

IRAN NEWS Congratulates Its Readers Over the Beginning of 2024 and Wish You a Happy and Prosperous Year and a Year With Victory of Peace Over War and Violence

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2 DOMESTIC



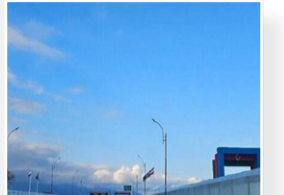
Iran to Work on De-Dollarization of Transactions Within BRICS

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Iran, Azerbaijan Inaugurate New Border Bridge

> SEE PAGE 3

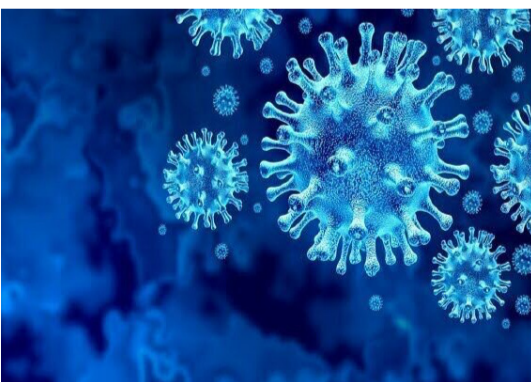


Iran-Turkey Trade Hits \$5b in 11-Month Period



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) put the total value of the trade exchanges between Iran and Turkey in the first 11 months of 2023 at \$5 billion. The trade exchanges between the two countries from January to the end of November 2023 registered a 13-percent decline compared to last year's corresponding period, it said. The total value of the trade exchanges between Iran and Turkey in the same period in 2022 exceeded \$5.8 billion. According to the report, Turkey exported \$3 billion worth of products to Iran from January to November 2023, registering a seven percent hike compared to the first 11 months of last year. Turkey exported over \$2.8 billion of products to Iran from January to November 2022. Turkey has imported \$2 billion worth of non-oil goods from Iran in the 11 months of 2023, showing a 33 percent decline compared to last year's corresponding period. Turkey imported over \$3 billion worth of products from Iran between January and November 2022. The total value of trade exchanges between Iran and Turkey exceeded \$594 million in November 2023, showing an 18 percent growth compared to November 2022. Meanwhile, Turkey's import from Iran in November 2023 reached \$182 million with a 13 percent decrease compared to the previous year. Turkey had imported \$212 million of goods from Iran in November last year. The total trade between the two countries in the 11th month of 2023 reached \$594 million with an 18 percent growth compared to the same period last year. Based on the data previously released by the Turkish Statistical Institute, the value of Iran's exports to 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 registered a 15-percent rise in 2022 compared to 2021. 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.

No JN.1 variant detected in Iran



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - JN.1, which is a descendant of the Omicron or B.1.1.529 variant of SARS-CoV-2, has not yet been reported in Iran. "According to the tests taken from hospitalized respiratory cases, about 30 percent is due to influenza, some 10 percent is caused by coronavirus and the rest is because of other respiratory viruses," ISNA quoted Babak Eshtrati, an official with the health ministry, as saying. The UN World Health Organization (WHO) has said it is continuously monitoring the global spread of JN.1, a COVID-19 variant of interest, adding that current vaccines continue to offer protection against severe disease and death from this and other variants in circulation. According to the classification of JN.1 as a separate variant of interest (VOI) is down to "its rapidly increasing spread" around the globe. JN.1 has been found in many countries, including India, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In comparison with its parent lineage BA.2.86, JN.1 has an additional mutation (the L455S mutation) in the spike protein.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



Leader Hails Martyr Soleimani for Revival of Resistance Front in Region

TEHRAN - The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says the revival of the Resistance Front was the most important service of Martyr Soleimani in the region. Ahead of the fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of Lt. General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei met with the family of Martyr Soleimani. Revival of the Resistance front in the region was the most important role and service of Martyr Soleimani, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution said in this meeting. Hailing the struggles of the Resistance forces in recent months, the Leader said, "Martyr Soleimani made a lot of efforts to revive the Resistance Front and he carried out this work with the same sincerity and wisdom and ethics." Ayatollah Khamenei praised and appreciated the efforts of the IRGC Quds Force commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, and said, "The path of strengthening the Resistance Front should be continued." In this meeting, Zainab Soleimani briefed the Leader on the measures taken regarding the transfer of thoughts of Martyr Soleimani to the young generation. Meanwhile a member of the Syrian negotiating team in Geneva said that Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was the founder of the resistance discourse in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Mohammed Khair al-Akam in an interview in Damascus about the role of Martyr Soleimani in the strength of the "Axis of Resistance", stated that what Yemen has done in support of the Palestinian resistance is the continuation of Martyr Soleimani's path. This member of the Syrian government emphasized that what the fighters of the axis of resistance are doing in the region today is the continuation of the path of martyr Soleimani and the thoughts of this martyred commander are still alive. Isa Vosuf, a member of the Syrian People's Assembly, in an exclusive interview with an Iran Press reporter in Damascus, regarding the role of Martyr Soleimani in the fight against terrorism and strengthening the axis of resistance, said: "General Soleimani was martyred in the way of defending the right and fighting terrorism and played a significant role in the fight against terrorism around the world." Isa Vosuf also stated that the martyr Soleimani was a supporter of the resistance of Palestine and Lebanon and the oppressed people of Yemen. "The Al-Aqsa Flood" operation of the Palestinian resistance is derived from the school of the martyr Qassem Soleimani," Vosuf emphasized. Ali al-Sheikh, a member of the Syrian People's Assembly, also in an exclusive interview with Iran Press reporter in Damascus said that what the survivors of the Palestinian resistance in Gaza did against the Israeli regime is the result of the school of martyr General Soleimani. The member of the Syrian People's Assembly stated that the "Axis of Resistance" as the legacy of Martyr Soleimani will remain throughout history, stating that freedom-loving nations will remain loyal to Martyr Sardar Soleimani.

Top Egyptian Official Expects Exchange of Ambassadors With Iran in Near Future



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A high-ranking Egyptian official says the Northeast African country and Iran are expected to fully restore diplomatic ties and exchange respective ambassadors in the near future after decades of estrangement. Member of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, Rakha Ahmad Hassan, said in an interview with the Arabic service of Russia's Sputnik news agency on Friday that an exchange of ambassadors is likely to happen soon. He pointed out that Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's congratulations to his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after his victory in the recent presidential election means that relations between Cairo and Tehran have reached the highest level. The two heads of state discussed several issues, including restoration of diplomatic ties as well as unfolding developments in the Gaza Strip and the Red Sea, during the telephone conversation this month, Hassan noted. "The current level of relations between the two countries indicates that the exchange of ambassadors is imminent. Latest remarks by Oman's ruler, Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, also suggest that efforts are being made in the region in this regard as he touched on the matter and the consequences that the rapprochement could bring about," the senior Egyptian official pointed out. He emphasized that re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Egypt and Iran will complete the cycle of resolving regional crises, especially after the recent rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran, and initiatives aimed at ending the Yemeni conflict. Iran's further involvement in the Arab world will not only increase the proportion of trade exchange with Arab states, but will also contribute to regional stability and progress, Hassan highlighted. Egypt severed its diplomatic relations with Iran in 1980 after it welcomed the deposed Pahlavi ruler of Iran and also recognized the apartheid Israeli regime.

Seminar to Discuss Role of Regional Factors in Low Rainfalls



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The first scientific seminar on the role of probable regional factors in lowering the volume of rainfalls in the country will be held this week. Due to the decrease in annual precipitation, particularly this year, the Department of Environment has asked its subsidiaries to carry out a detailed study on climate change and its causes. Despite the Meteorological Organization's forecasts that there would be adequate autumn rainfall, the amount of rainfall reported has been very low, IRNA reported. Salajeqeh has asked the Office for Marine Environment and Wetlands, the National Climate Change Research Center, and the Environmental Research Institute to cooperate and investigate the causes of low rainfall this year. In recent years, the issue of climate change has even become one of the major political issues of the world so the United Nations and many other governments have gotten involved in this issue. Thanks to the climate change, the air temperature has increased. Warmer temperature increases the rate of evaporation, a good example of which is the Caspian Sea's reduced volume of water. On the other hand, there has been a noticeable decrease in the amount of snowfall in the country and a change in the pattern of precipitation from snow to rain can be seen. But the total amount of rainfall has decreased as well. Climate change has already inserted many harmful effects on our country, and if we do not take steps to adapt ourselves to the consequences of this phenomenon and observe environmental principles, in the future, more dangerous consequences will surely plague Iran and make the conditions more unfavorable for human, animal, and plant species. According to the data released in September by the Meteorological Organization, most parts of the country were affected by moderate to severe drought over the past three crop years.

West Using UN Rights Body as Tool Against Iran

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has called for an end to the Western countries' "instrumental use" of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to exert pressure against the Islamic Republic. Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks on Sunday during a meeting at the Foreign Ministry with members of the special committee formed upon a decree by President Ebrahim Raisi to investigate 2022 foreign-backed riots across Iran. He hailed Raisi's initiative as a clear sign of Iran's "responsibility and seriousness about protecting and promoting human rights." He also condemned Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza and the gross violation of Palestinians' rights over the past eight decades, which are supported by the United States and the Western countries. The West's anti-Iran claims concerning human rights in the Islamic Republic "lack any legal and moral validity," Amir-Abdollahian added, urging

to exert political pressure against independent nations while supporting Israeli genocide against Palestinians. Foreign-backed riots broke out in Iran last September after the death of 22-year-old Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, with rioters going on a rampage, brutally attacking security officers and causing massive damage to public property. She fainted at a police station in the capital Tehran and was pronounced dead three days later at the hospital. In remarks in April, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei highlighted the Western countries' crimes in the past and in the contemporary era, saying they are in no position to talk about human rights. "The West isn't worthy of being the ones to talk about human rights at all. They are the enemies of humankind," the Leader said. "We saw their human rights in Daesh (ISIL or ISIS), when they burned people alive or sunk them in water and drowned them before everyone's eyes. We saw (their human rights) in their support of the MEK terrorists and in their support of Saddam Hussein and their crimes against Gaza and the Palestinians," Ayatollah Khamenei noted. The Leader also argued that the West's support for the assassination and killing of religious youth in the streets of Tehran is another example of the falsity of their claim of supporting human rights.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

IRAN NEWS



Iran Faces Worsening Drought Crisis

TEHRAN - Iran is grappling with one of its most severe droughts in over five decades, marking the fourth consecutive year of serious water scarcity. In a televised debate, Hashem Amini, the CEO of the Iranian Water and Wastewater Engineering Company emphasized that "autumn precipitation levels have plummeted by about 6 percent compared to the previous year, raising concerns about an impending drought." Despite Iran's historical experience with low precipitation conditions, the persistent drought has sparked criticism of the Iranian government's environmental mismanagement. The latest revelation comes four months after protests erupted in Tabriz against mismanagement. Earlier, Ali Salajegheh, the head of the Department of Environment, suggested that the drought might be the result of hostile foreign actions. "It is not unlikely that Iran's drought on a small scale is the result of hostile actions, but research in this area has not yet been conducted."

Harming Resistance to Cost U.S., Israel Dearly



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Days after the Israeli assassination of Iranian military adviser Seyed Razi Mousavi in Syria, the speaker of Iran's Parliament warned the US and the Zionist regime that inflicting any harm on the resistance front will come at a price. Addressing a parliamentary session on Sunday, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf offered his condolences on the loss of General Mousavi, an Iranian anti-terror adviser who was martyred in an Israeli missile strike in the suburbs of Damascus on December 26. "I should emphasize that any act of aggression against the commanders or the physical infrastructures of the resistance (front) will cost the US and the Zionists dearly," he warned. Denouncing the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, Qalibaf said the more the Zionist regime commits crimes, the closer it will get to defeat. He also echoed the stances of the "courageous leaders of the Palestinian resistance" that no ceasefire will be acceptable unless the Israeli strikes come to a complete halt and all Palestinian prisoners are freed in exchange for the release of Zionist captives.



Iran to Work on De-Dollarization of Transactions Within BRICS

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani indicated that Iran, like other BRICS members, will work on the de-dollarization of trade and economic and financial transactions within the group of major emerging economies, revealing that some efforts in this direction are already underway. "We have planned many missions and joint work with other BRICS members within the framework of this organization," Bagheri Kani told Sputnik. The diplomat highlighted that "one of the most important tasks is the de-dollarization of trade and economic transactions and financial cooperation." "Activities in this field of work of BRICS have already started, we hope to strengthen and expand these activities in order to achieve this goal as soon as possible." BRICS, established in 2009, is a group uniting the world's largest developing economies, which currently includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. In August, the 15th top-level BRICS summit in Johannesburg extended invitations to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to join the bloc. Their

full membership, except for Argentina, is scheduled to take effect on January 1, 2024. Last week, Iran and Russia entered into an agreement to avoid using the dollar in bilateral trade, relying instead on their own currencies, a new report says. The central bank governors of the two nations sealed the pact at a recent meeting, Iran's state media reported. Russian and Iranian banks and companies can now use non-SWIFT messaging platforms and bilateral brokerage links to facilitate transactions in the ruble and rial. Both Russia and Iran have been working to shift away from the dollar, after the US leveraged the greenback's global dominance to slap economic sanctions on the two countries in recent years. The move is also part of a wider drive among nations to reduce their reliance on the dollar in international payments and investments. Countries from China to Brazil have been pushing to increase the global usage of their own currencies, while the BRICS group of nations has been weighing the possibility of a shared tender. More countries have joined the trend this year — Indonesia recently set up a task force to widen the use of its currency, the rupiah.

Iran's Ties With Kazakhstan Important



TEHRAN (MNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has emphasized the importance of relations between his country and Kazakhstan within the Islamic Republic's neighborly policy. Amir-Abdollahian met on Saturday with Gholamreza Hashemi, the new Iranian consul general to Kazakhstan's city of Aktau. The meeting took place in Tehran before Hashemi headed for Aktau to begin his diplomatic mission there. Iran's ties with Kazakhstan important: Amir-Abdollahian also on Saturday, the top diplomat met with Iran's Ambassador to Tajikistan Alireza Haghghighian. The ambassador briefed the foreign minister on the growing cooperation between the two countries as well as results of the 16th meeting of Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Commission that was held recently. Amir-Abdollahian said that Tajikistan has an important position in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy as a friendly country that shares the same language and culture with Iran, stressing the need for further boosting bilateral relations.



Followers of Iran's Islamic Revolution Gracious in Region

TEHRAN (IP) - Tehran Mayor said Iran is today the role model of the regional countries and the countries learned resistance lessons from Iran and enjoy dignity for themselves in the region. The Iranian people from different walks of life gathered in Tehran's Imam Hossein (AS) Square, on Saturday, to mark the Dey 9 Epic. Delivering a speech at the ceremony in Tehran on Saturday evening to mark the Dey 9 Epic, Alireza Zakani told people that once the enemies of Islam led by the US, sought to seize the West Asian region but today they are seeking ways to escape the region. He promised that the Palestinian nation would celebrate its victory over Israel, the US would exit the region and the barriers made for Iran at the national, regional, and international levels would be removed. Zakani pointed to the coming parliamentary election in Iran and said that the enemies have planned plots to prevent Iran from holding a healthy election with a high turn-out. He pointed out that a strong parliament requires a strong election which itself requires a high turnout of the people in the polls. December 30 coincides with the ninth day of the month Dey in the Iranian calendar and is the reminder of the epic turnout of the Iranian nation to foil enemies' plots after the 2009 presidential elections. The Dey 9 Epic was indeed a turning point in that it dismayed the enemies of the Islamic Revolution who had invested in the electoral fraud allegations.

Blood Donation Rises by 4%

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Blood donation in Iran has increased by more than four percent in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year which started on March 21, compared to the same period last year. A total of 1,759,734 Iranians donated blood over the mentioned period, Bashir Haji-Beigi, the Blood Transfusion Organization spokesman said on Sunday. He went on to say that the highest blood donation growth was recorded in Lorestan, North Khorasan, and Kerman provinces with 29 percent, 20 percent, and 13 percent rise, respectively, IRNA reported. The continuous blood donation growth rate in the country is around 54 percent, he said, adding that the provinces of Semnan, Yazd, and Golestan hold the highest rates with 69 percent, 64 percent, and 63 percent, respectively. Referring to over four percent of women's share of blood donation in the country, he said: "Women should get more involved in

blood donation than in the past." Continuous and regular blood donation (at least twice a year) has increased slightly to 53 percent in the first five months of the year compared to the same period last year, as 527,385 units of blood were donated by regular donors, the official noted. The average blood donation rate in Iran is 26 per thousand people which places the country in a good situation among other countries. According to the World Health Organization, the median blood donation rate in high-income countries is 31.5 donations per 1000 people. This compares with 16.4 donations per 1000 people in upper-middle-income countries, 6.6 donations per 1000 people in lower-middle-income countries, and 5.0 donations per 1000 people in low-income countries. Of the 118.5 million blood donations collected globally, 40% of these are collected in high-income countries, home to 16% of the world's population.



Israel Assassinated IRGC Advisor out of Despair



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi has condemned in the strongest terms the Israeli assassination of a senior military advisor of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria, stating that the occupying regime committed the crime out of despair and hopelessness. Speaking in an interview with the Lebanese Arabic-language al-Mayadeen television news network on Saturday, Vahidi stated that the targeted killing points to the utter desolation and anguish that the Israeli regime is already experiencing. Brigadier General Seyyed Razi Mousavi, he said, was on "an official mission [in Syria], and was brutally targeted in broad daylight." The Iranian minister said the assassination of Iranian advisors in Syria "will never weaken the Axis of Resistance; on the contrary it will contribute to its further growth and empowerment." "Israel is caught in a downward spiral and on the path to extinction. It is behaving insanely, and this is accelerating its collapse," Vahidi pointed out. The Iranian interior minister noted that the blood of Palestinian martyrs and the slain IRGC commander "will certainly uproot the occupying entity." Mousavi was martyred by the Israeli regime on Monday in the Sayyeda Zeinab neighborhood of the Syrian capital of Damascus, while on an advisory mission in Syria. He was one of the companions of Iran's top anti-terror commander, Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020. Iran maintains an advisory mission in Syria at the request of the Arab country with the aim of helping Damascus get rid of the foreign-backed militants who have been fighting the democratically-elected government there since 2011.

Iran Squad Named for 2023 AFC Asian Cup

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran national football team head coach Amir Ghalenoei announced a 27-member squad for the 2023 AFC Asian Cup. The tournament kicks off in Doha on Jan. 12, 2024, with the tournament's final set to be played on Feb. 10, 2024. Team Melli have been drawn in Group C along with the UAE, Palestine and Hong Kong. Amir Ghalenoei's side will play Burkina Faso in a friendly match on Jan. 5 at the Kish Island in Persian Gulf. Iran squad: Goalkeepers: Alireza Beiranvand (Persepolis), Payam Niazmand (Sepahan), Hossein Hosseini (Esteghlal) Defenders: Milad Mohammadi (AEK Athens), Ehsan Hajisafi (AEK Athens), Ramin Rezaeian (Sepahan), Sadegh Moharrami (Dinamo Zagreb), Saman Fallah (Paykan), Rouzbeh Cheshmi (Esteghlal), Hossein Kanaizadegan (Persepolis), Shoja Khalilzadeh (Tractor), Majid Hosseini (Kayserispor), Aria Yousefi (Sepahan) Midfielders: Saied Ezatollahi (Vejle Boldklub), Mohammad Mohebbi (Rostov), Saman Ghoddos (Brentford), Mehdi Torabi (Persepolis), Alireza Jahanbakhsh (Feyenoord), Mohammadjavad Hosseinnejad (Sepahan), Omid Ebrahimi (Al-Shamal), Ali Gholizadeh (Lech Poznan), Mehdi Ghaedi (Ittihad Kalba)

IRAN NEWS



Iran Imports Over 15.5m Tons of Basic Goods in 9 Months

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Some 15.5 million tons of essential commodities have been imported into Iran over the nine calendar months to December 21, according to a report by the country's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO). The PMO report, which was released on Sunday, said that the basic goods imported into Iran included wheat, barley, corn, soy bean, rice, sugar, and edible oil. It added that the imports of corn have registered a 7% year-on-year growth with soy bean imports increasing by 12%. Iran imported as much as 3.13 million tons of soy bean in the March-December period of 2023 while the figure stood at 2.79 million tons in last year's corresponding period. The country also imported a total of 2.67 million tons of wheat, and 1.5 million tons of barley in the period under review, with its corn imports being reported at 6.96 million tons.

Iran Private Sector Ready for More Enhanced Role in Afghan Economy



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Head of Mashhad Chamber of Commerce, a local Iranian chamber of commerce in Khorasan Razavi Province which shares large borders with Afghanistan, says Iran private sector stands ready to play a more increased role in Afghanistan's economy. Mohammad-Reza Tavakkoli made the remarks in a meeting in Mashhad on Saturday with a high-ranking Afghan delegation headed by acting foreign minister of the Taliban Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi. Currently, the ground is prepared for greater cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan, he said, expressing hope for more improvement of economic relations between the two countries by removing some obstacles hindering bilateral relations. Speaking in the meantime, the Afghan foreign minister stressed that his country is secure enough for foreign investors, adding that Kabul is very eager to see the presence of Iranian economic actors in Afghanistan. Referring to Afghanistan's rich farms and mines, he said that today investors are coming to the Afghanistan from distant countries and the ground is prepared for the presence of Iranian investors. The minister added that his country plans to join Afghanistan's transportation routes to that of China, Central Asia and South East Asia and also to other world countries via the Iranian soil. Mahmoud Siadat, the head of Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, who was also present in the meeting, referred to some problems on the way of Iran-Afghanistan cooperation and proposed for the formation of a permanent committee to pursue the implementation of economic agreements between the two countries. Mohammad Yunus Momand, the Chairman of Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI), was another person who addressed the meeting and called for the establishment of preferential trade with Iran so as to give a boost to Afghanistan's exports to the western neighbor. "We don't want our trade balance to be negative and we are looking for a balance between exports to Iran and imports from this country," he said.

Iran, Azerbaijan Inaugurate New Border Bridge



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A new vehicular bridge that connects Astara in northwestern Iran to the city of the same name in southeast of the Republic of Azerbaijan was brought into operation at the common border on Saturday. The long-awaited vehicular bridge, built over the Astarachay River, was inaugurated at a ceremony attended by Iranian Roads Minister Mehرداد Bazrpash and Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan Shahin Mustafayev. The border bridge has a width of 32 meters and is 89 meters long. It completes a major section of an international highway that connects Iran's Rasht to the Azeri

capital of Baku. Speaking in the inauguration ceremony, Bazrpash said the new bridge is the fifth border crossing between the two neighbors. The old bridge and terminal between the two countries at Astara border had created many problems in the travel of trucks, the minister said, adding that the new bridge will significantly cut traffic congestion at the border. Bazrpash noted that the road and rail transport between the two countries have increased by 40 and 47 percent respectively. The foundation of the new bridge over the Astarachay river was laid in January 2022.

Iran to Launch Second Robotic Surgery Center in Indonesia



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran and Indonesia have agreed to establish the second Iran-Indonesia robotic tele-surgery center at a hospital in Makassar, a city in eastern Indonesia. The announcement was made during a virtual meeting between Iran's Deputy-President for Science, Technology and Knowledge-Based Economy Rouhollah Dehghani Firouzabadi and Indonesian Minister of Health Budi Gunadi Sadikin. The project will be supported by Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Sina Robotics and Medical Innovators Company, as well as the Ministry of Health of Indonesia, Hasanuddin University, and Indofarma Company, the Iranian official noted. The first robotic surgery between the two Indonesian cities of Bandung and Yogyakarta was successfully completed at a distance of 500 kilometers, and both sides expressed satisfaction with the progress made. The Indonesian health minister has proposed extending the process from west to east across the Indonesian archipelago, from the city of Medan to Makassar, at a distance of 3500 kilometers.

Iran Exports to China Hit \$10.3b in 9 Months



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN- Iran exported commodities valued at \$10.3 billion to China during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21), the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced. According to Mohammad Rezvani-Far, China was the top export destination of Iranian goods in the mentioned nine-month period. Also, exporting commodities valued at \$13.7 billion to Iran, China was Iran's second source of imports in the first nine months of the present year, the IRICA head announced. According to the data released by China's customs administration, the Islamic Republic and China traded \$15.795 billion worth of commodities in 2022, \$1.035 billion more than the figure for 2021. As reported, China's exports to Iran grew by 14 percent in the period under review compared to the preceding year to reach \$9.44 billion. The Asian country exported \$8.258 billion worth of goods to Iran in 2021. The value of Iran's non-oil exports to China, however, registered a two-percent decrease in 2022, reaching \$6.355 billion. Iran exported \$6.502 billion worth of goods to China in 2021. Iran's share of China's total global trade last year was only 0.25 percent. China's trade with the world reached \$6.308 trillion in 2022, of which \$3.593 trillion was the share of the country's exports and \$2.715 trillion was related to imports. China's global trade grew by 4.4 percent last year. China is one of Iran's main trade partners that has maintained strong trade ties with the Islamic Republic despite the

strict U.S. sanctions. Iran's Finance and Economic Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi said the 25-year strategic partnership plan between Iran and China has entered a new phase with new agreements being reached between various ministries of the two countries. According to Khandouzi, the mentioned agreements have been reached between the two sides during the visit of Iran's delegation to the 6th China International Import Expo (CIIE). "Specific projects were defined between the government departments of the respective ministries of Iran and China, and agreements were reached on the details of the implementation of the mentioned projects," Khandouzi said. Regarding the private sectors of the two countries, some Iranian companies operating in China and some large Chinese companies operating in Iran faced obstacles, which were discussed and resolved by the relevant authorities, he explained. Headed by Iran's First Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber, a senior delegation comprised of Economy Minister Ehsan Khandouzi, Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Abbas Aliabadi, as well as the deputies of various ministries and the economic deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited China in early November to attend the 6th CIIE. Iran and China officially signed the document for 25-year comprehensive cooperation in March 2021. The document was signed between Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

2.7m Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Week



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 2,754,754 tons of commodities and 29 vehicles with a total trading value of almost \$615m on its physical market. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,206,969 tons of commodities valued at more than \$377m. On this floor the IME sold 1,186,607 tons of cement, 580,000 tons of iron ore, 346,082 tons of steel, 77,500 tons of sponge iron, 8,220 tons of copper, 6,440 tons of aluminum, 2,150 tons of zinc, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 18 tons of precious metals concentrate and 29 vehicles. Moreover, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 543,046 tons of commodities worth nearly \$233m. Commodities traded on this floor included 212,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 114,205 tons of bitumen, 105,908 tons of polymeric products, 62,000 tons of lube cut, 36,387 tons of chemicals, 6,400 tons of sulfur, 3,639 tons of oil, 2,548 tons of petroleum products, 410 tons of feedstocks and 148 tons of waterproofing materials. The IME also traded within the same week 4,741 tons of goods on its side market.

Iran-Azerbaijan Exchange of Goods Up 46% in 2022

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The deputy prime minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan said that the exchange of goods between Iran and Azerbaijan registered a 46 percent hike in 2022 compared to a year earlier. Shahin Mustafayev, who is also the Azeri head of the Iran-Azerbaijan Joint Economic Cooperation Commission, stated that the relations between the two countries are on an upward trajectory under the wise management of the presidents of the two countries. Speaking in the operation ceremony of the new Astara-Astara border bridge on Astarachay Bridge, Mustafayev noted that the exchange of goods between Tehran and Baku registered a 46 percent hike last year, compared to 2021, Mehr news agency reported. He pointed to the significance of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and also the importance of the economic relations between the two countries and added that the launch of the new bridge can play a leading role in enhancing the transport and transit of goods between the two countries. Upon the inauguration of the new bridge, the two countries would witness considerable growth in the transit sector in the coming years, the Azeri deputy prime minister added.

Bolivian Court Bars Former President Morales From Re-Election

LA PAZ (Dispatches) - Bolivia's Constitutional Court has disqualified former president Evo Morales from running for re-election in 2025, reversing a ruling that had let him seek a fourth term in 2019. It said on its website that term limits provide "an ideal measure for ensuring that someone does not perpetuate themselves in power." Bolivia's first Indigenous president, Morales first took power in 2006 and was extremely popular until he tried to bypass the constitution and seek a fourth term in office in 2019. He won that vote but was forced to resign amid deadly protests over alleged election fraud, and fled the country. He returned after his then ally Luis Arce won the presidency in October 2020. Morales has since fallen out with Arce.



Thousands of Serbians Protest Alleged Electoral Fraud



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Thousands of protesters gathered in Belgrade in the biggest of a series of rallies against alleged electoral fraud. It marked the 13th consecutive demonstration since the December 17 parliamentary and local elections in which Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's party said it secured a commanding victory. Opposition groups contested the results and protesters have erected sporadic roadblocks in Belgrade, with more than 30 arrested after an attempt to storm city hall last week. "Students, 18 and 20 years old, are being charged for overthrowing the constitutional order, they are in house arrest -- is that a sign of fair elections?" asked one of the student leaders, Emilija Milenkovic. "We only want our voice to be heard at least in the polling stations," she added, thanking her colleagues who endured the 24-hour street blockade. The main opposition coalition "Serbia Against Violence" as well as other groups and initiatives alleged many irregularities, including that ethnic-Serb voters from neighbouring Bosnia had been allowed to cast ballots illegally in the capital. International observers also reported irregularities while several Western nations voiced concern over the electoral process. Saturday's protests were a continuation of the first 24-hour blockade of streets in central Belgrade, mainly by students organised within the Borba ("Fight") movement, who are calling for the results to be annulled and new votes held. The organisers called for facilitation by the European Union as well as establishing an independent investigation committee for the alleged irregularities, setting fair conditions for elections and organising new polls in six months. University professor Filip Ejdus said that the students "these days are holding a public class of civic responsibility and courage." "We do not agree on stolen election, arrested students and police torture," he added. The appearance on stage of Serbian opposition leader Marinika Tepic -- who had been on hunger strike since December 18 in protest -- enlivened the crowd the most. After being helped to get on the stage to address the demonstrators, Tepic went to the hospital and announced she was ending her hunger strike. The protest continued with demonstrators marching towards the Constitutional Court. "This is what we wanted, to bring back hope," said university professor Tamara Dzamonja Ignjatovic. The location at Terazije fountain symbolically connects the gathering with the so-called "Plush revolution" from March 1991 -- one of the first major demonstrations against former Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

China Calls Taiwan President Frontrunner a Destroyer of Peace



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's government called the frontrunner for Taiwan's next president "confrontational" and a destroyer of peace after he spoke at a presidential debate and said the island's sovereignty and independence belong to its people. The Jan. 13 presidential and parliamentary elections are happening at a time of fraught relations between Beijing and Taipei. China has been ramping up military pressure to assert its sovereignty claims over democratically-governed Taiwan. China has taken particular exception to current Vice President Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Party (DPP) and leading in opinion polls by varying margins, saying he is a dangerous separatist. Responding late on Saturday to Lai's comments at a live televised presidential debate earlier in the day, China's Taiwan Affairs Office said Lai had "exposed his true face as a stubborn 'worker for Taiwan independence' and destroyer of peace across the Taiwan Strait." "His words were full of confrontational thinking," spokesperson Chen Binhua said in a statement. Since 2016 - when President Tsai Ing-wen took office in the DPP-led government has promoted separatism and is the "criminal mastermind" in obstructing exchanges across the strait and damaging the interests of Taiwan's people, Chen said. "As the leading figure of the DPP authorities and current DPP chairman, Lai Ching-te cannot escape his responsibility for this," he added. Tsai and Lai have repeatedly offered talks with China, but have been rebuffed.



N. Korea's Kim Orders Military to Prepare for Possible War

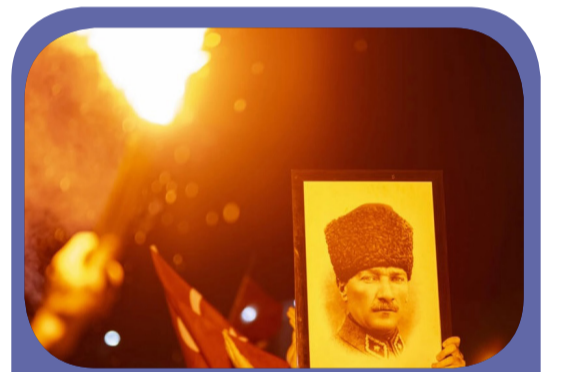
SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un wrapped the year with fresh threats of a nuclear attack on Seoul and orders for a military arsenal build-up to prepare for a war that can "break out at any time" on the peninsula, state media reported Sunday. Kim lambasted the United States during a lengthy speech at the end of five days of year-end party meetings that set his country's military, political, and economic policy decisions for 2024. The meeting announced plans for further military development in the coming year, including launching three more spy satellites, building unmanned drones and developing electronic warfare capabilities, as well as strengthening nuclear and missile forces, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). Pyongyang this year successfully launched a reconnaissance satellite, enshrined its status as a nuclear power in its constitution, and test-fired the most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in its arsenal. At the meeting that ended Saturday, Kim accused the United States of posing "various types of military threat" and ordered his armed forces to maintain "overwhelming war response capability", according to KCNA. It is a "fait accompli that a war can break out at any time on the Korean peninsula due to reckless moves by the enemies to invade us", Kim said. In an effort to deter Pyongyang, Washington earlier this month deployed a nuclear-powered submarine in the South Korean port city of Busan, and flew its long-range bombers in drills with Seoul and Tokyo. The North has previously described the deployment of Washington's strategic weapons -- such as B-52 bombers -- in joint drills on the Korean peninsula as the "intentional nuclear war provocative moves". "We must respond quickly to a possible

nuclear crisis and continue to accelerate preparations to pacify the entire territory of South Korea by mobilising all physical means and forces, including nuclear force, in case of emergency," Kim said. At the meeting, Kim said he would no longer seek reconciliation and reunification with South Korea, noting the "persisting uncontrollable crisis situation" which he said was triggered by Seoul and Washington. Inter-Korean relations have deteriorated to a low point this year, with Pyongyang's spy satellite launch prompting Seoul to partially suspend a 2018 military agreement aimed at defusing tensions. "I believe that it is a mistake that we should no longer make to consider the people who declare us as the 'main enemy'... as a counterpart for reconciliation and unification," KCNA cited Kim as saying. Kim ordered the drawing-up of measures for reorganising departments handling cross-border affairs, to "fundamentally shift the direction". Leif Easley, a professor of international relations at Ewha University in Seoul, said the emphasis on North Korea's "significant military capabilities" was likely aimed at hiding the country's poor economic achievements this year. "Much of what state-controlled media publishes is recycled propaganda," he said, adding: "Pyongyang's bellicose rhetoric suggests its military moves are not only about deterrence but also domestic politics and international coercion." Pyongyang declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power last year and has repeatedly said it will never give up its nukes program, which the regime views as essential for its survival. The United Nations Security Council has adopted many resolutions calling on North Korea to halt its nuclear and ballistic missile programs since it first conducted a nuclear test in 2006.



UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) - Russia accused Ukraine of conducting a "terrorist attack" on civilians in Belgorod and using widely prohibited cluster munitions, making the claim during an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council requested by Moscow. Russia said Ukraine attacked the city of Belgorod with missiles and rockets, killing at least 21 people and wounding dozens more, including 17 children, according to local authorities. It was "a terrorist attack by the Kyiv regime against a civilian city," Russia's ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebenzya said. "In order to increase the number of casualties of the terrorist attack they used cluster munitions," he continued, claiming that Kyiv targeted a sports center, an ice rink and a university. "It was a deliberate, indiscriminate attack against a civilian target." "UN Security Council members have an opportunity to do their duty and assess the damage done to a Russian city, Belgorod," Nebenzya added, holding up a QR code linking to what he said was video of the attack's aftermath. Ukrainian allies quickly retorted, saying Russia had started the war. Ukraine's ambassador to the UN Serhiy Dmytych said that "as long as this war, unleashed by the Kremlin dictator, endures the toll of death and suffering will continue to grow." "As Ukraine is still recovering from yesterday's horrendous strikes, new raids of Russian terror persist. Just hours ago... Russia again terrorized Kharkiv with its S-300 missiles hitting a residential area." The US representative John Kelly also put the blame squarely on Russian President Vladimir Putin. "This is (Putin's) war, it is his choice," he said. "Russia could end this war today... We call for the protection of all civilians on all sides of every conflict." The British envoy

Thomas Phipps said London "deeply" regrets any civilian losses, but also called out Moscow for having started the war with an invasion two years ago. "There are hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers in Ukraine. There is not a single Ukrainian soldier in Russia," he said. "If Russia wants someone to blame for the deaths of Russians in this war, it should start with President Putin." Phipps likewise said that Russia was the side to blame for targeting non-combatants, saying: "After having failed to defeat Ukraine militarily, Russia has now turned to indiscriminate attacks on civilians." The French envoy Nicolas de Riviere said Ukraine was simply defending itself under UN laws, while Moscow was "trampling" over the UN Charter. Ukraine, which has been resisting a Russian invasion for nearly two years and earlier this week came under a huge Russian missile and drone assault, has not officially commented on the strike against Belgorod. Belgorod lies about 30 kilometers (19 miles) from the border with Ukraine and has been repeatedly struck by what Moscow says is indiscriminate shelling by Kyiv's forces. "As the war continues we will see more Ukrainian and Russian civilians killed," said UN assistant secretary-general Mohamed Khari, warning there were "very real dangers of escalation and spillover of this war." Unverified footage showed a street strewn with debris and smoke billowing from burnt-out cars in the city's center, while a large blast could be heard in dashcam footage posted on social media. AFP was not able to immediately verify the circumstances of the strike, one of the deadliest on Russian soil since Moscow launched hostilities against Ukraine in February 2022. Two Vilkha missiles and Czech-made rockets were used in the attack, Russia said.



Erdogan Plays Down Row Over Saudi-Hosted Super Cup

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan brushed off criticism after the Turkish Super Cup final between two Istanbul giants was postponed following a row with its Saudi hosts. Friday night's Turkish Super Cup between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce had been due to be played in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. But it was postponed before kickoff after Saudi organizers refused to allow players to wear jerseys bearing political slogans. Both teams had wanted to warm up wearing shirts featuring the image of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern-day Turkey, to celebrate the republic's centenary, Turkish media reported. In a joint statement, the two teams and the Turkish football federation said the match had been postponed due to "mishaps in the organization", while thanking the match organizers. The Turkish Football Federation had come under fire for allowing the match to be played in Saudi Arabia rather than in Turkey as part of the republic's centenary celebrations. The opposition CHP party, founded by Ataturk, accused Erdogan's government of having failed to defend Turkey's honor. "Neither the clubs nor the Football Federation is to be blamed," said CHP leader Ozgur Ozel. "The main guilty party is Erdogan, who made Ataturk ... a subject of bargaining." Erdogan, speaking at a ceremony in Istanbul, responded "the whole world knows how we defend the honor of Turkey and the Turkish people." Turning sports into a political issue "is wrong, misguided and serves no purpose", he added, warning opposition parties not to abuse what was essentially a sports event.

Gaza War to Last Months

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to retake control of the Gaza Strip's border with Egypt, expanding Israel's mission to neutralize Hamas in a conflict it says it expects to last for months. "The war is at its height," Netanyahu told reporters on Saturday of the fighting since Oct. 7 when the Palestinian militant group Hamas and its allies infiltrated Israel, killing 1,200 people and capturing 240 hostages. He said the Philadelphi Corridor buffer zone that runs along Gaza's border with Egypt must be in Israeli hands. "It must be shut," Netanyahu said. "It is clear that any other arrangement would not ensure the demilitarisation that we seek." He did not elaborate, but such a move by Israel would be a de facto reversal of its 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, placing the enclave under exclusive Israeli control after years being run by Hamas. Netanyahu's comments about the buffer zone came as Israeli military forces pressed ahead with an offensive that the prime minister reiterated will last "for many more months." Following Hamas' surprise October incursion, Israel launched a full-scale attack in Gaza, displacing nearly all its 2.3 million residents and killing at least 21,672 Palestinians, according to health authorities in Gaza, with more than 56,000 injured and thousands more feared dead under the rubble. Residents and medics said Saturday's fighting was focused in al-Bureij,

Nuseirat, Maghazi and Khan Younis in central and southern Gaza. Hamas media reported on Saturday that Abdel-Fattah Maali, a senior member of the group's armed wing, was killed in an Israeli strike in Gaza. It said Maali, originally from the West Bank, was freed during a 2011 prisoner swap and expelled to Gaza. The reports did not specify when he was killed. Israel says 172 of its military personnel have been killed in the Gaza fighting. The conflict has sparked concerns it could spread across the region, potentially involving Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen that have exchanged fire with Israel and its U.S. ally, or targeted merchant shipping. Israel cited progress in destroying Hamas infrastructure, including a tunnel complex in the basement of one of the houses of the Hamas leader for Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, in Gaza City. Troops also raided the Hamas military intelligence headquarters and an Islamic Jihad command centre in Khan Younis, and destroyed targets including a weapons foundry, a military statement said. Hamas and Islamic Jihad - both sworn to Israel's destruction - issued statements saying their fighters destroyed and damaged several Israeli tanks and troop carriers in attacks across Gaza on Saturday. They also said they fired mortars against Israeli forces in Khan Younis and Al-Bureij as well as in northern Gaza.



Scientists Recommend This Diet for Slower Long-Term Weight Gain

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - From veganism to low-calorie diets, the Mediterranean regime and even intermittent fasting, there are all kinds of diets promising fast or gradual weight loss, depending on individual needs. But which approach is really effective long term, without damaging health? Researchers in the US have studied the subject, concluding that low-carbohydrate diets high in proteins, fats and carbohydrates from healthy, plant-based sources were linked with slower long-term weight gain. "Our study goes beyond the simple question of, 'To carb or not to carb?'" said lead author Binkai Liu, research assistant in the Department of Nutrition at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "It dissects the low-carbohydrate diet and provides a nuanced look at how the composition of these diets can affect health over years, not just weeks or months." To reach these conclusions, the researchers set out to evaluate different types of low-carbohydrate diets, whose benefits for weight loss are already known, but only in the short term.



Adding Salt to Food May Increase Risk of Chronic Kidney Disease



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Folks who habitually add an extra sprinkle of salt to their meals are doing no favors for their kidneys, new research confirms. The finding held even after researchers accounted for other health issues, such as being overweight, not exercising or smoking and/or drinking. The bottom line: "Adding salt to foods is associated with increased risk of chronic kidney disease in the general population," concluded a team led by Dr. Lu Qi, of Tulane University's Obesity Research Center, in New Orleans. Qi and his colleagues recently published studies showing that adding salt to meals upped people's odds for heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and shortened life spans. However, links between table salt and the odds of kidney disease in the general population hadn't been well-researched, Qi's group noted. To remedy that, they analyzed data on more than 465,000 people, averaging 56 years of age, who didn't have kidney disease when they registered for a British health database known as the UK Biobank. Participants' health and lifestyle were tracked from 2006 to 2023. According to the researchers, over 22,000 cases of kidney disease emerged over the study period. Compared to folks who never or rarely added salt to their food, people who did so had a higher odds of developing kidney trouble. The risk rose with the frequency at which people said they used table salt. For example, compared to never-users, folks who said they "sometimes" added extra salt had a 4% higher risk of kidney disease; those who "usually" added salt had a 7% higher risk, and those who "always" added salt saw their risk rise by 11%. Those risk estimates came after Qi's team accounted for lifestyle factors that often accompany heavy salt intake -- overweight/obesity, smoking, drinking, lack of exercise, diabetes, hypertension and other issues. The study was published in the Thursday issue of the journal JAMA Network Open. There are many physiological issues linking high sodium intake and poorer kidney function, the researchers noted, including hormonal changes and "increased oxidative stress" on the twin organs. According to the Tulane investigators, their findings "support the reduction of adding salt to foods as a potential intervention strategy for chronic kidney disease prevention."

Britain's Big Ben Marks 100 Years of New Year Bongs



LONDON (Dispatches) - London's Big Ben marked the 100th anniversary of its "bongs" to ring in the New Year being broadcast live across the world. Ever since New Year's Eve 1923 when BBC engineer A.G. Dryland clambered onto a roof opposite the British parliament to record the strikes, live transmission has become an annual tradition. The unmistakable sound of the "nation's timepiece" has long occupied a special place in national life. The bongs are heard twice daily -- at 6pm and midnight and three times on Sunday -- on BBC radio, and at the start of the nightly News at Ten on commercial channel ITV. Such is their importance that even during the recently-ended five-year restoration programme when they were largely silenced, important exceptions were made. As well as New Year, Big Ben also continued to mark Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday when the nation remembers its war dead. Big Ben also rang out to mark Britain's departure from the European Union in 2021 and the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022. After a week of testing, normal service finally resumed last November. While the rest of London is enjoying New Year's Eve, clock mechanic Andrew Strangeway will be at the top of the 96-metre (315-foot) Elizabeth Tower. The tower houses the clock and its five bells, including the largest one from which Big Ben takes its nickname. Along with the two other

members of the in-house timekeeping team, the 37-year-old will be making last minute checks to make sure the clock will be "within fractions of a second of being correct." Although the chances of a mishap on the big night are tiny, Strangeway said the clock did suffer a disaster during the 1970s when it stopped due to metal fatigue. "I think the chances of anything going seriously wrong are small. Our main worry on things like New Year is -- is it going to go off and is it going to be on time," he said. Completed in 1859, the structure was known as the Clock Tower before being renamed the Elizabeth Tower in 2012 to honour the late queen's Diamond Jubilee. In the years before the renovation, parliament's timekeepers would benchmark the Great Clock's time against the telephone speaking clock. Now, it is calibrated by GPS via Britain's National Physical Laboratory. But the method to adjust the clock's timing mechanism remains old-fashioned: old pennies are added or removed from weights attached to two giant coiled springs, to make or lose a second. "It's a fantastic job," Strangeway told AFP, adding that even when he was out and about in London he would frequently look for Big Ben and think "yes it's still running". He said he was very excited that he would be "right next to the bells... at that moment when everyone is looking at that clock for the start of the New Year".

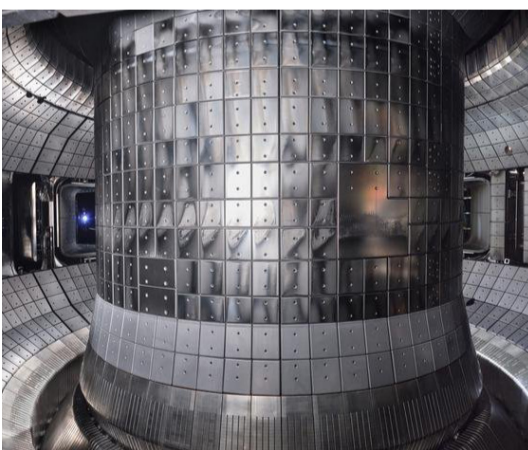
Childhood Trauma May Raise Risk for Chronic Pain in Adulthood

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Beyond a myriad of other consequences, childhood trauma appears to raise the specter of chronic pain in adulthood, new research shows. Researchers pored over 75 years' worth of data involving more than 826,000 people. That included information on levels of neglect or physical, emotional or sexual abuse, plus other serious trauma of childhood. Their review found strong links between a history of childhood physical abuse, especially, and chronic pain conditions decades later. But other forms of "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) appeared linked, too. "These results are extremely concerning, particularly as over 1 billion children -- half of the global child population -- are exposed to ACEs each year, putting them at increased risk of chronic pain and disability later in life," said study lead author André Bussi eres, an assistant professor of physical and occupational therapy at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. The findings -- based on data from 57 studies -- were published Tuesday in the European Journal of Psychotraumatology. Besides various forms of abuse, other trauma included in the new analysis involved domestic violence, living with a family member who has

substance abuse, or the loss of a parent. Conditions of adult chronic pain in the study included low back pain, arthritis, headache and migraine, often severe enough to interfere with daily living. Overall, kids exposed directly to neglect or physical, sexual or emotional abuse were 45% more apt to suffer a chronic pain condition as an adult, compared to those without such exposures, Bussi eres' team found. Physical abuse had the biggest impact, being linked to both chronic pain and pain so bad it led to real disability. Adding in "indirect" trauma -- things like domestic violence, a parent's substance abuse or parental loss -- upped the odds for chronic pain further, the study found. Bussi eres said in a journal news release that all of this shows that there's "an urgent need to develop targeted interventions and support systems to break the cycle of adversity and improve long-term health outcomes for those individuals who have been exposed to childhood trauma." His team is convinced more needs to be done to understand why a person who has suffered childhood trauma is at higher risk for adult physical pain. A better understanding of the link might also lead to new and better ways to help prevent these longer-term outcomes, researchers said.

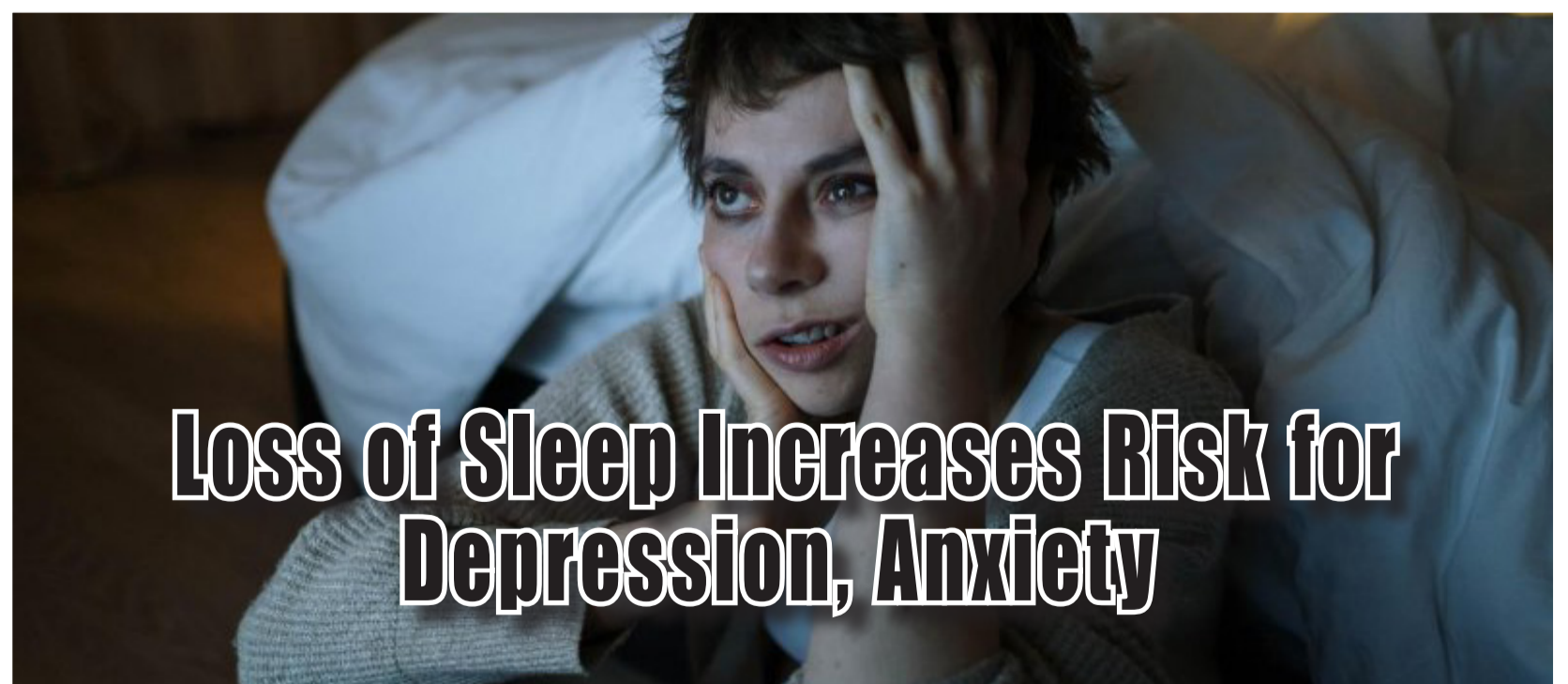


South Korea's So-Called Artificial Sun to Burn at 100M Degrees Celsius for Half a Minute



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - South Korea's superconducting fusion device and so-called artificial sun, KSTAR, has received upgrades that will allow it to run for longer periods of time. The Korea Institute of Fusion Energy said it had successfully installed a new tungsten divertor for its magnetic fusion device, KSTAR, which will allow it to run high-temperature plasma at more than 100 million degrees Celsius for 30 seconds. The new capabilities could lead to groundbreaking research results for commercializing nuclear fusion as an energy source, according to KFE. The institute also is leading a joint effort to accelerate the development of nuclear fusion energy with the ITER program. ITER is a project to construct a much larger magnetic fusion reactor in southern France. KFE President Dr. Suk Jae Yoo said the implementation of a tungsten divertor to operate KSTAR at higher temperatures will produce vital data for the ITER program. A divertor is a crucial component that manages the exhaust of waste gas and impurities from the reactor and also endures the highest surface heat loads. KSTAR previously had a carbon divertor that was less heat resistant than the tungsten divertor it now uses. The development of a tungsten divertor began in 2018. The first prototype was completed in 2021, and installation began in September 2022. Tungsten has a high melting point and low sputtering characteristics, which means the heat resistance has improved over two-fold, according to KFE. KFE said that, with the new divertor, it hopes to achieve high performance plasma operation for 300 seconds by the end of 2026.

Loss of Sleep Increases Risk for Depression, Anxiety



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - An exhaustive review of sleep research spanning five decades underscores the importance of getting your Zzzzs. Sleep loss undermines emotional functioning and increases a person's risk for anxiety and depression, the study found. It also takes a toll on positive emotions like joy, happiness and contentment. "In our largely sleep-deprived society, quantifying the effects of sleep loss on emotion is critical for promoting psychological health," said lead author Cara Palma, director of the Sleep and Development Lab at Montana State University in Bozeman. "This study ... provides strong evidence that periods of extended wakefulness, shortened sleep duration, and nighttime awakenings adversely influence human emotional functioning." For the study, Palma's team analyzed data from 154 studies that included more than 5,700 people. In every study, participants' sleep was disrupted for one night or more. Some kept participants awake for an extended period. Some allowed less-than-typical amounts of shuteye, and others awakened participants periodically throughout the night. Each also looked at one emotional measure, such as self-reported mood or measures of anxiety and depression. All three types of sleep loss took a toll on positive emotions and increased anxiety symptoms such as worry and rapid heart rate. "This occurred even after short periods of sleep loss, like staying up an hour

or two later than usual or after losing just a few hours of sleep," Palmer said in an American Psychological Association news release. "We also found that sleep loss increased anxiety symptoms and blunted arousal in response to emotional stimuli." Researchers said findings for depression symptoms and emotions such as sadness, worry and stress were inconsistent and smaller. One limitation of the study is that a majority of participants were young - average age 23. Future study should seek to learn more about how sleep deprivation affects people at different stages of life, researchers said. Other avenues of inquiry might include examining why some people are more vulnerable than others to the effects of sleep loss and the effects of sleep loss across different cultures. Most of the research in the current review was conducted in the U.S. and Europe. More than 30% of adults and up to 90% of teens don't get enough sleep, Palmer said. "The implications of this research for individual and public health are considerable in a largely sleep-deprived society," she said. "Industries and sectors prone to sleep loss, such as first responders, pilots and truck drivers, should develop and adopt policies that prioritize sleep to mitigate against the risks to daytime function and well-being." The findings were published Thursday in the journal Psychological Bulletin.

IRAN NEWS



India's Nov Infrastructure Output Rises at Slowest Pace in 6 Months

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - India's infrastructure output in November rose at the slowest pace in six months at 7.8% year-on-year, as a delayed festival season reduced working days leading to a drop in cement and crude oil production. It was the slowest growth in infrastructure output, comprising eight sectors also including coal and electricity, since the 5.2% recorded in May 2023. Diwali, one of India's main festivals, is usually celebrated in October, but fell later this year, in November. Cement output dropped 3.6% year on year in November while crude oil production fell 0.4%. Electricity generation rose 5.6% in the month, coal production was up 10.9% and the steel sector expanded 9.1% year on year, the data showed. Production of refinery products increased 12.4%. "Given the larger number of factory holidays, we anticipate a modest 2-4% rise in the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) in November 2023," said Aditi Nayar, an economist at ICRA.

Russian Factory Activity Expands at Fastest Pace in 7 Years in December



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Activity in Russia's manufacturing sector expanded at its fastest pace in almost seven years in December, a business survey showed, though new export orders contracted for the second month running. The S&P Global Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) for manufacturing rose to 54.6 in December from 53.8 in November, moving further above the 50 mark that separates expansion from contraction. It was the highest reading since January 2017. Output rose at its fastest pace in seven months and new orders also increased sharply again. "Greater client demand was largely focused on the domestic market, however, as new export orders fell for the second month running," S&P Global said in a statement. "Fewer customer requests from clients in key export markets led to the fastest fall in new business from abroad since July." Moscow is spending heavily on manufacturing, pouring cash into the defence sector to ramp up military production following its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The sector's growth in the almost two years since then has been largely predicated on domestic demand. Manufacturers are still grappling with logistical upheavals due to Western sanctions and the high cost of imported goods, hampered by the weak rouble and high inflation. The survey showed the rate of inflation was softening, S&P Global said. Despite labour shortages in Russia, with unemployment at a record low 2.9%, firms increased staffing numbers to try to reduce backlogs of work, S&P Global said, though companies remained optimistic about the future. "Confidence stemmed from planned investment in new products and machinery," S&P Global said. "The level of positive sentiment was historically elevated despite dropping to a three-month low."



China Dec Factory Contraction Deepens, More Stimulus on the Cards

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's manufacturing activity shrank for a third straight month in December and weakened more than expected, clouding the outlook for the country's economic recovery and raising the case for fresh stimulus measures in the New Year. The government has in recent months introduced a series of policies to shore up a feeble post-pandemic recovery, which is being held back by a severe property slump, local government debt risks and soft global demand. But the world's second-largest economy is still struggling to gain traction. The official purchasing managers' index (PMI) fell to 49.0 in December from 49.4 the previous month, an official factory survey showed on Sunday, below the 50-mark separating growth from contraction and weaker than a median forecast of 49.5 in a Reuters poll. "We must step up policy support, otherwise the trend of slowing growth will continue," said Nie Wen, an economist at Hwabao Trust. Nie expects the central bank to cut interest rates and banks' reserve requirement ratios (RRR) in the coming weeks. "Falling prices have greatly affected companies' profits and further affected people's employment and incomes. We may see a vicious cycle," he said. China's central bank said on Thursday it would step up policy adjustments to support the economy and promote a rebound in prices, amid signs of rising deflationary pressures. Earlier this month, top Chinese leaders at a key meeting to chart the economic course for 2024 pledged to take more steps to support the recovery next year. Five of China's largest state banks lowered interest rates on some deposits on

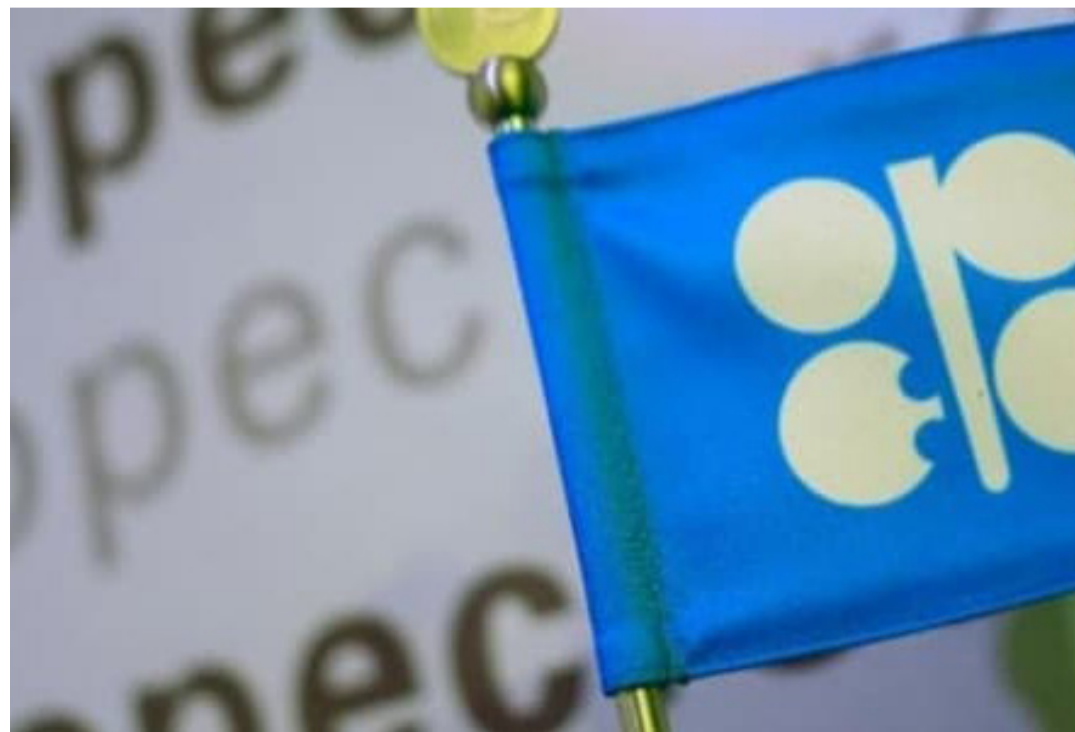
Dec. 22, the third round of such cuts this year, which could help the central bank move toward easing monetary policy. The government, which in October unveiled plans to issue 1 trillion yuan (\$140.89 billion) in sovereign bonds to fund investment projects, is likely to focus on more fiscal steps to support growth next year, analysts said. China's consumer prices fell the fastest in three years in November while factory-gate deflation deepened, weighed by weak domestic demand. "The current external environment is increasingly complex, severe, and uncertain," the statistical bureau said. "Some companies in the survey reported that reduced overseas orders and insufficient domestic effective demand are the main difficulties faced by the companies." The new orders sub-index was at 48.7, contracting for the third month, according to the PMI survey released by the National Bureau of Statistics. Weak external demand also remained a major drag on factory activity, with new export orders index registering 45.8 in December, contracting for the ninth straight month. The sub-index of factory gate prices was at 47.7, contracting for a third straight month, adding to signs of deflation and pressure on business profits. The official non-manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI), which includes services and construction, rose to 50.4 from 50.2 in November, supported by a recovery in the vast services sector. China's economic growth is seen on track to hit the official target of around 5% this year and Beijing is expected to maintain the target next year.

Reuters Claims OPEC Facing Significant Market Share Loss



LONDON (Dispatches) - OPEC could potentially face further loss of market share in early 2024 following the recent departure of Angola, weakening demand and rising output by non-OPEC producers, Reuters claims, based on its own calculations. Reuters reports that OPEC's production is set to slip below 27 million barrels per day (bpd) without Angola, good for less than 27% of the total global supply of 102 million bpd. The last time the cartel saw its market share fall to that level was at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when global oil demand fell by nearly 20%. Earlier in December, Angola officially announced its exit from OPEC over disagreements regarding its oil production quotas. Angola's crude output clocked in at 1.15 million barrels per day in November, a sharp decline from 1.88 million barrels per day in 2017, one year after it joined OPEC thanks in large part to under-investments in its aging, deepwater oil fields. OPEC has managed to maintain a market share in the 30-40% range, according to Reuters. However, record shale production by the United States has cut into that deeply. U.S. oil output hit an all-time high of 13.1 million barrels per day in the current year mainly due to efficiency and productivity gains by drillers in a bid to combat low oil prices. Some analysts have forecast a slackening of U.S. oil output increase will slacken in the New Year, but many others view the estimates from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) as too conservative for 2024. OPEC believes the market share loss might only be temporary. The group has predicted that the group's global market share will come in at 40% in 2045 largely due to non-OPEC output declining from the early 2030s.

U.S. Crude Oil Production Rates Sag in October



LONDON (Dispatches) - Crude oil production in the United States fell in the month of October, according to new data released by the Energy Information Administration. According to the latest data, average U.S. crude oil production fell from 13.252 million barrels per day in September to 13.248 million bpd in October—the first monthly decline in average daily production rates since April, but still the second-highest production rate in the history of the U.S. oil industry, behind only September. It is also 1.377 million bpd higher than pre-pandemic levels seen in January 2019. But while the daily average was down month over month, total production for October rose to 410.7 million barrels, compared to 397.6 million barrels in September—a difference of 13.1 million barrels, which roughly accounts for the extra day. While production rates were down month over month from September to October, EIA

data shows an increase in production rates from January to October. U.S. crude production in January totaled 389.6 million barrels—or 12.6 million barrels per day—compared to the 410.7 million in October—or 13.2 million barrels per day. The EIA had previously forecast that U.S. crude oil production for October would average 13.257 million bpd. By state, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Alaska account for a 57,000 bpd increase in production, while the largest declines were seen in North Dakota (-31,000 bpd) and the Gulf of Mexico (-40,000 bpd), according to the EIA data. In the agency's latest edition of its Short Term Energy Outlook published earlier this month, the EIA forecast 2024 crude oil production in the United States at 13.11 million bpd, compared to the forecast for 2023 of 12.93 million bpd. The Energy Information Administration releases monthly production data on the last business day of the month.

Vietnam 2023 Economic Growth Slows to 5.05% as Exports Fall



HANOI (Reuters) - Vietnam's economic growth slowed to 5.05% this year from an expansion of 8.02% last year, official data showed on Friday, weighed by weak global demand while public investment stalled amid an intensified anti-graft crackdown. This year's gross domestic product (GDP) growth was below a government target of 6.5% and lower than average growth of 5.87% during the previous decade, according to data released by the government's General Statistics Office (GSO). Vietnam is a regional manufacturing hub that relies heavily on trade. Exports in 2023 fell 4.4% from last year to \$355.5 billion, with shipments of smartphones, its largest foreign currency earner, dropping 8.3%, the GSO said in its report. Its industrial production index in 2023 rose 1.5% from last year, while average consumer prices in the year rose 3.25%, according to the GSO. Retail sales were up 9.6%. "Though this year's growth is below a government target of 6.5%, it is still a positive result, putting Vietnam in the group of the fastest growing economies in the region and in the world," the GSO said. Imports in 2023 fell 8.9% to \$327.5 billion, resulting in a trade surplus of \$28 billion for the year, according to the report. A large trade surplus is supportive for the dong currency, but a sharp fall in imports could indicate a slowdown in manufacturing activities in the months ahead. The country's central bank, in an effort to boost economic growth, has this year cut its policy rates four times, reducing its refinancing rate and discount rate by an accumulated 150 basis points each, but credit growth remains much weaker than its target of 14%. Overall credit growth in the economy as of end-November was 8.2%, according to data from the State Bank of Vietnam, the country's central bank, which said the "the economy was still facing difficulties with a slow economic recovery and therefore the demand for loans was weak." To compensate for the fall in exports, Vietnam has decided to extend a value-added tax cut to boost domestic consumption, while authorities have sought to speed up public investment, mostly on infrastructure. But public investment has stalled this year amid an intensification of the country's "blazing furnace" anti-corruption campaign, which has often paralysed activities.



Turkish-Made Heavyweight Torpedo AKYA Completes Test-Fire

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Türkiye successfully test-fired the domestically-produced heavyweight torpedo AKYA with warhead. AKYA, developed by Turkish defense giant Roketsan, was launched from the TCG Preveze submarine in the Eastern Mediterranean on Wednesday, and it hit the target with full accuracy, the National Defense Ministry said in a statement. The fully indigenous, new-generation torpedo hit the target from a distance of 12,000 yards and sank it. Naval Forces Commander Adm. Ercument Tatlioglu, Defense Industries Presidency chief Haluk Gorgun and Roketsan CEO Murat Ikinci watched the test-firing of AKYA from the command center of TCG GOKOVA, a Turkish frigate. "Today is a very important day for the Turkish Naval Forces. We performed a very successful launch of our local and national torpedo AKYA, and we included it in the inventory of the Turkish Naval Forces," said Tatlioglu in his remarks after the test-firing. "We will soon put into service our Hisar naval national and local guided missile, which we will use against air targets from our ships. Likewise, our national and local mine Malaman will be added to our inventory in a short time," said the commander, as he recalled that Atmaca, an anti-ship guided cruise missile developed by Roketsan, has recently been added to the navy's inventory. "Our ships use our domestically developed fire control systems, guidance bullets and torpedoes," he added.

Genetics May Help Identify Risk for Athlete's Heart Syndrome

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Elite athletes who suffer a sudden cardiac arrest might have genetics that make them more vulnerable to heart disease, a new study suggests. Analysis of more than 280 top-level endurance athletes revealed that 1 in 6 have measures that would normally suggest heart disease and reduced heart function, researchers report in the journal *Circulation*. Those athletes also carried a rich load of genes associated with heart disease, researchers said. "The phenomenon of the athletes' heart has long been known, but we were the first team to investigate the role an athlete's genetic makeup plays in their heart function and structure," researcher Dr. Diane Fatkin, a molecular cardiologist at the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute in Sydney, said in a news release. "What we have found is that there are far more profound changes than thought and that a high number of these athletes do have altered heart function," she continued. A series of recent near-tragedies on playing fields and in gymnasiums have prompted increased interest in how heavy exercise can affect the hearts of elite athletes.



Record Global Gasoline Consumption Defies IEA Forecast



LONDON (Dispatches) - Global gasoline consumption hit a record 26.9 million barrels per day (bpd) this year, exceeding the 2019 peak and defying estimates that the last pre-pandemic year was the time when gasoline demand worldwide would peak. The data, reported by Bloomberg Opinion columnist Javier Blas, shows the latest figures from the International Energy Agency (IEA). The same agency, which has been strongly advocating for a faster energy transition for years, had predicted just this year that 2019 was the peak demand for gasoline globally. Back in June, in its Oil 2023 annual report, the IEA said that "Growth is set to reverse after 2023 for gasoline and after 2026 for transport fuels overall." "Gasoline demand will be disproportionately impacted as EVs progressively replace vehicles with internal combustion engines (ICE)," the IEA said, adding that "This means that the fuel is likely to exhibit the earliest and most pronounced peak in demand." And it also said that "Usage will never return to 2019 levels and the post pandemic peak could come as early as 2023. Following a brief plateau, the decline is forecast to accelerate from 2026 onwards." However, the IEA's latest figures not only show that 2019 wasn't the peak demand year for global gasoline consumption, but that demand in both 2023 and 2024 would surpass the pre-pandemic levels. Per the latest data reported by Bloomberg's Blas, gasoline demand globally is set to further rise next year, to top 27 million bpd. In the June report, the IEA predicted that "Following a brief plateau, the decline is forecast to accelerate from 2026 onwards, with 2028 demand 900 kb/d below that of 2019." The IEA also famously said earlier this year that global demand for all three fossil fuels - oil, natural gas, and coal - is set to peak before 2030, which undermines the case for increasing investment in fossil fuels.

EU Economic Challenges Linger Despite Some Positive Signs in 2023



BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - In 2023, Western economies outperformed predictions, providing a ray of hope amid a turbulent global environment. Nevertheless, the outlook optimism is moderated by ongoing uncertainties, as experts warn challenges persist, especially concerning inflation and the European cost-of-living crisis, suggesting that the most challenging times may still lie ahead. The European economy has encountered headwinds this year, grappling with a high cost of living, weak external demand, and monetary tightening, leading to a notable loss of growth momentum. As interest rates stubbornly hold their ground, remaining "higher, for longer," concerns are mounting over the potential pain this could inflict on companies and consumers alike. One of the critical questions echoing through financial corridors is whether the worst is behind Europe on inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. "Inflation in the region has been primarily driven by increased energy costs and subsequently, rising food prices. November brought some relief as inflation unexpectedly dropped to 2.4%, marking the lowest point in over two years," according to Cevat Giray Aksoy of King's College London, who also serves as associate director of research at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). However, Aksoy added, this decline is attributed to a decrease in energy prices, partially offset by the continuous upward trend in food prices. "Despite this relief, the cost of living in real terms remains nearly 20% higher than the pre-inflation surge levels of three years ago. It seems premature to declare an end to the cost-of-living crisis," he underlined. "Looking ahead to the first half of 2024, economic activity weakness could further accelerate the decline in inflation. This will mean that monetary policy will remain tight for a relatively short period. I anticipate that this could prompt the European Central Bank (ECB) to consider a reduction in interest rates as early as the first half of next year," he underlined. During an event by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Philip Lane, chief economist of the ECB, also cautioned that it is early to declare inflation beaten. Anticipating a surge in headline inflation throughout the euro area in December, he foresees it persisting above the ECB's 2% target throughout 2024. Lane acknowledged that while the

energy price shock and post-coronavirus bottlenecks are in the past, the continuous rise in wages, particularly in the services sector, remains a significant factor. He emphasized that despite some positive indicators, the ongoing growth in wages and the absence of uniform disinflation in the services industry suggest that it is not yet time to declare victory over inflation. Looking ahead to the ECB's upcoming rate-setting meeting in January, Lane emphasized the need for a cautious approach. Throughout the year, the ECB directed its attention toward tackling the most elevated levels of inflation observed in four decades, primarily through the implementation of stringent monetary policy measures. In a recent speech, ECB President Christine Lagarde also posed the question, "Should we lower our guard?" "We contemplate that query. The answer is a resounding no. We absolutely should not lower our guard," she said. Despite feeble macroeconomic prospects, European banks face ongoing risks due to more restrictive financing conditions. While the swift rise in interest rates has initially enhanced overall profitability for banks, this positive impact is expected to wane as higher interest rates are transferred to depositors, according to the ECB. According to the European Commission's Autumn Forecast, following robust expansion throughout most of 2022, real gross domestic product (GDP) contracted towards the end of 2023 after barely growing at all in the first three quarters of the year. "Still high, though declining, inflation, and tightening monetary policy took a heavier toll than previously expected, alongside weak external demand," the report said. The Autumn Forecast revises down the EU GDP growth projections for 2023 to 0.6% for both the bloc itself and the euro area, reflecting a 0.2 percentage point reduction from the commission's summer estimates. However, despite these challenges, the report suggests that economic activity is poised to gradually recover. While some positive indicators have emerged, the EU economy grapples with persistent challenges, pushing policymakers to adopt a cautious stance in the face of ongoing uncertainties. The specter of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis looms large, demanding a delicate balance between economic recovery and prudent monetary measures.

Chinese Cities Ease Gasoline Car Restrictions to Boost Economy

BEIJING (Dispatches) - The Chinese city of Hangzhou, one of several large Chinese cities that restrict licenses for new fossil fuel-powered cars to reduce pollution and traffic congestion, is easing the curbs on eligibility for car ownership in an effort to boost flailing consumer spending and the economy, business news outlet Caixin Global reports. Hangzhou, alongside Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, has had such restrictions for nearly a decade. Hangzhou's city authorities have been granting just 80,000 new license plates for gasoline and diesel-powered cars per year, in a lottery. To compare, in February 2023, more than 800,000 residents registered to take part in the lottery to win fewer than 5,000 license plates, Caixin notes. The city government started easing the restrictions this year, allowing residents who haven't won the lottery more than 72 times to directly apply for a license plate for a gasoline or a diesel-fueled passenger vehicle. The aim of the eased restrictions is to boost consumer spending and the economy. This year, China has had an up-and-down path to recovery from the Covid-related lockdowns that lasted nearly three years. The crisis in the real estate sector and the patchy manufacturing output recovery have weighed on the Chinese economy and its near-term prospects. While electric vehicle (EV) sales in China continue to increase, the overall car market has been struggling, also due to the license plate limitations in big cities, Cui Dongshu, secretary-general of the China Passenger Car Association, wrote in an article early this year, Caixin noted. Cui has called for a nationwide cancellation of the restrictions on licenses for fossil fuel-powered passenger vehicles. If the restrictions were to be lifted, China's passenger car sales would rise by around 10 million units over five years, Cui says. Higher gasoline and diesel sales will lead to a rise in China's fuel demand, too.



Fifth of Global Oil Trade Used Non-Dollar Currencies in 2023

LONDON (Dispatches) - A fifth of global oil trade this year was settled in currencies different from the U.S. dollar as countries such as Russia and China move away from the petrodollar. This is according to JP Morgan's head of global commodities strategy, Natasha Kaneva, who spoke to the Wall Street Journal and said sanctions have been a major motivator for Russia and Iran to start doing their oil business in non-dollar currencies. "The U.S. dollar is getting some competition in commodities markets," Kaneva said, just a day after news broke that Russia and Iran have agreed to completely stop using the U.S. dollar in bilateral trade. Indeed, some analysts have argued that the barrage of sanctions that the U.S. leveled on Russia is causing other countries to consider ditching the dollar as a way of insulating themselves from the effect of potential sanctions. "This is something other countries are increasingly concerned about," William Jackson, chief emerging-markets economist at Capital Economics, told the WSJ. "Some are seeking to reduce their risk of possible sanctions on the use of dollars in trade. China is trying to act as a geopolitical counterweight." Yet sanctioned oil producers are not the only ones eager to ditch the dollar. China has also been active in replacing dollars in international trade with its own currency, which it seeks to make more global. Earlier this month Nikkei Asia reported that the Chinese yuan had become the fourth most popular currency in international settlements in November, overtaking the Japanese yen. The report explained the development with the more active trade between Russia and China. A month earlier, in October, China also completed the first cross-border payment for oil in digital yuan. Before that, state-owned oil companies made several oil and gas purchases paying for them in the Chinese currency rather than dollars. Per JP Morgan data, there were 12 major commodity contracts that were settled in currencies different from the greenback this year, the WSJ reported, adding that this compared with seven such deals in 2022 and two in the period between 2015 and 2021. Among the 2023 deals were one between the UAE and India for crude oil deliveries to be paid for in rupees, and another—a currency swap line—between Saudi Arabia and China worth \$7 billion.

Qatar Signs Its First-Ever Five-Year Crude Supply Deal With Shell

DOHA (Dispatches) - QatarEnergy has signed a deal with Shell under which the state firm of the tiny Persian Gulf oil and gas producer will deliver up to 18 million barrels of crude annually to the supermajor, in the first-ever five-year crude sales agreement for the Qatari company. QatarEnergy will start supplying Shell International Eastern Trading Company in Singapore with up to 18 million barrels per year of Qatar Land and Qatar Marine crudes, beginning in January 2024. "We are delighted to sign our first ever five-year crude sales agreement," said Saad Sherida Al-Kaabi, the Minister of State for Energy Affairs, the President and CEO of QatarEnergy. "This agreement further strengthens QatarEnergy's relationship with Shell, which is not only a reliable crude oil off-taker, but also a major customer and a strategic partner of QatarEnergy." The crude oil supply deal is the latest agreement between QatarEnergy and Shell, which have a long-standing strategic partnership through several shared investments in the energy industry, including in QatarEnergy's huge LNG expansion projects in Qatar. Two months ago, QatarEnergy and Shell signed two long-term LNG deals to supply LNG from Qatar to the Netherlands for 27 years starting in 2026 when Qatar's first export expansion projects are expected to come online. Under the sale and purchase agreements, Qatar and Shell will deliver up to 3.5 million tons per year of LNG to the Gate LNG terminal in the port of Rotterdam, the Qatari firm said in October. Shell is a minority partner in some of Qatar's huge expansion projects. The UK-based supermajor holds a 6.25% share in the North Field East (NFE) and a 9.375% share in the North Field South (NFS) expansion projects. In October, Qatar broke ground for the world's largest LNG project, the North Field expansion project, which will boost the tiny Gulf country's export capacity by 48 million tons per annum (mtpa) by 2027. In July this year, Al-Kaabi said that "40% of all the new LNG that will come to the market by 2029, when all our projects are up and running, is going to be from QatarEnergy."





Aston Villa, Man City Close on Premier League Lead

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Douglas Luiz's late penalty took Aston Villa joint top of the Premier League with a 3-2 win over 10-man Burnley as Manchester City closed on the leaders by sweeping aside Sheffield United 2-0. But Manchester United's thrilling comeback to beat Villa on Boxing Day proved to be a false dawn for Erik ten Hag's men as they slumped to a 2-1 defeat at Nottingham Forest. It looked like a festive season to forget for Villa was set to continue after dropping points at home for the first time this season to Sheffield United and blowing a 2-0 lead to lose 3-2 at United. However, Luiz's spot-kick, that crept in off the underside of the bar, sent Unai Emery's men level on points with Liverpool at the top of the table. Leon Bailey's opener for the home side was quickly cancelled out by Zeki Amdouni for Burnley. Moussa Diaby restored Villa's lead before half-time and they had a man advantage for the final 35 minutes after Sander Berge saw a second yellow card. But Villa's high line is begging to be picked off by opponents and Lyle Foster timed his run to blast past Emi Martinez 19 minutes from time. There was a final twist, though, as Jhon Duran was upended inside the box and Luiz fired home. "Everyone is so happy, we need to enjoy the moment," said Luiz. "The last three games we don't play so well. It is halfway through the season, the players are tired, we lost three or four important players to injury. It is difficult, but we need to keep going." Despite missing Erling Haaland for a seventh consecutive game due to a foot injury, City were never troubled by the bottom-of-the-table Blades. Rodri ended Sheffield United's resistance after just 14 minutes when the Spanish midfielder surged forward and fired low into the far corner. Julian Alvarez again ably filled Haaland's shoes as the Argentine tapped in his fourth goal in three

games to make the points safe from Phil Foden's cross just after the hour mark. City move alongside Arsenal on 40 points, just two points behind Villa and Liverpool, who are in action at home to Newcastle on Monday. United, by contrast, are 11 points off the top after losing for the 21st time in 2023. A second win in three games under Nuno Espirito Santo lifts Forest five points clear of the relegation zone. Nicolas Dominguez swept the home side in front after a well-worked move on 64 minutes. Marcus Rashford rolled home only his third goal of the season after Alejandro Garnacho pounced on an error from Forest goalkeeper Matt Turner to level with United's first away goal in four games. But the Red Devils were quickly cut open on the counter-attack as Anthony Elanga teed up Morgan Gibbs-White to fire home the winner from outside the box. Chelsea snapped a run of four consecutive away defeats thanks to Cole Palmer's double but had to withstand a nervy finale to beat Luton 3-2. Powerful strikes from Palmer and Noni Madueke gave the visitors a 2-0 half-time lead. Mauricio Pochettino's men appeared to have ridden out a second half storm when Palmer's classy finish made it 3-0. But former Chelsea midfielder Ross Barkley sparked a Luton revival and Elijah Adebayo bundled home from close range to set up a thrilling finale. "That is the Premier League. Luton are a team that fight until the end," said Pochettino. Luton remain just one point adrift of safety as Everton slumped to a 3-0 defeat at Wolves. Max Kilman, Matheus Cunha and Craig Dawson were on target for Gary O'Neil's men, who secured a third win in seven days. Any fears that Crystal Palace could be dragged into the relegation battle were eased by the Eagles first win in nine games as Brentford were beaten 3-1 at Selhurst Park.

Nadal Leaves Door Open to Playing Beyond 2024



BRISBANE (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal left the door ajar Sunday to continuing after the 2024 season, but conceded there was "a high percentage" that he was on his last trip as a player to Australia. Speaking ahead of his comeback from a 12-month injury absence at the season-opening Brisbane International, the 37-year-old Spaniard said he did not know for sure what the future held. "The problem about saying that's going to be my last season is I can't predict what's going on 100 percent in the future," he said. "That's why I say 'probably'. It's obvious it's a high percentage that it's going to be my last time playing here in Australia. But if I am here next year, don't tell me, 'You said it was going to be your last season', because I didn't say it. 'You never know what's going on, you know? I can't predict how I'm going to be in the next six months. I can't predict if my body will allow me to enjoy tennis as much as I enjoyed the past 20 years. It's not an easy decision, but I know inside myself that it is a high percentage that it's going to be my last one.' The 22-time Grand Slam champion said that the last year, with surgery for a hip injury, had been tough and he contemplated quitting at one point during his recovery. But he said he had never lost his love for the sport, which motivated him to keep going. "Of course I was asking myself that (about retirement), but at some point I decided to keep going. I had the determination to keep going."

Poland Sweep Past Brazil in United Cup

PERTH (Dispatches) - World number one Iga Swiatek helped Poland sweep past Brazil 3-0 at the United Cup in Perth with Zheng Qinwen stunning Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova as China beat the Czech Republic. Swiatek led her top-seeded nation to the opening group win, crediting a calming few weeks away from the game after lifting the year-end women's championships last month in Mexico. "It was peaceful for the first time, I was able to focus on practice and rest," Swiatek said after dominating Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-2, 6-2. "I hope to be more dangerous this season - I'll do my best," she said. "I'm having such fun here and can concentrate on tennis," added the 22-year-old three-time French Open champion. Swiatek said the victory over Haddad Maia showed off her recharged mental strength. "I worked hard in the pre-season and gained a lot of confidence. I was able to play freely without any other thoughts to mess up my game." Teammate Hubert Hurkacz secured the day's second win with a 6-7 (4/7), 6-2, 6-3 comeback over Thiago Seyboth Wild to put the tie out of reach. Earlier, Zheng served up an upset 6-1, 2-6, 6-1 win over the seventh-ranked Wimbledon titleholder Vondrousova. "It was just a normal match for me," said Zheng, the WTA's 2023 Most Improved Player who has risen to be world number 15. "It doesn't matter who I face, I'm happy with the win and excited for my team." The 21-year-old added. It followed teammate Zhang Zhizhen defeating Jiri Lehecka 5-7, 6-3, 6-4 in China's maiden appearance at the mixed teams tournament. Zhang held his nerve against Lehecka in a heavy-hitting clash, with the world number 58 dictating from the baseline. Alexander Zverev battled back from a set down to beat Italy's Lorenzo Sonego 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-4 and earn a point for Germany in Sydney to get his season off the a winning start. Jasmine Paolini had given Italy a 1-0 lead, surviving a bout of cramps to defeat Angelique Kerber 6-4, 7-5 in the first match of the German former world number one's comeback after having a baby. In the deciding mixed doubles, Kerber and Zverev combined to beat Angelica Moratelli and Sonego 6-3, 6-0. Casper Ruud, the top-ranked Norwegian in history after reaching a career-high two by making the 2022 US Open final, was a level above Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor in a 6-3, 6-4 win at Sydney. He converted three of seven break points to clinch victory in 72 minutes against a player who has risen to 23 in the world on the back of ATP Tour titles in Pune and Hertogenbosch this year. It helped Norway level the tie after the Netherlands' Arantxa Rus downed Malene Helgo 7-6 (7/4), 6-1 in the women's singles. Ruud, now ranked 11, returned to partner Ulrikke Eikeri in the mixed doubles, but they were unable to overcome Demi Schuurs and Wesley Koolhof who rallied from a break down in each set to win 7-6 (7/5), 7-5.



Cowboys Win Controversial Thriller With Lions



MIAMI (Dispatches) - The Dallas Cowboys survived a controversial finish to beat the Detroit Lions 20-19 and ensure they end with a 100 percent home record this season. With Dallas leading 20-13 and 23 seconds remaining in the battle of two teams already assured of the playoffs, Amon-Ra St. Brown caught an 11-yard touchdown pass from Jared Goff to bring the Lions within a point of levelling the game. True to his style, Detroit head coach Dan Campbell opted to go for two and take the lead rather than settle for the extra point. The move looked to have paid off when Goff found lineman Taylor Decker in the end zone for the two points but the referee ruled that Decker had been an ineligible receiver. The Lions protested the decision furiously arguing that Decker had reported as per the rules which state that players not normally receivers, such as Decker an offensive tackle, need to report as eligible receivers. Despite being penalised back to the seven yard line for the repeat of the play, Campbell stuck to his guns and although Goff was intercepted, the Cowboys were penalised this time for offside. That gave the Lions a third chance for the two points with Campbell sticking to his guns but James Mitchell was unable to collect Goff's pass. The Cowboys returned Detroit's onside kick attempt and were able to run out the clock and secure their eighth win in eight home games this season. Campbell was fuming at the end of the game. "70 (Dan Skipper) reported and 68 (Decker) didn't that was the explanation," said Campbell who insisted the referees had got it wrong and Decker had reported as eligible. Decker said he had reported as required. Video footage did show Decker and Skipper both approach the referee separately before the two point attempt. The result leaves both NFC teams on 11-5 records - the Philadelphia Eagles and San Francisco 49ers both have 11-4 records with two games remaining in the fight for the conference's top seed. Dallas had taken a 7-3 lead in spectacular fashion when scrambling quarterback Dak Prescott threw to CeeDee Lamb on the 50 yard line and he raced home for a 92-yard touchdown. Detroit got ahead through a three-yard rush from David Montgomery but Dallas put themselves in a game winning position thanks to an eight-yard touchdown pass from Prescott to Brandin Cooks and a 43-yard field goal from the reliable Brandon Aubrey. The late drama somewhat overshadowed the milestones reached by Lamb who overtook Michael Irvin for the most receiving yards in a season as he reached 1,604.

Pistons End 28-Game Losing Streak to Avoid Another Record

MIAMI (Dispatches) - The Detroit Pistons avoided an unwanted record when they ended their 28-game losing streak with a 129-127 win over the Toronto Raptors. The Pistons had equaled the record losing streak of the Philadelphia 76ers with their loss to the Boston Celtics on Thursday. The 76ers had a 28-game skid spanning the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons. Detroit's dismal run was the longest single-season losing streak in NBA history but a first win since October ensured the Pistons avoided another miserable milestone. Cade Cunningham's 30 points and 12 assists helped Detroit recapture the winning feeling and although a three pointer from Gary Trent with a second remaining narrowed the deficit it was too late for a Raptors comeback. Pistons head coach Monty Williams said the scenes in the locker-room after the win had been special. "Guys were screaming, I was almost in tears. I'm just so happy for our guys, I'm happy for everybody in the locker-room," he said. "I've been in a ton of locker rooms my whole life and that's a first for me to have that kind of, it wasn't relief, it was just like, 'Thank God, finally,'" added Williams. Williams, the 2022 NBA Coach of the Year, said he hoped the win would prove to be a turning point for his team. "Sometimes it just takes a win like that to get things started and I just have so much respect for our team. 'I think people may have thought that they were okay with losing. But they came in every day with a great spirit, and they wanted answers. They came in wanting to learn and try to get better.' So I just respect the heck out of our guys. Really happy that we finally got a win because it's so hard to win in this league," he said. LeBron James suffered defeat on his 39th birthday as the Los Angeles Lakers were beaten 108-106 at the Minnesota Timberwolves. James, who was on court for 39 minutes, put up 26 points on 10 of 21 shooting from the field with Anthony Davis top scoring for the Lakers with 33 points, 17 rebounds and eight assists. With 3.1 seconds remaining, James thought he had tied the game at 107-107 with a three point throw

right on the line of the arc but to his frustration the referee ruled it to be only a two point effort. Anthony Edwards, who top scored for Minnesota with 31 points, added a point from the free throw line before James was off-target with an attempted buzzer beater. The Miami Heat's four-game winning streak came to an end with a 117-109 defeat at the Utah Jazz with star Jimmy Butler suffering another injury setback. Butler had missed all four of Miami's recent wins with a calf injury but on his return to action he was unable to complete the game, leaving with a foot injury in the third quarter after making eight points. Collin Sexton top scored for the Jazz with 22 points and Keyonte George contributed 21 points as the Jazz (14-19) pulled off the win against the 19-13 Heat. Although Utah pulled away late in the game, outscoring Miami 29-21 in the fourth quarter, it had been a close contest with 25 lead changes and 12 ties. While Bam Adebayo delivered for the Heat, with 28 points and 16 rebounds, Miami's supporting cast failed to step up when Butler was forced out - Miami made just one field goal in the last 5:57. The Heat did reduce Utah's lead to two points with 2:41 remaining but the Jazz responded strongly to see out the game. "Second half, we were just never able to contain them off the bounce, regardless of what the action was," said Heat coach Erik Spoelstra. With MVP Joel Embiid still missing with an ankle injury, Philadelphia, third in the East, suffered a 105-92 loss at the Chicago Bulls to slip to 22-10 on the season. DeMar DeRozan scored 24 points and Coby White 20 for the Bulls. Luka Doncic returned to the Dallas Mavericks line-up, after missing Thursday's game at Minnesota, and scored 39 points, 25 of them in the second half as his team beat the Golden State Warriors 132-122. Doncic added ten assists and eight rebounds as Dallas moved to 19-14 on the season and handed the Warriors (15-17) their third straight loss. The Indiana Pacers beat the New York Knicks 140-126 with 22 points and a franchise record equalling 23 assists from Tyrese Haliburton.

