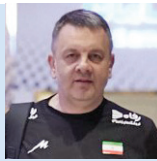




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Iranian and Russian presidents call ties 'strategic'



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180,000 jobs planned for corona-affected families

TEHRAN – Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam also known as Setad-e Ejraiy-e Farman-e Hazrat-e Emam, will implement 60,000 job creation plans for those financially struggling families who were affected by coronavirus outbreak, YJC reported on Tuesday.

All the measures of the Headquarters move in the direction of small and medium-sized home businesses, Mohammad Mokhber, head of the Headquarters stated.

Noting that the foundation is active in 56 fields, he said that "we have supported 75,000 job plans in the country last year, which led to the creation of 600,000 jobs in the country."

Today, 40,000 business plans are launched which aim to create 120,000 jobs, and the implementation of 60,000 job creation projects is going to create 180,000 job opportunities in the country for those affected by coronavirus, he explained. **→9**

U.S. oil futures plumb historic lows below zero, Brent plunges

U.S. oil futures continued to trade in negative territory on Tuesday, after closing down nearly \$40 on Monday in their first ever sub-zero dive, as concerns grew the United States will run out of storage for a glut caused by the coronavirus lockdown.

Global benchmark Brent crude also fell sharply in response to the collapse of demand following reduced economic activity.

U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for May delivery traded at minus \$7 a barrel by 0955 GMT, up \$30.63 from Monday's close when the contract settled at a discount of \$37.63 a barrel.

The slump in the U.S. contract was exaggerated by the looming expiry late on Tuesday of the front-month contract for delivery of oil in May when the lack of storage is set to be particularly acute. **→5**

Iranian professor publishes memories of 16-month captivity in U.S.

TEHRAN – Seyyed Mojtaba Atarodi, an Iranian professor and a suspect in a case of circumvention of the U.S. sanctions on Iran, has published his memories of a 16-month detention in a federal prison in San Francisco in a book.

The book titled "From Sharif to Los Angeles" has been published by Sureh-Mehr based on information Iranian

scholar Parviz Saadati gathered and some interviews he conducted with Atarodi.

Atarodi, a professor of microelectronics at the Sharif University of Technology in Tehran who traveled to the United States on December 7, 2011 for medical treatment, was detained at the Los Angeles International Airport. **→12**



ARTICLE

Ebrahim Fallahi
Tehran Times journalist

Missing out on LNG market Iran needs to take action

Last week, Qatar Petroleum announced the start of drilling operations for the development of its North Field (known in Iran as South Pars) gas field, in which the company plans to drill 80 new wells to increase the country's liquefied natural gas (LNG) production capacity by 43 percent to reach 110 million tons per annum (Mtpa).

Sharing the world's biggest gas reserve with Iran, Qatar currently accounts for 33 percent of the global LNG production capacity and this increase will boost the Persian Gulf country's market share even more. Iran, on the other hand, is not benefiting from the field as much as the tiny Arab neighbor.

■ The market

Considering the growing demand for natural gas in the Asian markets and all around the world, LNG is becoming one of the world's most strategic commodities which could play a very important role in the gas-producing countries' political and economic stance in the future.

Unfortunately, Iran currently does not have any LNG plants and although the country's gas production from the shared field has exceeded that of Qatar in recent years, the extracted gas is only being exported through pipelines to some neighbors.

■ The shared field

Iran and Qatar share the South Pars gas field (known as North Dome field in the Qatari side) in the Persian Gulf waters, it is by far the world's largest natural gas field.

The field was discovered in 1990 and Qatar immediately started developing its share which was called North Dome and began gas production in 1997; Iran, however, started the development operations eight years after Qatar in 1998.

It should be noted that, of the field's total 9,700 square kilometers, only 3,700 square kilometers is in the Iranian waters and the Arab nation holds almost two-third of the reserves, so the Qataris were ahead of Iran in terms of both time and reserves.

Since the beginning of the development project in 1997 up to 2005, Qatar Petroleum, the Arab country's National Oil and Gas Company, drilled 401 wells in the field and was producing nearly 565 million cubic meters (mcm) of gas per day. **→5**

The moral side of the epidemic

By M.A. Saki

TEHRAN — Now the shoe is on the other foot. The timing couldn't be better for Americans to experience first-hand a downturn economy, a chronic pain Iranians have endured for four decades under U.S.-led sanctions.

Unlike previous economic hardships, this one is caused by a common cause, and that's what makes it unique.

The novel coronavirus is all over the place. As yet, it has left thousands dead, more than two millions infected, and virtually everyone affected in more than 177 countries.

The U.S. has now become the country hit hardest by the pandemic. For the first time in the history of the country, all 50 states are under major disaster declaration with severe conse-

quences for national and economic security.

The pandemic curve seems to be flattening out in the major portion of Iran as it peaked sooner than in the U.S. despite a few hotspots seeing a resurgence after phasing in essential economic sectors.

For a rare moment in modern history, both nations, and by extension all other nations across the globe, are scratching their heads over the same set of questions despite living in categorically dissimilar geographical, cultural, economic and political fabrics.

Aside from human fatalities, the economic havoc the pandemic is wrecking and the uncertainty of returning to a semblance of normalcy before long have come to the fore over the past two months.

In the U.S., more than 22 million have filed unemployment only in a space of four weeks, almost equal to all jobs created after the last recession in 2008.

In a bellwether change to the epidemic scene, anti-lockdown demonstrations have started to break out around the U.S. as political leaders continue to wrangle over reopening the economy.

While the U.S. economy is resilient enough to bounce back fast soon after the epidemic is contained, the story is enormously different for Iran.

What is a return to normalcy in the U.S. is almost non-existent in Iran. We have always been looking forward to a return to less abnormal conditions not to a full normalcy due to unwarranted sanctions led by the U.S. **→3**

Syrian air defenses repel Israeli air strike on Palmyra area

Syrian air defenses are repelling an Israeli air strike on the Palmyra area in the east of the Homs governorate, the SANA news agency reported on Monday.

According to the agency, the Syrian military "managed to shoot down several missiles of the enemy before they reached ground targets."

Al Mayadeen TV channel reported that Israeli planes had attempted to strike military facilities north of the Palmyra airport.

A spokesperson for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) declined to comment on the information.

"We do not comment on foreign media reports," an IDF spokesperson told TASS by phone. On January 15, Israel's Air Force carried out a missile attack against Syria by attacking the

T-4 military aerodrome from the Al-Tanf region bordering Jordan and Iraq. The area houses a US military base.

On March 31, Syrian missile defense units repelled an airstrike at the Shayrat military airfield some 38 km east of Homs. The attack was carried out from the Lebanese airspace.

In late March, the Syrian army had intercepted a number of missiles fired by Israeli warplanes in the same province.

In the March 31 incident, the Israeli missiles violated the Lebanese airspace before being confronted by the Syrian army air defenses.

The Tel Aviv regime mostly keeps quiet about the attacks on Syrian territories which many view as knee-jerk reaction to Syrian government's increasing success in confronting terrorism in

country.

Israel has been a main supporter of terrorist groups that have opposed the government of President Bashar al-Assad since militancy erupted in Syria in March 2011.

Syrian government forces have taken back many areas once controlled by the terrorist groups. The government and allied forces are currently busy fighting last bastions of militants in the northwestern province of Idlib and areas in the neighboring Aleppo province.

The large-scale government offensive in Idlib has caused increasing friction with neighboring Turkey as Ankara insists that Syria and its main ally Russia are violating the terms of a ceasefire agreement reached in Russia in September.



© Tehran Times/ Shahab Chayoumi

Charities to provide free meals for the needy during Ramadan

Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation in cooperation with charity associations will provide underprivileged families across the country with five million meals during the holy month of Ramadan (starting April 25).

More than 300 kitchens run by universities, Basij bases, and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps will participate within the framework of a national program called "The Iranian Generosity."



ARTICLE

Faranak Bakhtiari
Tehran Times journalist

Earth Day 2020: nature is a beneficiary of coronavirus

Human beings have put too much pressure on the Earth causing irreparable damage, however, with the onset of coronavirus outbreak, the planet seemed to prosper and relieve the burden which was unprecedented over the past 50 years when the first Earth Day celebrated.

The planet is looking uninhabited these days as people across the world are sheltering in place and avoiding social gatherings to contain the spread of the virus.

The first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, which has now spread to more than 210 countries, infecting nearly 2,495,296 people and killing more than 171,064. With large gatherings prohibited, businesses shut down and governments around the world ordering citizens to "stay at home," the Earth has become so quiet and isolated but feeling much better.

This year, as the world celebrates the 50th anniversary of World Earth Day, the entire Earth is at its best condition in half a century, Mohammad Darvish, a member of the National Security Council for the environment, said.

Referring to the outbreak's effect on the spread of the pollutants throughout the world, he noted that over the past two months, most people around the world have experienced unprecedented shocks, and for the first time in a row, greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel consumption, air, land and water traffic have dropped dramatically.

All of this has led to greenhouse gas emissions in March 2020 being the same as in the 1990s, 30 years ago, and this shows how much people's lifestyles are at odds with what they call "global resilience," he highlighted.

The declining human traffic in nature and the outdoor environment has significantly reduced the amount of noise pollution and earthquakes produced on Earth, making it easier for geologists to study the Earth's outer crusts, he also noted. **→9**

'Iranians are victims of Washington's foreign policy'

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — John Calabrese, a professor at American University, has said that the Iranian people are victims of Washington's foreign policy.

In an interview with ILNA published on Tuesday, he said, "the Iranian people are not just victims of the coronavirus and they are also victims of the United States' foreign policy."

The professor noted that the "sanctions just complicate the problems". The U.S. claims that humanitarian aid are exempt from the sanctions, however, the sanctions have been designed in a way that impede Iran's access to medicine and medical equipment as foreign companies are cautious to trade with Iran, Calabrese said.

Democratic U.S. presidential nominee Joe Biden said on April 2 that Trump's administration must ease economic sanctions on Iran as a humanitarian gesture during the global coronavirus pandemic.

He said the U.S. has a moral obligation to be among the first to offer aid to people in need regardless of where they live when confronting a virus that knows no borders or political affiliations, according to Aljazeera.

Donald Trump's administration is not only refusing to remove its illegal sanctions on Iran, it is also blocking Tehran's efforts to get emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund to cope with the coronavirus problem.

Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein in a letter has urged Trump not to block Iran's access to a \$5 billion loan from the IMF to help fight the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis in the country.

"I am disappointed to see reports that your administration intends to block Iran from receiving \$5 billion in humanitarian aid from the IMF to combat the coronavirus pandemic," Feinstein wrote in her letter to Trump.

"Providing these funds to Iran would help it respond more effectively to the disease and mitigate the risk of further destabilization in the region," she added.

For the first time since 1962, Iran applied for emergency IMF funding in March to help it fight the coronavirus outbreak. Washington has indicated it will block IMF funding for Iran.

Tehran, as well as several countries, the United Nations, some U.S. lawmakers, and human rights groups have urged the United States to ease the sanctions to help Iran respond more effectively to the virus.

"We are a member of the IMF... There should be no discrimination in giving loans," President Hassan Rouhani said in a televised cabinet meeting on April 8.

IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva has stated that countries affected by the virus will be supported via Rapid Financial Instrument (RFI).

On April 8, President Hassan Rouhani dubbed illegal sanctions as "economic and medical terrorism".

Medicines and medical equipment are technically exempt from the U.S. sanctions, but purchases are frequently blocked by the unwillingness of banks to process transactions for fear of incurring large penalties in the United States.

Chris Murphy, the U.S. senator from Connecticut, warned on April 13 that the Trump administration could be partially responsible for "the death of innocent people" if it continues its current policies towards Iran amidst the epidemic.

"If this epidemic continues to grow and spread in Iran it will... result in the death of innocent people, partially as a result of U.S. policy that does not accrue to the national security benefit of our country," he told reporters on the conference call, The National Interest reported.

"Remember, if we don't beat it there, we don't beat it here. This virus doesn't respect borders," he added. "It's just good public health policy to help even our adversaries beat back this scourge."

Murphy had penned a March 26 letter, signed by ten other Democratic senators, asking the Trump administration to ensure that Iran and Venezuela can import medical supplies and other humanitarian goods to deal with the coronavirus outbreak.

Murphy also wrote on his Twitter page on April 6 that Iranians are dying of coronavirus partly because of U.S. sanctions.

"Innocent civilians are dying there in part because our sanctions are limiting humanitarian aid during coronavirus," he tweeted.

Fan Hongda, a professor of international relations at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), has also said that the United States sanctions on Iran violate human rights.

"Iran is fighting the coronavirus and faces shortage in medicine and medical equipment because of the United States' long term sanctions. This issue has affected the Iranian people's health seriously," he told IRNA in an interview published last week.

He added, "Instead of helping the countries to fight the coronavirus, the United States has imposed sanctions on Iran and put pressure on other countries not to help Iran."

Despite the U.S. pressure, China has not stopped sending aid to Iran, he noted.

Foreign ministers of the European Union have urged suspension of sanctions against countries, including Iran, in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

Dane Rowlands, a professor at Carleton University, has said it is "regrettable" that the United States is refusing to ease sanctions on Iran while the country is fighting the deadly virus.

Rouhani, Putin talk on phone, seek speedy implementation of Tehran-Moscow agreements

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — In a phone conversation late on Tuesday President Hassan Rouhani and Russian President Vladimir Putin called the Tehran-Moscow ties "strategic" and called a speedy implementation of the agreements between the two immediate neighbors.

Rouhani insisted on the need to strengthen ties in major areas, especially in the areas of commerce, economy, science and medicine.

"The two countries should also continue their trade exchanges by observing health protocols," Rouhani remarked.

"Today all countries across the world are facing difficult situation, and in such a situation friendly countries should establish a 'more intimate' relationship," the Iranian president added.

The two presidents also said it is necessary to strengthen cooperation in the struggle to contain the outbreak of coronavirus through collective cooperation.

Rouhani said coronavirus has spread all across the world and expressed hope that all countries would tackle the crisis through cooperation in the near future. He also said Iran and Russia can exchange experience in containing the pandemic disease.

Rouhani also pointed to the "illegal" sanctions on Iran and said in these hard times the U.S. is blocking the IMF to pay emergency loans to Iran.

In their phone conversation, Rouhani and Putin also talked about the need to advance the Astana peace process over Syria through trilateral talks, which involves Iran, Russia and Turkey.

The Russian leader also censured the U.S. sanctions against Iran a violation of human rights and said, "Unfortunately, the West talks a lot about human rights but they act differently in practice."

Rouhani urges EU to fulfil its duty in countering U.S. actions

EU must counter U.S. 'inhuman' and 'brutal' sanctions on Iran, Rouhani says

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — In a phone conversation with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez on Tuesday afternoon, President Hassan Rouhani said that the European Union must fulfil its duty in countering U.S. actions against Iran as the country is struggling to contain the outbreak of the coronavirus.

"In such a situation, relations between countries should be based on human principles, and hostile policies must be countered with, but unfortunately we are seeing that in these very difficult conditions, the United States continues to impose sanctions against Iran and even applies them on medicine," Rouhani regretted.

Referring to Iran's efforts to get loan from the International Monetary Fund for fighting coronavirus, Rouhani said, "The United States also opposes the payment of the loan, and the European Union and Spain are expected to take a stand against this illegal act."

For his part, Sanchez said, "We believe that U.S. sanctions have had a profound effect on the Iranian economy and the health of the people, especially in this difficult time when you are facing the coronavirus, and Spain and the European Union do not agree with these sanctions."

Iran in West Asia along with Spain and Italy in Europe are hardest hit by the deadly coronavirus.

In a similar phone talks Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte late on Monday, Rouhani also urged the EU to counter the United States' "inhuman" actions.

"We expect the European countries, especially Italy, to take necessary measures against violation of law [by the U.S.]," Rouhani said.

Rouhani described the U.S. pressure on other countries in a situation when they are fighting the coronavirus pandemic, as



"inhuman".

"Continuation of it [pressure and sanctions] is a brutal crime against a great nation and is contrary to human principles and international law," he added.

■ **'INSTEX has not been effective so far'**

Rouhani also told the Italian prime minister that INSTEX (the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) has not been effective so far.

He expressed hope that the EU would fulfil its obligations under the 2015 nuclear deal known as the JCPOA.

INSTEX has been designed by the European Union to facilitate legitimate trade with Tehran. It was introduced on January 31, 2019, by France, Germany, and Britain, the three European countries party to the nuclear deal.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas

Mousavi said on Monday that the INSTEX is a preliminary step for Europeans to fulfil their obligations and their commitments are not limited to it.

For his part, Conte said that Italy is ready to cooperate with Iran and strengthen the EU financial mechanism to interact with Iran.

■ **'No way but regional cooperation to boost security'**

In a separate phone conversation with Kuwaiti Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Rouhani said that there is no way but expanding regional cooperation and friendship to boost security and stability in the region.

He added that Iran is ready to expand cooperation and relations with Kuwait.

For his part, the Kuwaiti Emir said his country supports Iran's proposed Hormuz peace initiative.

At the United Nations summit in New

York in late September 2019, Iran officially unveiled the proposal for regional security.

"Based upon the historical responsibility of my country in maintaining security, peace, stability and progress in the Persian Gulf region and Strait of Hormuz, I would like to invite all the countries directly affected by the developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to the 'Coalition for Hope', meaning Hormuz Peace Endeavor," President Hassan Rouhani told the UN delegates.

Foreign Minister Zarif has invited all regional states to join the peace plan for securing the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

In a tweet in September, Zarif said the initiative entails "dialogue, confidence-building, freedom of navigation, energy security, non-aggression, and non-intervention".

In a post on his Twitter account on October 15, Zarif renewed Iran's call to all countries bordering the Persian Gulf to join Tehran to "forge a blueprint for peace, security, stability, and prosperity" in the region.

In a press briefing on November 25, the Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi announced that three countries have accepted to join Iran's Hormuz peace plan.

"Three countries have given written response to Iran's invitation and other countries are studying it," he said.

He also called on certain Persian Gulf Arab states to abandon reliance on foreign forces for their security, saying dependence on foreigners is just an "illusion".

"We called on the countries to respond to Iran's peace-seeking call and abandon illusions. We have stressed that the presence of foreign countries undermines security and stability. We hope this initiative of Iran would face with a positive response," Mousavi stated.

Russian, Iranian, Turkish foreign ministers to discuss Syria via video conference

By staff and agency

The foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey are scheduled to hold a round of negotiations on Syria via video conference on Wednesday, the Russian Foreign Ministry told TASS on Monday.

Russia, Iran, Turkey are guarantors of the Astana peace process.

"We confirm that trilateral ministerial Astana peace talks on Syria will be held on April 22 via video conference," TASS said, quoting the Russian Foreign Ministry.

These talks are to be held remotely online for the first time.

Earlier on Monday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif at a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus announced that the trilateral talks will focus on Syria's constitutional committee and developments in the Syrian province of Idlib.



The latest round of Astana talks took place on December 10-11, 2019 in Nur-Sultan. The next meeting was planned for March 2020, however, the meeting was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. This meeting, which was set to take place in Iran, remains on the agenda, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Mousavi said in early April.

Zarif expands on Tehran's regional peace efforts

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — After his meeting with Syrian officials in Damascus on Monday, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif expanded on regional peace and counterterrorism efforts by Iran.

While in Syria, Zarif held talks with President Beshar al-Assad, Foreign Minister Walid Mualllem. Zarif's talks with the Syrian officials focused on the Astana peace talks.

Zarif also sent his special envoy to Afghanistan to Kabul for talks with interim president Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, two senior Afghan figures who are trying to iron out disputes over power-sharing after the September 2019 presidential election.

In a post on his Twitter page, Zarif also said Iran's special is negotiating with the Yemenis and UN official on how to bring an end to the pains of the poor Yemeni people.

"Our regional peace and counterterrorism efforts:

Today I met with President Assad and FM of Syria ahead of Astana ministerial video conference.

Regarding Afghanistan, our Special Rep has met with all sides in Kabul in past days. On Yemen, our Special Rep working with UN and Yemenis to end suffering."

According to the Russian TASS news agency, the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey are going to hold a video conference on the Astana process on Wednesday, April 22. The trilateral talks are reportedly going to focus on Syria's constitutional committee and developments in the Syrian province of Idlib.

In line with their security cooperation, Iran, Turkey, and Russia - three power brokers in Syria - launched the Astana peace



talks on the Syrian crisis. The talks were launched in January 2017 with the aim of putting an end to the Syrian conflict.

Kazakhstan has hosted multiple rounds of talks on Syria since January 2017 most of which involved delegations from the Syrian government and opposition.

In his Monday talks with Assad, Zarif refuted the speculation that Iran may change its policy of supporting the resistance front and fighting terrorism after the assassination of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani.

"There will be no change in the Islamic Republic of Iran's path of supporting resistance and fighting terrorism in the region after martyrdom of General Soleimani," Zarif stated.

General Soleimani, who was assassinated in a U.S. drone attack on Baghdad's international airport on January 3, was a legendary commander in the fight against terrorist groups, especially Daesh, in Syria and Iraq.

Daesh celebrated the assassination of General Soleimani.

Unilateral sanctions deal a heavy blow to citizens in Iran: Lavrov

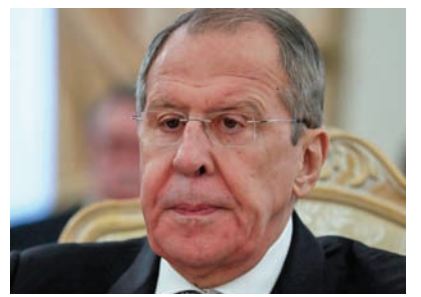
By staff and agency

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said that the United States' illegal unilateral sanctions amid the coronavirus pandemic deal a heavy blow to citizens in a range of states, first of all Iran, Syria and North Korea.

He told a video conference with the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund's delegates that these countries cannot purchase equipment, medicines and special protection gear. TASS reported on Tuesday.

"The Western states, first of all the U.S., have strongly rejected a proposal on declaring a humanitarian pause and exempting the supplies of goods needed to combat the pandemic from any sanctions," he said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had earlier called on the G20 to lift sanctions against other countries in order to effectively combat the coronavirus spread.



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet also backed the idea of cancelling or suspending sanctions amid the pandemic.

Medicines and medical equipment are technically exempt from the U.S. sanctions, but purchases are frequently blocked by the unwillingness of banks to process transactions for fear of incurring large penalties in the United States.

Judiciary dismisses UN rights report on prison furloughs amid virus outbreak

TEHRAN — (Press TV) — The Iranian Judiciary has dismissed as politically-motivated a United Nations human rights report that suggests Iranian prisoners face discrimination when it comes to receiving furloughs during a new coronavirus outbreak, saying Iran's performance in dealing with the issue — compared to that of the West — has been "exemplary."

"The Islamic Republic's performance in both protecting the inmates' health and prisoners' security and granting furloughs to them can be looked upon as an exemplary and outstanding model," Iran's Judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili said Tuesday.

Esmaili's remarks came after UN human rights experts called for the immediate release of prisoners, including dual nationals and foreigners, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit Iran and other world states.

In a report released on Friday, UN experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, said the Islamic Republic should expand its temporary release of thousands of detainees, claiming that "Iran's prisons have long-standing hygiene, overcrowding and healthcare problems."

Esmaili said that the UN experts would better report on what the United States, Britain and other European countries, where the coronavirus is more prevalent than in Iran, have done about their detainees.

"We have not seen any reports of furloughs or assistance to detainees from the countries" making such claims against Iran, he said, stressing that justice has been served and no distinction has been made among the inmates.



Ismaili said that Iran has recently furloughed more than 1,000 foreigners in order to prevent a further spread of the pandemic.

"We do not recognize dual citizenship, and our criteria for granting leave are the type of crime, the time served, the potential risks that an individual can pose to the society, and the eligibility to parole," he added.

The coronavirus first emerged in China and later spread to other world countries. Iran has so far reported 84,802 cases of infection with the virus and 5,297 deaths from COVID-19. Over 60,900 patients have also recovered.

The overall COVID-19 infections and fatalities in Iran have shown a downward trend in recent weeks.

As a result, Iran has eased some restrictions triggered by the coronavirus contagion, allowing low-risk businesses to reopen following weeks of closure with the aim of slowing the spread of the virus while providing relief to businesses and wage-earners.

Western states oppose stronger Iran-Russia relations: envoy

POLITICAL DESK **TEHRAN** — Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali has criticized Western countries for creating obstacles in the path of stronger relations between Iran and Russia.

"Many Western countries do not want the relations between Iran and Russia to expand. Many of them do nasty things and publish fake news, which we've witnessed in the last couple of months," Jalali said in an interview with IRNA published on Tuesday.

"Unfortunately, the Russians have looked at Iran through the West's lens and we, too, have looked at the Russians through the West's lens," he said.

He added that there's no correct understanding of Russia among Iranians following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and now that President Vladimir Putin is in power.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Jalali also said Iran and Russia have had close cooperation since the outbreak of the coronavirus in order to contain the deadly virus.

"The Russians voiced readiness to counter coronavirus through protocols and medical advice, and also a number of Russian pharmaceutical companies expressed their readiness to sell medicine to Iran, and the message was conveyed to Tehran," he said.

"Overall, it can be said that good collaborations took place," he said, adding,



"Unfortunately, the Russians have looked at Iran through the West's lens and we, too, have looked at the Russians through the West's lens," Ambassador Jalali says.

"Also, the foreign ministers and parliament speakers have talked with each other over this issue."

The coronavirus, also called COVID-19, initially emerged in China late last year and soon spread across the world.

In Iran, the outbreak has so far infected

84,802 people of whom 5,297 have lost their lives. Some 60,965 people have also recovered.

Jalali said the Russians have been very active with regard to the issue of the U.S.-imposed sanctions, which Tehran has termed as a very important factor

hampering its efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

Meanwhile, foreign ministers of the European Union have urged suspension of sanctions against countries, including Iran, in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

On March 31, a UN human rights expert called for lifting international sanctions against countries ranging from Iran to North Korea and Venezuela in coronavirus crisis, according to Reuters.

"The continued imposition of crippling economic sanctions on Syria, Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, and, to a lesser degree, Zimbabwe, to name the most prominent instances, severely undermines the ordinary citizens' fundamental right to sufficient and adequate food," Hilal Elver, UN special rapporteur on the right to food, said in a statement.

Chris Murphy, the U.S. senator from Connecticut, warned earlier this month that the Trump administration could be partially responsible for "the death of innocent people" if it continues its current policies towards Iran amidst the coronavirus epidemic.

"If this epidemic continues to grow and spread in Iran it will...result in the death of innocent people, partially as a result of U.S. policy that does not accrue to the national security benefit of our country," he told reporters on the Monday conference call, The National Interest reported.

Sanctions on Iran not justified under coronavirus circumstances: professor

South Alabama professor says sanctions are "unethical and immoral" at the current situation

POLITICAL DESK **TEHRAN** — A professor of political science says the United States' unilateral sanctions against Iran are not justified due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"As far as the sanctions on Iran are concerned, they are not justified when there is a pandemic," Mike Hollingsworth said in an interview with ILNA published on Tuesday.

"This is not the best time for political posturing and withholding aid from countries that are struggling to deal with this problem," said Hollingsworth from the University of South Alabama.

"It is unethical and immoral and this is why countries have offered aid to Iran. Humanitarian aid is exempt from the current sanctions, but the sanctions have weakened the economic power that Iran has, thus it limits the ability of the country to respond to the virus."

He argued that easing sanctions temporarily on Iran along with providing direct assistance in some way would be the best route to go given the current situation.

"Iran was hit relatively quickly by the virus. Policies need to be adjusted to provide aid to Iran indirectly, meaning that it doesn't need to come directly from Western powers," he remarked. "The government needs to be held accountable, however, since the aid needs to reach the people who need it."

Describing the coronavirus pandemic as a "serious threat

to world health, the professor said Iran has had more problems than most countries with this.

He said the coronavirus "seems to have spread more rapidly to some areas rather than others. There is a real threat in this pandemic but there have been far worse throughout history. Basically, the world got lucky with the last pandemic in 2009. Swine flu can be much worse, but the transmissibility of the novel coronavirus is a problem. While not normally lethal, it has that potential and without certain public health initiatives, the virus can cause a lot of problems."

Hollingsworth described the outbreak as a humanitarian issue which should transcend any international disputes, adding, "Unfortunately, countries like the United States are busy dealing with internal policies regarding the virus and not much attention has been paid to addressing Iranian problems."

Asked to assess the role of international organizations in dealing with the novel coronavirus, the professor said international organizations such as the World Health Organization set policies but they do not provide much direct aid.

"The United Nations is particularly ineffective in this realm," he said, adding, "They cannot really do anything. It is the policies of individual countries, sometimes acting as a collective that affects world health."

Unfortunately, he continued, less developed countries or



countries under heavy sanctions suffer disproportionately under this system.

"World health policy as a whole does not support a great deal of aid to those least able to protect themselves," he added.

Trump must do everything possible to avoid war with Iran: National Interest

POLITICAL DESK **TEHRAN** — In an article published on the National Interest, David Axe argued that U.S. President Donald Trump must do everything possible to avoid war with Iran.

The following is an excerpt of the article: There's still time to avoid a major conflict. But that would require Iranian and American leaders to do some stock-taking and get us off the road to war.

Jim Krane, a fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, wrote for Forbes in the summer of 2019 that Iran and the United States were "staggering toward war."

Four years ago, Tehran suspended urani-

um enrichment in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. Trump reimposed many of those sanctions.

There's no question Iran abided by nuclear deal

There is no question that Iran abided by the commitments it made in 2015. It opened its nuclear sites to inspection, dismantled most of its centrifuges, handed its uranium stocks to Russia, and even poured concrete into the reactor core that might have given it weapons-grade plutonium.

Sure enough, Iran is expected to announce an increase in its stockpile of uranium above what the 2015 deal allowed.

"Iran's Atomic Energy Organization

said that within days it expects that the country will have produced and kept in its stockpiles more low-enriched uranium — the sort used to fuel power plants — than allowed by the 2015 deal, which the Trump administration withdrew from last year," The New York Times reported on June 17, 2019. "Is there anything the Trump administration can do to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran?" Krane asked.

War also could block the Strait of Hormuz, with potentially devastating consequences. "An interstate war in the (Persian) Gulf would leave the Strait of Hormuz partially shut," Krane warned.

It would halt at least four million bar-

rels per day of exports, perhaps double that amount.

The outage could last from a month to a year and a half.

Ravaged oil markets could be worse off than we imagined.

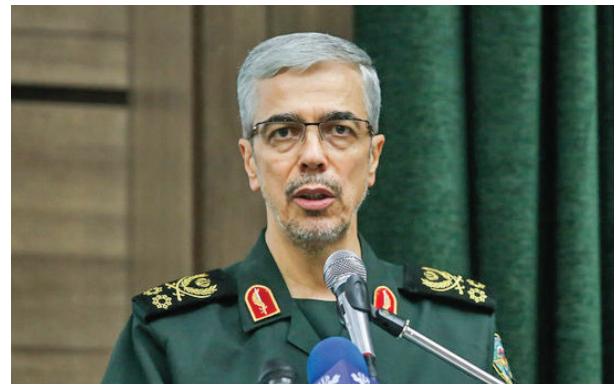
We hadn't considered that Houthi rebels in Yemen might simultaneously send drones to attack and shut Saudi Arabia's east-west pipeline, which allows the kingdom to export five million barrels per day via the Red Sea, avoiding the Strait of Hormuz.

There's still time to avoid a major conflict, Krane wrote. But that would require Iranian and American leaders to "do some stock-taking and get us off the road to war."

Military chief calls on IRGC to preserve high status

POLITICAL DESK **TEHRAN** — Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri has hailed the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) for playing a great role in safeguarding the Islamic Republic in all fronts.

In a message to IRGC Chief Major General Hossein Salami on Tuesday on the anniversary of the IRGC establishment 41 years ago, General Bagheri called on the Guards to preserve the high status of its readiness in the face of major events.



"I would like to congratulate all the commanders and staff of the Guards and its affiliated organizations on this glorious occasion," he said.

"I hope with God's grace, and under the wise guidance of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, you continue to increase your capacities and keep your readiness to face major events," the military chief stated.

General hails IRGC as pillar of national power

The commander of the Civil Defense Organization also described the IRGC as one of the pillars of the country's national power, saying such power has not been gained easily, therefore it must be defended wholeheartedly.

In his message, Brigadier General Gholamreza Jalali said the IRGC has taken great steps in a path filled with obstacles.

The shortcomings should not be an excuse for attacking and undermining the IRGC because "undermining the Guards is undermining national power," he said, according to Fars.

The IRGC was established on April 21, 1979, months after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, with the order of Imam Khomeini in order to protect the principles, values and ideals of the Revolution.

Last year on this day, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as the commander in chief, promoted Hossein Salami to the rank of major general and named him the commander of the IRGC.

Salami replaced Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari who held the post since September 2007.

It came two weeks after the IRGC was blacklisted by the U.S. as a "foreign terrorist organization".

In retaliation, the Iranian Supreme National Security Council named the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) a terrorist organization.

Sanctions relief not enough to help Iran stop coronavirus: Richard Nephew

TEHRAN (Tasnim) — Former White House official Richard Nephew has said sanctions relief will not be enough to help Iran import the goods it needs to fight the novel coronavirus.

At a video conference hosted by the CATO Institute on Monday, Nephew, who ran the Iran desk at the National Security Council from 2011 to 2013, said, "If you just simply suspended sanctions for the duration of the crisis, you potentially just create the same sorts of compliance headaches and burdens that already existed, where companies don't know where their lines are".

Nephew instead called for a "structured approach" where the "United States engages with the corporate sector and with Iran to facilitate certain transactions and certain transaction patterns" through "comfort letters" and other assurances, National Interest reported on Tuesday.

The former National Security Council official also served as a sanctions expert on the U.S. negotiating team with Iran from 2013 to 2014.

"In a normal environment, that might be enough, when you've got normal supply chains, normal business activity, normal banking, and normal manufacturing, and those sorts of things," Nephew said. "In the context of the pandemic, all conditions and the difficulties created by sanctions are exacerbated."

He said that the high cost of due diligence—compounded by Iran's own clandestine sanctions-busting activities—have contributed to "an impossible compliance burden" for companies who want to maintain regular business relationships with Iran.

And a recent press release by the State Department decrying "Iran's sanctions relief scam" may further scare companies away from trying to engage with the Iranian economy, Nephew said.

"Sanctions intend to interfere with normal trade. Their objective is to make normal trade and normal business activity much more difficult and much more complicated," he added. "This is part of how sanctions can be effective."

"The bigger problem is the possibility of de-risking from the United States altogether and the emergence of alternative mechanisms for conducting transactions," Nephew said.

"Part of the reason sanctions work is because people want to do business here. If they find ways of protecting themselves against the risks they're perceiving...that ultimately will have an effect to use those tools and certainly on our ability to take advantage of our economic position."

The moral side of the epidemic

1→ This has strengthened our resilience threshold in the face of such roller coaster swings and made us less susceptible to them.

If anything is to emerge out of this apocalyptic period, that is for Americans to put themselves in the Iranians' shoes and feel the pain of an economy falling apart.

Can Covid-19 serve as a catharsis for Americans who have never had to live under lingering economic hardship? Let's hope so.

TEHRAN (Press TV) — The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy says the country has increased the range of its naval missiles to 700 kilometers without any assistance from other countries.

"There was a time when the farthest range of our naval missiles did not exceed 45 km and even that was achieved with assistance from American military advisors," Brigadier General Alireza Tangsiri said in an interview on Monday.

"However, we have developed subsurface and surface-to-surface missiles with a range of 700 kilometers, which have been totally made by domestic military elites," he added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Tangsiri emphasized that foreigners are the source of insecurity in the region and said, "Wherever the Americans have been present, insecurity has followed and we know of nowhere [in the world] where the presence of the Americans has led to security."

He pointed to a recent naval incident between the IRGC's Navy and the U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf and said, "The Americans in this adventurism blocked the way to our vessels in violation of international regulations and even refrained from giving a radio response, but were faced with our forces' strong move."

Tangsiri noted that the presence of the Americans



in the Persian Gulf has led to a large increase in the number of maritime incidents, adding, "Since the arrival of the Americans in the region, 550 oil tankers have been targeted [in various attacks] and regional security has been decreased by 55 percent."

In a statement on Wednesday, the United States Navy claimed that 11 Iranian ships repeatedly came close to its military vessels in "dangerous and harassing approaches" in the Persian Gulf.

It alleged that the Iranian "vessels repeatedly crossed the bows and sterns of the U.S. vessels at extremely close range and high speeds," and came within 10 yards of the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Maui.

Number of real estate deals down 52% in a month on year

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The number of real estate deals in Iran has dropped 52 percent in the first month of the current Iranian calendar year, Farvardin (ended on April 19), compared to the same month in the past year, ISNA reported.



As reported, the number of deals has also fallen 70 percent to 1,250 in the capital city, Tehran, during the mentioned month. The number of real estate deals in the country had fallen 70 percent in the last month of the past Iranian calendar year, Esfand (ended on March 19), which was the highest drop that this sector has experienced over the past three years, according to Hesam Oqbaei, the vice chairman of Iranian Real Estate Agencies.

Inflation rate drops 2.6%: SCI

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) announced that the inflation rate in the twelve-month period ended on April 19, which marks the end of the first Iranian calendar month of Farvardin, stood at 32.2 percent.



The inflation rate has fallen 2.6 percent in the mentioned time span from the twelve-month period ended in the last day of the previous year, IRNA reported. The center also announced that the point-to-point inflation rate has dropped 2.2 percent to 19.8 percent in Farvardin from its preceding month. Point-to-point inflation has fallen 2 percent to 20.2 percent in the urban areas and slid 3 percent to 18.1 percent in the rural regions on a monthly basis, the same report confirmed. Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Governor Abdolnaser Hemmati has said that the inflation rate in Iran is predicted to go down to under 20 percent in the current Iranian calendar year (began on March 19). Also, the Statistical Center of Iran expects the inflation rate in the country to experience a downward trend in the first quarter of this year.

EU heads unlikely to make final call on coronavirus economic recovery on Thursday

European Union leaders meeting via video call on Thursday are not expected to make any final decisions on exactly how to finance economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, diplomats and officials told Reuters.



During a preparatory discussion with EU national envoys on Monday, the bloc's executive estimated the global outbreak could wipe off as much as a tenth of the continent's economic output. The Executive Commission told the 27 member states' envoys that it wanted to finance a new recovery fund via increased so-called headroom in the bloc's next joint budget, the sources said on Tuesday. The sources participated in the discussion behind closed doors, or were briefed on it. While the budget covers 2021-27, the Commission would ask for a temporary increase for 2021-22 of guarantees by member states for the EU budget's "own resources" and thus the head room to allow the Brussels-based executive to raise more cash against that. Countries such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, part of the fiscally conservative north that has so far firmly held out against any form of debt mutualization in the EU, told the gathering such a recovery fund must be temporary.

(Source: Reuters)

Economic facilities during coronavirus outbreak should not hinder other supportive decisions: ICCIMA head

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) has written a letter to the First Vice-President Es'haq Jahangiri, calling for measures to be taken to ensure that the economic facilities provided during the coronavirus outbreak do not overlap other supportive decisions regarding the normal conditions.

Emphasizing that almost all industries are in a worse situation than last year, Gholam-Hossein Shafe'i wrote that following the government's decision for introducing ten business categories which were affected by the pandemic the most, and considering some insurance and tax facilities for them, the Social Security Organization has canceled all the facilities which were provided by other organizations before the coronavirus outbreak.

In the letter, Shafe'i noted that the Social Security Organization's decision would deepen the crisis and create unemployment



ICCIMA Head Gholam-Hossein Shafe'i (R) and First Vice-President Es'haq Jahangiri for a large number of workers and shut down industries in the year which has been dubbed the "Surge in Production" by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei. Back in March, the government

announced the allocation of 1,000 trillion rails (about \$24 billion at the official rate of 42,000 rials) for helping lessen the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the national economy. "We allocated the sum in addition to the next year's budget to prevent huge losses and to be able to go on more conveniently," President Hassan Rouhani said. According to Rouhani, 750 trillion rials (about \$17.8 billion) would be paid in low-interest loans to businesses. Earlier on Saturday, Jahangiri had called on the government to further support the country's private sector as the economic frontiers in the battle against the coronavirus. Speaking in a meeting with the Industry, Mining and Trade Minister Reza Rahmani and his deputies, the official stressed the significant role of the private sector in the country's economy, noting that: "this year we need non-oil exports more than ever, and the government's priority is also promoting non-oil exports."

Issuance of industrial unit permits up 14% in a year

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — According to the latest data released by Iran's Industry, Mining and Trade Ministry, during the previous Iranian calendar year 1398 (ended on March 19), 27,947 licenses were issued for establishing new industrial units which mark a 14.2-percent increase year on year. As reported by IRNA, more than 3.63 quadrillion rials (about \$86.52 billion) was invested for the construction of the mentioned units which shows a 26-percent rise compared to the preceding year. The new units are expected to create job opportunities for 633,381 people, 14.2 percent more than the figure for the year 1397 (ended on March 20, 2019). In the past year, the number of licenses that were issued for the newly established industrial units to start operation also increase by 2.9 percent year on year. The investment in the newly established units increased 5.3 percent compared to the preceding year, while job creation by



the mentioned units fell 1.2 percent. The average investment in the mentioned sector also increased from 102.1 billion rials (about \$2.43 million) in 1397 to 104.5 billion rials (nearly \$2.5 million) in 1398. Earlier this month, Industry Minister Reza Rahmani outlined his ministry's major programs for supporting the domestic production in the current calendar year. The Ministry's programs included supporting the country's industrial units and facilitating license issuances in order to promote domestic production and non-oil exports.

Monthly rail freight transport of basic goods to ports up 300% yr/yr

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Transit of basic goods to the ports via railway network in the first Iranian calendar month of Farvardin (March 20-April 19) was tripled (up 300 percent) compared to the figure for the same month last year, IRIB reported, quoting the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (known as RAI). "The direct transport of goods from ship to train, which took place in the country's ports after 15 years, plays an important role in increasing the speed of cargo transportation and reducing the costs," Saeed Rasouli said. Regarding the transportation of cargoes from the mines to steel industries and mineral production centers in the mentioned period, a 100 percent growth was also recorded compared to the last year, he added. The official further explained that since due to the coronavirus outbreak the passenger transportation was greatly reduced, RAI used this opportunity for increasing the transportation of goods and cargoes and took effective measures in this area. He also mentioned the government's support for rail transport companies, which have been affected by the pan-



demc and said: "The government has provisioned certain measures in the form of low-interest facilities to support rail transport companies, the preparations for which have been made and the initial steps are taken." ■ **Direct transportation of goods from vessel to wagons saves \$900,000 in a month** Meanwhile, Director General of Business Services Coordination at Government Trading Corporation of Iran

(GTC) Hassan Fallahnejad said the direct transportation of goods from the vessels to the freight wagons has saved the country 40 billion rials (about \$900,000) in the first Iranian calendar month of Farvardin. In this new method, cargo shipping operations in ports will be carried out directly by the freight wagons of the rail transportation system, which will significantly reduce the costs of transportation," Fallahnejad told IRNA. According to the official, GTC has set a great record in the transportation of goods in the country's southern and northern ports. In the last month, basic goods have been sent to Tehran, East Azarbaijan, Isfahan, Karaj and Khorasan Razavi provinces through the rail transportation system, he stated. Back in December 2019, the head of RAI had announced that the country's rail freight transportation capacity was going to increase by five million tons in the near future. Also in July 2019, the official had said that 59 kilometers of railroads were constructed for connecting major cargo hubs in the country to the national railway network in the past Iranian calendar year.

South Korea's April 1-20 exports collapse as pandemic paralyzes production, demand

South Korean exports plunged nearly 27% in the first 20 days of April as the coronavirus health crisis paralyzed global manufacturing activity and crushed consumer demand. The worst may be yet to come with many of the country's top trading partners still in lockdowns to contain the virus' spread. Monthly trade data from Asia's fourth-largest economy is considered a bellwether for world trade as it is the first to be released among major exporting nations. Shipments fell 26.9% from a year earlier, sharply reversing 9.3% growth in the March 1-20 period, the Korea Customs Service data showed on Tuesday. Imports sank 18.6%, compared with a 4.0% rise in the previous month. "Today's data come as the global economy is in a bad shape, while shutdowns in car component factories abroad and a price plunge in petrochemical products have had a negative impact," a customs agency official told Reuters. A breakdown of the trade data showed overseas sales of semiconductors, the nation's top-selling item, tumbled 14.9%, while those of petrochemical products, car components and wireless devices plummeted 53.5%, 49.8% and 30.7%, respectively. By destination, shipments to the biggest trading partner China fell 17.0%, even as factories there resumed operations, while those to the United States



and the European Union slumped 17.5% and 32.6%, respectively. "The trend in exports slump could continue through June ... It will take a while for the United States and Europe to resume economic activities, while not only the volume of exports but a significant price drop of the goods are a great concern," said Park Sang-hyun, chief economist at Hi Investment & Securities. "Uncertainties for an export rebound in the third quarter remain high," Park added. The spread of the coronavirus has been slowing in major economies, prompting debate over whether to ease tough virus containment measures, but the peak of the outbreak still lays ahead as reported cases surpassed 2.41 million globally, according to a Reuters tally. Businesses have been paralyzed as lockdowns across the globe knocked demand and disrupted manufacturing and global supply chains.

(Source: Reuters)

UK employment growth slowed in March as COVID began to hit

The number of people in jobs in Britain grew more slowly in March than in February, official figures showed on Tuesday in an early sign of the impact of the coronavirus shutdown which is expected to hammer the jobs market. Growth in the number of people on companies' payrolls dropped to 0.8% in March from 1.1% in February, according to preliminary tax data that was released earlier than usual. "These experimental statistics show a softening picture in March, but cover the month as a whole including the period before the coronavirus restrictions were in place," David Freeman, a labor market statistician at the Office for National Statistics, said. Government budget forecasters last week said unemployment could rise as high as 10% with an extra 2 million people losing their jobs if a three-month lockdown was only slowly lifted over the next three months. "The small crack evident in the latest batch of labor market data may soon turn into a chasm," said Paul Dales, chief UK economist at consultancy Capital Economics, which predicts unemployment will peak at 9%. The ONS also reported a 12,100 monthly increase in the number of unemployment benefit claims for March, far below the median forecast of 172,500 in a Reuters poll of economists. The claims data is based on the situation on March 12, before much of the economy was shut down on March 23. The government ordered swathes of businesses to close to slow the spread of the coronavirus. It will meet 80% of the wages



of staff who are put on leave, until the end of June if needed, in a bid to slow a rise in unemployment. Last week, the ONS said a quarter of British companies had temporarily closed by early April, and the remainder had on average put 20% of their staff on leave. Finance minister Rishi Sunak said on Monday that businesses registered more than a million staff as furloughed within eight hours of the wage support program opening. On Monday, a survey of households showed that one in three suffered a loss in income by early April as the job market soured faster than during the 2008-09 financial crisis. Tuesday's data showed the unemployment rate in the three months to February unexpectedly edged up to 4.0% from 3.9%, which the ONS said reflected fewer new entrants to the labor market finding jobs than before. Wage growth slowed unexpectedly quickly, even before the crisis hit, falling to an annual rate of 2.8% in the three months to February, its weakest since the three months to August 2018, down from January's 3.1%.

(Source: Reuters)

Missing out on LNG market Iran needs to take action

1 → In 2005 the country halted all the development operations in the field, under a self-imposed development ban. At the time Iran had about 50 wells drilled in the field.

By 2013, the number of drilled wells in the Iranian side reached 110 and later on in 2017, the figure hit 252, resulting in the country's gas production to exceed 570 mcm/d.

Currently, Iran is producing more gas from the field than Qatar, however, the Qatar petroleum's announcement means that the Arab nation is getting ready to, once again, hit the gas!

■ Natural gas or LNG?

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) is natural gas that has been cooled to a liquid state, for shipping and storage. Exporting gas in the LNG form is much easier and more affordable since natural gas can only be exported if the destination markets have land borders with the source and constructing pipelines is a very time consuming and costly endeavor.

As I mentioned before, Iran, currently, does not have any LNG plants, so the country's share of the natural gas market is drastically lower than its actual capacities for export.

Qatar, on the other hand, is boosting efforts to expand its LNG projects in an attempt to catch up with the newly emerged rivals like the U.S., Australia and Canada.

■ Iran's LNG projects

National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) started planning for developing LNG plants across Iran in 2001. In its primary studies, NIOC defined six LNG projects to ensure Iran's presence in the global LNG market.

These projects include Persian LNG



project with a capacity of 16 million tons per year, Pars LNG with a capacity of 10 million tons per year, Iran LNG with a capacity of 11 million tons per year as well as North Pars LNG project with a capacity of 20 million tons per year, Golshan LNG with a production capacity of 10 million tons per year and two small-scale projects with a total production capacity of 3 million tons per year.

The mentioned projects were aimed to achieve the annual production target of 70 million tons of LNG per year. However, in 2015, after the country's international relations deteriorated over the nuclear issue, the mentioned plan lost its priority for the NIOC and the projects were completely halted due to their reliance on foreign technology

and investment.

After the imposition of international sanctions, exporting natural gas to the neighbors became the top priority of the NIOC.

To prepare the infrastructure for such exports, NIOC defined numerous projects, including an Iran-Pakistan pipeline, and an underwater pipeline for gas exports to Oman. However, despite all the efforts and costs, today, Turkey and Iraq are the only two major customers of the Iranian gas.

Turkey and Iran signed a 25-year agreement in 1996, based on which Iran has been supplying gas to its neighbor via pipeline. Since the agreement is going to expire soon, the two sides have been holding

rounds of negotiations to extend the deal. However, there hasn't been any major progress in negotiations. Iran is asking Turkey to increase the volume of imports and Turkey is asking for more discounts.

Turkey which is simultaneously importing natural gas from Azerbaijan and Russia, is also importing LNG from Qatar and the U.S. The country has also made huge investments in renewable energies; so this means that Iran is gradually losing Turkey's energy market as well.

As for Iraq, the Islamic Republic is using only 20 percent of its natural gas pipelines capacity to export gas to this Arab neighbor since the country is not a very good customer when it comes to due payments.

■ Final thoughts

All being said, we can see that despite all the efforts that NIOC has put into the development of the South Pars gas field, the increase in the production cannot be considered a win when the infrastructure is not provided for exports.

Qatar is using the most up to date technologies while Iran needs to indigenize the knowledge since due to the U.S. sanctions it does not have access to such technology.

In the current situation, in which Washington has re-imposed sanctions on Iran's oil industry and banking system, NIOC could seek help from the country's allies like China and Russia to transfer LNG knowledge and technology into the country.

We have already lost a lot in the global natural gas market in the past 20 years, and wasting any more time is no longer logical nor affordable.

Smog-free skies allow Germany to break record for solar power

Germany's solar panels produced record amounts of electricity, exacerbating market forces that were already hammering the profitability of the country's remaining coal plants.

Gin-clear skies over central Europe helped photovoltaic plants produce 32,227 megawatts on Monday, beating the previous record on March 23. Bright conditions are expected to continue this week, according to Germany's DWD federal weather service.

"There is hardly a cloud over Germany," Andreas Friedrich, a spokesman for the DWD, said by phone. "And a high-pressure system over Scandinavia will keep these conditions in place until at least Friday."

Renewables are cutting deeper into the market share for coal, the fuel on which Germany's wealth and industrial prowess was built. The government forecasts that green power will make up about 80 percent of the electricity mix by 2038, compared with just over 40 percent in 2019.

The government has agreed with coal plant operators led by RWE AG and LEAG to gradually wind down power plants fed by the fuel by 2038. Some of those facilities may close earlier than expected as falling costs for solar energy and firm prices for carbon pollution allowances makes coal power increasingly unprofitable.

Sunny conditions meant solar generated as much as about 40 percent of Germany's power Monday, compared to the 22 percent produced by coal and nuclear, according to Agora Energiewende. Solar, wind and other renewables accounted for 78 percent of Germany's electricity output.

■ German power generation

German solar power boosts share of

renewables in energy mixSource: Agora Energiewende

"Every year there's more installed solar, so the record gets broken nearly every spring," BloombergNEF analyst Jenny Chase said of the rise of solar power, adding that fewer flights and lower air pollution due to the coronavirus lockdowns may have lifted the share supply coming from solar.

Coronavirus lockdowns are accelerating market trends that spell doom for the dirtiest fossil fuel. Less activity has slashed electricity demand just as spring's sunnier and windy weather boosts output from renewables, which have priority over fossil fuels in feeding into the grid.

That's resulted in more hours when electricity prices turn negative, where consumers essentially are paid to take excess power off the grid. The phenomena is usually seen when holidays or week-ends coincide with exceptionally sunny or windy weather. Incidents of negative prices are increasing, with 773 negative prices recorded for 15-minute contracts in the first three months of the year, a 78 percent increase from the same period a year ago, according to Epex Spot exchange data

Green sources of power like solar and wind are used to meet electricity demand ahead of more costly production such as coal and lignite. With prices more regularly negative, fossil fuels aren't getting a look in.

"You have coal looking very much like the energy market's loser," Carlos Perez Linkenheil, a senior analyst at Berlin-based Energy Brainpool, said by phone last week.

(Source: Bloomberg)

U.S. oil futures plumb historic lows below zero, Brent plunges



1 → Global benchmark Brent crude for June delivery was down \$5.25, or 21 percent at \$20.32 per barrel.

The more-active June contract for WTI also plunged \$4.79, or 23.5 percent, to \$15.64 a barrel. June trading volumes were roughly 80 times those of the expiring May contract.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies, including Russia, a grouping known as OPEC+, agreed this month to cut output by 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd).

But that cut will not take place before May, and is not considered enough to restore market balance.

"The recently agreed supply cuts do little to solve the near-term oversupply problem in the global market," JBC Energy said in a note.

Describing the drop in U.S. oil futures as short-term and stemming from a "financial squeeze", U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday said his administration would con-

sider halting Saudi crude oil imports.

"Negative prices are a temporary glitch reflecting stressed flows in the futures markets and stressed storage conditions somewhere in the U.S. Midwest," Swiss bank Julius Baer's Head of Economics Norbert Ruecker.

The main U.S. storage hub in Cushing, Oklahoma, the delivery point for the U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) contract, is expected to be full within weeks.

Restrictions on movement to try to contain the novel coronavirus have reduced oil demand by an estimated 30 percent, resulting in a huge surplus of crude in need of storage.

U.S. crude inventories were expected to rise by about 16.1 million barrels in the week to April 17 after posting the biggest one-week build in history, five analysts polled by Reuters found.

The American Petroleum Institute is set to release its data at 4:30 p.m. (2030 GMT) on Tuesday.

(Source: Reuters)

What is a negative crude future and does it mean anything for consumers?

The price of a barrel of benchmark U.S. oil plunged below \$0 a barrel on Monday for the first time in history, a troubling sign of an unprecedented global energy glut as the coronavirus pandemic halts travel and curbs economic activity.

The contract for West Texas intermediate crude, or WTI, is the benchmark for U.S. crude oil prices. On Monday, it looked like this:

Such a steep drop in the oil benchmark prompted strong reactions beyond trading floors.

Here is an explanation of what negative crude prices mean in the real world:

■ What does a negative futures price mean?

The price of a barrel of crude varies based on factors such as supply, demand and quality. Supply of fuel has been far above demand since the coronavirus forced billions of people to stop traveling.

Because of oversupply, storage tanks for WTI are becoming so full it is difficult to find space. The U.S. Energy Information Administration said last week that storage at Cushing, Oklahoma, the heart of the U.S. pipeline network, was about 72 percent full as of April 10.

"There's no available storage anymore so the price of the commodity is effectively worthless," said Bob Yawger, director of futures at Mizuho in New York. "So when it's minus a dollar, they'll pay you a dollar to get it out of there."

The price plunge was partly due to the way oil is traded. A futures contract is for 1,000 barrels of crude, delivered into Cushing, where energy companies own storage tanks with roughly 76 million barrels of capacity.

Each contract trades for a month, with the May contract



due to expire on Tuesday. Investors holding May contracts didn't want to take delivery of the oil and incur storage costs, and in the end had to pay people to take it off their hands.

The June contract, with delivery a month away, is still trading at above \$20 a barrel, but the price crash indicates that most storage space has been gobbled up.

■ What does this mean for consumers?

The crash in crude futures prices at Cushing won't necessarily translate into a crash in prices at the gas pump, said Tom Kloza, a veteran analyst with Oil Price Information Services.

"I think it's more inside baseball," Kloza said. "We'll continue to see gasoline prices, diesel prices and jet fuel prices drift lower into May but one shouldn't conclude that we're going to see fuel given away or that we're going to match these incredible, unprecedented drops we saw in crude oil today," Kloza said.

With recent lower oil prices, the typical American family is probably going to save about \$150 to \$175 this month on their fuel purchases, he said.

■ What does it mean for airlines?

For cash-strapped airlines, the decline in crude prices will make it cheaper to operate flights that are already nearly empty as people remain homebound due to the coronavirus.

The plunge in crude futures also indicates that the market does not expect airlines to add back many flights to their slimmed down networks any time soon, said Raymond James analyst Savanthi Syth.

■ What does it say about the economic rebound?

While investors and analysts waded through the technicalities of the oil markets that contributed to the crash, others are trying to glean what it might say about the economy. As much as 30 million barrels per day - what used to be 30 percent of global demand - has been pumped into storage worldwide in the past two or three months.

Even if demand were to return to pre-virus levels, it would take a long time to burn off all that stored crude.

"What the energy market is telling you is that demand isn't coming back any time soon, and there's a supply glut," says Kevin Flanagan, head of fixed income strategy for Wisdomtree Asset Management, in New York.

The price of June crude contracts also dropped sharply on Monday, falling by 18.4 percent to \$20.43 a barrel. That's a more reliable view of how traders are thinking about consumer demand for energy in the immediate future. It isn't below zero, but it is falling rapidly.

(Source: Reuters)

Energy market upheaval puts LNG buyers in front seat

Although oil prices have hit rock bottom recently, liquefied natural gas is still holding its ground as a cheap and reliable energy source. So LNG could play a larger role in Europe's energy future, reports Bud Albright.

Economists and business leaders around the world grimaced as oil prices recently collapsed below \$20 (€18.36), the lowest level since 2002. At the time that happened, most of the world's economies were already in lockdown. Planes were grounded, highways and streets were empty; the world had ground to a near economic halt.

Furthermore, the current COVID-19 pandemic also exposed weakness of the supply chains and overdependence on the single source of any material or energy.

The first fall in oil prices came in January when China put Wuhan under quarantine, subduing demand. The badly timed price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia exacerbated the situation. Although some recovery in prices has been seen, it remains spotty and relatively unstable. Most economists seem to agree that depressed pricing in energy markets could be with us for some time.

Obviously, importing countries can immediately benefit from this low pricing. One of the more obvious and attractive fuels throughout the price curve, is natural gas. After all, natural gas is presently the cleanest, most efficient and consistently reliable fossil fuel for electricity generation available in today's market and has immediately started replacing coal with the fall in prices.

While, numerous countries are wisely taking a closer look at the many benefits of natural gas, not all have access to it. Moreover, in many geographies, like islands, the most common method of delivery of natural gas — by pipeline — is not suitable due to prohibitive costs or compromises in reliability due to political realities.

■ The LNG alternative

As such, liquefied natural gas (LNG) provides a highly attractive answer to the political and geographic realities faced by these areas. Additionally, the affordable cost associated with LNG infrastructure, such as storage and regasification facilities, helps add to the real-world appeal of this fuel.

With the current reduction in its cost, utilizing LNG for multiple applications becomes an even wiser energy play. The examples of Poland and Lithuania come immediately to mind, where the existence of LNG facilities has delivered security and stability previously constricted by dependence on alternate providers.

One can only imagine how differently the drama around Nord Stream 2 and the Gazprom-Ukraine supply conflict could have played out had Ukraine been able to receive seaborne LNG shipments — something which currently looks far-fetched given navigational restrictions of the Bosphorus.

But it's not only security. Economically, LNG projects can bring long term financial benefits to the country, especially in today's age of record low prices. A combination of LNG and efficient gas-fired generation is typically cheaper than oil and less efficient units. In Europe, the difference is amplified due to the savings on emissions.

■ Europe weigh options

The Mediterranean is the next frontier for LNG. Although adoption there has been relatively slow, strong demand and appealing market signals for the development to continue. Spain, Italy and Greece are active players in global LNG markets and remain eager for their neighbors to follow.

The European Commission has evidenced its support by providing a €101.4 million (\$110.2 million) grant along with the financing by the Croatian government for the Krk LNG terminal in 2019. Even without a prospect for private funding, Croatia enacted legislation to facilitate the permitting of the terminal, and the approval from the EU antitrust regulators followed thereafter.

The case for LNG is further bolstered by the energy reliability needs for the islands of Crete, Cyprus, Corsica, and Malta. Crete, for example, would benefit greatly by the Greek government's support for relevant projects on the island. The sooner regulators back LNG, the sooner Crete can recognize its potential to become a hub and a model for LNG's full-scale benefits.

The island stands well-positioned to play an integral role in helping in the transition of some of Greece's 6,000 islands from highly polluting heavy fuel oil and expensive diesel, to cleaner, more efficient, and more reliable gas.

Further to the East, Cyprus is moving ahead with a short-term LNG importation terminal to solve its current energy needs, while still developing offshore finds that someday may see that terminal used for export. In December 2019, after several false starts and cancellations, the state-owned ETIFA signed a landmark €290 million deal for an LNG import terminal with a consortium led by China Petroleum Pipeline Engineering.

Corsica is already experimenting with LNG for small-scale generation for berthed vessels, but the island still has a long way to go in terms of realizing LNG's full potential. Just recently, however, the Ministry of Ecology of France announced the long-awaited tender for LNG-to-Power project for France's largest island.

Special recognition should go to the Maltese government's decisiveness to approve an LNG-to-Power project in 2013. This decision resulted in Malta completely ridding itself of polluting fuel oil dependency, and it is now a leader in the adoption of clean new energy in the Mediterranean.

Electricity became more affordable and widely available and after the expiration of the government's mandatory five-year fixed price period in 2021, prices for the residents of Malta are expected to fall further.

■ Safe energy source

On energy security, the importance of the Maltese project is also evident. In December 2019, as a result of an accident, an undersea cable connecting the Maltese national grid to the European energy network was completely out of service. Disastrous consequences and a total blackout would have ensued had LNG facilities not been available to fuel the only two power plants remaining to supply power for the country.

Despite the fact that the cable was funded by the European Union, there were still parts of the day when LNG-based electricity was cheaper than the power imported by that cable. Once Malta moves into the floating LNG prices after 2021, this balance should shift towards LNG even further, questioning the rationale of EU's plans to also fund the Malta-Sicily gas pipeline.

Although developing LNG facilities has been repeatedly demonstrated as a sound and rational policy for enhancing energy reliability and environmental prudence, there remain pricing issues that must be addressed. While Malta did win on the immediate impact of the project on the economy and environment, did it get the pricing right?

The government was requiring Brent-based LNG formula and even went further by fixing the price. It worked in the beginning, but the current LNG spot prices are significantly lower. Many long-term buyers like Japan, India and China have all made similar miscalculations.

LNG has one of the most complex pricing mechanisms amongst the world's traded commodities. Origin, destination, tenor, and other contract terms complicate rational and stable pricing.

So what are the alternatives to Brent formula? Should LNG be pegged instead to the price of natural gas, e.g. using the Henry Hub or the TTF indexes?

(Source: DW)

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National Iranian Drilling Company

Subject of Tender:

Tender No.	Description
9747005-27-01	Parts For Caterpillar Equipment
9747008-27-01	Parts For Caterpillar Equipment

*** Tender descriptions:**

The Tender holder	Registration No. through national electronic tendering system	Tender No. /Tident No.	Estimated value (Rial)
National Iranian Drilling Company	3,233,707	Tender No. :FP/09-98/033-4 Ident No.:01-27-9747005	11,198,049,580
	3,233,710	Tender No. :FP/09-98/006-4 Ident No.:01-27-9747008	44,509,908,000

*** Qualitative evaluation of tenderers**

Method	Qualification process will be done in plain mode in offers opening session according to presentation of valid practice certificate / legal documents (certificate of corporation/ supply announcement up to latest changes) which should be related to tender subject.
* Purchasing & Submitting The distribution of the documents will be started one day after the publishing of second advertisement and ended on the following tenth day thereof Distribution Place Hall No. 113, 1 st floor, Foreign Procurement Dept., National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN - Tel : 061 34148601 Room No. 431, 4 th floor, Oil central building No.8, Yaghma alley, Jomhori Islami st., Tehran - Iran Tel: 021-66700249 Submitting Method • Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt in the amount of 190,000 Iranian Rials under account number 4001114004020491 (Shaba No. IR 52010000400114004020491) in name of "NIDC Incomes Centralized Fund" issued by I.R. of Iran Central Bank. • Submitting format Request for the purpose of receiving Tender Documents. Closing date • 35Days after the last time of Purchasing. Address Hall No. 107, 1 st floor, Tender Committee, Operation building, National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN, Tel: +98-61-34148580 +98-61-34148569	

*** Tender Guarantee**

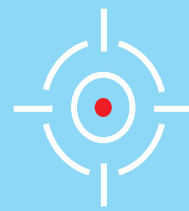
Value of guarantee	560,000,000 Rial / 4,414 Euro	Regarding Tender No. FP/09-98/033-4
2,226,000,000 Rial / 17,545 Euro <td>Regarding Tender No. FP/09-98/006-4 </td>	Regarding Tender No. FP/09-98/006-4	
Type of guarantee	✓ Bank guarantees or guarantees issued by non-bank institutions that obtain activity license from the central bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran. ✓ Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt under account number 4001114006376636 (Shaba No. IR 35010000400114006376636) in name of "NIDC saving account" by the central bank of Islamic Republic of Iran.	
Duration of credit & quotation	Tender Guarantee and quotation should be valid for 90 days and extendable maximum for one time in initial validity duration.	

(Foreign Procurement Dept.)
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Oil min. holds phone talk with Russia's energy min. on reducing oil output

TEHRAN, Feb. 20 (MNA) - Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh held a phone conversation with the Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak on Thursday regarding the cooperation of the two countries within the framework of OPEC Plus.

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United States' carrot-stick policy on Venezuela doomed to failure

The White House officials should avoid the already failed carrot-and-stick approach towards Caracas as the Venezuelans will never compromise their national interests and political fate under military pressures.

Leonardo Flores, who is a senior Latin American policy expert and campaigner with CodePink, wrote in his article published by Common Dreams that the United States' threat to deploy its military forces near Venezuela and then offering a plan of democratic transition framework are nothing but resorting to the old policy of carrot and stick.

He added, "On April 1, the Trump administration hijacked a COVID-19 press conference to announce the deployment of U.S. Navy vessels and other military assets towards Venezuela. According to Defense Secretary Mark Esper, "included in this force package are Navy destroyers and littoral combat ships, Coast Guard Cutters, P.A. patrol aircraft, and elements of an Army security force assistance brigade", while General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, added that there are "thousands of sailors, Coast Guardsman, soldiers, airmen, Marines involved in this operation." The pretext is a counter-narcotics operation to follow up on the Department of Justice's March 26 indictment of President Nicolás Maduro and 13 others on narcoterrorism charges. This indictment is politically motivated and has been critiqued in depth."

He further said that simultaneous with the sticks of indictments and the deployment, the Trump administration seemingly offered a carrot: a proposed "democratic transition framework" that would progressively see the sanctions lifted after the resignations of Maduro and Juan Guaidó, the installation of a "Council of State" and elections in which neither Maduro nor Guaidó can participate.

The proposal, which is more of a poison pill than a carrot, was immediately rejected by Venezuelan opposition politicians and the government. The plan is unconstitutional, it violates Venezuelan sovereignty (insofar as it is a tacit acceptance that illegal sanctions imposed by the U.S. should be allowed to dictate the country's domestic affairs), and it runs counter to the ongoing dialogue in Venezuela that is getting closer every day to establishing a new National Electoral Council and setting a date for legislative elections. Henri Falcón – a former opposition presidential candidate – criticized the plan and said an agreement cannot be imposed, that a "solution in Venezuela is between Venezuelans." It was also called into question by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel, who called the approach "an utterly incoherent policy", as it came days after the Department of Justice said nothing would stop them from moving forward with the narcoterrorism case.

It seemed as though Venezuela was finally moving forward towards a negotiated solution to its political crisis, yet the naval deployment may sabotage the dialogue, as it was partially designed to do. The other purposes of the deployment were to distract from COVID-19 at home and to take advantage of the epidemic in



order to increase the pressure on the Maduro government.

It was a bizarre scene that played out on April 1 during the press conference announcing the deployment. CNN was covering the conference live, believing it to be about the pandemic; this belief was reasonable, as it was marketed as a coronavirus briefing and it came a day after that the government released an estimated COVID-19 death toll of anywhere between 100,000 to 240,000. As the White House argued that drug traffickers might exploit the virus, CNN cut away from the discussion of the "seemingly unrelated counternarcotics operations." That night Twitter was flooded with #WagTheDog tweets, a hashtag indicating that Trump was trying to drum up a war to distract from the incompetent handling of the pandemic.

A senior Pentagon official even told Newsweek that Trump was "using the operation to redirect attention." By April 3, the White House was pitching the idea that fighting the drug trade would somehow help fight the coronavirus, leading military officials to express "shock" at the conflation between the war on drugs and COVID-19. Of course, as shown by recent events onboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, whose captain was dismissed after the virus rapidly spread amongst his sailors, U.S. service members are being exposed to greater risk of contagion by this massive deployment to the Caribbean. They are exposed on crowded ships and they are exposed on land at the nine U.S. military bases in Colombia. This is especially true considering that in Colombia, the COVID-19 response has been so poor that in late March, one of the country's two machines for analyzing the results of coronavirus testing was knocked offline for 24 hours.

Apparently, this risk is acceptable to the Trump administration, as it sees an opportunity to weaponize the pandemic, using the instability and chaos it is causing to further its regime change goals. William Brownfield, former U.S. ambassador to Venezuela and one

of the architects of the regime change policy, characterized "the sanctions, the price of oil, the pandemic, the humanitarian crisis" and the migration of so many Venezuelans as a "perfect storm" to pressure Maduro with the "non-negotiable" offer that he must leave.

The Trump administration has not given details as to what "counter-narcotics operations" might look like off Venezuelan waters, but it is very clearly a provocation. There is also the possibility of false flag or false positives, in which any incident between the U.S. and Venezuelan navies could be used as a pretext to war, much like the Gulf of Tonkin incident was used to draw the U.S. into Vietnam.

There are other possible scenarios that could have devastating economic consequences. The Venezuelan government is concerned that everything from imports to oil exports could be intercepted or seized by the U.S. Navy. This is a valid concern, as the Pentagon has claimed – without offering any evidence – that drugs are trafficked "using naval vessels from Venezuela to Cuba." Given the U.S. government's targeting and sanction of ships that transport oil from Cuba to Venezuela, it hardly beggars belief that Venezuelan oil tankers could be boarded by the U.S. military.

As piracy is apparently back in fashion, with the U.S., among other countries, seizing COVID-19 equipment that has already been paid for by smaller countries, it would not be surprising to see the U.S. seize Venezuelan oil or other assets on the high seas, particularly given Trump's penchant for saying that other countries will pay for U.S. military expenditures (whether it's the wall on the Mexico border, NATO security spending or the threatened plundering of Iraqi or Syrian oil). It is an open question whether the world would allow the Venezuelan people to essentially be starved by this type of blockade.

Trump has been threatening military action against Venezuela since August 2017 and a naval blockade since August 2019. The deployment

of the Navy towards Venezuela is the first step in backing up both threats. According to the AP, it is "one of the largest U.S. military operations in the region since the 1989 invasion of Panama to remove Gen. Manuel Noriega from power and bring him to the U.S. to face drug charges." The indictment of Maduro also draws comparisons to Noriega, himself indicted on similar charges. Senator Marco Rubio – arguably the biggest backer of violent regime change in Washington – tweeted pictures of Noriega in a not-so-veiled threat to President Maduro last year. The ties to Panama go even deeper: Attorney General William Barr and Trump's Special Representative on Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, both worked for the Bush administration as it ramped the pressure up on Noriega.

Yet the overthrow of Noriega wasn't achieved with sanctions, indictments or a naval deployment, it was achieved by a U.S. invasion. Furthermore, Venezuela isn't Panama. It is a substantially bigger country, it is stronger militarily, it has important allies in China and Russia, and it counts with a 3-million-person militia.

This latter point is often overlooked or dismissed but understanding the seriousness of this militia is key to understanding the political landscape of Venezuela. In February 2019, as rumors swirled of a possible invasion from Colombia, members of the militia occupied key bridges along the border, fully prepared to risk their lives, as one militia member said in a recent documentary. The militia is part of the identity of Chavismo, the left-wing revolutionary movement that backs Maduro and takes its inspiration from former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. For most on the left in Venezuela, there are no more than two degrees of separation from the militia: they either form part of it, they know someone in the militia, or they know someone who knows someone in the militia.

The implications of this should be evident: Venezuela has a substantial population that will resist any invasion or coup. This isn't mere rhetoric; the biggest popular uprising in Venezuela of the past 30 years occurred on April 12 and 13, 2002, when Venezuela's poor, working-class, black, brown and indigenous people took to the streets to demand the return of ousted president Hugo Chávez, reversing a right-wing coup within 48 hours. (Of note: Elliott Abrams was in the George W. Bush administration at the time and "gave a nod" to the coup, according to The Guardian.)

What this all means is that Venezuela won't be like Panama, where there was little resistance. If the worst happens and a war breaks out, more apt comparisons would be Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq, countries in which the U.S. spent billions for regime change at a disastrous cost to human lives and regional stability. The Trump administration's dangerous deployment should be challenged by Democrats and Republicans alike, but so far, no major politician has criticized the maneuver. Hopefully the American people will read the message of peace sent by President Maduro and urge the U.S. government to fight COVID-19, not Venezuela.

How awfully COVID-19 outbreak can affect Afghan refugees in Pakistan?

By Mohammad Jafari

A rapid surge in coronavirus cases globally has raised concerns that the outbreak could be particularly devastating for a huge number of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan.

Sikander Ahmed Shah, who is a former legal adviser to Pakistan's foreign ministry, explained in his article published by the Dawn that global health crises have disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups in any population through the history. Such groups, including women, children, and daily-wage workers, are often poorly positioned to utilize the resources the government marshals and less insulated from the effects of the crisis. But, as part of mainstream polity, they are included in any governmental calculus when developing responses to such outbreaks. Refugees and migrant workers, however, often operate on the peripheries of society, and do not figure much in either public consciousness or state deliberations.

Pakistan is host to some 2.4 million Afghan refugees, but it has not ratified either the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. Regardless, it remains bound by a tripartite agreement executed with Afghanistan and UNHCR in 2003, which while facilitating repatriation, accords Afghan refugees' rights and privileges.

In addition to the 2003 tripartite agreement, Pakistan is also bound by norms of customary international law relating to the treatment and protection of refugees, including the principle of non-refoulement which prevents the return or expulsion of a person to another state where such person would be in danger or would fear persecution. This principle has also been codified in Article 2(1) of the Convention Against Torture, ratified by Pakistan.



Pakistan has also ratified all other major human rights conventions extending political, civil, economic, and social protections to all individuals, including refugees, residing under its control. Equal treatment under the law, and the principle of non-discrimination, is also enshrined in UN Charter and many foundational human rights conventions. Thus, as long as an individual – whether or not a citizen of Pakistan – abides within the territory of and under the control of the Pakistani state, they are entitled to certain international legal protections. This position was confirmed by the International Court of Justice in its 2004 Advisory Opinion.

Pakistan cannot afford to neglect its refugee population. Most refugees in Pakistan are not entitled to citizenship. The status of the children of refugees born in Pakistan also remains ambiguous. In this vulnerable state, the refugee population in Pakistan finds itself either close to or below the poverty line, living in slums and reliant on the daily wages they earn through unskilled manual labor. These conditions are further exacerbated by societal xenophobia and adverse treatment and discrimination at the hands of police, who often arrest refugees for alleged violations of the Foreigners Act, 1946.

In response to the pandemic, Pakistan has mobilized its resources to safeguard its citizenry and contain the crisis, but refugees living in Pakistan are being excluded from these protective measures, and the restrictions imposed by the government to contain the spread of the infection is preventing daily-wage labor, including refugees, from earning a livelihood. Refugees violating governmental lockdown orders in order to feed their families face discrimination or hostility at the hands of law enforcement. Where the government has been working to offer financial relief to its citizens, including launching the Ehsaas program, it has taken no such measures to offer similar assistance to its resident refugee population.

Denied access to regular public schooling and often excluded from public health awareness program, refugees in Pakistan are ignorant of both their rights and health and safety protocols, thus becoming more susceptible to not just contracting the infection but also spreading it in the densely populated katchi abadis they live in. If such a refugee community becomes a cluster for the novel coronavirus, the resultant impact and subsequent spread would be difficult to contain and would further strain the government's resources.

In these testing times, the relevant governmental stakeholders – the ministries of national health services, the interior, human rights, states and frontier regions (including its commissionerate for Afghan refugees) – must collaborate with international institutions such as the WHO and UNHCR to directly address the concerns of the refugee population.

The government must include the latter within the ambit of its economic and healthcare support initiatives and, drawing upon the UNHCR's expertise, make available to them medical aid, hygiene kits, technical assistance, as well as training for community health workers. In this hour of need, it is crucial that we do not neglect them; neglecting these vulnerable persons would threaten our own social and national health too. A pandemic like Covid-19 will not discriminate between citizens and refugees.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 3.8 million refugees have been repatriated to Afghanistan since 2002, but many returned to Pakistan due to ongoing violence, unemployment and a lack of education and medical facilities.

There are around 2.8 million documented and undocumented Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, making it the largest refugee population in the world after the Syrians in Turkey.

Only around half of the refugees are registered, with the rest to live without documents, mostly in northeastern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and southwestern Balochistan provinces which border war-infested Afghanistan.

Southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital, also hosts 500,000 Afghan refugees.

As of April 20, the death toll from COVID-19 in Pakistan rose to 169 with record 24 new deaths in a day, and number of confirmed infections reached 8,411 as the virus cases are now sharply increasing in the country.

Out of the total cases, Punjab had 3,822, Sindh 2,537, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 1,137, Balochistan 432, Islamabad Capital Territory 171, Gilgit-Baltistan 263 and Azad Kashmir had 49 cases.

So far, 1,868 patients of coronavirus recovered, while 167 died including 56 in Sindh, 41 in Punjab, 60 in KP, two in ICT, five in Balochistan and three in GB.

As many as 47 corona patients were in critical condition. Some 98,522 tests were conducted during the last 24 hours. There were 63 percent cases of local transmission, while foreign travel cases were 37 percent.

Military experts getting worried about a fresh round of arms race between Pakistan and India

Arms sale data shows that the two nuclear-armed states of Pakistan and India have been engaged in purchasing more cutting-edge weapons and ammunitions, showing their intention to start a new round of arms race, an Indian analyst said, voicing concern over a possible all-out devastating war in South Asia.

Rishikesh Kumar wrote in an article published by Sputnik that while China remains one of the major suppliers of defense equipment to Pakistan along with the U.S., in recent years, Beijing has enhanced the military capability of India's arch rival with upgrades and supplied state-of-the-art equipment.

On April 12, shells fired by a Pakistani weapons system damaged several houses and injured people in the Indian part of Kashmir, Kumar said, adding that the recent firefight between the two arch-rivals started on April 6 but surprised many this time, as shells fired from the Pakistani side landed deep inside the villages of Kupwara in Indian-administered Kashmir.

On August 5, 2019, India, through a presidential decree, revoked the special autonomy status of disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir to fully integrate its only Muslim-majority state with the rest of the country. The move erupted protests all over Pakistan, while the Indian-controlled Kashmir region was under lockdown. Pakistan and India both have a claim over Kashmir in its entirety and had three wars over the disputed territory.

Kumar further said that a former Indian Army Brigadier and defense analyst, Rahul Bhonsle, believed that it was China which completely overhauled the capability of Pakistan and the 'China-Pakistan axis' presents a formidable challenge.

"The China-Pakistan axis is no doubt a major challenge for India, given the close integration of Chinese weapons systems such as tanks, combat aircraft and the sharing of technology on tactical nuclear weapons, amongst others, Kumar quoted Bhonsle as saying.

Pakistan in some ways has become a test lab for the Chinese weapons," the Indian military observer went on to say.

Defense trade figures published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute have revealed that China has solely replaced the entire fall in U.S.-Pakistan defense trade in the past five years. China has been supplying defense equipment to Pakistan since the 1960's and increased its share in the total Pakistani defense arsenal to around 60 percent in recent years. Besides nuclear-capable missiles, armored capability has gained prime importance in collaboration between the two countries.

Pakistan's capacity in terms of main battle tanks (MBT), with approximate 2,400 in the field, is said to be diverse, with



three Chinese-made tanks. Pakistan's MBTs include 1,100 Al-Zarrar tanks, based on the Chinese Type 59 MBT, as well as 50 T-54/T-55, 400 Type-69 tanks, 350 Al-Khalid tanks, and the country is set to roll out Chinese-made VT-4 tanks. Pakistan is also working on a more advanced version of the al-Khalid III MBT.

"China may at times to come provide Pakistan with front line Type 99 tanks but Pakistan may not have the resources to acquire the same. Pakistan's inventory of a large mix of tanks from Al Zarrar to Khalid T-80 etc, is an outcome of a lack of funds and a mix-and-match approach, which will remain a major challenge in the future as well," Bhonsle added.

A review of weapons classifications shows that Pakistan is militarizing its skies (48 percent of total arms import) at an unprecedented rate but at the same time, armored vehicles and artillery have constituted around 20 percent of total arms imports since 2010. It is also upgrading most of the tanks and enhancing their capability to attack any time of day, while India is playing catch-up.

"India is mainly relying now on the tried and tested T-90 S and upgraded T-72. These are versatile and have the capability to meet the challenge posed by the Pakistan armor. Gradual upgrades of these in terms of night fighting, fire control and armament may be the way ahead," Bhonsle replied when asked whether the Indian Army should also diversify its tanks.

Last December, media reports claimed that Pakistan's army had inked a deal with China's Northern Industries Corporation (NORINCO) to procure artillery guns for deployment along the Indian border. The two countries also inked a deal to overhaul Pakistan's main battle tank, the Type 85-IIAP.

"India had a good option of developing indigenous Future Ready Combat Vehicles (FRCV) but at present there are no current developments that are known. While upgrading the

current generation on the fly for enhanced capabilities, India may also look at the Russian Armata in case it is not serious about the FRCV project," Rahul Bhonsle said, suggesting ways to improve the nation's armored capability.

India has approximately 3,300 main battle tanks: 1,900 T-72M1, 1,000 T-90S, and around 500 T-90SM. The Indian army has also inducted the domestically-produced Arjun MK-I but hopes to address some technical issues before rolling out a more capable version of the Arjun.

Nevertheless, Indian Army chief M. M. Naravane has indicated that country is moving away from the "military icons of the 20th century", like tanks, fighter aircraft and primarily looking at the possible induction of laser and directed-energy weapons.

"In the five-odd decades since – in Iraq, Lebanon, Georgia, Chechnya and Syria, armored formations have either followed, supported the application of air power and artillery, or else their units and sub-units have been committed in smaller tactical groupings as part of infantry-armor assaults in urban terrain," Naravane said in March of this year while speaking at an event in Delhi.

In future warfare, Pakistan and China have also been working on the development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles including the Caihong-5 and Wing Loong-I.

"Pakistan's military, despite having fewer assets, is conventionally not inferior to the Indian military. Moreover, given its inter-operability with the People's Liberation Army, when it is offered cyber, space and Electronic Warfare support, the balance may tip in Pakistan's favor. Complacency will not help the Indian Army," Praveen Sawhney, a former military officer and author of several books on military affairs said.

Ultimately it is the man behind the gun that is important, as was proved by the Indian Centurion who outgunned the Pakistan Patton in 1965, but "we cannot rest on past laurels," Rahul Bhonsle, who has had a distinguished service career lasting over 30 years, concluded.

Territorial disputes over the Kashmir region sparked two of the three major Indo-Pakistani wars in 1947 and 1965, and a limited war in 1999. Although both countries have maintained a fragile cease-fire since 2003, they regularly exchange fire across the contested border, known as the Line of Control. Both sides accuse the other of violating the cease-fire and claim to be shooting in response to attacks. An uptick in border skirmishes that began in late 2016 and continued into 2018 killed dozens and displaced thousands of civilians on both sides of the Line of Control.

Iran's national museum unveils Qajar era Gulistan manuscript

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** — The National Museum of Iran unveiled a manuscript of Persian poet Sadi's major work Gulistan from the Qajar era (1789–1925) on Monday



to observe Sadi National Day. The 260-page illuminated manuscript dates back to 1822 and is written in nastaliq.

The book, which is preserved in the museum, can be visited online, as the museums are on lockdown due to coronavirus outbreak in the country.

One of the greatest figures of classical Persian literature, Sheikh Muslih od-Din Sadi Shirazi (C. 1213-1291) is famous worldwide for his Bustan (The Orchard) and Gulistan (The Rose Garden).

CULINARY VACATIONS

Iranian dishes you need to try: Khorosht Fesenjaan

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** — Apart from its rich history and culture, Iran has long been a fabulous destination when it comes to gastronomy tourism, featuring wide-ranging stews, rice dishes, kebabs and desserts to name a few.

One of the iconic dishes to eat at an Iranian home/restaurant is Khorosht Fesenjaan; a rich, tangy chicken stew in the walnut and pomegranate sauce. You might not normally think to make a sauce with walnuts and pomegranates, but it's a perfect combination!



The dish that should be served with white rice has long been a highlight of Shab-e Yalda, a winter-solstice tradition, which dates thousands of years.

To make it ready, chicken pieces are first browned and then slowly cooked in a sauce with ground toasted walnuts and pomegranate molasses.

The toasted walnuts are rich and warm and the pomegranate molasses sharp and berry-toned. Cooked slowly with the chicken, the sauce is spectacular. Bowl-licking good.

Here, the only ingredient that might be a little unusual is the pomegranate molasses which you can make it your own with pomegranate juice, or look for it at a store that carries Persian ingredients.

Below is how the dish is prepared based on a recipe posted to simplyrecipes.com. Prep. time: 10 minutes; cook time: 2 hours; yield: serves 6-8

Ingredients

- 1 to 2 large yellow onions, chopped, (3 cups)
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 5 tablespoons pomegranate molasses
- 1/2 pound walnut halves (about 2 cups)
- 2 pounds boneless skinless chicken thighs and/or breasts, trimmed of excess fat, cut into medium size pieces, patted dry and salted
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons of sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon turmeric
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- Salt
- 1/2 cup fresh pomegranate arils for garnish (optional)

Preparation

1 - Toast and grind the walnuts: You can toast the walnuts in one of two ways. You can either spread them out in a single layer in a large skillet, and toast them on medium-high heat, stirring frequently until lightly toasted, OR you can spread them out in a single layer in a baking rimmed baking sheet, and toast at 350°F in the oven for 8 to 10 minutes.

In either case, once toasted, remove from heat and allow to cool. Once cool enough to handle, pulse in a food processor or blender until finely ground.

2 - Brown the chicken pieces on all sides: In a large pan, heat 1 tablespoon of butter and 2 tablespoons of olive oil over medium-high heat.

When the butter has melted, pat the chicken pieces dry again and place the chicken pieces in the pan, working in batches if necessary to not crowd the pan, and cook until golden brown on all sides. Sprinkle the chicken with salt while they are cooking.

3 - Sauté the onions: Use a slotted spoon or tongs to remove the chicken from the pan, set aside. Add a tablespoon of butter and a tablespoon of oil to the pan. Lower the heat to medium-low. Add chopped onions to the pan and sauté until translucent, stirring on occasion to release the browned bits from the bottom of the pan.

4 - Add chicken and stock: Return the chicken pieces to the pan with the onions. Pour 2 cups of chicken stock over the chicken and onions. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, cover and simmer gently for 30 minutes.

5 - Add ground walnuts, pomegranate molasses, sugar, spices, cover and cook: Stir in the ground walnuts, pomegranate molasses, sugar, and spices. Cover and cook on very low heat for 1 hour, stirring every 20 minutes or so to prevent the walnuts from sticking to the bottom of the pan.

Remove from heat and adjust sugar/salt to taste. At this point, the chicken should be fall-apart tender.

Flashfloods reveal archaeological site in northeast Iran

HERITAGE d e s k **TEHRAN** — An archaeological site has recently been unearthed on the outskirts of Torbat-e Heydarieh after torrential rains washed the soil away in the northeastern Iranian region.

"A number of historical potteries were found in a [nearby] river after torrential rains poured down in the region, which caused a historical site to be unveiled," Ali Mohammadi, the head of Torbat-e Heydarieh Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department, said on Monday, CHTN reported.

The site dates back to the early and middle Islamic eras, according to preliminary studies carried out by the cultural heritage experts, the official noted.



Police forces and local officials in charge of safeguarding cultural heritage have been on high alert during and after the rainfalls, he said.

"Over 40 inspections have been made over the past couple of days and an illegal excavation team has been

arrested in this regard," he noted.

The history of the area stretches back to very ancient times. It was part of the Achaemenian Empire of the 6th to 4th century BC and the Parthian Empire, which spanned from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century CE.

Iran's national museum holds online exhibitions

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** — The National Museum of Iran has launched online visits and virtual tours of its temporary exhibitions, the director of the museum Jebrael Nokandeh said on Monday, ILNA reported.

"Spanish Archaeological Heritage", an exhibition displaying about 300 relics date back to the Paleolithic era, and "Human and Sea", showcasing Over 160 relics, date from prehistorical times to the Islamic era related to maritime culture, are among the exhibits available

on Arawin application.

Earlier this month, the museum arranged virtual tours of its centuries-old objects, as all the museums are on lockdown for over a month due to coronavirus outbreak in the country.

The National Museum of Iran is somewhat chockfull of priceless relics that represent various eras of the country's rich history. Its structure was completed in 1928 based on the design by French architect André Godard who was also an archaeologist and historian of French and Middle Eastern Art.



Coronavirus causes \$52m damage to Zanjan's tourism industry



TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** — Zanjan province's tourism industry has taken 2,200 billion rials (over \$52 million) hit from the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) over the last two months.

The loss amounts to 400 billion rials (about \$9.5 million) in tourism sector and 1800 billion rials (about \$43 million) in handicrafts sector, respectively, as all the tourist attractions and historical sites are on lockdown over coronavirus outbreak across the country, provincial tourism chief Amir Arjmand announced on Tuesday, ILNA reported.

Zanjan is one of the cities founded by Sassanid King Ardashir I (180-242 CE). The province makes a base for wider explorations with the architectural wonder of Soltaniyeh, the subterranean delights of the Katala-Khor caves, colorful mountains and the UNESCO-registered Takht-e Soleiman ruins are nearby.

In late January, Zanjan was designated as a "world city of filigree" by the World Crafts Council after the WCC assessors visited various craft workshops, stores, exhibits and bazaars of city in a two-day itinerary in last December.

Filigree consists of curling, twisting, or plaiting fine, pliable metal threads and soldering them at their points of contact with each other with a metal groundwork.

22 new eco-lodges aim to improve hospitality in Hormozgan



TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** — A total of 22 new eco-lodges were inaugurated across Hormozgan during the past Iranian calendar year 1398 (ended March 20) in a bid to improve hospitality sector in the southern Iranian province.

"22 eco-lodges were inaugurated in Hormozgan during the past year, of which six are located in Hormuz Island, five in Lark Island, four in Bandar Abbas,, " provincial tourism chief Reza Boroumand said on Saturday, CHTN reported.

"Construction and inauguration of eco-lodge units in rural areas play an important role in attracting more tourists and expand employment opportunities for local communities," the official explained.

Experts say each eco-lodge unit generates jobs for seven to eight people on the average so that the scheme could create around 160,000 jobs.

Having a very diverse natural setting, Iran offers varied excursions to nature lovers. Sightseers may live with a nomad or rural family or enjoy an independent stay. The country is home to abundant historical mansions, caravanserais, bathhouses, madrasas, and other massive monuments, which can buttress its budding tourism and hospitality sectors if managed appropriately and refurbished properly.

Ardebil to launch porcelain and ceramic museum



HERITAGE d e s k **TEHRAN** — The first porcelain and ceramic museum in the northwestern Ardebil province will be launched, said Nader Fallahi, the provincial chief of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Department.

The museum will be established at the Jafar Eslami School, a historical site dating back to Qajar era (1789–1925), Fallahi said on Tuesday, CHTN reported.

He also noted that the department's motto for the next Iranian calendar year 1400 (starting on March 21, 2021) will be "Ardebil the City of Museums", therefore, the department is planning to add more museums to the currently fifteen operating ones.

Sprawling on a high, windswept plateau, whose altitude averages 3,000 meters above sea level, Ardebil is well-known for having lush natural beauties, hospitable people and its silk and carpet trade tradition, it is also home to the UNESCO-registered Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble.

The province is very cold in winter and mild in summer, attracting thousands every year. The capital city of Ardabil is usually recorded as one of the coldest cities in the country in winter.

Foreign arrivals in West Azarbaijan up 12% yr/yr

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** — The number of international tourists visiting [or passing through] Iran's West Azarbaijan province rose by 12 percent during the past Iranian calendar year 1398 compared to the year earlier.

A total of 1,255,156 foreign nationals arrived in [West Azarbaijan] province over the past year, which shows a 12 percent growth compared to the past year, CHTN reported on Sunday.

Over the past year, 1,067,611 domestic travelers visited the province, which shows 35 percent growth year on year, the report added.

The cited statistics have been documented and obtained from the relevant authorities, including the province's customs office.

West Azarbaijan embraces a very

changing lush natural sceneries; variety of cultural heritage sites and museums; the UNESCO sites of Takht-e Soleyman and Qareh Klise (St. Thaddeus Monastery); as well as Tepe Hasanlu and the ruined Bastam Citadel both magnificent historical sites.

The Azarbaijan region is bounded on the north by the Aras River, which separates it from Azerbaijan and Armenia, and on the west by Iraq and Turkey. The region was a center of several ancient civilizations. According to Britannica, it was conquered by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC and was named Atropatene after one of Alexander's generals, Atropates, who established a small kingdom there. Ultimately, the area returned to Persian (Iranian) rule under the Sasanians in the 3rd century CE.



An undated photo released by IRNA depicts people visiting the UNESCO-inscribed Qareh Klise (the Monastery of Saint Thaddeus) in Iran's West Azarbaijan province.

Earth Day 2020: nature is a beneficiary of coronavirus

1→ He went on to say that about 3.5 billion people on the planet travel by train, car, plane, ship and other means of transportation every day. These movements and construction activities, mines and others are putting pressure on the Earth's outer crust, but now, following the outbreak of the coronavirus, almost all of these operations and activities in the world have stopped.

As a result, there is no human-caused quake, and geologists can more easily engage in geological activities and studies, he added.

Effect of coronavirus on ozone layer

The most important component that caused the ozone layer to perforate was the use of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) gases, which were used in refrigerators and sprays. Fortunately, these gases have not been used for many years, which is why the ozone layer has been repairing for more than a decade, Darvish stated.

The Montreal Protocol to the Vienna Convention, which recognizes the responsibility of countries to repair the ozone layer and has been one of the most successful environmental conventions, has saved the ozone layer, he also highlighted.

There are reports that the movement of satellites, aircraft, missiles and such activities could also affect the ozone layer, some of which have naturally declined sharply over the past two months, he said, adding, If the ozone layer did not get better over this period, it would continue with the same positive routine.

Biodiversity improves

Pointing to the pandemic impact on wildlife, he stated that due to declining human presence in natural areas and habitats, living conditions of wildlife have improved dramatically.

He noted that the wildlife population of many countries has declined by 29 to 40 percent over the past decade; but in the wake of the epidemic, improvement and a consequent increase in wildlife populations indicates, which are considered positive.



One of the reasons for wildfires in rangeland and forests was camping and the presence of tourists in natural habitats, but now with the cessation of the tourism industry in most parts of the world, has sharply decreased, he also said.

"On the other hand, we are facing an increase in the smuggling of wood by local communities, as earning income is much more difficult these days, due to the halt of the tourism industry and local businesses," he lamented, adding, coal mining and illegal poaching is rising these days, which are extremely worrying.

Why human absence prospers nature?

Pointing out that protecting the planet is important to humans, and we need to maintain the best conditions on Earth after Coronavirus, he said that the pandemic has caused the earth to breathe deeply, and now the wise man is faced with the question that "why, when human activity

as a member of the ecosystem decreases, not only does nothing happen, but the condition of nature improves."

Think of bees being removed from nature. In this case, the integrity of the Earth's environmental property, the reproduction of many species and humans themselves will be damaged, or if brown bears are removed, soil fertility will decrease, or if wild boars are removed, water permeability will decrease and floods will increase., he explained.

Therefore, there have been wise in the creation of all plant and animal species or even insects, and have contributed to the earth's resilience, he emphasized.

Why has it now happened that man, who considers himself the best of creatures, that must be more responsible, has behaved in such a way that his absence is in favor of nature and the earth?

I hope that such happening gives up a lesson to change our development programs in favor of nature and try to understand the

laws of nature, instead of spending budgets on warfare, larger and more horrific weapons, he noted, implying that environmental research and health is now more essential as well as improvement of the education system so that in the post-corona crisis world we can appear wiser, more knowledgeable, and more responsible.

World Earth Day 2020

The first Earth Day took place in 1970. Outraged by oil spills, smog, and polluted rivers, 20 million people took to the streets, protesting what they recognized as an environmental crisis. It was the planet's largest civic event at the time and compelled governments to take concrete actions, including passing environmental laws and establishing environmental agencies. In addition to these practical outcomes, the event demonstrated just how much can be achieved when people come together and demand action.

Selecting climate action as its theme, Earth Day 2020 was already poised to be a historic event. An occasion planned to bring people physically together across a series of events, COVID-19 has now prompted a dramatic shift to completely digital and virtual platforms. Earth Day 2020 calls for 24 hours of actions, big and small, for people and the planet. On this 50th anniversary, civil society organizers hope to fill the world's digital landscape with global conversations, positive acts, performances, webinars and events supporting urgent action on climate change.

As the world rushes to plan for a post-pandemic recovery, UNEP and other parts of the United Nations system see this as an opportunity to call attention to the need to "build back better." The risks faced by ignoring the threats of environmental destruction must be understood and addressed with protections and policies. April 22 is a timely reminder to embrace the opportunities of the natural world for green jobs, sustainable economic stimulus, for urgently taking action to protect ourselves against unsurvivable global heating and for securing healthy, dignified futures.

Charity to build 120 schools in deprived areas

SOCIETY **TEHRAN** — Barekat Charity Foundation, affiliated to the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam also known as Setad-e Ejrai-e Farman-e Hazrat-e Emam, will build 120 schools in deprived areas across the country in the current Iranian calendar year (began March 21), ISNA reported on Tuesday.

"We scheduled to construct 120 schools consisting of 700 classrooms in underprivileged areas," Mohammad Mahjouri, deputy director of the foundation, said.

With the construction of these 120 schools this year, the number of schools built and completed by the Barakat foundation in deprived areas of the country will reach 1,230



schools with 6,800 classrooms, he explained.

Referring to the allocation of 9.5 billion rials (around \$226 million) for the construction of Barakat schools, he added that "The foundation is committed to building 1,770 schools in deprived and less privileged areas of the country. With the full operation of this number of schools, 205,000 students will gain access to education."

According to Mahjouri, the schools have so far covered 2,600 villages in 31 provinces.

These schools are built in deprived areas identified by the Ministry of Education and the school renovation organization and in accordance with educational, technical and infrastructural standards, he concluded.

Coronavirus shows the enormous scale of the climate crisis

The world is in the grip of two crises. The first, the coronavirus pandemic, was completely unknown to us just four months ago but has already warped our lives beyond all recognition. Next to the perilous urgency of coronavirus, the second great crisis, the climate crisis, may currently feel more distant than at any other point in the last decade. The devastating Aus-

tralian bushfires were still burning when coronavirus started spreading in central China but already those events seemed consigned to a different era.

There are moments when these simultaneous crises bring each other into sharp relief. In Delhi, Bangkok and São Paulo residents expressed disbelief at the unusually clean air in cities usually choked

with pollution. New research from Italy, Spain, France and Germany also suggests that air pollution may be a contributor to Covid-19 deaths. As leading public health experts have long warned, the climate crisis is also a public health crisis.

While the coronavirus pandemic is giving us a glimpse of what life would look like with less air pollution, it's also

shedding more light on the scale of the climate crisis we all face. And though there are precious few certainties in the world right now, one thing is becoming clear: how we respond to the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis will have a huge impact on our ability to tackle the other great crisis of our lifetimes.

(Source: wired.co.uk)

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

A ← → ع

8-year-old boy battling cancer achieves dream of becoming a fireman

Arian, an eight-year-old boy suffering from cancer, got to fulfill his wish of becoming a firefighter.

Arian celebrated his eighth birthday on Friday with Ahvaz city's officials, citizens and firefighters in attendance. He was appointed as a commander of operations for one day, IRNA news agency reported on Saturday.

At a symbolic ceremony, a fire alarm was sounded and the young commander while dressed in full firefighters' uniform, was dispatched to the scene along with firefighters and eight fire engines.

Arian's firefighting operations were well done and the little boy's wish of becoming a fireman finally came true thanks to Ahvaz fire department.

آرزوی آتش نشان شدن پسر ۸ ساله مبتلا به سرطان برآورده شد

آرین، پسر هشت ساله مبتلا به بیماری سرطان، که آرزوی آتش نشان شدن داشت، برای یک روز فرمانده عملیات آتش نشانی شد و به آرزویش رسید.

به گزارش ایرنا، آرین روز جمعه سالروز هشت سالگی خود را با حضور جمعی از مسئولان، شهروندان و نیروهای آتش نشان شهر اهواز جشن گرفت، و از سوی رئیس سازمان آتش نشانی و خدمات ایمنی اهواز برای یک روز به فرماندهی عملیات منصوب شد.

در مراسمی نمادین، آژیر خطر عملیات اطفای حریق به صدا درآمد و این فرمانده خردسال به همراه نیروهای آتش نشان و هشت دستگاه خودروی اطفای حریق به محل حادثه اعزام شدند. و عملیات اطفای حریق به فرماندهی آرین به خوبی انجام شد.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“-ful, -fully”

■ **Meaning:** full

■ **For example:** She plays *wonderfully*.

PHRASAL VERB

Pull up

■ **Meaning:** to stop the vehicle that you are driving

■ **For example:** He pulled up in front of the gates.

IDIOM

Dive in headfirst

■ **Explanation:** If you begin something enthusiastically, without thinking about the possible consequences

■ **For example:** Tony accepted the project without calculating the time it would take; he always dives in headfirst!

180,000 jobs planned for corona-affected families

1→ One million food packages and one million healthcare packages will be distributed in the deprived areas from today, he highlighted.

He went on to say that "We decided to provide a budget of 180 billion rials (nearly \$4.2 million at an official rate of 42,000 rials) to medium and medium-to-high enterprises in the country.

"We have considered 5 trillion rials (about \$120 million) for small enterprises damaged by the pandemic and 2 trillion rials (about \$47 million) for knowledge-based companies," Mokhber concluded.

Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam was founded in 1989. In the Iranian calendar year 1386 (March 2017-March 2018) Barekat Charity Foundation- the social arm of the organization - with the aim of promoting social justice was established.

Socio-economic empowerment of communities by encouraging entrepreneurship prioritizing breadwinner women, developing infrastructures such as water supply and power grids, building roads, constructing schools and increasing educational spaces, promoting health for all, granting non-repayable loans and insurance especially in less developed areas and regions most affected by 1980s war and natural disasters are of the priorities of the charity foundation.

India sends medical gear to Iran amid pandemic

SOCIETY **TEHRAN** — The Relief and Rescue Organization of Iran's Red Crescent Society confirmed that India's relief consignment of medical items arrived on Sunday to help Tehran with the Covid-19 outbreak.



Officials gathered at the Red Crescent Society headquarters in Tehran on Sunday to receive the Indian medical consignment. From left to right: Dr. Jalal Naei, Deputy for Bilateral Cooperation, Ministry of Health, Dr. Mohsen Asadi-Lari, Director-General for International Cooperation, Ministry of Health, Gaddam Dharmendra, Ambassador of India in Iran, Dr. Mohamm Hossein Heydari, Director-General for Inspection and Evaluation, Ministry of Health and Morteza Salimi, Head of Relief and Rescue Organization of the Red Crescent Society.

India extended the consignment of relief assistance to the Ministry of Health. The items include bio-safety lab and testing equipment and personal protection equipment such as gloves, face masks and gowns arrived in Tehran by air.

Gaddam Dharmendra, Ambassador of India in Iran, Mr. Morteza Salimi, Head of Relief and Rescue Organization of the Iranian Red Crescent and Dr. Mohsen Asadi-Lari, Iran Ministry of Health's Director-General for International Cooperation attended the ceremony at Relief and Rescue Organization of Iran's Red Crescent Society in Tehran.

So far more than 80,000 people in Iran have been infected during the Covid-19 outbreak which originated in the city of Wuhan in China.

Meanwhile in late March Zoroastrians in India sent their second medical consignment to Iran. According to the Iranian embassy in New Delhi, the shipment consisted of items which are necessary for Iran's health system. The Indian Zoroastrians had sent the first medical consignment through the Iranian embassy earlier in March.

WORDS IN THE NEWS

Johannesburg's Nelson Mandela Bridge

(July 21, 2003)

The former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, has opened a new bridge in Johannesburg intended to revive the centre of the city. Mr Mandela, who's celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday, said he was humbled that the bridge had been named after him. This report from Barnaby Phillips.

The Nelson Mandela Bridge is a striking **structure**. Pylons at each end **reach for the sky**, massive cables keep it stable. But its real significance is that its construction **marks** yet another attempt to **revive** Johannesburg's city centre. From a distance, downtown Johannesburg looks impressive, a collection of skyscrapers and **neon lights**. The reality is much more depressing. Over the past fifteen years, big business has fled to the northern suburbs.

Many of the skyscrapers are abandoned, leaving squatters, crime and **urban decay**. Now, the city authorities argue that **they have brought crime under control** with a network of close-circuit TV cameras. **Business occupancy rates** are rising and a huge investment has been made in the Newtown area, intended as a **vibrant** cultural centre and home to the famous Market Theatre. The Nelson Mandela Bridge connects Newtown with the north. In effect, it enables rich, **predominantly** white South Africans to enjoy a quick and safe drive into the city centre. The bridge may succeed in bringing South Africans of all races closer, something Nelson Mandela has tried to do throughout his long life.

Words

structure: something that has been built
reach for the sky: point upwards towards the sky
marks: if an event marks something else, it happens at the same time in order to draw attention to it
revive: improve, bring new life to
neon lights: brightly coloured lights used in signs
urban decay: buildings and other town features that haven't been looked after and now look in bad condition
they have brought crime under control: they have improved the crime problem
business occupancy rates: the number of businesses choosing to be located in that place
vibrant: exciting, full of life
predominantly: mainly

(Source: BBC)

U.S. voters now blame Trump not China for coronavirus crisis

By staff & agencies

The coronavirus pandemic has sparked a partisan blame game. Most Democratic voters — 60% — now blame Trump rather than China, for the health emergency now underway nationwide, according to a Rasmussen Reports survey released Monday.

Among all voters, 42% also pointed the finger at the president. Not so Republicans. The poll found that 71% disagreed with the idea, along with 46% of independents.

The pollster based the question on recent public commentary from Sen. Chris Murphy. The Connecticut Democrat suggested that China and the World Health Organization were not responsible for the coronavirus crisis, clearly casting blame on Mr. Trump, instead.

“The reason that we’re in the crisis that we are today is not because of anything that China did, is not because of anything the WHO did. It’s because of what this president did,” Mr. Murphy told CNN.

“It’s because he didn’t take this virus seriously. We weren’t going to be able to keep every case out of the United States, but we didn’t have to have tens of thousands of people dying,” the senator said.

The survey also revealed partisan divides about the U.S. response to the pandemic.

■ Trump says he will suspend all immigration into U.S. over coronavirus

In another development, Trump said he will suspend all immigration into the United States temporarily through an executive order in response to the coronavirus outbreak and to protect American jobs.

The move, which the Republican president announced on Twitter, effectively achieves a long-term Trump policy goal to curb immigration, making use of the health and economic crisis that has swept the country as a result of the pandemic to do so, Reuters reported.

The decision drew swift condemnation from some Democrats, who accused the president of creating a distraction from what they view as a slow and faulty response to the coronavirus.

Trump said he was taking the action to protect the U.S. workforce. Millions of Americans are suffering unemployment after companies shed employees amid nationwide lockdowns to stop the contagion.

“In light of the attack from the Invisible Enemy, as well as the need to protect the jobs of our GREAT American Citizens, I will be signing an Executive Order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States,” Trump said in a tweet.

The White House declined to offer further details about the reasoning behind the decision, its timing, or its legal basis.

“As our country battles the pandemic, as workers put their lives on the line, the President attacks immigrants & blames others for his own failures”, former Democratic presidential candidate Amy Klobuchar said in a tweet.

Immigration is largely halted into the United States anyway thanks to border restrictions and flight bans put in place as the virus spread across the globe.

But the issue remains an effective rallying cry for Trump’s supporters.

Trump won the White House in 2016 in part on a promise to curb immigration by building a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico. He and his advisers have spent the first three years of his tenure cracking down on both legal and illegal entries into the country. Crowds regularly chant “Build the Wall!” at Trump’s political rallies, which are now idled because of the virus.

The U.S. death toll from the virus topped 42,000 on Monday, according to a Reuters tally.

The U.S. economy has come to a near standstill because of the pandemic; more than 22 million people applied for unemployment benefits in the last month.

The United States has the world’s largest number of confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 780,000 infections, up 27,000 on Monday.

But the president has made a point of saying the peak had passed and has been encouraging U.S. states to reopen their economies.

Erdogan says coronavirus starting to reach plateau in Turkey

The coronavirus outbreak in Turkey is starting to reach a plateau and the country aims to return to normal life after the Ramadan, which ends in late May, President Tayyip Erdogan was quoted as saying by state-owned Anadolu news agency Tuesday.

“We aim to achieve maximum observance of measures during the month of Ramadan and, God willing, a transition to normal life for our country after the holiday (at the end of Ramadan),” Erdogan said.

(Source: Daily Star)

Italy says current virus cases fall for the first time

Italy reported its first symbolic drop in the number of people currently suffering from the novel coronavirus since it recorded its first infection in February.

The civil protection service said 108,237 people were either being treated in hospital or were recovering at home after testing positive -- down 20 from the total reported Sunday, AFP reported.

“For the first time, we have seen a new positive development: the number of currently positive has declined,” civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli told reporters.

The Mediterranean country’s death toll still rose by 454 to 24,114 -- second only to the United States.

However, the figures are widely regarded as benchmarks rather than actual tallies -- most Italian doctors believe the numbers of deaths and infections are far higher than those officially reported.

Those who died at home or in care facilities are not included and some of the hardest-hit regions have only been testing the most sick patients.

Some experts believe the true extent of the damage caused by the pandemic will be revealed in the number of excess deaths registered in the past few months.

U.S. eyes reports on Kim’s health; S. Korea, China cast doubt

South Korean and Chinese officials on Tuesday cast doubt on reports North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was ill after media outlets said he had undergone a cardiovascular procedure and was in “grave danger,” as U.S. officials closely eyed the reports.

Daily NK, a Seoul-based specialty website, reported late on Monday, citing one unnamed source in North Korea, that Kim was recovering after undergoing the procedure on April 12. The North Korean leader is believed to be about 36.

“We’re monitoring these reports very closely,” U.S. President Donald Trump’s national security adviser, Robert O’Brien, told Fox News in an interview on Tuesday, but he gave no other details.

Two South Korean government officials rejected an earlier CNN report citing an unnamed U.S. official saying Washington was “monitoring intelligence” that Kim was in grave danger after surgery, but they did not elaborate on whether Kim had undergone surgery. The presidential Blue House said there were no unusual signs coming from the reclusive, nuclear-capable state, Reuters reported.

Bloomberg News separately quoted an unnamed U.S. official as saying the White House was told that Kim took a turn for the worse after the surgery.

Kim is the unquestioned leader of North Korea and the sole commander of its nuclear arsenal. He has no clear successor and any instability in the country could be a major international risk.

The state KCNA news agency gave no indication of the whereabouts of Kim in routine dispatches on Tuesday, but said he had sent birthday gifts to prominent citizens.

An official at the Chinese Communist Party’s International Liaison Department, which deals with North Korea, told Reuters the source did not believe Kim was critically ill. China is North Korea’s only major ally.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Beijing was aware of reports about the health of Kim, but said it does not know their source, without commenting on whether it has any information about the situation.



South Korean shares exposed to North Korea tumbled and the Korean won KRW= fell on the reports. The won traded down more than 1% against the dollar even as South Korean government sources said Kim was not gravely ill.

U.S. stock futures were trading lower Tuesday morning, but it was unclear how much of that weakness was due to the historic collapse in U.S. oil prices amid weak global demand.

Daily NK said Kim had been admitted to hospital on April 12, just hours before the cardiovascular procedure, as his health had deteriorated since August due to heavy

smoking, obesity and overwork.

It said he was now receiving treatment at a villa in the Mount Myohyang resort north of the capital Pyongyang.

“My understanding is that he had been struggling (with cardiovascular problems) since last August but it worsened after repeated visits to Mount Paektu,” a source was quoted as saying, referring to the country’s sacred mountain.

Accompanied by senior North Korean figures, Kim took two well-publicised rides on a stallion on the snowy slopes of the mountain in October and December.

Netanyahu remains Israeli PM in power-sharing deal with rival Gantz

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his election rival, opposition leader Benny Gantz, have agreed on the formation of an “emergency” coalition administration to end months of unprecedented political deadlock.

The power-sharing deal between Netanyahu’s Likud Party and former military chief Gantz’s Blue and White alliance was clinched on Monday, averting what would have been a fourth consecutive election in the occupied territories in just over a year.

According to a joint statement, the coalition is to serve as an “emergency government” for an initial six months, during which laws unrelated to a coronavirus outbreak could not be introduced.

According to Press TV, the three-year deal would allow Netanyahu, Israel’s longest serving premier, to remain in



office for the duration of his upcoming trial on corruption charges due to begin on May 24.

Netanyahu, in power consecutively for the past 11 years, is under criminal indictment in three corruption cases, including bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Under the coalition pact, Netanyahu will be prime minister for 18 months, after which Gantz will replace him.

Gantz’s party will take control of a number of senior ministries, including foreign and military affairs, but Netanyahu’s party will gain influence over judicial appointments — a key demand of the incumbent prime minister as he prepares to go on trial.

According to the coalition agreement, released to the media, the new unity administration plans to extend Israeli sovereignty to the settlements built in the occupied West Bank in breach of international law.

New details on how Saudi hit men try to hide traces of Khashoggi murder



A Turkish indictment filed by the Istanbul prosecutor’s office on the state-sponsored murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi gives more details on a cover-up operation by the Saudi regime’s operatives to hide their tracks.

The indictment, obtained by the Middle East Eye (MEE) news portal on Monday, quoted witnesses as describing the movements of the Saudi assassination team, who were sent to kill Khashoggi inside the kingdom’s consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018.

A local technician working for the Saudi consulate told the Turkish investigators that he had seen two members of the hit squad at the garden of the Saudi consul-general’s residence following the murder.

The worker noted that he had been told a group of engineers had come to renovate the residence, and that he had been asked to help them.

The technician also said that when he arrived in the residence garden, he saw several people running around, with some coming out of a hut and others leaving the kitchen.

“These people told me to fire the oven.

I realized that they had tried to fire it but it didn’t work because the ventilation was blocked,” he said. “Then they asked me to carry some wood to the oven and one of them helped me to carry a couple of pieces of wood.”

According to press TV, the worker told police that one member of the hit team — thought to be either Saad H Alzahrani or Saad al-Bostani — had helped him carry wood, and that one of the individuals he saw leaving the hut had either been Mustafa Mohammed al-Madani or Naif Hassan al-Arifi.

He added that everyone in the area had been in a hurry, and that he had been asked to quickly leave the garden.

“The marble around the oven was cleaned either by nitric acid or bleach, because its color was different,” he said.

Another witness working for a local restaurant said that one hour before Khashoggi’s assassination two people, who spoke both Arabic and Turkish, had purchased raw meat from their store.

Khashoggi — a late but vocal critic of Saudi Crown Prince bin Salman — had entered the Saudi consulate to obtain papers to marry his fiancée but never exited the building.

Pakistan records highest number of coronavirus deaths in a day



Pakistan has seen its highest rise in deaths in a single day from the coronavirus, with 17 new cases taking the country’s death toll from the highly contagious virus to at least 192, according to government data.

Monday also saw the highest single-day rise in cases in Pakistan, with 705 confirmed cases taking the country’s tally to 9,214, according to the data.

The country has been easing its lockdown in order to stave off an economic crisis from stagnating growth, al Jazeera reported.

So far, at least 2,053 patients have recovered from COVID-19 in the country, leaving the active case tally at 6,969.

The increase in cases has occurred in conjunction with a modest increase in testing capacity, as the government aims to ramp up to 25,000 tests a day.

Pakistan has conducted 111,806 tests, or 0.53 tests per thousand people.

The government appears to be far off its target, however, with only 5,347 tests conducted on Monday, as per government data.

After an initial outbreak sparked mainly by cases of travellers from neighbouring Iran and other countries, Pakistan has seen a spike in local transmission of the virus, which accounted for 65 percent of all cases as of this week, the country’s de facto Health Minister Zafar Mirza told reporters.

Mirza also said the government was working on setting up a platform to allow Pakistani doctors in the global diaspora to return to the country and help efforts to fight the coronavirus.

On Sunday, doctors’ unions across the country formed the Grand National Health Alliance in protest against what they say is a lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE) kits and other steps to keep doctors safe from the virus.

The move came days after young doctors protesting the lack of PPE kits clashed with police outside a main government building in the eastern city of Lahore. A group of protesters is holding a hunger strike at that protest site, demanding better protection for healthcare workers.

Two U.S. warships in South China Sea amid China-Malaysia standoff

The U.S. Navy has confirmed on Tuesday that two U.S. warships are operating in the South China Sea, with three regional security sources saying they were near an area of a standoff between China and Malaysia.

The Haiyang Dizhi 8, a Chinese government research ship, was spotted last week conducting a survey close to an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia’s state oil company Petronas, months after it undertook a similar patrol off Vietnam.

The incident prompted the US to call on China to stop its “bullying behaviour” in the disputed waters, citing concern over Beijing’s provocative actions towards offshore oil and gas developments there.

The U.S. State Department has said China was taking advantage of the region’s focus on the coronavirus pandemic to “coerce its neighbors”.

The USS America amphibious assault ship and the USS Bunker Hill, a guided-missile cruiser, have been

deployed and were operating in the South China Sea, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command spokeswoman Nicole Schwegman said on Tuesday.

“Through our continued operational presence in the South China Sea, we are working ... to promote freedom of navigation and overflight, and the international principles that underpin security and prosperity for the Indo-Pacific,” Schwegman said in an emailed statement to Reuters.

Iran volleyball deserve more success: Ghafour

By Mohammad Ali Haqshenas

TEHRAN — Iranian international opposite spiker Amir Ghafour says the National Volleyball Team can attain more achievements in the years ahead.

Italy's Cucine Lube Civitanova player returned to Tehran last week and joined his family following his negative test for COVID-19 after a two-day quarantine in a hotel in Tehran.

In an interview, he talked about various issues, including Iran's status and coach.

"This team certainly has the potential to achieve more success and deserve it because many have worked hard for it," Ghafour told Varzesh3 website on Tuesday after arriving in Iran.

Iran's No. 10 joined the SuperLega and European Champions Lube last year for a one-year contract. After having months of success with the team, he suffered an injury that sidelined him for more than three months. The treatment process started in late 2019 and so he missed Iran's matches in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics qualifiers. When Ghafour was recovered and ready to repeat his super-spikes, coronavirus hit the world and hit Italy harder, leading to the cancellation of the Italian Volleyball League.

"Unfortunately, I missed the Olympics qualifiers due to the injury. It was a very important tournament and very hard for me to watch the matches from TV," he said, referring to AVC Men's Tokyo Volleyball Qualification which was held in China in mid-January and ended with Iran's winning of the second consecutive quota to the Olympics.



Now that the Olympics has been postponed at least for a year, Ghafour says this postponement would bring both advantages and disadvantages. "Being away from training and matches will lead to a reduction in readiness; it is true that some training can be carried out at homes but those are not enough for a professional athlete. On the other hand, the postponement gives us more time to recover from injuries."

He then pointed to the change of coaches

in the national team. The Iranian federation decided to terminate Igor Kolakovic's contract with mutual consent due to the postponement of major volleyball events in 2020. The officials are still assessing different foreign and Iranian options for the seat.

"Before saying anything I should thank Kolakovic because he worked hard for the team over the past three years," Ghafour said. "I hope that the best decision would be made for the team's future so that Team

Melli would further improve.

Asked about his club career, Ghafour said that he cannot talk about the future for the moment since this is not a normal situation.

"I had a one-year contract with Lube and future is not clear," he said, noting that many clubs have suffered financial damages due to the outbreak. "We should first hope that conditions would return to normal and then I will think about my next team."

Iran to form women's para powerlifting team



S P O R T S TEHRAN — Iran will form the women's para powerlifting team for the first time.

Iran Sports Federation for the Disabled Vice President Mojgan Nasiri has said that the female para powerlifters will par take at the international events after the Ministry of Sports and Youth confirms their dress code.

"With the aim of finding new talents in the sport, the domestic league was held with participation of 19 teams across the country last year," Nasiri said.

"We were due to form the national team in the current year but it was de-

layed due to coronavirus outbreak. The team will be formed, when the situation becomes normal," she added.

"We first want to participate at the Asian Para Games and our female powerlifters will compete at the Paralympic Games," Nasiri went on to say.

Last year, The Iran Weightlifting Federation sent the women lifters to the Asian Championships and International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) World Championships for the first time.

The Iranian women athletes have improved in the recent years and obtained achievements in the international events.

Iran officially cancels Igor Kolakovic contract



S P O R T S TEHRAN — Islamic Republic of Iran Volleyball Federation (IRIVF) has officially terminated the contract with Igor Kolakovic.

The Montenegrin coach's current contract runs until September but the two parties reached an agreement to bring an end to their cooperation following cancellation of the FIVB Volleyball Nations League and 2020 Olympic Games due to coronavirus outbreak.

Now, IRIVF President Mohammadreza Davarzani has announced that the deal was officially canceled.

"We want to achieve the best possible results in the Olympics and we've come here

to find the best option for the national team. The consultation will take place in the future," Davarzani said on Monday after a meeting with the experts at the IRIVF's headquarters.

The media reports suggest that the federation has been linked with the Italian coaches but Davarzani said the Iranian coaches also have equal chance of being named as the coach. Iran debuted in 2016 Olympic Games and finished in fifth place behind Brazil, Italy, the U.S. and Russia.

In Tokyo, Iran will meet Japan, Poland, Italy, Canada and Venezuela in Pool A, while Pool B consists of Brazil, the U.S., Russia, Argentina, France, and Tunisia.

ESPN's Michael Jordan documentary 'The Last Dance' drew an average of 6.1 million viewers

The first two episodes of ESPN's "The Last Dance," the documentary showcasing Michael Jordan's last season with the National Basketball Association's Chicago Bulls, averaged 6.1 million viewers Sunday night, ESPN said in a statement.

More people watched the first two episodes than any ESPN documentary ever, including the critically acclaimed "OJ: Made in America" series in 2016 and 2012's "You Don't Know Bo," ESPN said in a statement. It's also ESPN's highest rated telecast since the College Football Playoff National Championship game in January.

Disney-owned ESPN moved up the 10-part documentary series to April from June after professional sports leagues postponed games en masse amid coronavirus concerns. The series will run each Sunday until May 17 and is available on Netflix for international audiences the following day.

"We were so thrilled with the response to the premiere of 'The Last Dance,'" said Connor Schell, ESPN's executive vice

president of content. "Clearly, fans are craving high-quality sports content and we look forward to building upon the momentum in the coming weeks as the series continues to get better with each episode."

Still, ratings were well below a typical ESPN "Monday Night Football" game, which averaged more than 12 million viewers a game this year, or a playoff NBA game, which can draw audiences of more than 10 million on ESPN. While 6.1 million people is a huge audience for previously recorded programming, which has become synonymous with streaming video services rather than cable television, it also showcases the value of live games.

Chicago had the highest TV rating (12.1) in an individual market, nearly doubling the next highest, Raleigh-Durham (6.5 rating). Jordan won six NBA Championships with the Chicago Bulls and went to college at the University of North Carolina after growing up in Wilmington, North Carolina.

There are a few other Jordan quotes from the interview that become more interesting with the passage of time.

One example is when Jordan discussed his return to the NBA after taking a year off to play minor league baseball. "That helped me put things in perspective," he said.

"When I went back to [basketball] I appreciated it even more. So when we won those championships [in 1996, 1997 and 1998] those things mattered to me far more than what I did in '91, '92 and '93. People don't see that. All they think about is he batted .202, and he struck out a certain number of times. Yeah, OK. But the effort was there and the learning curve and the passion was there.

"That's what my father and my mother instilled in me. Take a negative and turn it into a positive. Don't be afraid to fail."

Jordan said one reason he was such a big baseball fan was because of his late father, James.

(Source: CNBC)

Firouzja; 16-year-old Iranian sensation in world's richest online chess tournament

A few days after he was shocked by 16-year-old chess sensation Alireza Firouzja, world champion Magnus Carlsen has enacted his revenge on the Iranian.

The Norwegian was stunned last week in the final of Banter Blitz Cup by Firouzja, who won \$14,000 as a result.

But Carlsen, who has been world champion since 2013, reclaimed his spot on top with a 2.5-1.5 victory in Round 2 of the Magnus Carlsen Invitational.

The tournament, hosted by the grandmaster and in which eight of the world's best players face off, is the world's richest online chess tournament, with a prize of \$250,000.

Carlsen beat Firouzja in the opener. But in a remarkable twist, the 16-year-old, who

sat in a gaming chair wearing shorts, stole the second game, prompting the 29-year-old to describe his teenage opponent as "very, very slippery."

The world No.1 won Game 3 comfortably and held out for a draw in the final game to move atop the leaderboard, while Firouzja has yet to pick up a point.

"It wasn't an easy ride, that's for sure. But what can I say? I'm happy to have made it in the end," Carlsen told chess24 afterwards.

While Firouzja is yet to get off the mark in the tournament, his performances have enhanced his reputation. His ability to push an experienced veteran like Carlsen to the limit has tipped him to rival him

in years to come.

And although Russian super grandmaster Peter Svidler thought he was "slightly overhyped" beforehand, Firouzja's performances suggest he is destined for a career at the top. The title distinguishes players with over a 2700 Fédération Internationale des Échecs (FIDE) rating on the scale that governs international chess competition.

"The needle got shifted a little for me," Svidler said in commentary. "I thought he (Firouzja) was slightly overhyped, but then I watch Magnus seemingly really struggle against Alireza, and you can't help wondering if it's not just Magnus having off day, it's because of who he is playing."

"I'm now thinking, yes, it's maybe in Magnus's head, and then it all gets a lot more interesting."

Grandmaster Alexander Grischuk said: "I think it's a bit like (Garry) Kasparov. He convinced himself that (Vladimir) Kramnik is going to be the next World Champion, and then when he played the match against him, he just totally could not play ... He can fight anyone but not destiny."

Firouzja began turning heads from an early age, becoming the second-youngest player to reach the 2700 FIDE rating.

He rose to fame when he came in second to Carlsen in the Moscow World Blitz in December.

(Source: CNN)

Iran handball to participate in 2020 Asian Beach Games

MNA – Iran's national beach handball team is going to compete in the 6th edition of Asian Beach Games which is slated to be held in November in China.

This is the first time Iran handball is going to compete in the event. The team ranked third in the last Asian Championships held in China in June 2019.

The sixth Asian Beach Games are set to be held in Sanya from November 28 to December 6 in 17 sports disciplines with participation from all 45 member National Olympic Committees (NOCs).

Officials at the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) said that the competition will be held as no case of COVID-19 has been reported in the area.

"The OCA has been in regular contact with the organising committee and with the Chinese Olympic Committee over the past three months and we have been very impressed with how the authorities have handled the Covid-19 outbreak in Sanya City and Hainan province," said Al-Musallam, the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) director general, Sportbusiness reported on April 15. "We appreciate there is still a long way to go in respect of controlling and preventing the spread of Covid-19 around Asia because the health, safety and well-being of our athletes is the most important factor."

"However, we remain hopeful that our Asian Beach Games can go ahead as planned in seven months' time. We will continue to monitor the situation with the organising committee, the Chinese Olympic Committee and with all our National Olympic Committees in the five zones of Asia," he added.

K-League allows practice matches as COVID-19 fears ease

Seoul: Korea Republic football clubs will be allowed to hold practice matches behind closed doors from Tuesday, the K-League said, with the season delayed by two months so far over the coronavirus epidemic.

Korea Republic endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic outside China PR, but appears to have brought it under control thanks to its extensive "trace, test and treat" programme.

The outbreak had prompted sports leagues to suspend or delay their seasons across the country.

Sports fans around the world have been starved of live action because of the virus, with broadcasters resorting to repeats of matches from past years.

But at the weekend Seoul said it would permit outdoor sports matches behind closed doors as the country is seeing a steady decline in new virus cases.

The Korean Professional Football League responded late Monday, announcing that its clubs would be allowed to play practice matches against each other from Tuesday.

No games have been confirmed yet, and a K-league spokesman said the exact schedule was under discussion between the clubs.

As well as fans being barred, media access will be limited, the K-League statement said.

As preventive measures, it added, footballers will be banned from talking to each other during matches, while handshakes with referees will also be prohibited.

A new date for the start of the season has yet to be set but a mid-May kickoff behind closed doors was a likely scenario, according to Yonhap news agency.

(Source: AFP)

Families sue helicopter firm in Kobe Bryant crash

The families of four passengers who were killed in the helicopter crash with NBA legend Kobe Bryant and his 13-year-old daughter Gianna have launched legal proceedings against the firms that owned and operated the chopper, media reports said.

The lawsuits were filed Sunday in the Los Angeles Superior Court on behalf of the families of basketball coach John Altobelli, his wife Keri and their 13-year-old daughter Alyssa -- who played basketball with Gianna -- and of assistant coach Christina Mauser, the TMZ website said.

The complaints accuse Island Express Helicopters and Island Express Holding Corp. of negligence.

Bryant's widow Vanessa filed a lawsuit nearly two months ago against the operators of the helicopter and the estate of the pilot, Ara Zobayan, who was among the nine killed when they crashed in rugged terrain west of Los Angeles on January 26.

Her complaint faults the company for allowing the helicopter to fly in "heavy fog and low clouds."

The helicopter was headed to Bryant's Mamba Sports Academy in Thousand Oaks, where his daughter was set to play.

(Source: Eurosport)

Nadal has feet of clay with Instagram Lives

Virtually unbeatable on the red stuff it turns out that Rafael Nadal has feet of clay when it comes to technology.

The 19-time grand slam champion hosted an Instagram Live event on Monday with a number of stars from the sport but had a few issues getting to grips with the platform.

Fans tuned in to enjoy the Spaniard looking quizzically at the screen as he attempted, a number of times, to invite Roger Federer to the chat.

"As you can see, I'm a disaster in everything. But I'm trying hard," Nadal laughed, admitting it was his first time using the Live function.

Eventually, Nadal managed to pair with his Swiss counterpart but not before he fell victim to some ribbing from another pro waiting in the wings.

"He can win 52 French Opens, but not work Instagram," wrote three-time grand slam winner Andy Murray.

With tennis suspended because of the coronavirus outbreak, stars have been getting used to some rare time off the tour.

Nadal and Federer were keen to compare notes on their lives during lockdown and reminisced about the early stages of their careers.

(Source: ESPN)

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GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Why should a human being boast? His beginning is a sticky embryo, and his end a terrible corpse. He can neither secure his subsistence, nor ward off death.

Imam Ali (AS)

Documentaries on Abbas Kiarostami's Koker Trilogy released

A R T TEHRAN — Documentarian Hamideh Sharifrad has released three of her documentaries about Abbas Kiarostami's The Koker Trilogy on Hashure, an Iranian platform providing the video on demand (VOD) service for documentary films.

Kiarostami's "Where Is the Friend's House?", "And Life Goes On" and "Through the Olive Trees" are known as The Koker Trilogy, set in the rural northern-Iranian town of Koker.



A scene from "Near the Tree" by documentarian Hamideh Sharifrad.

"An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami", "Near the Tree", and "Beyond the Olive Trees" are the three films available on the portal until May 6 for free. Iran's Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC) announced on Tuesday.

"The documentaries are about Kiarostami's three acclaimed movies and I always desired that those interested in Kiarostami and his films would have an opportunity to gain more information about his works," Sharifrad said.

"That is why I decided to release the three documentaries for interested individuals during the home quarantine," she added.

"I got to know Mr. Kiarostami in 2002 when I registered in courses at the Iranian Youth Cinema Society and began to collaborate with him. I carried out an interview about all his works, and my main goal was to feature his words on his own films," she said.

"I actually intended to make a film so that those interested in the cinema of Kiarostami could find more about his method of filmmaking through his voice on his own films, and the idea was liked and welcomed by Kiarostami himself," she explained.

She further added that Kiarostami's son, Bahman, had recorded some very good images while his father was filming "Through the Olive Trees" and "Taste of Cherry", and those photos were very useful for her while she was making "Beyond the Olive Trees".

"Wherever Kiarostami went for filmmaking I accompanied him or even went alone to the locations and did interviews with about 400 individuals who collaborated with Kiarostami in his projects," she noted.

Iranian professor publishes memories of 16-month captivity in U.S.



A poster for Iranian scholar Parviz Saadati's book "From Sharif to Los Angeles" that recounts Iranian professor Seyyed Mojtaba Atarodi's memories of his detention in a U.S. prison.

➔ He was accused of involvement in buying some high-tech experimental equipment for Iran, as well as violating U.S. export laws.

"I was curious both to know a professor who was illegally imprisoned for over 500 days by U.S. security and judiciary officials with no evidence for their claims, and to find a way into his mind in order to think like him and to gain a proper understanding of his loneliness in the concrete prison cells," Saadati said in a preface to the book.

Oman mediated between Iran and the U.S. in this case and Atarodi was released on 27 April 2013.

"Hafez and Goethe", "Vars" to screen at Archaeology Channel Intl. Film Festival

A R T TEHRAN — The Iranian documentaries "Vars" and "Hafez and Goethe" will be competing in the Archaeology Channel International Film Festival in the United States, the organizers have announced.

The festival is scheduled to take place in Eugene in the U.S. state of Oregon from May 13 to 17.

Due to complications from the COVID-19 outbreak in Oregon, the festival's playlist will be available from May 13 to help viewers around the world see the films selected for screening.

Directed by Javad Vatani, "Vars" is about Veresk Bridge, an over 80-year-old bridge in northern Iran, which played a key role during World War II as it was used by the Allies to deliver aid to the Soviets in their fight against Hitler.

Two screenings have been arranged for the film at the Sheffer Recital Hall and the Shedd Institute on May 15 at 7:19 and 8:12 pm.

Produced at Iran's Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC), "Hafez and Goethe", which has been directed by Farshad Fereshteh-Hekmat, explores the impacts of Hafez and Goethe, two of the most prominent poets of all time.

It takes a closer look at how Hafez, a Persian poet writing in the 14th century, came to have a strong impact and influence on Goethe, a German poet writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Hafez's influence is best explored through Goethe's invaluable collection of poems called "West-Eastern Divan." This collection can be seen as an early example of the blending of Western and Eastern cultures in art.



Iranian actor Nasser Aqai portrays German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the docufiction "Hafez and Goethe" by Farshad Fereshteh-Hekmat. (DEFC)

The Sheffer Recital Hall and the Shedd Institute will screen the film on May 16 at 1:50 and 3:08 pm.

The DEFC announced on Tuesday that the Iranian film expert Bahman Nurai, who

is also the director of the Trade Department of the center, has been selected for the jury of the festival.

The festival intends to showcase the wonderful diversity of human cultures

past and present in the exploration of our place in history and in our world, as well to promote the genre and the makers of film and video productions about cultural heritage, the organizers said.

Over 105,000 titles published in Iran over past year



People are seen in a Tehran bookstore. (Tehran Picture Agency/Shayan Mehrabi)

C U L T U R E TEHRAN — Over 105,000 book titles have been published in Iran during the national calendar year of 1398 (March 20, 2019-2020).

The price of books has been doubled compared to the year 1397, Book House, a private Iranian organization that publishes information about books being published in Iran, reported in Tuesday.

Out of the total number of publications, 75,644 book titles have been authored by the Iranian writers, and 29,941 titles are

translated books.

The number of all books in circulation in the year 1398 was 148,981,126 copies, which represents an increase of over 23 percent in the number of books compared to 1397.

The number of children's books published in the year was 38,910,247, which was the highest in numbers compared to previous years.

The average price of a book in 1398 was about 350,000 rials (about \$8), but in 1397 it was about 180,000 rials (about \$4).

"Listen to your heart": Indigenous elders channel tough love in Earth Day film

LONDON (Reuters) — Indigenous elders from Alaska to Australia have come together to deliver some tough love in a new film for Earth Day: the human race will only survive if we start putting our minds at the service of our hearts.

Produced by Academy and Emmy award-winner Jeffrey D. Brown, Wisdom Weavers of the World was shot in Hawaii where Ilarion "Kuuyux" Mercurieff, an Alaskan Unangan leader, gathered a dozen other elders to hold councils and ceremonies in November 2017.

"Mother Earth is crying for her human children," Mercurieff says in the documentary, shot against a backdrop of volcanic slopes and surf on the island of Kauai.

"She has lived for billions of years. She'll live for more. It's a question of whether or not we human beings are going to live."

With Wednesday marking the 50th anniversary of Earth Day here a milestone in the emergence of the environmental movement, indigenous peoples are increasingly at the forefront of global struggles against habit destruction and climate change.

The four-day gathering of elders concluded that such problems will only be solved through a fundamental shift in human consciousness, rather than a constant striving after purely political or technological fixes.

"The world is looking in the wrong directions for answers," Mercurieff told Reuters television by video call from Anchorage, speaking from a room decorated with traditional drums.

"We have thousands more environmental organizations in existence today than we had 30 years ago and yet Mother Earth's life support systems are coming to the edge, and no one is asking why. The elders are saying that we must look



PHOTO: Mona Ann Polacca, a Hopi-Havasupai-Tewa elder and founding member of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, takes part in a ceremony at a gathering of indigenous elders on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, U.S., November 4, 2017. (Ian Mercurieff/Handout via Reuters)

inside, rather than outside, for the answers."

Leaders who joined the gathering included Zhaparkul Raimbekov, a snow leopard shaman from Kyrgyzstan, Lorenzo Izquierdo, a Mamo spiritual priest from Colombia's Arhuacopeople, and Mona Ann Polacca, a Hopi-Havasupai-Tewa elder and founding member of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers.

The 14-minute film can be seen for free from 1700 GMT (1 p.m. ET) on Wednesday through the Wisdom Weavers of the World <https://www.wisdomweavers.world> website and social media channels, with translations in 12 languages.

Movies from Iran honored at Nigeria Realtime festival



Amir-Reza Faramarzi acts in a scene from "Fireworks Wednesday" by director Reza Muri.

A R T TEHRAN — Three Iranian short films were honored at the 6th edition of the Realtime International Film Festival (RTF) in Nigeria, the organizers have announced.

"Load" by Leila Omran won the award for most liked film on the portal of the festival, which was held online in Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, from April 7 to 14.

The award for best production design went to "Women Who Run with Wolves"

by director Amir-Athar Soheili.

Amir-Reza Faramarzi won the award for best child actor for his role in "Fireworks Wednesday" by director Reza Muri.

Anupama Srinivasan from India won the award for best female director for her film "Are You Going to School Today?", and Ozor Uche from Nigeria won the best art director award for "Ounje Ale".

"I Loved the Mountains" by Brett Jubinville from Canada also received the award for best film made for kids.

Mercurieff and other elders will be hosting a virtual gathering open to the public at 1730 GMT.

The team behind the film see it as a starting point for an open-ended series of events and collaborations to inspire people to ask themselves how they could make a deeper contribution to the lives of their communities and the planet.

"The film offers a gateway to ongoing connection with elders," said Violet Starkey, of the Wisdom Weavers core team.

In the meantime, Mercurieff hopes that people will use the pause enforced by the coronavirus pandemic to reflect on how they could help change the "dream" of the modern world.

"It's not an easy job going from the mind to the heart and letting our heart be in charge of what we do. Because most people would think that was crazy. But indigenous people worldwide know that that's the way to go," he said.

"We're placed on this Earth now for a reason," Mercurieff added. "If we have the courage to listen to our hearts, we know that this gift that we carry will be broadcast and help in some way throughout the world."

Kumu Sabra Kauka, a Hawaiian studies educator and tradition bearer, who appears in the documentary, told Reuters wildfires in California and Australia had been a wake-up call.

"One of the things that we all shared was a deep love and respect for Mother Earth. And this is a story that has to be shared today because not everyone remembers it," Kauka said.

Pausing for a moment to reflect, she summed up the message the film aims to convey: "Listen to your heart. Follow your path. May it be clear, and for the good of all."

Warner Bros. delays many releases including "The Batman"

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Warner Bros. is delaying a batch of theatrical releases including "The Batman" and "The Sopranos" prequel "The Many Saints of Newark."

The studio said Monday that "The Sopranos" film will be pushed from September 2020 to a March 2021 release, while "The

Batman" starring Robert Pattinson will be delayed four months to October 2021.

Many studios have shuffled release dates due to both shuttered productions and the closure of movie theaters to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

This year also lost the Will Smith drama "King

Richard", which has been moved back a year to November 2021, and a biographical drama about Black Panthers activist Fred Hampton set for August which now has no release date.

Baz Luhrmann's yet-to-be-titled Elvis film that Tom Hanks was shooting in Australia when he and Rita Wilson tested positive for COVID-19

was delayed a month to November 2021.

The studio has not abandoned summer 2020 entirely, however. Warner Bros. still has Christopher Nolan's "Tenet" dated for July 17 and "Wonder Woman 1984," which was pushed back from June, for an Aug. 14 theatrical release.