geographical, racial and class distinctions is among the main points of the Hajj rituals.

The leader added the self-proclaimed civilized countries are still struggling with black and white as well as European and non-European racial bias.

Ayatollah Khamenei also said as it has been repeatedly announced, the Iranian people and officials should pay serious heed to the enemy's plots, methods, policies and points of strengths and weaknesses so that they would not be deceived.

"If we are aware of global issues, we can understand the enemy's real goal and the reason for his insistence on some issues," he noted.

He added that wherever Iranian officials were careful and acted correctly, they succeeded in achieving very good progress in regional and global issues which have angered the US.

Iran Oil Show 2023 Kicks Off in Tehran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN Oil Minister says the participation of 200 foreign companies in the 27th Iran International Oil, Gas, Refining and Petrochemical Exhibition, also known as Iran Oil Show 2023, is indicative of the effective promotion of energy diplomacy by the incumbent administration.

Javad Owji made the remarks in an address to the opening ceremony of the Iran Oil Show 2023 in the Iranian capital Tehran on Wednesday, which was attended by Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, Science, Research and Technology Minister Mohammad-Ali Zolfigol, CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) Mohsen Khojastehmehr, Syrian Oil Minister Firas Hassan Kaddour, a number of the Iranian Parliament's members as well as other Iranian officials and senior oil industry directors.

Owji said the scopes and importance of Iran Oil Show 2023 are far beyond those of a normal exhibition event as it has provided the ground for cooperation among the Iranian and foreign individuals and companies involved in the oil industry.

He added the great event is, as a matter of fact, among the biggest exhibitions in the Middle East and the world, which has been held with greater prosperity year after year despite the cruel sanctions imposed on Iran's oil and gas industry.

The minister said in the exhibition, domestic and foreign firms, contractors, investors, constructors, knowledge-based companies and academic centers involved in the oil and gas industry's upstream and downstream sectors present their needs and challenges and prepare the ground for holding negotiations and commencing trade cooperation in the future.

Among the Iranian participants in the expo, whose motto is "Oil Industry; Technological Production, Optimal Consumption", are the officials of NIOC, National Petrochemical Company, National Iranian Gas Company, National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company, Iranian Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Products Exporters' Union, Iranian Petroleum Industries Equipment Manufacturers Association and Iran Industrial Equipment Manufacturers Association, and representatives of knowledge-based firms, technology parks and startups.

The exhibition will be open to visitors every day from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (0530 to 1330 GMT) until Saturday.

ViewPoint U.S. Inching Towards Economic Collapse

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Yes. Experts and analysts were right by predicting that the U.S. is approaching end of its economic and even political supremacy in the world and now every day we see some signs of the prediction which is coming true.

Economic chaos and better to say economic decline of the U.S. as the economy No. 1 has started its countdown and it is accelerating every day, and soon this country may lose the title of economy No.1 and countries like China and even India may replace it.

In recent days Western economies have shown their concerns about this decline and many Western countries are working to gradually distance their dependence at least economically on the U.S. by taking different measures.

Of course many big and independent countries have already started distancing their dependence on dollar and the U.S. economy, and they have tried to use their own national currencies in trade and this has been an alarm to the U.S. as the policy of ditching dollar is gradually spreading to Western and European countries and even among the U.S. allies in the other regions.

On Monday U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned once more that the United States is on track for default in June if the opposing Republican lawmakers do not approve the proposed budget bill hinged on debt increase and decrease in public spending.

It is likely that the U.S. could default on its obligations early next month – possibly as soon as June 1 – if Congress doesn't act, Treasury Secretary Yellen warned again. Of course, Yellen wants to blame the Republicans for this economic chaos but the truth is something else that U.S. statesmen like Yellen do not want to accept it.

The chaos is so that even U.S. President Joe Biden cut back a major upcoming trip to Asia and returned to Washington early for talks to avert a potentially catastrophic debt default.

Meanwhile on Monday a U.S. Treasury Department official says the country is in for a massive recession that would cost millions of jobs if it defaults on its debts by June 15.

The bleak warning was issued on Sunday by Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo, as negotiations to forge a debt deal are expected to resume this coming week.

His remarks echoed similar warnings by U.S. policymakers, bankers and the White House that the country is on the precipice of default. They say a default could lead to drastic consequences for the country, including a looming recession and likely global financial contagion.

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Iran-Saudi Reconciliation Deal To Be Recorded in History

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistani President Arif Alvi has hailed the wisdom of Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations, saying the reconciliation and peace agreement reached between the two countries will be recorded in history.

In a Tuesday note, Alvi pointed to the intensification of political tensions in Pakistan and said all Pakistani factions must make a revision in their thoughts in an effort to restore peace and calm to the country.

This is what Iran and Saudi Arabia have carried out and reached great peace and their ideal goals, he noted.

He hailed China's positive role in promoting reconciliation talks between Tehran and Riyadh, saying the two sides' top officials have succeeded in establishing long-lasting peace by reviewing their ideas and making fundamental changes.

The Pakistani president emphasized that the wise and constructive thoughts of the authorities of Iran and Saudi Arabia have prepared the ground for putting an end to decades of hostility. On March 10, after several days of intensive negotiations hosted by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to resume their diplomatic ties and reopen their embassies.

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Qatari Coast Guard Arrests 6 Iranian Divers

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Qatari coast guard has arrested six Iranians who wandered off to territorial waters of Qatar by mistake while diving in Iranian waters, Iran's ambassador to Doha said.

"We dispatched one of our colleagues to the city of Ras Laffan to visit the six citizens who were arrested by the Qatari coast guard," Hamid Dehqani said in a Twitter post in Farsi on Tuesday.

The six Iranians wandered off to Qatar's territorial waters by mistake while diving in Iranian waters before they were arrested, Iran's ambassador to Doha said.

He added that the Iranian detainees are in good health, and that negotiations are underway with Qatari officials to secure their release.

IAEA No Party to JCPOA Revival Talks

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's nuclear chief says the parties to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and not the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are in charge of the negotiations to revive the agreement.

"The Agency is not responsible for the [nuclear deal revival] negotiations. This responsibility lies with the existing parties to the JCPOA," Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), told reporters on Wednesday, referring to the US-abandoned agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

He said relations between Iran and the IAEA are based on the Safeguards Agreements and the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT).

The IAEA is proceeding with monitoring Iran's peaceful nuclear program and there is no disruption in this path, he added.

Eslami's remarks came days after the IAEA chief said that it is important to keep interacting with Iran despite slim chances of the JCPOA's revival.

"Probably there could be a return to the negotiating table, but if the interactions between Iran and the agency are seen or assessed as bad and the cooperation is not



good, the chances are zero," Rafael Mariano Grossi said in an interview with CBC News published on Saturday.

Iran proved the peaceful nature of its nuclear program to the world by signing the JCPOA with six world powers. However, Washington's exit in May 2018 and its subsequent re-imposition of sanctions against Tehran left the future of the deal in limbo.

Eslami also rejected a report by Bloomberg claiming that the number of examinations of Iran's nuclear program fell by 10% in 2022 after Tehran decided to turn off the monitoring cameras installed by the IAEA at the country's nuclear sites.

In a statement in June 2022, the AEOI announced plans to turn off some surveillance cameras of the IAEA, whose operation is deemed beyond Iran's obligations under the UN agency's Safeguards Agreement.

The Iranian nuclear chief said a month later that the IAEA monitoring cameras will remain turned off until the JCPOA is fully restored.

Iran Opens Optical Fiber Service

TEHRAN (IP) - Minister of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) reported the utilization of the optical fiber plan in the country.

On the sidelines of the cabinet session, Isa Zarepour told reporters that the plan is ready to cover 100 cities in the country for 3 million people.

Zarepour said that until the end of the current Persian year, the optical fiber service will cover up to 10 million households. He noted that with the nationwide coverage of the project, in all cities and villages, mobile communication antennas will also be activated through optical fiber.

The ICT minister said that all the people in the country will have enjoyed the optical fiber service after the next three years.

Iran Unveils Largest Ship Navigation Simulator in West Asia

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran has unveiled a comprehensive ship navigation and command simulator, the largest in West Asia, in the northern city of Nowshahr.

The simulator was unveiled in a ceremony at the Imam Khomeini Naval University of Nowshahr on Wednesday. It was attended by Iranian Army Chief Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi.

The simulator unveiled today is the largest in West Asia, Second Flotilla Admiral Arya Shafeghat.

Shafeghat further said the simulator was a great achievement for the Iranian Armed forces, adding that it was developed using state-of-the-art domestic technology.

Iran Gas Exports to Iraq In 2022 Valued at \$4b

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iran exported \$4 billion worth of gas to neighboring Iraq in the last Persian calendar year of 1401 (March 21, 2022 to March 20, 2023), according to the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

The value of trade exchanges with neighboring Iraq reached from \$10.096 million in 1400 (March 21, 2021 to March 20, 2022) to \$10.501 million in 1401, showing a four percent growth compared to a year earlier, IRICA reported.

The total volume of trade exchanges between Iran and Iraq (non-oil exports and imports) exceeded 27,437 tons, valued at \$10.501 million, from March 21, 2022 to March 20, 2023, IRICA added.

Meanwhile, Iran's balance of trade with Iraq hit \$9,974 million in this timespan, it said.

Natural gas, ferrous or steel bars, tomato, components of steam-operated turbines, light lubricants, and byproducts except gasoline, kitchenware, iron ingot and polyethylene were of the main products exported from Iran to Iraq in this period, IRICA continued.

Unrest Complaints Under Investigation

TEHRAN (IP) - Interior Minister says the investigation committee for the crimes of the saboteurs in the recent unrest is keeping on the probe into the cases.

On the sidelines of the cabinet session on Wednesday, Ahmad Vahidi told reporters that if anybody has been harmed in the 2022 unrest and has a complaint, it will be addressed by the competent executive agencies.

Vahidi noted that along with the committee, a special committee is working on the issue, which has been tasked by President Raisi. Unrest broke out in Iran in September 2022, under the pretext of a 22-year-old girl Mahsa Amini, and caused the enemies of the Islamic Republic to use the opportunity to interfere with the domestic affairs of Iran and fuel the recent riots.

Israel's Western Backers Complicit in Tel Aviv's Crimes

TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Ebrahim Raisi has denounced the Israeli regime's Western supporters' abetment in Tel Aviv's crimes against the oppressed Palestinian people.

The chief executive made the remarks in a message issued on Tuesday on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Nakba (Catastrophe) Day.

The Israeli regime claimed existence on that day in 1948 after occupying huge swathes of Palestinian territories in a Western-backed war.

"Since the day that has been rightly named as the 'Day of Catastrophe,' the Zionist regime has brought about displacement of millions of Palestinians and [enabled] targeted killings of Palestinian activists and ordinary people," read the message.

Ever since, the occupying regime has also caused the destruction of Palestinians' houses, farms, and businesses, and been responsible for violation of the fundamental principles of the international law against them, it added.

"It is obvious that the regime's Western supporters, especially the United States, are complicit in its crimes," Raisi stated.

The regime has successfully avoided all sorts of accountability for its actions targeting the Palestinians and other peoples of the region thanks to steadfast support on the part of Washington, which has invariably vetoed all of the United Nations resolutions holding Tel Aviv responsible for the atrocities.

Raisi, however, said Iran condemns the apartheid regime's crimes "in the strongest terms," and reasserted emphasis on the Islamic Republic's "democratic proposal" for political resolution of the crisis that has manifested itself in the form of Palestine's occupation.

The Iranian president, meanwhile, reemphasized Tehran's support for the Palestinian people's "legitimate cause" of liberating their territories and establishing an "independent and integrated" state across the entirety of the historical Palestinian territories, with the holy occupied city of al-Quds as its capital.

JCPOA Talks Likely to Resume in Near Future

TEHRAN (MNA) - A member of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy commission says that the talks on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal and removing anti-Iran sanctions may resume in the near future.

Saying that the U.S. seeks to revive JCPOA in a way that Iran's interests are not realized, Shahriar Heidari said that the American side should know that Iran's position and strategy in the talks are unchangeable.

Heidari went on to say that the Islamic Republic of Iran attaches great importance to the conclusion of the negotiations and the complete removal of sanctions, adding, "Considering the series of messages that have reached us from the United States and European countries (the US, Germany and France), negotiations to revive the JCPOA will probably be resumed soon."

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian parliament member reacted to the remarks of the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan who recently claimed that the Zionist regime has the freedom of action to act against Iran's nuclear program.

Stressing that the Westerners and the Israeli regime have been seeking to create psychological warfare against Iran after the Islamic Revolution, Heidari cited that the Iranophobia project has failed and the position of the Westerners in the region is shaky due to the recent positive regional developments and Iran's effective stance and the global developments.

No excuses are acceptable anymore for the presence of the US and the Zionist regime in the region, therefore the Westerners are extremely worried and started threatening Iran, he added.

The Zionist regime is not capable of threatening Iran or taking military action against it, Heidari stressed.

Stressing that the Zionist regime is too small to be considered in Iran's defense and military equations, the parliament member underlined that the regime may be able to carry out a series of acts of sabotage and terror but these actions do not indicate that they're a global power.

"Western threats against Iran are just a psychological operation and are raised due to the strengthening of Iran's relations with the countries of the region and restoring relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is not pleasant for them," he concluded.

Iran Calls on OPCW Meet Medical Needs of Chemical Veterans

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran is the biggest victim of chemical weapons in the contemporary era, the Iranian Deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs said, calling on OPCW to meet the medical needs of the said veterans.

Reza Najafi made the remark in a meeting with the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Fernando Arias on Tuesday on the sidelines of the Chemical Weapons Convention's Fifth Review Conference.

During the meeting, Najafi briefed the OPCW chief about the effects of the US cruel sanctions on the

health and treatment of Iranian chemical veterans, calling for measures to meet the urgent medical needs of the said veterans.

Emphasizing that Iran is the biggest victim of chemical weapons in the contemporary era, he added that the goal and purpose of the Chemical Weapons Convention will not be achieved without the complete destruction of all types of chemical weapons stockpiles.

The OPCW director general also confirmed the necessity of addressing the medical needs of the chemical victims, adding that he will continue to talk with the relevant parties.

Iran, Russia Discuss Ways to Counter Organized Crimes

MOSCOW (IRNA) - Head of the Supreme Court of Iran Hojjatoleslam Ahmad Mortazavi Moqaddam has underlined the importance of the continuation of cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in the fight against organized crimes, computer crime, extremism, and terrorism.

Mortazavi made the remarks in a meeting held in Moscow late on Tuesday with Russia's Prosecutor General Igor Victorovich Krasnov.

In the meeting, Mortazavi called for an exchange of experiences between the judicial offices of the two countries.

He further termed such bilateral meetings as good opportunities for fighting corruption and improving judicial systems in both countries.

For his part, the Russian prosecutor general stressed the need to counter any kind of violation of law.

Mortazavi Moqaddam arrived in Moscow on Monday evening. His five-day Moscow visit takes place at the invitation of the Russian side.

Tehran, Moscow Stand United Against Threats, Arrogant Domination

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian Army commander says the country will enhance cooperation with its allies, including Russia, to counter threats posed to regional security by "global arrogance."

In a meeting with Commander-in-Chief of Russia's Navy Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov in Tehran, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, deputy chief of the Iranian Army for Coordination, urged vigilance to prevent any domination of the global arrogance.

"We do not want to dominate and attack any country, but we stand against any threats and arrogant domination. In this regard, we will strengthen our cooperation and synergy with friendly and allied countries, including Russia," Sayyari said.

"We must certainly be strong to ensure security and peace in the region... Also, we must have unity and synergy, and use each other's experiences in such a way that ... leads to effective deterrence."

The commander also expressed the Iranian Army's readiness to implement joint cooperation projects with Russia in the fields of making mutual visits, improving the quality of military competitions, as well as maritime patrols

and exercises, ensuring economic security, taking counter-terrorism measures, conducting maritime search and rescue operations and trainings, and helping damaged vessels.

He further hailed the capability of Iran's Navy, saying the force has faithful and knowledgeable employees and state-of-the-art surface and subsurface equipment.

Iranian naval vessels, he added, have today made voyages to important ports, including Port of St. Petersburg, and circumnavigated the globe.

"Following the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran ... put the appropriate use of the sea on its agenda. After pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden, the Navy developed its powerful presence in international waters ... and even helped many countries."

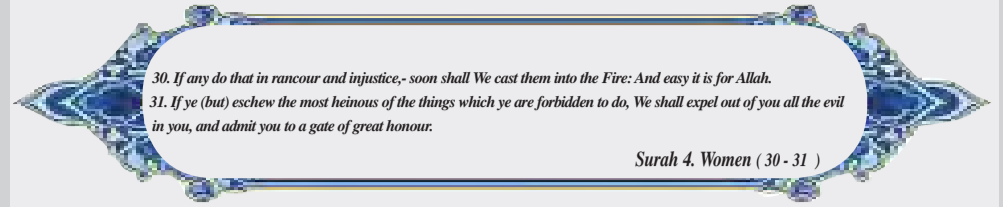
The Russian admiral also stressed enhanced cooperation between the naval forces of the two countries.

The Iranian and Russian navies enjoy close relations and have staged several joint exercises.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:00
■ Evening (Maghreb)	19:24
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	03:16
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	04:56



30. If any do that in rancour and injustice, - soon shall We cast them into the Fire: And easy it is for Allah.
31. If ye (but) eschew the most heinous of the things which ye are forbidden to do, We shall expel out of you all the evil in you, and admit you to a gate of great honour.

Surah 4. Women (30 - 31)

Tehran, Moscow Make Progress on New Oil, Gas Projects in Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Tehran and Moscow have made progress regarding the participation of Russian companies in new oil and gas projects in Iran, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said during talks with Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji.

"We are implementing projects to develop oil fields in Iran and have outlined new projects, where I expect progress soon," he said.

The Iranian minister, in turn, said the Russian and Iranian delegations had spent several hours at the negotiating table. Among other participants was Deputy Chairman of Gazprom Management Committee Vitaly Markelov.

According to Owji, the delegations discussed issues related to oil and gas.

"I am pleased to announce that major Russian companies have already arrived in Iran, came to terms with Iranian companies, and contracts are already being fulfilled," he said, expressing hope that more contracts will follow in the future.

The sides also discussed the construction of nuclear power plants in Iran and other



electrical power generation matters, Owji added.

The two countries' delegations exchanged views on bilateral cooperation in the oil, gas, petrochemical, electricity, and nuclear energy fields.

Their discussions also revolved around following up previous memorandums of understanding and overcoming obstacles in the path of implementing the MoUs.

The Russian side was scheduled to complete studies on Iran's oil fields soon and offer its assessment.

Iran and Russia's gas experts explored all avenues and agreed to hold more talks on their cooperation.

According to the Iranian officials, Tehran and Moscow will sign deals later.

The delegations also talked about previous projects in the electricity sector.

According to an agreement, Russia has allocated a credit line for the construction of Sirik Power Plant in Iran.

It is a 1,400-megawatt gas-fired power plant in southern province of Hormuzgan.

The project of synchronizing Iran-Russia-Azerbaijan power grids was discussed.

Iran and Russia also exchanged views on financial issues of phases 2 and 3 of Iran's nuclear power plant in southern province of Bushehr.

North Drilling Company, Russia's Traکتoriya-Servis Sign MoU



TEHRAN (Shana) - Iran's North Drilling Company and Russia's Traکتoriya-Servis LLC here inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in drilling operations.

The two sides, which signed the MoU on the sidelines of Iran-Russia B2B meeting in the presence of Iran's Deputy Oil Minister for International Affairs and Trade Ahmad Asadzadeh, agreed to cooperate in implementing drilling projects, particularly directional drilling, and supplying equipment.

Morteza Pakravan Nouqani, North Drilling Company acting head, said NDCO has considerable experience in offering technical and engineering drilling services, adding, "If Russians are eager to get [our] services, we will draw out contracts and MoUs in the future."

Russia's Second Largest Bank Inaugurates Office in Tehran

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Russia's second-largest and majority state-owned VTB Bank has opened up a representative office in Iran as the two neighboring countries seek to further connect their interbank communication and transfer systems in the face of Western sanctions.

Chairman of Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPOI) Alireza Peyman-Pak made the announcement in a post published on his Twitter page on Wednesday.

With the official start of VTB Bank activities in Iran, conditions will be favorably provided for the low-cost and safe access of Iranian entrepreneurs and businessmen to the banking systems of many European, African and Asian states.

Iranian companies will now have the chance to make international bank transfers. Moreover, VTB Bank and its subsidiaries are extensively active in South American countries, empowering Iran to diversify its exchange routes with export target countries in that region.

The Russian bank has lately expanded its activities in China, South Africa, Venezuela and member countries of the Arab League, offering Iranian banks and companies to the banking network of those countries. In Europe, VTB Bank and its subsidiaries are active in Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Sweden.

Earlier this year, Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Mohammadreza Farzin said a direct link had been established between the central banks of Iran and Russia. Farzin said on January 30 that the channel between Iran and the rest of the globe is being restored, adding that the Iranian banking network will also have a direct connection with 106 other foreign banks.

Monthly Non-Oil Export to Turkey Up 52%

TEHRAN (MNA) - The value of Iran's non-oil export to Turkey increased by 52 percent in the first month of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-April 20), as compared to the first month of the past year, the spokesman of Trade Development Committee of the Iranian House of Industry, Mining, and Trade announced.

Ruhollah Latifi said that importing non-oil commodities worth \$550 million, Turkey was Iran's second export destination in the said month.

Turkey was also Iran's second source of import in the first month, through exporting non-oil goods valued at \$345 million, with 26 percent growth year on year, he added.

As previously announced by an official with Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), the value of Iran's export to Turkey increased by 23 percent in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20).

Farzad Piltan, the director-general of TPO's Office of West Asian Countries, said that based on the data released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA), Iran exported commodities worth \$7.45 billion to its neighbor in 1401, while the figure was \$6.079 in 1400.

Saying that Turkey was Iran's third top export destination in the past year, the official named natural gas, aluminum, urea, polyethylene, copper cathode and cathode parts, copper wires, iron and steel ingots, and polyethylene as the major products Iran exported to Turkey in the previous year.

Piltan further announced that Iran's import from Turkey also rose 15 percent to about \$6 billion in 1401, from \$5.2 billion in 1400.

Stating that Turkey was the third source of import for Iran in the previous year, the official named sunflower seed oil, road tractors, corn, bananas, generators, barley, soybeans, synthetic fibers, crude soybean oil, and solid acrylic polymers as the main items Iran imported from its neighbor in 1401.

Based on the data previously released by the Turkish Statistical Institute, the value of Iran's exports to neighboring Turkey increased by 19 percent to reach \$3.35 billion in 2022. Turkey had imported over \$2.82 billion worth of commodities from the Islamic Republic in 2021.

Based on the mentioned data, Iran's imports from the country also marked an 11-percent rise to hit \$3.07 billion in the past year, in comparison with 2021, when the figure was \$2.77 billion.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the trade between the two countries has registered a 15-percent rise in 2022.

The value of trade between the two neighbors reached \$6.42 billion in 2022, while the figure stood at \$5.59 billion in the preceding year.

Iran's trade balance with Turkey has been \$280 million positive in favor of Iran in the past year.

Iran, Russia Considering Setting Up Energy Consortium

TEHRAN (Shana) - Iran and Russia are considering a proposal to set up an energy consortium comprising the two countries' companies to improve production from their oil and gas resources, said an adviser to the Iranian oil minister.

Hossein Shameli, the Iranian oil minister's special adviser and assistant for international and trade affairs, made the remarks in an address to the opening ceremony of the first business-to-business (B2B) meetings between Iranian and Russian oil and gas companies here in Tehran on Tuesday.

He stressed that Iran and Russia play a "fundamental" role in meeting the world's energy needs, adding the two countries' cooperation can be of contribution to the sustainability of the global energy supply.

Shameli noted, "We maintain that the bilateral use of [modern] technologies will play a key role in the development of and production from the two countries' resources."

He emphasized that the two countries' private sectors can play a significant role in preparing the ground for the exchange of experiences in the fields of educating human resources and creating new financial mechanisms for accelerating and facilitating expansion of the bilateral relations, which are all very "essential" for the development and completion of the two states' energy chains.

Shameli added economic development will be among the outcomes of such cooperation, saying



the two countries can, within a "dynamic and effective" structure, enhance their cooperation in the energy sector and move toward ensuring energy supply sustainability and their own economic growth.

He said the exchange of technical and engineering services between the two countries with the active presence of their technology-based companies can be further promoted, for which Iran and Russia are required to place on their agenda sharing the required technologies. Shameli voiced the Iranian Oil Ministry's readiness to support the two countries' public and private companies and follow up on the implementation of the bilateral cooperation policies until the achievement of the desired results.

He described the prospects of the Iran-Russia cooperation as "long-term and lasting."

Official Calls for Ramping Up Iran, Russia SMEs' Cooperation

SHANA (Tehran) - Iran's deputy oil minister for international affairs and trade on Tuesday called for boosting cooperation between Iranian and Russian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Ahmad Asadzadeh made the remarks at the opening ceremony of the first business-to-business (B2B) meeting between Iranian and Russian companies on cooperation in oil and gas sectors at the Research Institute of Petroleum Industry (RIPI) in Tehran.

He pointed to Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak's visit to Tehran and added, "Iranian and Russian oil and gas companies hold talks and will sign contracts in the presence of Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji and Novak."

On the sidelines of the first day of the 27th Iran International Oil, Gas, Refining and Petrochemical Exhibition, Iran's Institute for International Energy Studies (IIES) in collaboration with Russia's Roscongress Foundation will hold three expert meetings titled "New Energy Order: Common Interests and Threats", "Expansion of Cooperation and Management of Competition", and "Mechanisms and Needs" at Tehran International Permanent Fairground. The 27th edition of the exhibition, aka Iran Oil Show 2023, will be held in the capital city from May 17-20.

Iran Reports Slight y/y Increase In Steel Output in April

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's production of steel increased slightly in the calendar month to April 20 compared to the same month in 2022.

Figures by Iranian Steel Producers Association (ISPA) published on Tuesday showed that total production of steel in the country had risen by 1% year on year in April. The figures showed that semi-finished steel output in Iran had increased by 6% to 3.063 million metric tons (mt) in the calendar month to late April.

Production of sponge iron, also known as direct reduced iron, reached 3.407 million mt in Iran in the month to late April, up 5% year on year, the data showed.

The ISPA said Iran's long steel output had increased by 4% to 0.997 million mt year on year in April while steel sheet production in the country dropped by 2% to 0.851 million mt over the same period. Iran churned out 1.848 million mt of finished steel products in the calendar month to late April, up by 1% year on year, showed the figures.

Iran is the 10th largest producer of steel in the world. The country has seen a surge in its production and exports of steel in recent years, mainly because of increased government support for the sector, which has been a response to US sanctions on the country's oil exports.

Iran, Syria Sign Agreement on Production of Vans, Buses

TEHRAN (MNA) - A good agreement was reached between Iran and Syria regarding the production of vans and buses, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy said, referring to President Raisi's visit to Damascus.

The 20 cooperation documents signed between Iran and Syria will expand the cooperation between the two countries in the field of energy, mines, extraterritorial cultivation, etc., Mahdi Safari said Wednesday, referring to President Raisi's recent visit to Damascus.

During the visit, good agreements were made between the two countries regarding the tariffs, and this measure affect Iran's exports to Syria positively, Safari added.

He also expressed hope to witness the growth of trade interactions between Iran and Syria.

A good agreement was also reached between Iran and Syria regarding the production of vans and buses, he also said.

The issue of cooperation in the field of energy production and distribution, facilitating economic and commercial cooperation by establishing a joint bank and insurance and reducing trade tariffs between the two countries to zero, strengthening and expanding transit between Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the efforts of the Syrian side and Iran's assistance to revive Syria's agricultural, industrial and energy capacities after the war and facilitating pilgrimages between the two countries were among the main topics of the cooperation documents that were signed between the two countries, President Ebrahim Raisi said in a press conference after his two-day trip to Syria.

Senegal Opposition Leader's Trial Postponed

DAKAR (Dispatches) - The rape trial of Senegal's main opposition leader Ousmane Sonko that was due to open on Tuesday in the capital has been postponed until May 23.

The delay came after 24 hours of unrest linked to the case against the prominent politician in the West African nation in which the interior ministry says three people died, including a police officer killed by a reversing armored car.

Police and Sonko's supporters clashed Monday in the southern city of Ziguinchor where youths threw stones and used tree trunks to barricade streets leading to Sonko's house. In the capital, Dakar, around 20 buses were burned in the unrest, which saw protesters hurl stones and firebombs at police, with security forces responding with tear gas.



UN Reports Extensive Flooding Damage in Central Somalia

MOGADISHU (Dispatches) - Floods caused by the annual rains have left "a trail of destruction" across Somalia, a United Nations spokesman said, citing inundated homes and farmland as well as the shutdown of health facilities.

"According to early estimates by our partners, more than 460,000 people have been impacted, including nearly 219,000 men, women and children who have been displaced due to this (flooding)," Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

At least five people, including three children, have been killed in the flooding, Mohamed Moalim of the Somalia National Disaster Management Agency told The Associated Press.



Russia Launches Exceptional Air Attack on Kyiv



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian air defenses thwarted an intense Russian air attack on Kyiv, shooting down all 18 missiles aimed at the capital with the help of Western-supplied weapons, officials said.

Loud explosions boomed over Kyiv as the nighttime attack combined Russian missiles launched from the air, sea and land in an apparent attempt to overwhelm Ukraine's air defenses. No casualties were reported.

The barrage came as European leaders sought new ways to punish Russia for the war and a Chinese envoy sought traction for Beijing's peace proposal, which so far appears to have made little impression on the warring sides. It also came as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy returned home following a whirlwind European tour to greet Ukraine's key wartime allies, which spurred an additional tranche of pledged military aid.

The overnight attack on Kyiv was "exceptional in its density — the maximum number of attacking missiles in the shortest period of time," said Serhii Popko, the head of the Kyiv military administration.

Valentyna Myronets, a 64-year-old Kyiv resident, said she felt "pain, fear, nervousness, restlessness" amid the assaults. "God, we are waiting for victory and when all this is over," she said.

U.K. Ambassador Melinda Simmons tweeted that the barrage was "pretty intense."

"Bangs and shaking walls are not an easy night," she wrote.

It was the eighth time this month that Russian air raids had targeted the capital, a clear escalation after weeks of lull and ahead of a much-anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Six "Kinzhal" aero-ballistic missiles were launched from MiG-31K aircraft, nine cruise missiles from ships in the Black Sea and three land-based S-400 cruise missiles targeted the capital, air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said in a statement on Telegram.

After the first onslaught, Russia also launched Iranian-made Shahed attack drones and conducted aerial reconnaissance, Ihnat said.

Debris fell across several districts in the capital, starting fires, but no losses were reported, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said.

Sophisticated air defense systems provided by Ukraine's Western allies, including American-made Patriot missiles, have helped spare Kyiv from the kind of destruction witnessed elsewhere in the country as Russian forces press on with their tactic of long-range bombardment.

A metal fragment inside the Kyiv zoo and was seen by Associated Press reporters was labeled Lockheed Martin and Boeing, two of the companies involved in the manufacture of the Patriot missile system.

A Russian defense official said that Tuesday's attack destroyed a Patriot missile battery in Kyiv. Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said the system was destroyed by a "Kinzhal."

He didn't provide evidence, and the statement couldn't be independently verified. Ihnat, the Ukrainian air force spokesman, refused to comment on the claim. The bolstered air defenses have deterred Russian aircraft from going deep into Ukraine and helped shape the course of the war, military experts say.

Meanwhile, a Chinese envoy is preparing to visit Ukraine and Russia in coming days as Beijing presses the peace plan it released in February. Li Hui, a former ambassador to Moscow, also will visit Poland, France and Germany, according to the Chinese foreign ministry.

Ukraine has cautiously welcomed China's proposal while saying it would wait to see what specific actions China takes. Chinese leader Xi Jinping's government says it is neutral and wants to play a role as mediator in the war, but it has given Moscow political support, and a breakthrough appears unlikely more than 14 months after Russia's full-scale invasion.

China Ready to Smash Taiwan Self-Rule

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China is prepared to "resolutely smash any form of Taiwan independence," its military said, as the U.S. reportedly prepares to accelerate the sale of defensive weapons and other military assistance to the self-governing island democracy.

A recent increase in exchanges between the U.S. and Taiwanese militaries is an "extremely wrong and dangerous move," Defense Ministry spokesperson Col. Tan Kefei said in a statement and video posted online.

China's People's Liberation Army "continues to strengthen military training and preparations and will resolutely smash any form of Taiwanese independence secession along with attempts at outside interference, and will resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity," Tan said, in a reference to Taiwan's closest ally, the United States.

China claims the island of 23 million people as its own territory, to be brought under its control by force if necessary. With the world's largest navy, latest-generation fighter jets and a huge arsenal of ballistic missiles, China has been upping its threats by sending planes and warships into waters and airspace around Taiwan. With



more than 2 million members, the PLA also ranks as the world's largest standing military, although transporting even a portion of the force in the event of an invasion is considered a huge logistical challenge.

Along with daily air and sea incursions around Taiwan, Beijing has held military exercises in and around the Taiwan Strait dividing the sides, seen in part as a rehearsal for a blockade or invasion that would have massive consequences for security and economies worldwide.

Such actions seek to harass Taiwan's military and intimidate politicians and voters who will choose a new president and legislature next year.

The moves appear to have had limited effect, with most Taiwanese firmly in favor of maintaining their de facto independent status. Politicians and other public figures from Europe and the U.S. have also been making frequent trips to Taipei to show their support, despite their countries' lack of formal diplomatic ties in deference to Beijing.

Russian Duma Votes to Scrap Cold War Armed Forces Deal

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - The lower house of Russia's parliament voted unanimously to formally pull out of a key Cold War-era security deal, more than eight years after Moscow halted its participation.

The vote in the State Duma came less than a week after President Vladimir Putin introduced a draft bill on May 10 "denouncing" the Treaty of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which aimed to prevent Cold War rivals from massing forces at or near mutual borders. The deal was signed in November 1990, but not fully ratified until two years later.

The Federation Council, Russia's Kremlin-controlled upper chamber that generally rubber-stamps legislation that the Duma has approved, is scheduled to consider Russia's pullout from the treaty next Wednesday.

Moscow first announced its intention to completely withdraw from the agreement in early 2015. Since last February, Moscow's military operation in Ukraine has seen hundreds of thousands of Russian troops pour into the country, which shares a border with NATO members Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary.

On Tuesday, Putin's designated envoy told the State Duma that NATO countries had "made it impossible" for Russia to remain in the treaty by allowing for the alliance's expansion into Central and Eastern Europe.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov also described the treaty as "contrary to Russia's security interests" in an interview published Monday in *Parliamentskaya Gazeta*, a weekly published by the State Duma.

Ryabkov's remarks were echoed by key deputies during the parliamentary session Tuesday. State Duma speaker Leonid Slutsky charged that the treaty had "long existed only on paper," while Andrey Kartapolov, the chairman of Russia's parliamentary committee, said that it had been rendered obsolete by NATO's placing of military infrastructure in Central and Eastern European member states.

Ryabkov told lawmakers that completing the withdrawal process would take about six months.

Air Strikes Pound Sudan's Capital

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - The Sudanese army carried out air strikes in the north of the capital Khartoum on Monday, attacking its paramilitary rivals around a hospital that witnesses said was damaged in the bombardment.

Intense battles in Khartoum and its sister cities of Bahri and Omdurman have raged despite Saudi and U.S.-brokered talks between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Jeddah aimed at securing humanitarian access and a ceasefire.

The fighting has spread to the western region of Darfur, but has been concentrated in the capital, where RSF fighters have taken up positions across neighborhoods and the army has used air strikes and heavy artillery fire to target them.

"We're under heavy bombardment now in Sharq el-Nil and Rapid Support are responding with anti-aircraft guns," said 55-year-old Awatef Saleh, referring to the area she lives in along the Nile in Bahri. "All this is happening near our homes, we're in a state of terror and fear."

In a voice message released by the RSF, its leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, dismissed rumors that he had been killed or injured in the battles.

"I am moving freely around my forces, I am present in Bahri, I am present in Omdurman, I am present in Khartoum, I am present in Sharq al-Nil," Hemedti said.

"They are spreading rumours that Mohamed Hamdan has been killed, and these are all lies that show that they are being defeated ... I am thank God present with the troops," he said.

Army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Hemedti held the top positions on Sudan's ruling council following the 2019 overthrow of former leader Omar al-Bashir during a popular uprising, and staged a coup two years later as a deadline to hand power to civilians approached. The war began after disputes over plans for the RSF to join the army and the chain of command in a new political transition.

It has caused about 200,000 to flee into nearby countries and over 700,000 have been displaced inside Sudan, triggering a humanitarian crisis that threatens to destabilize the region.

Those still in Khartoum are struggling to survive. "Goods are slowly disappearing, the stores are emptying out," said Mohamed, a resident in an area of Omdurman not yet hit by fighting. "Famine is coming for sure. If we aren't killed by the war, we'll die from the insecurity or hunger."

Residents report a rise in looting and lawlessness after police vanished from the streets at the outset of the conflict. On Monday, Burhan replaced the head of the police, in one of several of changes of senior officials after the central government largely ceased to function.



Colombian Rebel Leader Says Peace Talks Are on Pause

BOGOTA (Dispatches) - Colombian rebel leader Pablo Beltran said that peace talks between his National Liberation Army and the government have been put "on pause" due to remarks made last week by President Gustavo Petro.

Petro questioned whether members of the rebel group's delegation in Cuba could effectively control the actions of their own commanders on the battlefield. He also said the younger leaders of the group, known as the ELN, were motivated not by political goals, but by drug trafficking profits.

In an interview published on YouTube by the ELN's communication team, Beltran said that delegations from both sides would have to meet to "examine" the comments by Colombia's president before issues like a ceasefire and rural development schemes can continue to be discussed. The negotiations began in November and have failed to produce any major breakthroughs so far.

The ELN was recognized as "an armed rebel group" by Colombia's government during the last round of talks which took place in Mexico, a designation that enables it to seek policy changes in peace talks instead of just negotiating reduced sentences for their crimes. Beltran argued that Petro's recent comments are putting its status as a "political organization" in jeopardy.

"If they are saying one thing in the negotiations, while the president says another we feel like we are stuck in the middle," Beltran said. "So we are asking for an explanation."

During a speech to military officers on Friday, Petro described members of the ELN's peace delegation as "elderly" leaders who were interested in discussing political changes. But he questioned whether younger ELN commanders who lead troops on the ground have the same kind of goals.

"They may use the same banners," Petro said. "But what motivates them is (profiting from) illicit economies." Petro added that elderly leaders like Beltran were "willing to sit down and talk. But are they really in charge?"

The ELN was founded in the 1960s by union leaders, students and priests inspired by the Cuban revolution. It is Colombia's largest remaining rebel group and has been notoriously difficult for previous Colombian governments to negotiate with.



New Threat to Privacy? Scientists Sound Alarm About DNA Tool

PARIS (Dispatches) - The traces of genetic material that humans constantly shed wherever they go could soon be used to track individual people, or even whole ethnic groups, scientists said, warning of a looming "ethical quagmire".

A recently developed technique can glean a huge amount of information from tiny samples of genetic material called environmental DNA, or eDNA, that humans and animals leave behind everywhere -- including in the air.

The tool could lead to a range of medical and scientific advances, and could even help track down criminals, according to the authors of a new study published in the journal *Nature Ecology & Evolution*.

But it also poses a vast range of concerns around consent, privacy and surveillance, they added.

Humans spread their DNA -- which carries genetic information specific to each person -- everywhere, by shedding skin or hair cells, coughing out droplets, or in wastewater flushed down toilets.

In recent years, scientists have been increasingly collecting the eDNA of wild animals, in the hopes of helping threatened species.

For the new research, scientists at the University of Florida's Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience had been focused on collecting the eDNA of endangered sea turtles.

But the international team of researchers inadvertently collected a massive amount of human eDNA, which they called "human genetic bycatch".

David Duffy, a wildlife disease genomic professor at the Whitney Laboratory who led the project, said they were "consistently surprised" by the amount and quality of the human eDNA they collected.

"In most cases the quality is almost equivalent to if you took a sample from a person," he said.

The scientists collected human eDNA from nearby oceans, rivers and towns, as well as from areas far from human settlements.

Struggling to find a sample not tainted by humans, they went to a section of a remote Florida island inaccessible to the public.

It was free of human DNA -- at least until a member of the team walked barefoot along the beach. They were then able to detect eDNA from a single footprint in the sand.



In Duffy's native Ireland, the team found human DNA all along a river, with the exception of the remote mountain stream at its source.

Taking samples from the air of a veterinary hospital, the team captured eDNA that matched the staff, their animal patient and viruses common in animals.

One of the study's authors, Mark McCauley of the Whitney Laboratory, said that by sequencing the DNA samples, the team was able to identify if a person had a greater risk of diseases such as autism and diabetes.

"All of this very personal, ancestral and health-related data is freely available in the environment, and it's simply floating around us in the air right now," McCauley told an online press conference.

"We specifically did not examine our sequences in a way that we would be able to pick out specific individuals because of the ethical issues," he said.

But that would "definitely" be possible in the future, he added. "The question is how long it takes until we're at that stage."

The researchers emphasised the potential benefits of collecting human eDNA, such as tracking cancer mutations in wastewater, discovering long-hidden archaeological sites or revealing the true culprit of a crime using only the DNA they left in a room.

Natalie Ram, a law professor at the University of Maryland not involved in the research, said the findings "should raise serious concern about genetic privacy and the appropriate limits of policing".

"Exploiting involuntarily shed genetic information for investigative aims risks putting all of us under perpetual genetic surveillance," she wrote in a commentary on the study. The authors of the study shared her concerns.

McCauley warned harvesting human eDNA without consent could be used to track individual people or even target "vulnerable populations or ethnic minorities".

It is why the team decided to sound the alarm, they said in a statement, calling for policymakers and scientists to start working on regulation that could address the "ethical quagmire".

WHO Advises Not to Use Non-Sugar Sweeteners for Weight Control



GENEVA (Dispatches) - The World Health Organization (WHO) has released a new guideline on non-sugar sweeteners (NSS), which recommends against the use of NSS to control body weight or reduce the risk of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

The recommendation is based on the findings of a systematic review of the available evidence which suggests that use of NSS does not confer any long-term benefit in reducing body fat in adults or children. Results of the review also suggest that there may be potential undesirable effects from long-term use of NSS, such as an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mortality in adults.

"Replacing free sugars with NSS does not help with weight control in the long term. People need to consider other ways to reduce free sugars intake, such as consuming food with naturally occurring sugars, like fruit, or unsweetened food and beverages," says Francesco Branca, WHO Director for Nutrition and Food Safety. "NSS are not essential dietary factors and have no nutritional value. People should reduce the sweetness of the diet altogether, starting early in life, to improve their health."

The recommendation applies to all people except individuals with pre-existing diabetes and includes all synthetic and naturally occurring or modified non-nutritive sweeteners that are not classified as sugars found in manufactured foods and beverages, or sold on their own to be added to foods and beverages by consumers. Common NSS include acesulfame K, aspartame, advantame, cyclamates, neotame, saccharin, sucralose, stevia and stevia derivatives.

The recommendation does not apply to personal care and hygiene products containing NSS, such as toothpaste, skin cream, and medications, or to low-calorie sugars and sugar alcohols (polyols), which are sugars or sugar derivatives containing calories and are therefore not considered NSS.

Because the link observed in the evidence between NSS and disease outcomes might be confounded by baseline characteristics of study participants and complicated patterns of NSS use, the recommendation has been assessed as conditional, following WHO processes for developing guidelines. This signals that policy decisions based on this recommendation may require substantive discussion in specific country contexts, linked for example to the extent of consumption in different age groups.

The WHO guideline on NSS is part of a suite of existing and forthcoming guidelines on healthy diets that aim to establish lifelong healthy eating habits, improve dietary quality and decrease the risk of NCDs worldwide.

Could Lab-Grown Meat Actually Be Worse for the Planet?



LONDON (Dispatches) - Some US\$2 billion dollars have already been invested in cultured meat technology. However, research from the University of California may have thrown a spanner in the works by challenging the ecological argument that often supports the legitimacy of this kind of research. In fact, lab-grown meat could be up to 25 times more harmful to the planet than regular beef.

Promises of CO2 emissions cut by between 80 and 92 per cent compared to conventional farming is one argument brandished by the French start-up Gournemy to extol the virtues of its synthetic foie gras. Many companies around the world that have embarked on creating cultured meat use such claims to convince people of the merits of their research. According to the Good Food Institute, a think tank focused on accelerating alternative protein innovation, "if renewable energy is used throughout the supply chain, cultivated meat's footprint could drop to 2.8 kg CO2eq/kg. Even when compared to highly optimistic future scenarios for conventional meat production, this carbon footprint is up to 92 per cent less than beef, 44 per cent less than pork, and about the same as chicken."

The GFI was right to specify in this study published in March 2021 that renewable energies were taken into account in these calculations. Because the development of cultured meat requires so much energy that scientists from the University of California put the environmental cost of lab-grown meat into perspective. According to their calculations, the impact could be 4 to 25 times more harmful to the climate than conventional farming. Speaking to *The New Scientist*, Derrick Risner of the University of California explains that despite some US\$2 billion having already been invested in this technology, it's not yet clear if it will actually be better for the environment.

A Rare Mutation Helped One Man Stave Off Alzheimer's for Decades

LONDON (Dispatches) - A rare genetic mutation never seen before protected a man with an inherited form of Alzheimer's from developing the disease for decades.

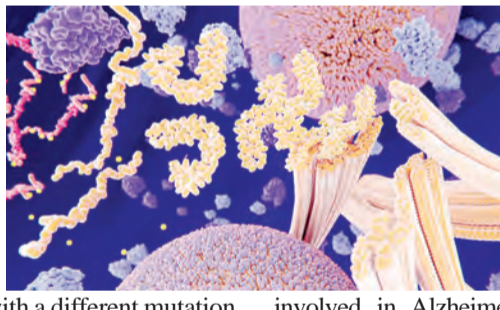
He is the second person found to have such protection, following a report in 2019 of a woman with a different mutation. Both mutations may have staved off the disease for years by acting in similar ways in the brain, an insight that could lead to new treatments for all forms of Alzheimer's, scientists report May 15 in *Nature Medicine*.

The best of *Science News* - direct to your inbox. But some researchers are cautious about concluding too much from just two cases. "The results look very promising, but it would be useful to see replication in more samples," says neurologist Rudolph Tanzi of Harvard Medical School who was not involved in the new study. Still, the work is important as "it can serve as a useful guide for drug discovery," he says.

Both the man and woman were members of a Colombian family who have a mutation in the PSEN1 gene that causes the rare inherited variety of Alzheimer's. People with "familial" Alzheimer's usually start showing signs in their 40s. The more common "sporadic" form does not cause symptoms until people are in their 70s or 80s.

The woman stayed sharp into her 70s, while the man described in the new study was still mentally healthy at 67. "That means they were protected, because they should have gotten the disease 30 years earlier, and they didn't," says Diego Sepulveda-Falla, a neurologist at the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf in Germany.

The woman had a protective mutation in a gene closely linked to Alzheimer's, APOE. This mutation is known as the Christchurch variant, after the city in New Zealand where it was first found. The mutation identified in the new study was in a gene called RELN. Sepulveda-Falla and colleagues named this new mutation RELN-COLBOS, after a joint Colombia-Boston study that the man participated in.



He died three years ago, at age 74, from other causes, and his family donated his brain for study.

The researchers compared the two cases, finding striking similarities and differences. Amyloid plaques, thought by many researchers to be deeply involved in Alzheimer's, were abundant in both patients' brains. But the woman had low levels of another possible Alzheimer's culprit, clusters of proteins called tau tangles. The researchers think this is what spared her from dementia for decades, as tau is more tightly linked to symptoms than amyloid, researchers suspect.

In the Colombian man's brain, the researchers found a different picture for tau. "Unlike the Christchurch case, this case was severely affected by tau," Sepulveda-Falla says. "This shocked us initially, then we figured out we needed to roll our sleeves up and dig deeper."

Some brain regions, notably the entorhinal cortex, which is important for memory and one of the earliest areas affected in Alzheimer's, had been spared from the tau buildup, the team found.

The difference in tau between the two cases is due to where the two protective genes are active in the brain. In adults, RELN is active in only a few places, including the entorhinal cortex. APOE is active everywhere. "Since APOE is ubiquitous, in one patient you get protection all around," Sepulveda-Falla says. "In this other, the protection is localized to [certain] neurons, and by chance they happen to be the neurons that are key for preserving cognition."

Despite affecting different genes, both mutations produce proteins that attach to the same molecules on cells, and, ultimately, appear to reduce the formation of tau tangles. Sepulveda-Falla and colleagues confirmed this for the new mutation using mice genetically engineered to produce tau. Introducing the RELN-COLBOS mutation into these mice prevented tau buildup. This mechanism, common to both mutations, could be targeted by new treatments aiming to stave off all types of Alzheimer's, the researchers say.

Bats May Hold the Secret To Prevent Aging



LONDON (Dispatches) - Bats help manage pests, pollinate plants, and disperse seeds in our ecosystem. However, new research finds bats may be the key to further inflammation and old-age disease therapies.

Duke-NUS Medical School scientists' findings reveal bat protein may hold fresh answers for fighting inflammatory and old-age-related diseases.

Despite being such a small mammal, bats have relatively long life spans. The United States Department of the Interior notes most bats break the mold around the smaller the animal, the shorter the lifespan. In the wild, bats live less than 20 years, but six known species of bats live longer than 30 years.

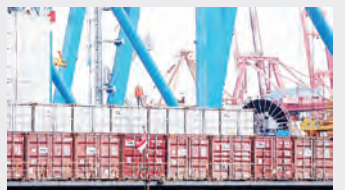
Bats have the ability to host a wide range of viruses like SARS-CoV-2 or the Ebola virus and show few signs of illness. This is because the ASC2 protein in bats has the ability to suppress inflammasomes, which assist in the body's immune response to infection or an injury.

Human and bat immune systems differ. When a white blood cell detects a virus in a human, the cell triggers its inflammasome that notifies other parts of the immune system. On the other hand, when a bat's white blood cell senses a virus, it releases the ASC2 protein to keep its immune system in check and prevent inflammasome activation.

ASC2 protein production is not only present in bats. Humans produce a weaker version of the ASC2 that is unable to keep control of the inflammasome. The increased activation of inflammasomes can lead to chronic inflammation and various age-related diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, cardiovascular disease, and arthritis.

Indonesia April Trade Surplus Beats Forecast

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia's April trade surplus came in slightly bigger than expected, even as exports and imports plunged amid declining prices of its main commodities like palm oil, coal and nickel. The recovery of Southeast Asia's largest economy from pandemic lows has been fuelled by a global commodity boom, but analysts warn that declining commodity prices mean its trade surplus would shrink and economic growth could slow. Indonesia's exports in April plunged 29.4% by value on a yearly basis to \$19.29 billion, according to data released by the statistics bureau on Monday, more than the 18.55% drop predicted in a Reuters poll. The fall was the biggest since early 2009, according to Refinitiv Eikon data.



Europe Sees Stronger 2023 Growth But Inflation Still Squeezes

LONDON (Dispatches) - Economic growth in the eurozone will be slightly faster than earlier expected this year and the next, the European Union's executive body said Monday, after dodging a winter recession that was feared amid an energy crisis, but stubbornly high inflation is likely to keep hurting the economy by sapping people's ability to spend.

The outlook for the 20 countries using the euro currency improved to growth of 1.1% this year from 0.9% in February's predictions, the European Commission said in its spring forecast Monday, thanks to faster expansion in Italy and Spain.

Europe had faced expectations of a winter energy catastrophe after Russia cut off most of its supply of natural gas to the continent amid the war in Ukraine. Prices surged to record highs for gas needed to heat homes, generate electricity and power factories - fueling painful spikes in consumer prices.

A mad scramble to line up new sources of natural gas - through more expensive supplies of liquefied gas coming by ship - along with mild weather and reduced use helped Europe get through the winter without a major energy crisis.

"The European economy continues to show resilience in a challenging global context," European Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni said at a news conference. "Declining energy prices, diversification of energy supply and reduced consumption have contained the adverse economic impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine."

"As lower energy prices continue to provide relief to households and firms' budgets, the economic expansion is expected to continue in 2023 and pick up some pace in 2024," he added.

The growth forecast for next year was raised to 1.6% from 1.5% in the earlier projection.

"Last year, the EU successfully managed to largely wean itself off Russian gas. The modest growth registered in the first quarter of the year dispelled fears of a winter recession which only a few months ago appeared unavoidable," the commission said.

"Survey data, moreover, suggest that, though timid, the expansion is set to continue in the second quarter. The better-than-expected performance at the beginning of the year lifts the forecast for EU economic growth marginally upward," it added. Officials cautioned, however, that inflation is persistently high, which erodes people's purchasing power and weighs on growth. Consumer prices rose 7% in April from a year earlier, while the economy barely scraped out a 0.1% expansion in the first three months of the year.

There are also challenges from rising interest rates that the European Central Bank (ECB) is using to try to return inflation to the bank's target of 2%.

Higher borrowing costs for consumers and businesses have been reducing the availability of loans for home purchases or business investment and shrinking demand for loans. But the faster growth, with the unemployment rate unchanged at 6.8% in 2023 and falling to 6.7% in 2024, also means that inflation would be higher at 5.8% in 2023 and 2.8% in 2024, compared to 5.6% and 2.5%, respectively expected in February.

Soaring Fertilizer Prices to Intensify Food Crisis

ROME (Dispatches) - Soaring prices of fertilizers could worsen the problem of agricultural commodity prices in the upcoming year, a senior official at the U.N.'s food agency warned on Monday.

"Gas supplies and energy prices will affect fertilizer prices and an expected fertilizer crisis will affect the final commodity price," said AbdulHakim Elwaer, the assistant director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and regional representative for the Near East and North Africa.

Elwaer's remarks came on the sidelines of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) Group's annual meeting in the Saudi Arabian port city of Jeddah. "We have to understand the dynamics and the chronology of the issue and the problem when the war in the Black Sea started," he told Anadolu Agency (AA).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sent energy prices, especially natural gas, spiraling. And Ukraine, a major grain supplier, struggled to export products, and countries that depend on these faced major food shortages.

Ukrainian Black Sea ports were blockaded after Russia's invasion, but access to three of them was cleared last July under a deal between Moscow and Kyiv, brokered by the United Nations and Turkey.

The initiative aimed at tackling the global food crisis worsened by Moscow's war in Ukraine.

"The positive picture is that the whole communities, countries, systems and institutions are waking up to redesign their food security and food supply systems," Elwaer said.

He added that they invested and maximized local production, reviewed and redesigned their subsidies system, looked at more redistribution in the domestic market and diversified sources for international trade and importing food.

Instead of relying on one source in one geographical region, Elwaer said countries became more aware of finding different suppliers in different regions to prevent them from becoming a victim of a regional crisis.

"Especially the region around the Black Sea became more resilient and absorbed southern food prices shocks," he said. Morocco and Egypt have done much better than in the past 10 years to maximize local production, he added.

Elwaer said increased grain stock capacity in the era of the coronavirus pandemic reduced the effects of the war on countries that imported grain from the region.



Venezuelan Bills for Power and Water Soar

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuelans are battling fast-rising utility bills as subsidies from the cash-strapped government dwindle, leaving many paying large chunks of their salaries for electricity and water despite regular blackouts and mains water shut-offs.

Residents and business owners told Reuters that a sharp spike in water, gas and phone bills since the start of the year as government income has dwindled from the South American country's once-booming energy sector.

"Bills go up and we still don't have good services," said Maria Rodriguez, 36, a speech therapist from Valencia in Carabobo state, adding the city suffered frequent power outages.

Rodriguez is paying the equivalent of \$80 per month in bills for services this year, double the rate in 2022 and almost a third of her monthly income of roughly \$300, she said.

For years Venezuelans' utilities bills were kept largely frozen despite political turmoil in the country, with the government able to rely on oil income to fund subsidies.

However, in recent years those have declined, starting with those for garbage collection and then state Internet. Since December, water, electricity and telephone bills have spiked.

Inflation for basic services - including electricity, water and garbage collection - rose 325.4% in the 12 months through March, according to data from Venezuela's central bank, published last week. Prices for telecommunications and internet services rose 1,003% in the same period, the bank said.

Sri Lanka Reforms Critical, Evaluating Progress

COLOMBO (Reuters) -The International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission in Sri Lanka will evaluate progress made on reforms so far and complete an exercise to improve governance in key areas of the economy, an IMF official said.

An IMF team is in Colombo until May 23 as part of regular consultations ahead of the first review mission later this year. The team met with multiple officials including President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is also the country's finance minister.

"It is now essential to continue the reform momentum," said Krishna Srinivasan, Director of Asia Pacific Department at IMF.

Sri Lanka, with the help of a \$2.9 billion bailout from the global lender, is trying to recover from its worst financial crisis since gaining independence in 1948 and turn around its battered economy.

The island nation defaulted on its foreign debt last April.

Peter Breuer, IMF Senior Mission Chief for Sri Lanka, Asia and Pacific Department said the lender will be looking at whether the government's macro framework is still appropriate or whether it requires revisions.

"This is something we will decide towards the end of the mission, to what extent revisions are needed," he said.

Sri Lankan authorities formally presented a request for debt treatment in the first meeting of the official bilateral creditors committee, which include India and Paris Club members earlier this month. China, which is the island's largest bilateral lender, participated as an observer.

Srinivasan said the governance exercise will identify key weaknesses and corruption vulnerabilities across six key areas including central bank governance, financial sector oversight, market regulations among others.

The report is expected to be completed by September and lay down recommendations to improve governance and reduce corruption going forward.

The IMF is also encouraging local authorities to come up with a strategy to bring down high domestic interest rates so that it can be part of a virtuous cycle to restore stability.

The IMF currently expects the Sri Lankan economy to contract by 3% in 2023 given the weak external environment and domestic policy tightening before registering a modest growth of 1.5% in 2024, Srinivasan said.

"Prospects hinge quite critically on the implementation of the economic reform program."

Argentina Ramps Interest Rate to 97% As Inflation Soars

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Argentina's central bank hiked its base interest rate Monday by six points to 97 percent as the government prepares to announce a spate of measures to tackle soaring inflation ahead of October's general election.

It is the second time in less than a month that the bank has ramped up interest rates as year-on-year inflation hit almost 109 percent in April.

In a statement the central bank said the move was aimed at "preventing financial volatility from acting as a driver of inflation expectations."

Local media claim the government will announce a raft of measures over the coming week, such as an intervention in the exchange rate, subsidies for the most vulnerable sectors and facilitating imports to bring down prices.

The measures were prepared at the weekend during a meeting headed by Economy Minister Sergio Massa aimed at finding a way to tackle Argentina's economic woes just months out from a general election.

With center-left President Alberto Fernandez already having announced he will not stand for re-election, Massa is one of the leading candidates to represent the ruling Frente de Todos (Everyone's Front) party on October 22.

Latin America's third largest economy is in turmoil.

The peso lost 20 percent of its value against the dollar in a single week in mid April.

It briefly fell to 500 to the dollar on the informal exchange rate -- about double the rate of the official one -- before stabilizing at 470.

The official rate is 238.

The central bank responded by pushing up interest rates by 10 points to 91 percent.

Inflation hit its highest level in three decades in 2022, finishing the year on 94.8 percent.

But it has kept on climbing and reached almost 109 percent year-on-year in April.

The cost of living has risen by 31 percent since January 1.

Last year, more than 39 percent of the population was living in poverty.

Fernandez and the central bank are hoping these measures will ease the massive demand for dollars.

Many Argentines see converting their pesos to US currency as their only defense against the ravages of inflation.

"Economic conditions are deteriorating rapidly and will continue as the electoral process approaches," said Daniel Kerner, managing director for Latin America at the Eurasia Group, last week.

"Reserves are at a critical level, with a severe drought hurting export revenues."

Turkish Agri Exports Hit 4-Month Record



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's agriculture exporters have managed to maintain pace and lift their overseas sales to record in the first four months of this year despite multiple challenges, according to official data.

The demand remained robust despite geopolitical risks, prevailing concerns over supply and ongoing global challenges regarding food accessibility.

Outbound shipments of Turkey's agricultural sector totaled almost \$11.2 billion from January through April, a 1.6% year-over-year increase, data compiled by Anadolu Agency (AA) from the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM) showed.

The industry accounted for 13.8% of Turkey's January-April exports, which amounted to almost \$81 billion. The overall shipments dropped by 3% year-over-year due to the prolonged effect of the devastating earthquakes that struck the country's southeast in early February and an adverse calendar impact from the Ramadan holiday.

The quakes killed over 50,000 people, flattened hundreds of thousands of buildings and inflicted severe infrastructural damage in the region that accounts for over 20% of the country's food production.

The affected region, known as Turkey's "fertile crescent," accounts for nearly 15% of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) and contributes to almost 20% of the country's agrifood exports, according to the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Out of 10 sectors categorized under agriculture, three managed to achieve the best January-April exports ever, the data showed. These included grain, legumes, oilseeds and relevant products, fresh fruits and vegetables and olive and olive oil sectors.

Hakan Demir Takes Charge of Iran Basketball Team

TEHRAN (MNA) – Turkish coach Hakan Demir was appointed as the new head coach of Iran’s basketball team. He replaced Saeid Armaghani in national basketball team. The 54-year-old coach will also coach Manisa Metropolitan Belediyespor in the Turkish Insurance Basketball Super League at the same time.

Having previously experienced abroad by coaching Switzerland’s Herens Basket and Romania’s Dinamo Bucharest teams, Demir also undertook the head coaching of Turkish teams such as Beşiktaş, TOFAŞ, Banvit, Trabzonspor and Pınar Karşıyaka. Demir will lead the Iran basketball team in the 2023 FIBA World Cup, where the Persians are drawn in Group G along with Spain, Brazil and Ivory Coast.



How Turkey’s Election Went Wrong for Erdogan’s Rival

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkey’s biggest election of its post-Ottoman era confounded pollsters and threw up surprises that underscored the difficulty of gauging the mood of the sharply polarised country.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan came within a fraction of a percentage point of defeating secular challenger Kemal Kilicdaroglu in the first round.

Neither one’s ability to break the 50-percent threshold sets up a historic May 28 runoff -- Turkey’s first -- that Erdogan enters as the strong favourite.

Kilicdaroglu’s performance was the opposition’s best of Erdogan’s two-decade rule. But the 74-year-old former civil servant had to assume the role of consoler-in-chief instead of president-elect on Monday.

“Don’t despair,” he told his despondent supporters.

AFP looks at Sunday’s main surprises.

“It’s the economy, stupid,” strategist James Carville famously told future US President Bill Clinton when trying to come up with a battle plan for his 1992 election campaign.

Turkey’s case proved that mantra had caveats.

Erdogan entered the election battling Turkey’s worst economic crisis since the 1990s.

The official annual inflation rate touched 85 percent last year. The unofficial one calculated by economists -- and trusted by most Turks -- approached 200 percent.

Erdogan fought it by refusing to drop his unconventional theories and instead handed out incentives and pay rises to various segments of the population.

Analysts estimate the cost of his pledges at billions of dollars.

“The last-minute spending promises -- like the 45-percent wage hike for 700,000 public servants -- have helped,” said Verisk Maplecroft analyst Hamish Kinnear.

“Erdogan’s promise to rebuild areas devastated by the earthquake also appears to have cut through to voters.”

Erdogan maintained high levels of support in almost every region hit by the deadly February disaster.

Turkey’s long-repressed Kurdish community accounts for almost a fifth of the population and more than 10 percent of the vote.

It largely supported Erdogan in his first decade of rule and turned against him in the second.

Some analysts felt that the main pro-Kurdish party’s decision to formally endorse Kilicdaroglu could put him over the top.

But Erdogan used it against him by telling voters that the opposition was taking orders from the PKK Kurdish militia.

“Erdogan’s strategy of linking the opposition to the PKK and the terrorist movement paid off,” Bayram Balci of the CERI Sciences Po institute said.

Istanbul housewife Leyla Gurler said the opposition’s courtship of the pro-Kurdish HDP party concerned her.

“If the opposition had won, it would have been because of the HDP and the PKK,” said the 57-year-old. “They stood together with the PKK. They made a mistake there.”

Erdogan’s chances on May 28 are helped by the unexpected rise of little-known ultra-nationalist Sinan Ogan.



The 55-year-old picked up 5.1 percent of the vote as an independent.

He was once a member of an ultra-nationalist party that forms part of Erdogan’s parliamentary alliance and represents voters who have more in common with Turkey’s leader than the leftist Kilicdaroglu.

Analyst Umut Ozkirimli said nationalism has been a “constant” component of Turkish politics since the 1990s.

Various nationalist and far-right groups picked up 22 percent of the vote in Sunday’s legislative ballot.

“The fact that Sinan Ogan won above five percent of the vote underlines that unadulterated ultranationalism is well and alive in Turkey,” political risk consultant Anthony Skinner said.

“It would be a surprise if Ogan decides to place his support behind the moderate Kilicdaroglu for the second round of the presidential election. Erdogan is in pole position on 28 May.”

Turkey’s pollsters emerged as one of the day’s biggest losers.

Only a small fraction predicted an Erdogan victory. Some put Kilicdaroglu ahead by 10 percentage points.

“Staggering how bad the polls and most of the secular analysts were in calling this one,” emerging markets economist Timothy Ash remarked.

The veteran Turkey watcher attributed it to pollsters’ inherent political bias in a country with sharply polarised and deeply entrenched views.

“I have to say all the analysts I trust, who are closer to the (ruling party), were saying 50-50, too close to call, with a bias to Erdogan.”

Skinner noted that Kilicdaroglu’s party had spent part of Sunday night claiming to be ahead in the election and disputing the results published by state media.

Opposition “officials still have to explain why they were so bullish as the voting progressed. Were their models fundamentally flawed or was something else at play?” Skinner told AFP.

Audio Book Narrators Say AI Is Already Taking Away Business

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - As people brace for the disruptive impact of artificial intelligence on jobs and everyday living, those in the world of audio books say their field is already being transformed.

AI has the ability to create human-sounding recordings — at assembly-line speed — while bypassing at least part of the services of the human professionals who for years have made a living with their voices.

Many of them are already seeing a sharp drop off in business.

Tanya Eby has been a full-time voice actor and professional narrator for 20 years. She has a recording studio in her home.

But in the past six months she has seen her work load fall by half. Her bookings now run only through June, while in a normal year they would extend through August.

Many of her colleagues report similar declines.

While other factors could be at play, she told AFP, “It seems to make sense that AI is affecting all of us.”

There is no label identifying AI-assisted recordings as such, but professionals say thousands of audio books currently in circulation use “voices” generated from a databank.

Among the most cutting-edge, DeepZen offers rates that can slash the cost of producing an audio book to one-fourth, or less, than of a traditional project.

The small London-based company draws from a database it created by recording the voices of several actors who were asked to speak in a variety of emotional registers.

“Every voice that we are using, we sign a license agreement, and we pay for the recordings,” said DeepZen CEO Kamis Taylan.

For every project, he added, “we pay royalties based on the work that we do.”

Not everyone respects that standard, said Eby.

“All these new companies are popping up who are not as ethical,” she said, and some use voices found in databases without paying for them.

“There’s that gray area” being exploited by several platforms, Taylan acknowledged.

“They take your voice, my voice, five other people’s voices combined that just creates a separate voice... They say that it doesn’t belong to anybody.”

All the audio book companies contacted by AFP denied using such practices.

Speechki, a Texas-based start-up, uses both its own recordings and voices from existing databanks, said CEO Dima Abramov.

But that is done only after a contract has been signed covering usage rights, he said.

The five largest US publishing houses did not respond to requests for comment.



But professionals contacted by AFP said several traditional publishers are already using so-called generative AI, which can create texts, images, videos and voices from existing content — without human intervention.

“Professional narration has always been, and will remain, core to the Audible listening experience,” said a spokesperson for that Amazon subsidiary, a giant in the American audio book sector.

“However, as text-to-speech technology improves, we see a future in which human performances and text-to-speech generated content can coexist.”

The giants of US technology, deeply involved in the explosively developing field of AI, are all pursuing the promising business of digitally narrated audio books.

Early this year, Apple announced it was moving into AI-narrated audio books, a move it said would make the “creation of audio books more accessible to all”, notably independent authors and small publishers.

Google is offering a similar service, which it describes as “auto-narration”.

“We have to democratize the publishing industry, because only the most famous and the big names are getting converted into audio,” said Taylan.

“Synthetic narration just opened the door for old books that have never been recorded, and all the books from the future that never will be recorded because of the economics,” added Speechki’s Abramov.

Given the costs of human-based recording, he added, only some five percent of all books are turned into audio books.

But Abramov insisted that the growing market would also benefit voice actors. “They will make more money, they will make more recordings,” he said.

“The essence of storytelling is teaching humanity how to be human. And we feel strongly that that should never be given to a machine to teach us about how to be human,” said Emily Ellet, an actor and audio book narrator who cofounded the Professional Audiobook Narrators Association (PANA).

“Storytelling,” she added, “should remain human entirely.” Eby underlined a frequent criticism of digitally generated recordings.

When compared to a human recording, she said, an AI product “lacks in emotional connectivity”.

Eby said she fears, however, that people will grow accustomed to the machine-generated version, “and I think that’s quietly what’s kind of happening.”

Her wish is simply “that companies would let listeners know that they’re listening to an AI-generated piece... I just want people to be honest about it.”

Tesla’s New Car-Making Process Stokes Debate Among Industry Experts

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tesla Inc’s new vehicle-assembly system, which created instant buzz when it was unveiled in March, ignited a debate among auto manufacturing experts on whether CEO Elon Musk’s so-called unboxed process is radical, revisionist or derivative - or all of the above.

Musk believes the company needs to radically rethink conventional manufacturing methods in order to build more affordable - and profitable - electric vehicles in higher volumes.

Investors have been waiting for Tesla, the world’s most valuable automaker, to announce what is perceived as the company’s holy grail: An electric vehicle priced under \$30,000. Right now, the least expensive Tesla starts at more than \$40,000.

The unboxed assembly process is intended to enable Tesla to hit that ambitious price target.

One expert described the process as “revolutionary,” with the potential to upend the auto industry’s traditional moving assembly line. Others questioned whether a process that relies on previously tested techniques such as modular assembly can contribute to dramatically lower production costs.

When the new process was revealed at Tesla’s March 1 Investor Day, executives said it would make the company’s next-generation vehicles “significantly simpler and more affordable.”

Officials said the unboxed process could cut production costs in half and reduce the factory footprint by 40%. The aim, said the company, is to “build more vehicles at lower cost.”

U.S. Inching...

FROM PAGE 1

On Friday, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office forecast that the US could default on its debts by June 15 if lawmakers failed to agree on a deal with President Joe Biden to raise current limits on government spending.

“We shouldn’t be here,”

Adeyemo said in an interview with CNN, repeating the Biden administration’s call for lawmakers to end the standoff and extend US borrowing authority.

“If Congress failed to raise the debt limit by the time of default, we would go into a recession and it’d be catastrophic,” the Treasury official said, adding, “The United States of America has never defaulted on its debt -- and we can’t.”

As it was mentioned earlier, the Democrat officials want to blame their rival Republicans for this economic fiasco but the truth is what the experts and analysts had predicted before, and these are signs of collapse of the U.S. and this country is gradually weakening in all fields.

Even before the Republicans win the majority in the Congress, Biden’s Administration had witnessed the worst inflation and unemployment rates in the country and nobody believes Yellen’s claims of blaming Republicans’ for this fiasco.

The U.S. economy slowed sharply from January through March, decelerating to just a 1.1% annual pace as higher interest rates hammered the housing market and businesses reduced their inventories.

The estimate from the Commerce Department showed that the nation’s gross domestic product — the broadest gauge of economic output — weakened after growing 3.2% from July through September and 2.6% from October through December.

But consumer spending, which accounts for about 70% of U.S. economic activity, remained resilient, growing at a 3.7% annual pace, the fastest such rate in nearly two years. Spending on goods, in particular, was solid: It rose at its fastest pace since the second quarter of 2021.

Economists had been expecting overall GDP to grow at a 1.9% pace in the January-March quarter. Behind much of the quarter’s weakness was a sharp reduction in business inventories, which subtracted roughly 2.3 percentage points from overall growth. Companies typically slash their inventories when they anticipate a coming downturn.

Of course the conflict between two political parties of Democrats and Republicans will help the decline get faster and this country may fall from the horse of dominating the world sooner than what it had been predicted.

Of course shift in the policies of nations and governments can also accelerate pulling down of the U.S. as a big power, and it may put an end to the unipolar world and all countries can sigh of deep relief and having a world free of hegemony, and we can see the U.S. is inching towards economic collapse and later to a political one.

Iran, Russia...

FROM PAGE 1

“Iran and Russia are cooperating in different fields. Today’s [railway construction] deal is one of the manifestations of cooperation not only between the two countries, but also other states on the path of the INSTC,” he said.

“The INSTC will benefit all regional states as it will establish friendship, convergence and commercial cooperation between the countries in East Asia, as well as those in the Caucasus and North Europe.”

The Iranian chief executive also noted that negotiations were held 20 years ago about the deal, but its signing was postponed. The Russian president, for his part, said the Rasht-Astara railway would help connect Russian ports on the Baltic Sea with Iranian ports in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

“The unique North-South transport artery, of which the Rasht-Astara railway will become a part, will help to significantly diversify global traffic flows,” he added.

Putin further expressed hope for the exchange of foodstuff and other goods between the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf countries through the INSTC.

Iran-Saudi...

FROM PAGE 1

In a joint statement after signing the agreement, Tehran and Riyadh highlighted the need to respect each other’s national sovereignty and refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of one another.

They agreed to implement a security cooperation agreement signed in April 2001 and another accord reached in May 1998 to boost economic, commercial, investment, technical, scientific, cultural, sports, and youth affairs cooperation.

Meanwhile, Pakistani Senator Mushahid Hussain said the Muslim world’s politics was defined for the past four decades by an ideological foreign policy of Saudi Arabia with its triangular mixture of money, militancy and madrassas, however, the recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia ended destabilization in the region.

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McIlroy Close to Top Form at PGA

ROCHESTER (Dispatches) - Rory McIlroy says he is near the form he needs to win his first major title since 2014 after a mental health break to cope with a deflating Masters result. The four-time major winner also said Tuesday at the PGA Championship that avoiding talk about the LIV Golf League will be part of how he moves forward after previously being one of most vocal PGA Tour supporters.

Man Utd to Play Lyon in Pre-Season Edinburgh Friendly

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United will face Olympique Lyonnais in a pre-season friendly in Edinburgh on July 19, marking the first time in 13 years that the Premier League giants have featured in Scotland, the club said. Erik ten Hag's side will face the French Ligue 1 outfit at Murrayfield, regarded as the home of Scottish rugby, before they begin a four-game tour to the United States on July 22 to prepare for next season.

Inter Win Milan Derby to Reach Champions League Final

MILAN (Dispatches) - Inter Milan reached their first Champions League final for 13 years as Lautaro Martinez's sole goal of the match gave them a 3-0 aggregate win against AC Milan on Tuesday.

Inter will undoubtedly be the underdogs against either Real Madrid or Manchester City in Istanbul on June 10, but the way they managed both legs of this all-Milan tie suggests they will be hard to beat.

The key moment of the night at the San Siro came when Argentinian Martinez exchanged passes with substitute Romelu Lukaku and drilled a shot from inside the penalty area that Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan allowed in at his near post.

Martinez, Inter's captain, hailed the cohesion of his team over the two matches against their city rivals.

"What counts is the squad. I experienced it at the World Cup (with Argentina)," he said. "It makes it easy if you have a united squad with everyone pulling in the same direction. It means you get to play these very important matches in the best possible way."

He added: "After winning the World Cup and experiencing what is the pinnacle for a player I knew we could reach this final, and we did it."

His goal effectively killed off the tie.

Trailing 2-0 from the first leg, Milan had pushed hard in the first half, spearheaded by Rafael Leao who shot across the goal and past the post with one of his side's best chances.

Maignan then superbly dropped to his knees to collect Edin Dzeko's glancing header from Hakan Calhanoglu's pacy free-kick.

Lukaku's introduction in the second half proved the spark that Inter needed to extend their lead. Absent for much of the season with injuries and with a damaged reputation following a disastrous World Cup with Belgium, Lukaku has slowly worked his way back to his best.

The forward on loan from Chelsea immediately caused problems in the Milan defence and created Martinez's goal to



guarantee their place in their first Champions League final since the last time they won European club football's biggest prize under Jose Mourinho in 2010.

"Tutti a Istanbul", the joyous Inter fans sang with the Nerazzurri now one game away from a fourth Champions League title.

Inter coach Simone Inzaghi said: "It's a dream come true. We always believed we could do it, we have had an extraordinary journey (to the final)."

"What pleased me? Everything. The running, the determination, the concentration... they were very good."

Facing Inzaghi's men will be either Manchester City or record 14-time winners Real Madrid, with that semi-final finely poised at 1-1 ahead of decider at City's Etihad Stadium.

"We're going to have to give it our all," Martinez said.

Milan's coach Stefano Pioli was left to contemplate a harsh ending to "a terrific" run to the last four.

"It's normal to be disappointed after losing in the semi-final, especially in a derby. The players gave their all in both legs but Inter deserved it. They played better than us, winning both matches."

"Given our journey and what we've done over the past three years it would have been fabulous to get to the final. But we didn't make it, that's a massive disappointment."

Argentine Bielsa Appointed Uruguay Coach

LONDON (Dispatches) - Marcelo Bielsa has been named the new coach of Uruguay, the country's FA (AUF) announced, with the former Leeds United manager signing a contract until 2026, according to media reports.

The Argentine takes over following the exit of Diego Alonso after Uruguay failed to reach the World Cup knockout stages.

"The fans are calling for games and emotions. The time has come," read a message on the team's official Twitter account, which also confirmed Bielsa's appointment.

Bielsa, who is expected to be presented at a press conference on Wednesday, returns to coaching following his departure from Leeds in February 2022.

Bielsa led Leeds into the Premier League after a 16-year absence.

The 67-year-old, who also had spells with Olympique de Marseille and Athletic Bilbao, has previously coached Argentina and Chile at the 2002 and 2010 World Cups respectively.

Bielsa's tenure will begin with two home friendlies against Nicaragua and Cuba next month.

11 Footballers Arrested In Hong Kong Match-Fixing Probe

HONG KONG (Dispatches) - Hong Kong authorities have arrested 11 footballers from the same team over allegations of match-fixing in a domestic league, the city's anti-graft body said.

After a yearlong investigation, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) on Monday detained 23 people in total, including a coach, over the alleged fixing of results in the First Division, Hong Kong football's second tier.

The alleged offences include bribery manipulating match results and illegal gambling, ICAC principal investigator Kate Cheuk said at a press conference on Tuesday.

"This operation is the largest in recent years carried out by the ICAC against match-fixing," she added.

ICAC said the match-fixing group was suspected of paying each player up to about HK\$10,000 (\$1,200) for each game, depending on their impact.

"It's not about how well they played but how well they faked (their performance) or how much they could help manipulate the results," ICAC's Cheuk said.

The suspected footballers would either play passively so their team would lose to a weaker rival, or they sought to achieve a certain score that was unpopular and at high odds, she added.

The group and some of the players then bet on these results in an illegally organised scheme for profits.

The arrested players and the coach belonged to the same club, which ICAC did not name.

Local media, however, cited sources as saying they were from Happy Valley, one of Hong Kong's oldest football clubs.

The anti-graft body said they belong to a First Division team that had played 26 matches and won eight in the 2022-23 season.

There are currently three First Division teams with eight wins -- Happy Valley is one of them.

ICAC said it has yet to come up with the total amount of money involved as the probe is still ongoing.



Sabitzer out for Rest of Season With Knee Injury

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - On-loan Manchester United midfielder Marcel Sabitzer has been ruled out of their last three Premier League games and next month's FA Cup final due to a knee injury, the club said.

Austria international Sabitzer, 29, joined United from Bayern Munich in January on a short-term deal until the

end of the season. He has scored three times in 18 appearances and won the League Cup in February.

"Marcel Sabitzer has suffered a meniscal injury which will, unfortunately, rule him out for the remainder of the season," United said in a statement.

"Everyone at the club is disappointed to lose Marcel's services, as we strive for a strong finish to our season... and we appreciate his contribution to our progress so far."

Sabitzer made 24 appearances for Bayern this season before joining United. He has won 69 caps for Austria.

United travel to Bournemouth on Saturday before hosting Chelsea and Fulham. They will take on Manchester City in the FA Cup final at Wembley on June 3.

Djokovic Crushes Norrie to Reach Rome Quarters

ROME (Dispatches) - Holder Novak Djokovic blasted past Briton Cameron Norrie 6-3 6-4 in a tense encounter to reach the Italian Open quarter-finals today and remain on track for a seventh title in Rome.

Djokovic made slow starts to his opening two matches but the fired-up world number one bolted out of the blocks for a 3-0 lead and let slip two opportunities to break Rio champion Norrie a second time before taking the first set on serve.

The duo swapped breaks early in a spicy second set where Norrie's overhead shot hit Djokovic on the leg after the Serbian had turned his back on the net. The 22-times Grand Slam champion continued to stare down Norrie at the end of the fifth game.

An error-prone Norrie surrendered his serve again and had treatment for a right leg issue, before top seed Djokovic came from 0-30 down in the final game of the contest to complete the victory over the world number 13 on his second match point.

"So far so good," Djokovic, who will meet seventh seed Holger Rune or Alexei Popyrin in the last eight, said of his progress in Rome.

"It was an early start today. Strange conditions. I actually finished my warm-up 10 minutes before I went on the court so I was rushing a bit with everything but we couldn't play earlier because of the rain."

"I'm just glad to overcome today's challenge in straight sets and move on."



Klopp Urges Liverpool to Keep Pressure on

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp urged his team to keep the pressure on their Premier League rivals in the last two games of the season as they make a late charge for a top-four finish.

Liverpool secured Europa League football for next season after 3-0 win at Leicester City and sit one point behind fourth-placed Manchester United and third-placed Newcastle United, though both teams have a game in hand each.

Klopp, whose side are now on a seven-game winning streak, said six weeks ago he had doubts about their chances of playing in Europe next season.

"I didn't believe it can happen," Klopp told reporters. "What we lacked that time was obviously consistency and there was only one chance for us to get in these situations -- winning pretty much all the football games."

"All the rest is not in our own hands but we know we have to win all the games until the end of the season to have a chance."

"... You wish anyway that the opponent was just losing and you have that kind of pressure off your shoulder. Our job is to keep the pressure."

Liverpool host Aston Villa on Saturday before a trip for their final match to Southampton, whose relegation has been confirmed.

