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U.S. opposing good relations between Iran, neighbors: Takht-Ravanchi

TEHRAN — Majid Takht-Ravanchi, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, has said Iran is ready to make amends with its neighbors while the U.S. remains the main obstacle to peace in Western Asia.

"The U.S. is definitely not interested in the improvement of relations between Iran and its neighbors," Takht-Ravanchi said in an interview with Asia Times published on Wednesday.

"We have always said that we want to live in peace with our neighbors," he said.

"We believe that through inclusion [rather] than exclusion, cooperation [rather] than rivalry, good neighborliness [rather] than interference in the internal affairs of others and detente [rather] than tension building, regional countries can build a better and safer region," the senior diplomat pointed out. [→3](#)

Iranian charities donate \$83m to support COVID-19 relief

TEHRAN — Iranian benefactors and charity organizations have contributed 3.5 trillion rials (around \$83 million at an official rate of 42,000 rials) since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak until March 29, Social Security Organization's deputy director announced on Wednesday.

More than 1.7 trillion rials (about \$40 million) has been provided by the national association of health donors and over 210 billion rials (nearly \$5 million) has been donated by charities affiliated to the country's hospitals, IRNA quoted Zahra Abedini as saying. [→9](#)

How is COVID-19 affecting travel in Iran? Experts explain

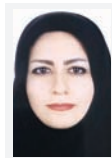
By Afshin Majlesi

TEHRAN — As you are well aware, nearly all travel businesses have been disrupted worldwide in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Weighing tourism losses is not easy to gage, as the data changes rapidly and the virus behavior is less-known. However, one thing is evident; if the pandemic continues

for the months to come, it will lead to the loss of tens of millions of jobs and billions of dollars in revenues in the global scene.

Being shut down for the past two months, Iran's travel industry is among the hardest hit. If the question is, 'Will there be light at the end of the tunnel?' Many experts say yes, considering Iran's gigantic tourism potentials. [→8](#)



ARTICLE

Haniyeh Sadat Jafariyeh
Tehran Times Journalist

Iran practicing, learning corona-friendly lifestyle

Two months since the first cases of Covid-19 were detected in Iran in mid-February, the Iranian nation is getting adapted to its new lifestyle under the toughest US sanctions.

All 31 provinces of the country are now battling against the disease; with more than 85,996 confirmed cases and 5,391 deaths as of Monday April, 22.

How Iran reacted to the breakout can be discussed in two aspects: governmental measures and society's spontaneous moves.

■ Governmental measures:

Iranian administration avoided a coronavirus lockdown in cities. Its pivotal anti-coronavirus policy to break the transmission chain mainly revolves around 'public awareness' besides 'formation of a national unity to combat the disease'. It urges people to stay at home, warning that Iran may face loops of coronavirus resurgence in case mass closures policy is not followed. The government has assured Iranians that 85 percent of Covid-19 cases recover by self-quarantine, without any treatment.

In general, the Rouhani administration has preferred people to go on with their normal economic and social life. In his remarks in late February President Rouhni admitted that "Coronavirus must not be turned into a weapon for our enemies to halt work and production in our country."

The government has sought to carry out economic activities and health protocols together, letting administrative, productive and economic activities go on.

The government started implementation of a plan initially titled 'social distancing' or 'physical distancing plan', in late March. With the first and second phases of the physical distancing plan's good achievements, the scheme was then improved to its third phase i.e. 'smart social distancing', in early April across the country; including development of health protocols according to the needs of each sector for the safe reopening of businesses and other protective measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Some initiatives and plans to curb spread of the lethal virus have been implemented as of the outbreak. [→9](#)

Historic fall in U.S. oil prices amid virus outbreak

By Salman Parviz

TEHRAN — When the capital city of Tehran partially emerged out of the shutdown on Saturday, we witnessed some traffic on the roads for the first time after almost a month, since the beginning of Nowruz holidays. President Hassan Rouhani has refused to implement 24-hour lockdowns seen in other Middle Eastern countries.

The demand for crude has been on a downward trend as most of the major cities of the world still remain in lockdown as Western Texas Intermediate (WTI) plunged 40 percent on Monday trading at negative \$37.63. This is the first time in history that U.S. oil futures has entered the red zone.

Oil prices collapsed to more than 60 percent since beginning of 2020, helping pave the way for Saudi Arabia and Russia to co-

ordinate a record 9.7 million barrels a day of output cuts until end of June at OPEC+ April 10 meeting. However, the meeting failed to produce results.

Storage facilities are now struggling to deal with the glut of oil caused by the reduction in demand. Analysts say negative prices could return for June, given the surplus environment and absence of meaningful demand recovery. The fall on Monday was also partly a result of market technicality, with Tuesday marking the final trading day of WTI futures contract for delivery in May.

WTI contracts for delivery in June were still trading above \$20 a barrel, even though they had fallen from near \$60 at the start of the year. Brent crude, the international benchmark, is better insulated as it is a seaborne crude, making storage less of an issue as long as traders can

charter supertankers. Brent price is hovering around \$26 a barrel on Wednesday.

The economic impact of the lockdowns has resulted in bleak economic figures all over the world.

According to Tehran-based economic daily Financial Tribune the most biting of Iran's economic challenges for the new year (started March 21) are the U.S. sanctions, depletion of foreign reserves combined by economic losses due to coronavirus outbreak and disruption caused to business that would reduce tax revenue.

IMF predicts the country's economic growth (real GDP) to reach 3.1 percent in 2021 after a contraction of minus six percent in 2020.

With official unemployment rate at 10.6 percent last year (ended March 21) we are expected to brace for a tough year ahead due to the impact of COVID-19 outbreak. [→7](#)

Projects worth over \$1.4b underway in Iranian ports

TERHAN — Some 11 new development projects with 59 trillion rials (over \$1.4 billion) of investment are currently underway in the Iranian ports, according to the head of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO).

Mohammad Rastad said, "In the last [Iranian calendar] year (ended on March 19), despite the difficult economic conditions, 11 private investment projects valued at 59 trillion rials were started in the country's ports under BOT (build-operate-transfer) contracts", IRNA reported on Wednesday.

According to the official, following the PMO plans for development of the country's ports, last year 12 development projects worth 9 trillion

rials (about \$214 million) were completed in collaboration with the private sector.

He further noted that his organization has also allocated 21 trillion rials (about \$500 million) of its internal resources to such development projects in the current year.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rastad noted that port machinery worth over €20 million, which were supposed to be imported into the country in the previous year, were built by domestic companies and installed in Shahid Rajaei Port (Iran's largest container port in the southern province of Hormozgan).

According to the deputy transport minister,

52.5 million tons of non-oil commodities were exported from Iranian ports in the previous year.

The official further noted that this year, three phases of Shahid Rajaei port will be put into operation and 900 meters of wharves will also be inaugurated to increase the port's container capacity.

In late March, Rastad announced that PMO is going to pay 36 trillion rials (about \$857 million) for supplying marine fleet during the current Iranian calendar year.

The official said this fund will be paid to the marine industries of the country for supplying the required fleet this year, which is named the year of "Surge in Production".



Drawing "National Heroes" embellishes Iranian medical staff

TEHRAN — Iran's State Post Company has recently unveiled a postage stamp bearing graphic designer Alireza Zakeri's drawing "National Heroes" to salute doctors and medical staff fighting COVID-19.

The design depicts doctors and health workers wearing face masks beside Iranian soldiers wearing chemical gas masks in the frontline during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war.

"During the first days of the spread of the new virus I had to go to the emergency department of a hospital and I saw the difficult moments of doctors and nurses in visiting the patients, and I vividly remembered the war days and the hardships on the frontlines," Zakeri told the Persian service of Honaronline. [→12](#)



ARTICLE

Faranak Bakhtiari
Tehran Times journalist

Why corona lockdown did not bring Tehran cleaner air?

Many cities around the world have enjoyed cleaner air since restrictive measures were applied due to the coronavirus outbreak. However, Tehran, being hit by nitrogen oxides (NOX) pollutant, has experienced less clean air days.

Many countries across the world declared a lockdown to prevent disease transmission, so that polluted megacities such as Bangkok, Beijing, New Delhi, Sao Paulo and Bogota, all reported an unprecedented decline in air pollution.

A national social distancing plan started in Iran on March 28 to stop the spread of the virus, which resulted in a 50 to 90 percent reduction in traffic in cities. This is while, the capital city of Tehran is still choking on NOX pollutant.

Ozone in the lower atmosphere is formed by the reaction of sunlight on air containing hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides (NOX) that react to form ozone directly at the source of the pollution namely, cars, industry, gas vapors, chemical solvents, fuel combustion.

According to the statistics published by Air Quality Control Company, Tehran air quality index (AQI) demonstrated 14 days of excellent air since the beginning of this year (March 21), while during the same period last year, Tehraners breathed 22 days of clean air.

An AQI is used to communicate to the public how polluted the air currently is or how polluted it is forecast to become.

The index categorizes conditions according to a measure of polluting matters into excellent (0-50), good (51-100), lightly polluted or unhealthy for sensitive groups (101-150), moderately polluted (151-200), heavily polluted (201-300) and severely polluted (301-500).

This is while, last year over the same period 11 days of good quality air reported in the city, while this year it increased to 19 days.

The concentration of other pollutants in Tehran also has increased in the first month of spring compared to the same period last year. [→9](#)

Ayatollah Khamenei praises IRGC's performance

POLITICAL **d e s k** **TEHRAN** — Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei issued a message on Wednesday thanking the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) for their “good performance and efforts”.

The Leader's message was delivered by Brigadier General Mohammad Shirazi, the head of the military office of the Leader, in a phone conversation with IRGC Chief Hossein Salami. “Send my greetings to personnel of the Guards and their respected families on the occasion of the establishment of the Guards. I thank good performance and efforts of the Guards and pray for them,” read the message.

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, Ayatollah Khamenei, as the commander in chief, promoted Salami to the rank of major general and named him the commander of the IRGC.

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

In a message on Tuesday, Brigadier General Gholamreza Jalali, the commander of the Civil Defense Organization, described the IRGC as one of the pillars of the country's national power. Jalali said such power has not been gained easily, therefore it must be defended wholeheartedly.

He said the IRGC has taken great steps in a path filled with obstacles.

Coronavirus is now a test for competence of countries, Rouhani says

POLITICAL **d e s k** **TEHRAN** — President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday that the coronavirus pandemic has turned into a test for competence of countries and systems in the world.

“People are well aware that the outbreak of coronavirus has turned into a test for capability of all countries and systems around the world. All countries are competing to find a treatment for the disease and some have been more successful, some have been less successful,” Rouhani said during a cabinet meeting.

He noted that Iran's medical teamwork has become more skilful in fighting the coronavirus.

The president added that fight against the disease is not over. “So far, we have gained success in fighting this disease. However, it is harmful to think the fight has come to an end.”

Rouhani said that the people must observe the social distancing and the healthcare protocols.

He added, “We have shown unity in fighting [the virus] and we must continue the same path.”

The country will reach nowhere without unity, he pointed out.

Zarif, Lavrov, Cavusoglu hold video conference on Syria, call for persistent dialogue through Astana process

POLITICAL **d e s k** **TERAN** — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and their Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu held a video conference on the Syria crisis in line with the Astana process on Wednesday.



The three chief diplomats, whose countries are guarantors of the Astana process, insisted that continued dialogue and co-ordination at highest level are the best and most effective way to resolve the Syrian crisis which have been lingering for about nine years.

The foreign ministers exchanged views about the situation in Idlib, the Syrian constitutional committee, the need to lift unilateral sanctions on Syria amid the coronavirus pandemic, the humanitarian situation in the country, and the repatriation of refugees.

The sides also agreed to honor the Syrian independence, national sovereignty, territorial integrity, finding a political solution to the conflict, make a distinction between terrorists and opposition groups, and fight terrorism.

Zarif visited Damascus on Monday for talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

In the trilateral video conference, Zarif pointed to the latest development in Idlib and said it is necessary that Syria have control over its entire territory and fight terrorists.

Zarif also referred to his negotiations with UN special envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen and said Tehran backs envoy's efforts to facilitate intra-Syria talks within the framework of the constitutional committee and that it is necessary that this committee remain independent and immune from foreign interference.

The Iranian foreign minister also said unilateral sanctions are a serious hurdle to counter the coronavirus pandemic and suggested that the international community is duty bound to help remove sanctions and allay the suffering of the Syrian people, especially those refugees held in camps under the U.S. occupation.

An immediate return of Syrian refugees and sending international humanitarian aid to the people can help bring hope and stability to the Syrian society.

The Iranian Foreign Minister also said repeated aggressions of the Israeli regime against Syria clearly violate the Syrian national sovereignty, threaten regional peace and stability and go against international law.

Iran's IRGC launches first military satellite into orbit

General Salami says IRGC now enjoys space technology

POLITICAL **d e s k** **TEHRAN** — The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) successfully launched Iran's first military satellite into the orbit on Wednesday.

The first military satellite, dubbed Noor 1 [Light 1], was launched upon Ghased (Messenger) satellite carrier in the early hours of Wednesday from a location in the central desert of Iran, Sepah News reported.

The satellite was placed into orbit 425 kilometers (265 miles) above the Earth's surface.

The satellite launch was carried out on the anniversary of the 41st anniversary of the establishment of the IRGC.

Over the past decade, Iran has sent several short-lived satellites into orbit. In 2013 Iran launched a monkey into space.

IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami said the “successful launch of the satellite promoted new dimensions of the defense power of the Islamic Republic of Iran” and called it a “strategic achievement” for the country.



According to Sepah News, General Salami said the multi-purpose satellite has military applications as well.

The IRGC chief congratulated this success to

the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the “noble” Iranian nation. General Salami added now the IRGC enjoys

the advanced space technology.

In modern era powerful militaries cannot boast a comprehensive defense plan without access to space, Salami remarked.

It also marks a great jump for the IRGC's intelligence capabilities, the senior commander remarked.

The multipurpose satellite is highly valuable in terms of information technology and information warfare, he explained.

■ IRGC Aerospace Force chief: Access to space is not a choice but a necessity
Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, said access to space is unavoidable.

“Today access and using space is not a choice but an unavoidable necessity and we must also find our place in the space,” Hajizadeh remarked.

Pointing to the technological aspects of the satellite, which uses combined liquid and solid fuel, the commander added, “Only superpowers have this capability and others are just consumers of this technology.”

E3 not objecting IMF's emergency loan to Iran: Germany



By staff and agency

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Tuesday that Germany, France and the United Kingdom, known as European trio, do not oppose the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) loan to Iran which Tehran needs to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

Germany, France and the United Kingdom are three European countries signatory to the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran.

“In fact, the German government is positive about the possibility of providing the IMF loan to Iran to fight coronavirus and its consequences, but the final vote of the German government depends on a format of the loan the IMF and Iran will agree on,” Maas said after talks with the foreign ministers of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Austria and Switzerland, UrduPoint News reported.

Iran's central bank wrote in March to the IMF requesting \$5bn from its Rapid Financing Initiative, an emergency program that gives loans to countries facing with sudden shocks such as natural disasters.

It was Tehran's first request for IMF loan since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Earlier in April, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing sources from the White House, that the United States was seeking to prevent the IMF from providing loan to Iran.

Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Governor Abdolnaser Hemmati, in a post on his Instagram page on April 9, wrote, “We expect the IMF to immediately respond to the request of Iran which itself is a founding member of the fund.”

Hemmati has urged the IMF to put politics aside and do its professional duties in regard to Iran's requests for financial

aid during crises, especially in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

“I would like to repeat that all UN organizations, say the IMF or WHO, should stay away from politics and deliver on their institutional mandates,” Hemmati said in an interview with Bloomberg published on April 19.

The central banker said, “We were among the first countries who requested support through a Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) on March 6, 2020, more than 40 days ago. Remember, we were among the first five countries who were hit hard by the coronavirus and when the managing director of the IMF announced that the IMF is ready to help countries using the RFI, we, as one of the member countries, submitted our request to access this facility. We have provided all the information and the data that the IMF requires to evaluate our eligibility. This information and the latest economic data are all available in the Central Bank of Iran's website. I have also written a letter to the IMF's managing director and expressed our appreciation for what the IMF is doing around the world and have urged her to take our request to the Board of the IMF soon.”

Government spokesperson Ali Rabiei said on April 13 that the United States has no right to prevent the IMF from giving loan to Iran.

“From the legal point of view, the United States is not in the position to obstruct the legal performance of institutions and international organizations,” he said in a press conference.

He added, “The United States must understand that the international institutions are not its property.”

Vaezi says Iran is fighting two viruses: corona and U.S. sanctions



POLITICAL **d e s k** **TEHRAN** — Presidential chief of staff Mahmoud Vaezi said on Wednesday that Iran is fighting two viruses, one is the coronavirus and the other is the United States' sanctions.

Talking to reporters after a cabinet meeting, Vaezi said diplomats, statesmen and media must tell the world that Iran is simultaneously fighting the two viruses.

He added that people's cooperation is required more than ever to contain the outbreak of coronavirus.

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 crisis.

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.

Iran is one the countries hit hard by the deadly coronavirus.

Also, 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.

“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.

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.

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 a 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.

Tough U.S. sanctions helped Iran economy face historic drop in oil prices: VP

(Press TV) — First Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri says America's tough sanctions targeting Iran's economy and energy sector have helped the Islamic Republic adapt to the historic oil market crash, which has seen U.S. crude futures plunge below zero for the first time in history.

“Crises and sanctions [imposed by] the United States of America have enabled us to develop the necessary readiness to run the country's affairs under the current circumstances,” Jahangiri said in a Tuesday meeting with senior managers of Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

Tehran has drawn up special plans and managed to adjust its budget to zero oil income, Jahangiri added.

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 new coronavirus lockdown.

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

The crash came after oil producers ran out of space to store the oversupply of crude left by the coronavirus pandemic, which has battered almost all world nations.

Jahangiri further said the U.S. economy, which possesses 25 percent of the gross world product (GWP), has been selling its crude oil futures in negative territory since last night and “this indicates that other world countries will



not remain unaffected by the economic consequences of the coronavirus” pandemic.

He added that oil-producing countries, such as Saudi Arabia, will definitely encounter serious problems with crude traded at below \$70 a barrel.

The Iranian vice president noted that even a deal announced last week between OPEC and independent producers to cut output by about 10 million barrels per day from May failed to prevent the drop in oil prices.

He warned that other businesses dependent on oil, such as the petrochemical and metal industries, would suffer the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, asking Iranian universities and scientific centers to present scientific solutions in this regard.

Jahangiri also urged the administrative bodies to develop proper plans to deal with the current circumstances.

Iran has been under the “toughest ever” U.S. sanctions since May 2018, when Washington abandoned a nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic and five other states.

After quitting the deal, the U.S. under President Donald Trump unleashed a “maximum pressure” campaign mainly aimed at paralyzing Iran's banking sector and driving to “zero” its oil exports — the country's main source of income.

Faced with the obstacles that the U.S. has been creating in the way of its oil sales, Tehran has stepped up work to wean the country off oil revenues and diversify its economy.

In December 2019, President Hassan Rouhani submitted a draft state budget to the Parliament, saying it had the least possible reliance on oil and was meant to resist and counter the draconian U.S. bans.

The budget for the next Iranian fiscal year is yet to receive final parliamentary approval as many sessions of the legislative chamber have been cancelled due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei has, on numerous occasions, stressed the need for the country to reduce reliance on oil as part of the “Economy of Resistance,” saying the Islamic Republic must continue on the path of scientific and technological progress towards that goal.

U.S. opposing good relations between Iran, neighbors: Takht-Ravanchi

Iran's ambassador to UN says 'people in the entire region' want the U.S. to leave

➔ The following is the transcript of the interview:

■ What is Iran's response to the call by UN Secretary General for a universal truce in light of the growing coronavirus pandemic?

A: The Secretary General's call for a comprehensive ceasefire should be taken seriously by the international community because it can play an important role in the fight against Covid-19, which is a pandemic affecting the whole world.

In addition to the Secretary General's appeal for a universal truce, he and a number of UN high officials, governments, parliamentarians including from the U.S. and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have called for the lifting of sanctions so as to enable the countries affected by the coronavirus to better fight it.

Iran is one of the countries which have been hit hard by Covid-19. The continuation of illegal and inhuman U.S. unilateral sanctions against Iran undermines our efforts to defeat this menace.

Unfortunately, the U.S. does not heed the international community's call to lift the sanctions and, once again, exhibits its animosity towards the Iranian people who are working hard to combat the virus. It seems that the U.S. does not recognize the severity of the problem.

The disease doesn't recognize borders and no country is immune from its threats. The whole world is in the same boat. Either we will win or lose together. The pandemics cannot be contained unless all capacities at the international level are employed and a concerted and well-coordinated plan to defeat this pandemic is executed by all countries.

Therefore, the required resources should be available to all countries that are affected by the virus.

■ Is Iran ready to halt tensions with the U.S. and its allies in the region?

A: Many of the problems in our region are rooted in the U.S. military presence in this neighborhood. Furthermore, Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal has exacerbated tension in the region. We are not responsible for the current tense situation. The U.S. has come to the Persian Gulf from thousands of miles away from its shores.

They are selling billions of dollars' worth of deadly armaments to certain countries in this region. They are making every effort to sow discord amongst regional countries. The best thing that can happen in the region is the U.S. withdrawal from this sensitive part of the world. This has been expressly called for by the Iraqi parliament and this position is shared by the people in the entire region.

The U.S. is definitely not interested in the improvement of relations between Iran and its neighbors. We have always said that we want to live in peace with our neighbors. We want best of relations with them. Last year, President [Hassan] Rouhani introduced an initiative for the establishment of a regional security arrangements in the Persian Gulf, called Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE).

We believe that through inclusion [rather] than exclusion, cooperation [rather] than rivalry, good neighborliness [rather] than interference in the internal affairs of others and detente [rather] than tension building, regional countries can build a better and safer region.

■ What are the pandemic's effects on Iran



“We believe that through inclusion [rather] than exclusion, cooperation [rather] than rivalry, good neighborliness [rather] than interference in the internal affairs of others and detente [rather] than tension building, regional countries can build a better and safer region,” Takht-Ravanchi notes.

and its foreign policy priorities?

A: There is no doubt that the pandemic has changed the world. Besides the hardships that it has brought about to an overwhelming majority of nations, particularly the precious lives which have been lost as a result, the world economy has been badly affected by this virus.

Iran is no exception. We have been hit hard by the pandemic and are striving hard to contain and hopefully defeat it soon. We have one of the best medical staffs in the world who are working hard all across Iran to help the patients. They have done a great job in saving lives despite the fact that inhumane sanctions continue to create hardships for our people including in the medical field.

Nowadays, Iran's foreign policy is geared towards working with other countries in the direction of total elimination of this pandemic. A number of countries, including some neighbors, and international organizations have provided assistance to Iran. At the same time, the U.S. continues to impose its illegal sanctions against our country.

As the latest example, last week the U.S. banned South Korea from selling coronavirus diagnostic test kits to Iran. At this critical juncture, the Iranian people will never forget those who are helping and those who are hurting them.

■ With respect to the Iran nuclear accord, given your own personal involvement as a key member of the nuclear negotiation team, what is the status of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) agreement, and how do you foresee its future prospects?

A: The JCPOA is the result of more than 12 years of intense negotiations with a number of countries. For almost three and a half years, Iran honored all its JCPOA commitments.

When in May 2018 the U.S., in violation of its international commitments, withdrew

from the nuclear deal, our European partners in the deal pleaded with Iran not to do the same and leave the deal.

They promised us to compensate the damages inflicted on us as a result of the U.S.'s withdrawal. We accepted their request and waited for almost a year to only witness that the promises made to us by our EU partners were not kept.

It was at that time in May 2019 when Iran had to act in accordance with articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA and ceased performing certain parts of its commitments. We have clearly stated that as soon as our European partners go back to the full implementation of the JCPOA, Iran will immediately reverse back its steps and go back to the full implementation of the JCPOA too.

■ Recently the European mechanism to trade with Iran, known as INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges), has finally been operationalized. How do you interpret this development with respect to Iran-EU relations? Are you optimistic about the prospects for positive evolution of these relations?

A: INSTEX had been in the making since the U.S. exited from the JCPOA and it took more than a year to be operational. Its success is yet to be known and depends on European countries' ability to provide it with the necessary liquidity. We have always emphasized on our JCPOA rights to be materialized through available mechanisms.

If INSTEX can do the job, we welcome that. If other mechanisms can do it, we are fine with that too. The important thing is that Iran should enjoy the dividends enshrined in the deal. Up to now, one instance of trade has been registered through INSTEX. That is a good thing.

However, what needs to be done is to expand the scope of this mechanism to include non-humanitarian trade as well as to make

financial resources available to INSTEX so that it can facilitate large amounts of trade.

INSTEX needs to be financed, either through the money received from Iranian oil sales to Europe or through direct financing by European countries. Iranian oil is not under EU sanctions. Therefore, Europe can buy oil from Iran for immediate or future use.

EU's approach towards Iran, including in the area of trade and business, particularly when the infamous maximum pressure policy of the U.S. is becoming harsher, will be a determining factor in the future for long-term Iran-EU relations.

■ Iran has sought financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but the Trump administration has sought to block it. Do you anticipate that the IMF will withstand American pressure and assist Iran?

A: Many countries have been affected by the Covid-19, requiring assistance from abroad to cope with different aspects of the pandemic particularly its economic fallout. Some affected countries have requested the IMF to provide financial assistance to them.

The IMF has a number of methods to address these requests and one of them is “Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI)” which is designed, as its name implies, to provide rapid assistance to countries in need.

Iran has requested the IMF to provide it with a U.S. \$5 billion loan through this mechanism because we have been hit hard by the virus and is one of the most eligible countries to receive such assistance. It is an open secret that the U.S. is doing everything possible to delay the IMF's decision on Iran's request with the ultimate hope of persuading IMF Board members to reject it.

In the eyes of Iranians, U.S. hostility towards them is given. Now the IMF's credibility is on the line. Our talks with the IMF are still ongoing and we hope the Fund will soon make the right decision to grant the loan to Iran.

Iran ready to share experience in coronavirus fight: Rouhani

TEHRAN (MNA) — Referring to the difficult situation in the region and the world due to the outbreak of coronavirus and the need for cooperation of all countries in the fight against the disease, President Rouhani said that Iran is ready to share its experience and achievements in this field to Oman.

Speaking to the Sultan of Oman on Wednesday by telephone, President Hassan Rouhani commemorated the late Sultan Qaboos and wished success for the new Sultan of the country, expressing hope that relations between the two countries would develop more during his tenure.



Rouhani said that in recent months, we have witnessed an increase in trade between the two countries, emphasizing the development and deepening of Iran-Oman relations in all fields and said, “We are eager to implement the agreements between the two countries, including the transfer of Iranian gas to Oman and Oman's investment in Chabahar Port as soon as possible, which will benefit both governments and people.”

Appreciating the Omani government for its cooperation and efforts regarding the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) initiative by Iran, the President added, “We are fully prepared to take action on this initiative and any other initiative that leaves the crisis management to the hands of regional countries.”

Rouhani said that because of the good relations between the two countries, the Strait of Hormuz has been kept in peace, stability and security throughout history, adding, “In recent years, we have always tried to prevent war and bloodshed in the region, and we must continue working to put an stop to the war in Yemen, which has caused destruction and famine.”

Pointing out that we have no doubt that the stability of the region has been because of friendly relations between the countries of the region, the President emphasized, “Today, we call for good relations among neighbors and I hope that during Your Excellency's tenure, we witness good cooperation in bilateral and regional fields.”

Rouhani also congratulated the government and people of Oman on the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan in advance.

In the telephone conversation, the Sultan of Oman described the relations between the two countries very good and sincere, and emphasized, “Our relations are historical and I assure you that these relations will continue like the time of the late Sultan Qaboos.”

Emphasizing the need to develop and deepen relations between the two countries at all levels, Haitham bin Tariq said that the implementation of the Iran-Oman agreement is in the interests of both sides.

Appreciating Iran's positions and policies regarding peace and stability in the region and establishing security and peace in the Strait of Hormuz, the Sultan of Oman added, “We should all try to keep the region away from any kind of war and worrisome issues.”

10,000 medical staff of IRGC Ground Force mobilized to fight coronavirus

TEHRAN (FNA) — Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Ground Force Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour said that thousands of the force's medical staff have cooperated with the government in the battle against the coronavirus.

“Nearly, 10,000 specialized treatment staff of the IRGC Ground Force across the country have been mobilized to continue fight against the coronavirus or they are cooperating with the universities of medical sciences and the 10 IRGC Ground Force's treatment bases across Iran,” General Pakpour said on Wednesday.



He added that field hospitals of the IRGC Ground Force with 3,000 beds are ready to treat the patients infected with COVID-19 virus, noting that all hospitals of the force are prepared to fight against coronavirus.

“Nearly 60,000 masks, 57,000 pairs of gloves and 4,100 protective gears for medical staff have been produced in the IRGC Ground Force's workshops,” General Pakpour said.

Spokesman of IRGC Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif said earlier this month that “in the recent days we have witnessed increase of new capacities in the number of beds for hospitalization and ICU at the hospitals of IRGC across the country”.

He added that “1000 convalescent beds have been readied for use”.

Sharif went on to say that 500 beds of Baqiatallah Hospital's 700 beds have been dedicated to coronavirus-infected patients and, upon the order of Commander of IRGC Major General Hossein Salami, 100 beds have been added to the ones needed at ICU sections.

Larijani congratulates Turkish parliament's centenary



POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — Parliament Speaker Ali Akbar Salami has congratulated Turkey on 100th anniversary of the establishment of its parliament, according to IRNA.

In a message to his Turkish counterpart Mustafa Sentop, Larijani called for closer ties so as to ensure both countries' interests.

“I would like to express my sincere congratulations on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey to Your Excellency, esteemed members of parliament, government and

the great nation of your country,” Larijani's message read.

He underlined that that parliamentary cooperation in various fields will open a bright horizon for relations between the two countries

Larijani also voiced the Iranian parliament's readiness for enhancement of mutual cooperation.

“I would like to take this opportunity to pray to God to bestow on Your Excellency and esteemed members of the National Assembly good health and increasing success as well as well-being and prosperity for the people of the friendly and neighborly country of Turkey,” he said.

IRGC's braveries have foiled conspiracies, says Pezeshkian

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — Iranian Deputy Parliament Speaker Masoud Pezeshkian has said that the braveries of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) have thwarted the conspiracies hatched by Iran's enemies.

“Without the existence of the dear Guards we were never able to experience security and the Guards caused us to stand up against all the conspiracies hatched by the enemies,” Pezeshkian said on Wednesday at the beginning of an open session of the parliament.

The remarks came as Iran's military celebrated the anniversary of the IRGC establishment.

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.

Pezeshkian congratulated the IRGC forces on the occasion, saying the IRGC is a source of “pride” and “dignity” for the Iranian people.

He also praised the IRGC forces' presence in all fields, such as helping the quake-hit people and the sick, as well as participating in the country's construction.

Meanwhile, Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri hailed the 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, 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.

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.

Shapour Mohammadi appointed new head of MBRI

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Shapour Mohammadi was selected as the new head of Iran's Monetary and Banking Research Institute (MBRI), IRNA reported.



Central Bank of Iran (CBI)'s Governor Abdolnaser Hemmati appointed Mohammadi to the post, replacing Akbar Komeijani, a CBI deputy governor who was also the acting head of MBRI.

Mohammadi was previously the head of Iran's Securities and Exchange Organization (SEO). He resigned his post in mid-April and Hasan Qalibaf, the former head of Tehran Stock Exchange (TSE), took the post.

Commodities worth over \$1.8b traded at IME in a month

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Over 1.812 million tons of commodities valued at 76 trillion rials (about \$1.809 billion) were traded at Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) in the past Iranian calendar month of Farvardin (March 20-February 19), Tasnim news agency reported.

The oil and petrochemicals floor of IME witnessed the trade of 1.316 million tons of commodities worth 40.99 trillion rials (about \$975.5 million), while 485,411 tons of goods valued at 35.561 trillion rials (about \$846.6 million) were traded at the industrial products and minerals floor of the IME during Farvardin (the first month of Iranian calendar year).

As reported by IME's Public Relations Department, the value and weight of goods traded at this commodity market witnessed the growth of 40 and 44 percent, respectively, during the past Iranian calendar week (ended on Friday).

Some 763,000 tons of commodities worth \$785 million were traded at IME over the past week.

IME is one of the four major stock markets of Iran, the other three markets are Tehran Stock Exchange (TSE), Iran's over-the-counter (OTC) market known also as Iran Fara Bourse (IFB), and Iran Energy Exchange (IRENEX).

On Tuesday, IME Managing Director Hamed Soltani-Nejad unveiled the market's new outlook plan, which depicts IME's development roadmap until the Iranian calendar year of 1404 (March 20205-March 2026). Materializing the slogan of this Iranian year, which is "Surge in Production" is seriously considered in the mentioned plan and it is, in fact, the strategic approach of the outlook plan.

Global CEOs see U-shaped recession due to coronavirus: survey

The pandemic sweeping the world has killed nearly 180,000 people, routed financial markets and could trigger the worst economic meltdown since the 1930s Great Depression.



Around 60% of chief executives are preparing for a U-shaped recovery - a long period between recession and an upturn - compared with 22% who predict a double-dip recession, according to an April 15-19 poll of 3,534 chief executives from 109 countries conducted by YPO, a business leadership network.

The survey found that 11% of chief executives see coronavirus as a risk to the survival of their firm, while a further 40% say the pandemic poses a severe threat.

"We have not seen a crisis like this for over a hundred years, and some household names will not survive," said Glenn Keys, Executive Chairman of Aspen Medical, a Sydney-based health services firm and YPO member.

Business leaders in the hospitality and restaurant sectors were the most vulnerable with 41% of executives saying their firms were at risk of not surviving, while 30% in aviation and 19% in wholesale and retail sales feared they may go under, the survey found.

There are some beneficiaries, with 10% of sector-specific retail and wholesale leaders as well as heads of production firms in agriculture, factories, mines and utilities reporting a positive impact on their revenue.

However, most chief executives expect things to get worse before they get better.

Almost two-thirds of business leaders forecast a negative impact on earnings to continue for more than a year, while a quarter expect their workforce to be down by more than 20% a year from now.

"Across the globe, the mindset of the business leader is clearly that the world has changed in a very short space of time," said Scott Mordell, YPO's chief executive.

"We are in uncharted waters, filled with an unprecedented number of pitfalls, that are challenging some businesses' very existence."

(Source: Reuters)

Falling oil prices have least impact on Iran's economy: Rouhani

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the falling oil prices will have the least impact on the Iranian economy since the country is not completely reliant on oil anymore, Shana reported.

Speaking in a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Rouhani said in the current situation, the countries that are more relied on oil will suffer more, but since Iran's reliance on oil has been reduced, willingly or under the U.S. sanctions, the country's losses will certainly be less, Shana reported.

Mentioning the negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the global economy, the president noted that today the whole world is economically and administratively



Iran produces up to 860,000 tons of red meat annually

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Managing Director of Iran's Livestock Affairs Support Company Hassan Abbasi Maroufan says up to 860,000 tons of red meat is produced in the country every year, IRIB reported on Wednesday.

The official underlined that 900,000 tons of red meat, including beef and mutton, is needed annually in the country, adding that the country faces a shortage of 40,000 to 50,000 tons when meat consumption increases.

"The shortage is supplied through the imports to prevent any potential problems in the market," he stressed.

According to Abbasi, last year, all the country's chicken meat needs were supplied by domestic producers and chicken was not imported into the country.

"We are taking necessary efforts to supply the red meat through domestic production as well and reduce imports of the commodity to zero," he said.

Accordingly, the company has started negotiating with domestic producers and is going to purchase 10,000 tons of beef



and 3,000 tons of mutton from them for strategic reserves in the first phase, Abbasi explained.

Iran is among the leading consumers of red meat in the West Asia region with lamb being the most sought after.

However, the consumption per person is around a third of what is normally seen in countries like the U.S. and Australia, mainly due to the prohibition of pork in Islamic law.

The major part of Iran's red meat imports comes from countries like Brazil, where Iranian supervisors directly control culling methods to ensure they comply with religious rules.

TPO plans to hold exhibitions online amid coronavirus outbreak

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) said none of the country's exhibitions scheduled for the current Iranian calendar year (began on March 20) are going to be canceled and the events will be held online.

"As the country's foreign trade policymaker, Trade Promotion Organization is ready to hold commercial events virtually. Accordingly, no trade fairs and events will be canceled this year, and businessmen active in this field will not have to worry about this," TPO portal quoted Hamid Zadboum as saying.

According to the official, the exhibition

industry offers a wide range of job opportunities so considering the importance of this industry, TPO is making the necessary arrangements for holding exhibitions virtually.

He underlined holding online exhibitions as a new opportunity for small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), which were previously facing various limitations like costs and space for attending international trade fairs.

Zadboum finally noted that after the end of the restrictions caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the physical setup of exhibitions will be pursued seriously, adding that the procedures and the exact schedule of the physical exhibition will be announced accordingly.

Creating 1,000 hectares of new greenhouses on agenda: APC head

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Managing Director of Iran's Agricultural Parks Company (APC) says his company plans to create 1,000 hectares of new greenhouses in the country's agricultural parks during the current Iranian calendar year (March 2020-March 2021).

According to Ali Ashraf Mansouri, following a plan for developing the country's agricultural parks, so far, over 7,250 hectares of land has been allocated to be developed as agricultural parks, IRNA reported.

Some 1,500 hectares of fishery parks and 600 hectares of livestock, poultry, and aquaculture parks are also planned to be inaugurated this year, the official added.

He further noted that APC has registered a request for 40 trillion rials (about \$952 million) of bank facilities for implementing development projects.

The parks will be awarded to capable companies without any specific limitations and facilities will also be provided for development in three areas of greenhouse, aquaculture, as well as livestock and poultry. Development of the country's agri-



cultural parks not only is going to create new job opportunities but also increases the country's non-oil exports and helps to preserve the environment and the national water and soil resources.

Back in March, Mansouri had announced that 8.3 trillion rials (about \$197.6 million) of facilities were paid for the development of agricultural parks across the country since the beginning of the past calendar year (March 21, 2019) up to March 11.

According to the official, the mentioned facilities were paid for development or construction of various agricultural parks including greenhouses, fisheries, and aquaculture, as well as livestock and poultry.



Pandemic won't cause euro debt crisis, but a North-South divide

Euro zone government debt will surge this year on the coronavirus pandemic, but while another debt crisis is unlikely, large differences in indebtedness as countries emerge from the downturn could seriously test their unity.

The International Monetary Fund expects debt in the 19 countries sharing the euro to jump by more than 13% of GDP to 97% this year as Europe-wide lockdowns cause an unprecedented 7.5%-euro zone recession. But despite massive expected borrowing, the effect on yields has so far been small.

Interest on bonds of already highly indebted Italy, Spain, Greece or Portugal is up by only 40-50 bps - kept in check by massive European Central Bank bond buying.

"As the ECB is literally cleaning up all the secondary market ... the risk of a sovereign debt crisis is close to zero," Saxo Bank's economist Christopher Dembik said, echoing many economists and officials.

■ This time it's different

The biggest difference compared to the euro zone debt crisis of 2010-2012 is the ECB. Then, there was no unconditional ECB pledge to do "whatever it takes" to support the euro. As soon as it was made, in mid-2012, the crisis ended.

Neither was there the ECB's Outright Monetary Transactions scheme of unlimited sovereign bond purchases or an experienced bailout fund with an unused lending capacity of 410 billion euros, ready to lend cheaply and practically without conditions.

But rather than market panic, it is the fact that the South will have to recover from the downturn while carrying huge debt, in contrast to the North, that worries markets and euro zone officials alike.

The key risk is political: to stay intact, the euro zone must not allow nationalist and Eurosceptic parties in the South to capitalize on the hardships of recovery with huge debt levels and swing public opinion against the EU, economists said.

"The ECB can buy a lot of Italian bonds but it cannot convince markets that Italy wants to stay in the euro forever," said Holger Schmieding, chief economist at Berenberg bank.

"The tail risk that a future Italian government may want to leave the euro is one the market is watching. It's not about the details, it's about the risk of political backlash," he said.

The backlash could take the form of popular resentment in Italy at its relatively limited ability to respond to the epidemic compared with Germany or the Netherlands.



■ Debt differences to spike, a threat to Euro

Germany's immediate fiscal response to the pandemic was almost seven times larger than in Italy, where the crisis has been harsher, the chairman of the euro zone's finance ministers, Mario Centeno, told the European Parliament, adding that such "fragmentation" undermined the single market and the euro.

Yet the future debt differences will be big. The IMF sees Greek debt rocketing almost 22 points to 200% of GDP this year, Italian almost 21 points to 156% and Spanish 18 points to more than 113%. France, Portugal and Belgium will also be badly hit.

By contrast, Germany is expected to increase its debt by only 9 points to 69% and the Netherlands by 10 points to 58%. Austria, Finland, Slovakia and the Baltics will see similar or slightly bigger increases, but to much lower levels than southern states.

"I would bet 100 euros that a debt crisis will not return in the next one or two years," said ING economist Carsten Brzeski, noting the euro zone's very strong political will to avoid such a crisis when all its economies are suffering from the epidemic.

"However, I would probably also bet another 100 euros that an existential crisis of the euro zone will return. To some extent, the corona crisis is an accelerator. It will bring back the fundamental question on what is the right policy and how to deal with high government debt," he said.

"The current crisis will lead to new economic divergence

struggling with the pandemic.

"Who would have thought that such a virus could dishevel the global economy," he said.

Of course, all the oil-rich countries, including ours, will suffer losses, but for some the losses will be very big and for some much less, he added.

Earlier on Monday, U.S. oil prices fell into negative territory for the first time in history as the huge fall in the demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic flooded the markets with oil and left not enough storage capacity so producers were forced to even pay buyers to take it off their hands.

West Texas Intermediate, the U.S. benchmark, traded as low as -\$40.32 a barrel on the mentioned day.

(Source: Reuters)

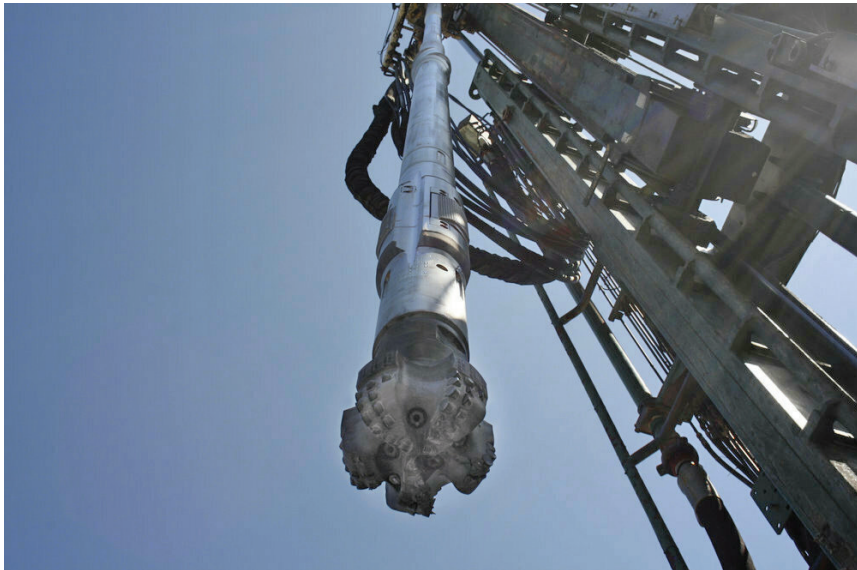
NIOC plans to drill 8 new exploratory wells by March 2021

E N E R G Y **TEHRAN** – Director of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) Exploration Department, Saleh Hendi, says the company has it on the agenda to drill eight new exploratory wells in the current Iranian calendar year (ends on March 20, 2021).

As ILNA reported, six of the mentioned wells are going to be drilled in the onshore exploration sites while the other two will be offshore.

“The drilling operations for yet another five exploratory wells which were started in the previous calendar year (ended on March 19) will also continue in the current year,” Hendi said.

Explaining about the two offshore wells, the official noted that one of these wells is located in Siri region, which is being drilled independently by the Exploration Department, and the other in the Yalda field for which the drilling operations started this week in collaboration with Pars Oil and Gas Company (POGC).



According to the official, the Exploration Department has identified and prioritized all of the country's sedimentary basins, and each of these basins is carefully studied and modeled with new methods.

Last year, a total of 18,000 meters of exploratory wells were dug through 60 rigs, meaning that an average of five drilling rigs were active each month, he noted.

Earlier in March, Mohammadreza Hor, the deputy director for technical affairs at NIOC's Exploration Directorate, announced that the mentioned directorate had seven active drilling rigs in the said month and according to the development plans the number of the rigs was planned to increase to eight in the coming months.

He had also announced the completion of drilling operations of three wells in Forouzan, Mansouri and Deng fields after conducting preliminary tests in February, saying: “Currently, operation trials are underway for Arman exploration well in the region.”

OPEC+ ministers hold impromptu call to reflect on price rout

Oil ministers from the OPEC+ coalition held an unscheduled conference call on Tuesday to discuss the collapse in crude prices, though a closing statement signaled they didn't settle on any new policy measures.

Alarmed by the market's unrelenting plunge, despite their announcement of record production cuts earlier this month, several producers held informal talks “to brainstorm the current dramatic oil market situation,” the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries said on Twitter. They reaffirmed their commitment to the curbs and agreed to hold regular calls to consult on the market.

Crude prices have continued to slump, even though the 23 OPEC+ nations intend to cut global supply by 10%, with futures falling below zero in New York on Monday for the first time ever. The targeted output reduction of 9.7 million barrels a day isn't nearly enough to counter lost demand as the coronavirus outbreak forces countries to lock down.

“We continue to see extraordinary turmoil in oil markets in this Black April for the industry,” Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency, said on Twitter. “The OPEC+ supply cut is a solid start but insufficient to rebalance the market immediately due to the scale of the drop in demand.”

Saudi Arabia, OPEC's biggest member, reiterated in a statement on Tuesday that it's prepared for further measures with the rest of the group and its allies to ensure market stability.

The organization has also received a proposal from Algeria, which this year holds



OPEC's rotating presidency, to start the planned cutbacks immediately, instead of May 1 as currently scheduled. The suggestion hasn't so far received backing from bigger members.

It's also unclear whether the Saudis and other major exporters in the group like Russia have the will, or the ability, to make deeper cuts. The latest deal already requires participants to make sharp cutbacks, which many will likely struggle to deliver.

The closing statement didn't specify which producers had participated in the call, though photographs posted by OPEC's secretariat on Twitter showed representatives from Azerbaijan, Angola, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Nigeria and Venezuela. Russia, one of the most influential countries in the alliance, didn't participate, according to a delegate.

The statement said that ministers should “continue holding such consultations on the market situation on regular basis.” Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro earlier suggested to Russian leader Vladimir Putin that OPEC+ should hold one of its monitoring meetings on May 10.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Green energy could drive Covid-19 recovery with \$100tn boost

Renewable energy could power an economic recovery from Covid-19 by spurring global GDP gains of almost \$100tn (£80tn) between now and 2050, according to a report.

The International Renewable Energy Agency found that accelerating investment in renewable energy could generate huge economic benefits while helping to tackle the global climate emergency.

The agency's director general, Francesco La Camera, said the global crisis ignited by the coronavirus outbreak exposed “the deep vulnerabilities of the current system” and urged governments to invest in renewable energy to kickstart economic growth and help meet climate targets.

The agency's landmark report found that accelerating investment in renewable energy would help tackle the climate crisis and would in effect pay for itself.

Investing in renewable energy would deliver global GDP gains of \$98tn above a business-as-usual scenario by 2050 by returning between \$3 and \$8 on every dollar invested.

It would also quadruple the number of jobs in the sector to 42m over the next 30 years, and measurably improve global health and welfare scores, according to the report.

“Governments are facing a difficult task of bringing the health emergency under control while introducing major stimulus and recovery measures,” La Camera said. “By accelerating renewables and making the energy transition an integral part of the wider recovery, governments can achieve multiple economic and social objectives in the pursuit of a resilient future that leaves nobody behind.”

The report also found that renewable ener-

gy could curb the rise in global temperatures by helping to reduce the energy industry's carbon dioxide emissions by 70% by 2050 by replacing fossil fuels.

Renewables could play a greater role in cutting carbon emissions from heavy industry and transport to reach virtually zero emissions by 2050, particularly by investing in green hydrogen.

The clean-burning fuel, which can replace the fossil fuel gas in steel and cement making, could be made by using vast amounts of clean electricity to split water into hydrogen and oxygen elements.

Andrew Steer, chief executive of the World Resources Institute, said: “As the world looks to recover from the current health and economic crises, we face a choice: we can pursue a modern, clean, healthy energy system, or we can go back to the old, polluting ways of doing business. We must choose the former.”

The call for a green economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis comes after a warning from Fatih Birol, head of the International Energy Agency, that government policies must be put in place to avoid an investment hiatus in the energy transition.

“We should not allow today's crisis to compromise the clean energy transition,” he said. “We have an important window of opportunity.”

Ignacio Galán, the chairman and CEO of the Spanish renewables giant Iberdrola, which owns Scottish Power, said the company would continue to invest billions in renewable energy as well as electricity networks and batteries to help integrate clean energy in the electricity.

(Source: The Guardian)

Russia races to squeeze the U.S. out of Asian natural gas markets

The increasingly close relationship on multiple levels between Russia and China became obvious to anyone with an interest in such matters last July when the two countries staged their first joint air patrol in the Asia-Pacific region, sending the air and naval defenses of the principal U.S. satellite countries in the area – Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines – into panic mode. At the same time, the two countries continue to push ahead with their game-changing US\$400 billion ‘Power of Siberia’ gas project that will move at least 38 billion cubic meters of gas annually for 30 years from the Chayandinskoye and Kovyktinskoye fields in Eastern Siberia to Northeastern China. Last week saw major announcements from Russia that now that China is apparently past the peak of its coronavirus outbreak, plans for the project are moving quickly ahead and are being expanded in scope and scale.

In broad terms, Russian President Vladimir Putin has found a perfectly complementary counterpart in China's President Xi Jinping. Xi, like Putin, is a leader who – since taking over as General Secretary of the Communist Party in China in November 2012 and as President of the People's Republic of China in March 2013 – has stressed the virtue of ‘self-reliance’ and, as part of this, the importance of the State extending its influence into all areas of the country's economic and social fabric. This ‘centralization’ ethos of the Chinese Communist Party, was encapsulated in Xi's recent statement that: “Government, military, civilian, and academic, east, west, south, north, and center, the [Communist] Party leads everything.”

Putin tried in his early years to make friendly overtures to the West – notably his 25 September 2001 speech in Germany's Bundestag in which he outlined that Russia's destiny was in Europe and that the Cold War was definitively over – but then drew back, initially because of the West's censure over the Chechen Wars and then over the annexation of Crimea. Xi, though, has never sought such a relationship with the West and, since taking power, has actively sought to develop limited relationships with global partners to make up for the ending of the ‘constructive engagement’ with the U.S. and its allies of China's previous leaders over the past four decades.

As TS Lombard's London-based China research team chairman, Jonathan Fenby, told OilPrice.com: “This political-economic nexus is set to bring growing divergence from the U.S. as part of the wider agenda of the ‘national strengthening’ being pursued by Xi Jinping, and Beijing is shifting from being an economic adversary to the U.S. to a geopolitical alternative and this could result in a step change in the nature of the confrontation between the two countries.” In both cases, the Power



of Siberia project is perhaps the most tangible representation of this increasing economic and political congruence between the two countries.

Having already demonstrated its willingness to use its abundant gas resources as a weapon in its numerous suspension and complete shutdowns of supply to Ukraine (and therefore to Europe) since the first major supply cut-off on 1 January 2006, Russia is looking to extend such leverage further in the shape of Nord Stream 2, the undersea Baltic gas pipeline to Germany, and the TurkStream pipeline to Turkey and Southern Europe. The Power of Siberia pipeline project fits into such a mould, although the initial focus is in undermining the U.S.'s geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific, a broad strategic move that is thoroughly in line with China's own plans for the area that it regards as its own backyard.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus, it is easy to forget that China was fully engaged in an all-out trade war with the U.S., and in this context the Power of Siberia pipeline can be used to edge out the U.S.'s gas supplies to the region as and when the need for an extra negotiating weapon arises. It would also add weight to China's global geopolitical game-changing strategy implicit in its multi-generational ‘One Belt, One Road’ program.

Russia, therefore, in the course of the last week, has stated that it is looking to increase both the flows through the Power of Siberia and the overall capacity (including storage) associated with these flows. Currently, the pipeline – in its eastern route – supplies gas from the Chayandinskoye field (the key element in the Yakutia gas production center) to domestic consumers in Russia's Far East and then on to China. According to Russia's state gas giant, Gazprom, these commercial flows began last December at a rate of around 10 million cubic meters per day (cu m/d) towards an overall target rate of 38 billion cubic meters per year (Bcm/y).

To achieve this as quickly as possible, Gazprom stated last week, the Chayandinskoye field – discovered in 1983, with B1+B2 reserves of at least 1.2 trillion cubic meters of gas and about 61.6 million tons of oil and gas condensate – is now fully back on track following a two-week maintenance program that was implemented to coincide with the force majeure on some import obligations declared in March by China's PetroChina, due to the coronavirus outbreak. This is aimed at achieving the field's annual design output of 25 billion cubic meters of gas ahead of schedule and specifically includes expanding the operating Comprehensive Gas Treatment Unit (CGTU) that feeds gas into the Power of Siberia pipeline and finalizing the membrane unit for helium concentrate extraction (expected to come on-stream in the next few months).

At the same time, Gazprom announced that it will complete the construction of the second compressor station on the Power of Siberia line before the end of 2020 and that it is to bring gas into the pipeline flow from the second major field in the project – Kovyktinskoye, the focus of the Irkutsk gas production center – as from the end of 2022. Discovered in 1987, the Kovyktinskoye field holds the largest gas reserves in eastern Russia, with C1+C2 reserves across the licensed blocks (Kovyktinsky, Khandinsky, and Chikansky) containing 2.7 trillion cubic metres of gas and 90.6 million tons of gas condensate. Production drilling is now in full swing, according to Gazprom, with seven drilling rigs currently in operation but 18 in total planned for next year.

This will allow the company to export to China at least 5 Bcm of gas in the first year of operations through the Power of Siberia before the figure increases to at least 10 Bcm in the second year and the full capacity of 38 Bcm/y as from 2025. Linking the two key sites of Chayandinskoye and Kovyktinskoye will begin in the third quarter of this year with the construction of a new section of the Power of Siberia pipeline.

Alongside this, Gazprom is busy building out its storage capacity, last week announcing a target of more than 1 Bcm/d of withdrawal capacity by 2030. From 2010 to now, Gazprom has increased this amount that can be delivered from storage daily by 36 per cent, to 843 million cu m/d but plans to add a further 200 million cu m/d by the beginning of 2030, according to the firm. This will be achieved by expanding existing storage facilities at the Kaliningradskoye and Volgogradskoye sites and the construction of a new facility at Shatrovskoye and other – as yet unspecified sites – in Tatarstan and the Northwestern, Siberian, and Far Eastern Federal Districts, Gazprom concluded.

(Source: oilprice.com)

What negative US oil prices mean for the industry

Benchmark US crude oil prices traded with negative prices for the first time in history on Monday, sending shockwaves through the global energy sector.

But what are negative prices and what do they mean for the wider industry?

■ What happened?

US oil prices traded below zero for the first time ever, meaning producers or traders were essentially paying other market participants to take the oil off their hands.

It is the clearest sign yet that coronavirus, which has cut oil demand by up to a third worldwide, has turned the US oil market on its head.

The price crash came as the US benchmark oil contract, known as West Texas Intermediate, headed towards its expiry date for May delivery, the month when demand hit from lockdowns and travel restrictions is expected to peak.

Each month WTI future contracts, which trade on CME Group's New York Mercantile Exchange, need to be settled with physical delivery of crude oil, giving a real-world link to one of the world's most heavily traded derivatives.

Normally this happens each month without incident or drama. But Monday was different. Analysts believe a lack of available storage capacity at the WTI contract's delivery point of Cushing, Oklahoma – known as the Pipeline Crossroads of the World – set off panic among traders holding derivative contracts, who found themselves with nowhere to put the oil.

WTI opened for trading on Sunday night at \$18 a barrel. By the end of the day it had dropped to as low as minus \$40 a barrel.

“With adequate storage in Cushing unavailable to those who need it, selling intensified,” said Ann-Louise Hittle at consultancy Wood Mackenzie.

“This issue is most intense for May WTI because oil demand is at its weakest, with full coronavirus containment measures in place across much of the US. Storage at the Oklahoma facility is expected to be full within weeks.”

As of April 10, Cushing's tanks housed 55m barrels of crude, or 72 percent of working storage capacity of 76.1m barrels, according to the Energy Information Administration. The remaining capacity was not necessarily available to those who had not already leased it.

CME Group said its market was functioning, adding that the negative price suggested that spot and futures prices were converging as designed.

“Today's negative settlement price in the May WTI futures contract reflects both the global oversupply of crude oil and high levels of storage utilization in the United States,” the exchange operator said late on Monday.

Traders with long-term leases were probably able to score huge profits. WTI contracts for delivery in June are still trading above \$20 a barrel, even though they have fallen from near \$60 at the start of the year. Get paid \$30-\$40 a barrel to take the oil, then sell it forward in the futures market for \$20 a barrel.

■ What will it do to the sector?

Several casualties will be visible as the dust settles on Monday's unprecedented price rout. They range from traders left holding contracts that lost almost \$60 a barrel in a single day, to U.S. industry executives who only a few days ago were hailing an OPEC deal that was supposed to put a floor under the oil price. That floor was obliterated on Monday.

One day's trading of a contract on the eve of expiry will not on its own cause significant damage to the U.S. energy sector – but sub-zero prices will tarnish the commodity's brand as a safe investment, especially among retail investors that piled into oil contracts in recent weeks.

But the biggest worry for the sector is the colossal imbalance in U.S. supply and demand that underlies Monday's flash crash. As the coronavirus lockdowns spread and unemployment rises, the U.S. is now on its own producing 2m bpd more than its slowing refineries need, and lacks available storage to handle the excess, say analysts. Consumption has to leap higher, oilfields need to be shut sooner or new unknown storage capacity needs to be found faster.

Until the imbalance is fixed, prices will remain low and volatile, crippling the sector and forcing widespread distress on producers. The May contract's capitulation is a nasty sign of a deeply dislocated market.

■ How will the main players react?

Sub-zero oil prices are an embarrassment for Saudi Arabia and Russia, which just over a week ago agreed the biggest coordinated supply cuts ever – and President Donald Trump, who pushed them to seal the deal.

Their powerlessness in the face of the demand collapse was plainly visible in Monday's capitulation. Despite OPEC delegates feeding rumors of deeper and swifter cuts and more talks among producer nations led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, they are unlikely to help.

Even a doubling of the OPEC supply reductions, due to start in May, would do nothing to add storage capacity in Cushing now.

It is an embarrassment for Trump, who set out to protect the U.S. shale sector after being extensively lobbied by industry executives in recent weeks. After an agreement was reached between global producers he called it “a great deal for all”.

The federal government has some measures it might now pursue, including urging deeper cuts from OPEC; tariffs on foreign oil imports; freeing up more storage capacity, including in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR); paying producers to keep oil in the ground; or extending financial support to oil companies. All have been discussed at various levels of the U.S. government.

Trump reiterated on Monday evening that he was looking at putting as much as 75m barrels of U.S. oil in the country's SPR, filling the emergency stockpile to the brim, but he has struggled to win funding from the U.S. Congress.

In Texas, the price collapse may alter a recent debate in favor of a proposal to mandate production curtailments on companies operating in the state. A hearing on this idea was held last week and the Texas Railroad Commission will rule on Tuesday. “We now see an emergency pro-rationing measure as a viable outcome,” said analysts at Clearview Energy Partners in Washington.

■ Is this the bottom?

The May WTI contract was expected to suffer, as demand takes the biggest hit from lockdown measures in force across the U.S. and coincides with a flood of supply and storage tanks at Cushing set to fill up. But the coming weeks will see swaths of the country still under travel restrictions.

Domestic production is eventually expected to fall sharply, possibly by more than 10 percent, but it may not happen soon enough as producers endure a war of attrition. The June contract, which fell 15 percent on Monday but clung on above \$20 a barrel, is unlikely to be in the clear, even if some of the selling pressure eases.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, is better insulated as it is a seaborne crude, making storage less of an issue as long as traders can charter supertankers. Brent is trading near \$26 a barrel.

But memories of Monday's panic will not fade quickly for traders. The industry is also watching for the knock-on effect on WTI-linked crude grades, as the benchmark contract is used to help price barrels from all over the region, including oil from Canada, Mexico and other U.S. regional crudes.

(Source: Financial Times)

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Historic fall in U.S. oil prices amid virus outbreak

Global lockdowns of major cities decrease demand

➔ Low oil prices are expected to have a minimal impact on Iran. Due to sanctions Iran's economy has gradually shed its dependence on oil exports. When U.S. President Donald Trump exited the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions on Iran in May of 2018, Iran's oil exports stood at around 2.5 million barrels a day. The six-month waivers granted to some countries ended April 2019, at which point Iranian crude exports dropped to some 1-1.3 million barrel a day. By March most estimates valued Iran crude exports to 250,000 barrels a day.

Today Iran's exports are even below that level making this short-term oil shock impact on Iran minimal.

The real impact on today's oil prices has been caused by lockdowns in major cities in countries that depend on oil imports, including U.S., China, Japan, India, and so on. Let's have a brief look at some of them.

The economic projections in these economies along with their ability to successfully contain the Covid-19 outbreak will to a great extent determine the demand for crude in the future.

U.S.A.:

Even though U.S. was the world's largest oil producer due to shale oil revolution but it has imported oil from neighbors in south and north, Mexico and Canada respectively.

If present oil prices persist long enough it would put the final nails on the coffin of the U.S. shale industry. Most of U.S. shale producers budgeted for oil between \$55-65 per barrel in 2020, anything below would make the industry unfeasible.

The dire situation of many Americans living in large cities like New York confirmed how close to the edge many Americans lived, with pay and benefits eroding as corporate profits surged. Last week ill patients lined up overnight in freezing cold to wait for Covid-19 testing.

In one instance 29 fatalities were reported at one nursing home in New York with 227 beds. Fatality rates continue to spike in nursing homes throughout U.S.

On Thursday more than 5.2 million Americans were added to unemployed workers as jobless claims exceeded 20 million in four weeks. Such statistics have not been seen since great depression.

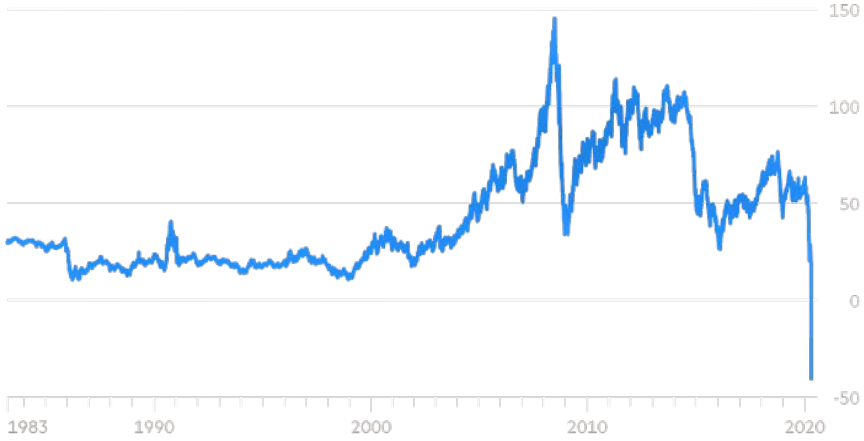
Last Wednesday Commerce Department declared steepest monthly drop in retail sales since record keeping began 30 years ago. The U.S. Federal Reserve reported industrial production had recorded its biggest decline since 1946.

"A national shutdown is not a sustainable

US oil trades in negative territory for the first time

West Texas Intermediate

— \$ per barrel



Source: Refinitiv
© FT

long-term solution," U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters on Thursday adding that "lot of states would open relatively soon." Many consider Trump's decision as premature just like his early assessment of what he has referred to as "Chinese flue".

Trump has also claimed that the U.S. has passed the 'peak' death figures. Many question his assessment as U.S. has the world's highest number of infections and deaths, with 792,938 Covid-19 infections and over 42,518 fatalities until Tuesday.

With unemployment hitting 17 percent in April, compared to 4.4 percent in March the question is whether the wave of job destruction has also peaked despite stimulus and relief measures?

CHINA:

China's official GDP shrank 6.8 percent for the first time since 1979 as the world's second largest economy braced itself for the pandemic.

China is known as the World Factory and its economy depends on global demand. For example one major market for China is Europe where the death toll is approaching 100,000 and demand is not expected to rise this year.

On Friday (April 17) China revised death toll in Wuhan city by 50 percent, adding 1,290 fatalities with a new total of 3,869 fatalities and confirmed nearly 84,000 infections nationwide. Officials in Wuhan, Hubei Province, said the

revised figures were the result of new data received from multiple sources and a shortage of testing capacity that kept many infected patients not accounted for.

In December 2019, Chinese authorities started investigations into a mysterious viral pneumonia, reported cases to WHO on December 31. WHO officials were allowed to visit China and investigate the outbreak on February 10.

China has been praised for its handling of crisis and the unprecedented restrictions instituted. WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has hailed China for the "speed with which it detected the outbreak" and its "commitment to transparency".

Trump has called WHO "China centric" and perhaps it is also because of Ghebreyesus' comments that he has decided to cut off funding to the organization.

JAPAN:

Japan is the world's fourth largest oil importer with a daily consumption of over four million barrels. Japan's customs-cleared crude oil imports fell 0.7 percent in March from the same month a year earlier, the Ministry of Finance said Monday.

Japan's oil refiner Idemitsu Kosan expects Japan's demand for oil products to fall by about 20 percent in the April-June quarter from a year earlier. Due to the reduction in demand Japanese oil refiners are seeking to delay imports.

Two weeks have passed since the government declared a state of emergency in Japan where suspensions and reductions at assembly plants began mid-February. There is growing concern among Japanese automakers that production will be suspended for a long time, and restaurants and retailers are looking for ways to survive under the assumption that temporary closures and shorter working hours will be prolonged, reports Japan Times.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promised on Thursday to give a one-off sum of \$930 to every citizen of Japan in a step to response to the Covid-19 outbreak as he declared a state of emergency across the whole country. It will run until May 6.

Tanks at key energy hub in Oklahoma could hit their limits within three weeks as traders are willing to pay others to take that oil for delivery in May off their hands, so long as they also take the burden of figuring out where to keep it.

INDIA:

With 3.1 million barrels a day of lost demand, oil demand slumped 70 percent in India, as the third biggest crude buyer imposed the planet's largest national lockdown. India's March 25 decision to impose a three-week shutdown ended April 15, but President Narinder Modi extended it to third of May.

The average price of Indian basket for crude was \$33.36 a barrel in March compared to \$71 in April, 2019 – first month of the financial year. On April 15 the price slipped to \$19.32. The crude price was predicted to further fall to \$10 despite the production cuts as the world was soon running out of storage space.

India imports 82 percent of its crude accounting for 20 percent of India's whole merchandise imports.

Some important dates

On 31 December a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan was reported to WHO.

On March 11, alarmed with the spreading level and severity, and by alarming levels of inaction, WHO made the assessment that Covid-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.

On Monday the WHO Director General said that the "worst" of the novel coronavirus has yet to come.

The number of confirmed cases on Tuesday stood at 2,495,994, 171,255 deaths and 571,971 recoveries.

Oil prices and the global economy will take a while to recover from this pandemic and maybe some aspects of the present situation will remain permanent bringing about a new world order politically and in socially. Only time will show.

1st Iranian military satellite utter surprise for ignorant west, world

By Mehdi Azizi

Iran could manage to launch its first military satellite, the Noor-1 Satellite, by the domestically-built launcher Qas-sed (messenger) on Wednesday morning to expand its international presence in the space industry.

The significant point is that the U.S. intelligence and security forces could not have any clue about Iran's such activities and this caused them a great surprise.

Besides being a surprise, Noor-1 Satellite is a great

achievement for. It is a big security shock to westerners and Americans, in particular when Iran is under tough U.S. sanctions.

The Islamic Republic was not expected to take such a measure under the sanctions and amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Westerners, who are entrapped in the pandemic and have not been able to gain any success in curbing the virus, did not expect such a move from Tehran.

More interesting than the silence of Arab and west

countries about this achievement of Iran and their effort for disparaging it was Trump's tweet a few hours after the Noor-1 Satellite was launched. He threatened Iranian gun-boats for being shot down if they get near to the U.S. boats.

Trump seeks revenge in international waters, while IRGC forces have reached the space.

However, the last week's confrontation between IRGC and the American military vessels must be kept in mind.

Trump also wishes to find a way out of U.S. domestic challenges and its crisis under the pandemic.



from SPR which is meant for an emergency. SPR is designed to be used during wars, hurricanes, floods...SPR is not for commercial or domestic objectives.

As such Trump was unable to buy oil from producers to store in SPR. This time President Trump asked producers to seize production and in fact, keep and store their crude oil under the ground instead of bringing crude up and run through pipelines that were already loaded with unsold oil.

It is important to note that the United States has to still import crude oil from other countries including Canada, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. It is about crude quality. Shale oil and WTI are graded as super light crudes. These very light crudes with an API of over 50 degrees are usually mixed with heavy crude oil from imported crude grades of 24-27 API degrees. Other than that, very light crudes are suitable to be refined as jet fuel.

US air navigation is a huge industry and business. The number of flights that are carried out within the US airspace is about 22 times flights around the earth. Coronavirus has now stopped that. America does not need all that super light crudes.

What about types of crude oil traded on the market?

In fact, Brent's price isn't doing that bad at all. At a time WTI is available at 1Cent, Brent is touching low \$20 per

barrel. Dubai grade oil is even better-off.

In this context, oversupply is hitting small and medium oil (and gas) companies that often work on loans from banks. They're not able to cover costs of production and fill up bankruptcy chapters one after the others. International Oil Companies IOC's are doing well.

They're all over the world and make their own profits.

How will/can OPEC react?

As we have discussed before, Coronavirus hit the international economy hard and amongst all sectors of the economy, oil is hit worst. When there's no tourism and traveling, cars, airlines, buses, and trains are parked and use up no gasoline. Demand is broken down and supply is in abundance.

OPEC plus decided to cut output by 9.7 Million barrels on an emergency meeting of ministers on April 9. However, decisions will be effective for two months of May and June, after which OPEC plus ministers meet again and evaluate the market. There's every possibility that they may even moot earlier and go for a dipper production cuts.

Nevertheless, there's still an unresolved issue. United States is required to be a party to the OPEC plus agreement. However, domestic regulations in America does not permit market management in order to manipulate prices. The US has to find a way out of the dilemma.

In the meantime, President Putin has called for an extraordinary meeting of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council in September and has been welcomed by all members. Energy is an important topic among other issues.

The market is currently watching three men namely Mohammed Ben Salman, Putin, and Trump. The three of them hold the key to supply management which is now of crucial importance to market fundamentals.

OPEC misses the presence of Iran most dearly. In past Iran was instrumental in crisis management within OPEC. The country is a founding member of OPEC and an important producer, however, its presence in the world oil market has been restricted under US sanctions.

How Saudis victimize OPEC members for the sake of Trump's wealthy supporters!

BY Mohammad Jafari

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's so-called oil war against Russia and Riyadh's move to increase oil supply and subsequent drop in price just helped Donald Trump's wealthy supporters cope easier with decline in the US oil production due to COVID-19 restrictions, a senior economic expert said, noting that OPEC members have realized that they have been victimized by MbS for the sake Saudis' American friends.

Thembisa Fakude wrote in his article in the Middle East Monitor that when Saudi Arabia approached members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its affiliates recently to cut oil production in an attempt to cushion the impact of the falling oil prices as a result of Covid-19, Russia rejected the proposal. The subsequent spat between Moscow and Riyadh saw the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates increase oil production in an effort to punish Russia. This increase has led to record low prices in the industry, with the price per barrel plunging to an 18-year low of less than \$28.

Notwithstanding the possible loss of revenue as a result of increased oil production, Russia — a significant oil producer in its own right — stood its ground, much to the annoyance of Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, who threatened to increase the Kingdom's oil production further if Russia failed to yield. Why did Russia reject the Saudi proposal which was intended to benefit all oil producers, not just Saudi Arabia?

While the reduction in volume would certainly have helped OPEC countries recoup lost profits, particularly the smaller oil producers, Russia's concern was that cuts could mean a possible loss of market share, with US producers filling the gap. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's plan was seen by Russia as an attempt to assist Donald Trump to meet his economic and political challenges in the US.

Trump and his allies on Capitol Hill are fully aware of the problem: the fortunes of many of the president's wealthy supporters in the industry are on the line, as are the jobs of workers concentrated heavily in red states like Texas, North Dakota and Louisiana.

Since the US is not a member of OPEC, it would have not been bound by the terms of the proposed Saudi deal but would have benefited from the shortfall in global oil supply and agreed price. The change in course would give American companies room to reduce production gradually on their own terms, without government or regulatory mandates, as they invest far less in exploration and production.

The increase in oil supply and subsequent drop in price have been good for those countries that import it, giving them a chance to build up their stockpiles, which will most likely have an impact on the demand of oil in the foreseeable future. However, for oil producing countries, especially the smaller producers, the situation has been a disaster. Many have failed to diversify their economies over the years and are still dependent on oil exports. As such, the continuing instability in oil production has forced many to slash national spending. Saudi Arabia, the most influential of OPEC's 12 member states, actually needs oil to be at \$106 a barrel in order to break even after the costs of its generous welfare programs and energy subsidies are taken into account. The Kingdom will be forced to plunder its financial reserves to fund its bloated budget if the price of oil plummets further.

A deal was finally brokered which enabled Russia and Saudi Arabia to get back to the negotiation table. Consequently, members of the OPEC cartel and its allies have agreed to withhold almost 10m barrels a day from next month, not least because the coronavirus pandemic has devastated the demand for fossil fuels.

The lesson to be learnt from this experience is that the client-state relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US under President Donald Trump is dangerous for world stability. The re-election of Trump in November will almost certainly mean the continuation of the status quo, which should be a major concern.

Saudi Arabia has still not accounted for the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and has at best treated those demanding justice for Khashoggi and his family with disdain. Furthermore, a couple of days ago, Saudi activist Abdul Rahim Al-Hwaiti was killed in a hail of bullets at his home in Al-Khraybah, in the north-west of the Kingdom. He was a member of the powerful Al-Huwaitat tribe spread across Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula.

The tribe's presence in the region for more than 800 years predates the Saudi Kingdom by many centuries. Al-Hwaiti has been protesting against what he regarded as his forcible removal from his ancestral land to allow the Saudi authorities to develop a mega city known as NEOM in the province of Tabuk. The city is expected to be a hub for new housing, business, science research and other industry. It is a pet project of Bin Salman which has been described as "crazy".

The brutal killing of Al-Hwaiti and the unnecessary disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Russia are both two examples of what Bin Salman can get away with under Trump's protection. His increase of oil production levels at the expense of OPEC members was unprecedented. The Crown Prince was basically willing to gamble with other countries' national budgets in order to pursue a vendetta against Russia. As with the murder of Khashoggi, Bin Salman has again been allowed to act with impunity, demonstrating the toxicity of the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. This should be a huge concern for everyone in the Middle East and, indeed, the rest of the world.

Trump explained on April 20, at night's COVID-19 press briefing, "Based on the record low price of oil, it is at a level that is very interesting to a lot of people, we're filling up our national petroleum reserves, strategic reserves and we are looking to put as much as 75 million barrels into the reserves themselves that would top it out, that would be the first time in a long time it's been topped out and we'd get it at the right price." Trump added, "This is a great time to buy oil...Nobody's ever heard of negative oil before."

The Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) is the world's largest supply of emergency oil reserves. It was established by the U.S. government in the 1970s to minimize the impact of disruptions in the oil product supply chain.

As of April 17, the SPR held 635 million barrels of crude oil, consisting of 384.7 million barrels of sour crude and 250.3 million barrels of sweet crude.

While the plan to buy crude oil at historic lows isn't exactly outrageous, it may find some pushback from Democrats who blocked the Department of Energy's previous proposal to buy up as much as \$3 billion worth of crude as part of the massive economic stimulus package in March.

Documentaries to promote tourism in Markazi province

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** – Markazi Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department plans to produce a number of short documentaries to introduce tourist attractions and historical sites in the central province.



Some 140 minutes of short documentaries will be made in collaboration with the Markazi province's branch of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), provincial tourism chief Alireza Izadi announced on Wednesday, CHTN reported.

The series will be broadcast from IRIB's local channels during the current Iranian calendar year 1399 (started on March 21), he added.

Markazi province is considered as the industrial capital of the country. It is rich in natural, historical, cultural and religious attractions.

Hand-woven carpets and klims, made in its cities including Farahan, Sarugh, Lilivan, Senejan and Vafs are known internationally.

World Heritage Committee session postponed over coronavirus

HERITAGE d e s k **TEHRAN** – The 44th session of the World Heritage Committee has been postponed indefinitely in an attempt to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), UNESCO official website has announced.



The session was scheduled to be held in the Chinese city of Fuzhou from June 29 to July 9.

The exact date of the session and further information will be announced in the near future.

The overall aim of the forum is to highlight key opportunities and challenges of heritage management in the twenty-first century. The participants will gain insights into the processes and working practices of the 1972 World Heritage Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Iran's vast Hyrcanian Forest was selected as a World Heritage site in the previous session of the committee, which was held in the Azerbaijani capital Baku last July. It was the second such Iranian natural site after Lut Desert, which was granted the tag in 2016.

Iran has also 22 cultural properties being registered on the prestigious list, including Cultural Landscape of Maymand, Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars Region, and Historic City of Yazd.

Yazd tourist attractions available online

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** – Tourist attractions in the central Iranian province of Yazd can be visited online, said Seyyed Mostafa Fatemi, the provincial tourism chief, CHTN reported on Wednesday.



Over 1,700 videos, photos and video clips have been produced to facilitate online visiting and virtual trips to the province's historical sites and natural sights for the people who are in home quarantine over the coronavirus outbreak in the country, he added.

He also noted that such videos can help people to organize their trips to the province more properly after end of the coronavirus pandemic in the country.

With its winding lanes, forest of badgirs (wind catchers), mud-brick houses, atmospheric alleyways and centuries of history, Yazd is a delightful place to stay, referring as a 'don't miss' destination by almost all travel associates in the region. The oasis city is wedged between the northern Dasht-e Kavir and southern Dasht-e Lut on a flat plain ringed by mountains.

Yazd Jameh Mosque, Dowlatabad Garden, the Yazd Atash Behram, also known as Atashkadeh-e Yazd, Towers of Silence, and adjacent desert landscape are among its tourist sites.

How is COVID-19 affecting travel in Iran? Experts explain

→ 1 The rebound, according to experts, will be much more noticeable once the Iranian government agrees to grant proper bailouts and economic relief packages to the beleaguered travel industry being brought to a virtual standstill.

On one hand, the government has announced it will bail out those which are grappling with fiscal problems by offering loans with a 12-percent interest rate. On the other, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts has suggested a rescue package for tourism businesses.

Travel experts, however, hail such supportive measures, yet voice skepticism, saying they cannot resolve immense problems that the travel and hospitality industry is facing.

Several Iranian experts have explained the kinds of protection that the government could provide to COVID-19-hit people and businesses.

“Such amount of bailouts will not compensate for much of the losses as the virus pandemic has brought tourism to a standstill for two months,” said Amir-Pouya Rafiei-Shad who presides over Tehran province's Tour and Travel Agencies Association.

Last [Iranian calendar] year was a bumpy ride for Iran's tourism as it suffered from flooding in the spring, protests [over petrol prices] in November, and the fatal Ukraine International Airlines plane crash in January, he explained.

“The spread of the coronavirus was the latest blow to the industry, not only in Iran but in the whole world,” he added.

Rafiei-Shad added that the Iranian government needs to offer tax exemption to the tourism industry for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 fiscal years, and provide social welfare support to employees of this sector.

“Lowering the rate of unemployment has been the promise made by all governments. To attain that goal, support should be large enough to help save jobs and prevent the bankruptcy of travel agencies,” he said.

Rafiei-Shad put the number of travel agencies in Tehran province at about 20,000, adding they provide livelihood for some 80,000 people only in Tehran, if we assume each travel agency has an average of 10 people on their payrolls and each employer serves a four-member household on average.

Tour guide Mahdiyeh Jahangir believes that “Nobody assumes the responsibility for the unemployment of tour guides in the face of coronavirus pandemic.”

According to her, one of the reasons for this situation is the lack of employers for tour guides. She considers



A man takes photos of the historical Agha Bozorg Mosque in Kashan, central Iran.

the lack of social insurance as one of the most important problems of tour guides during the virus outbreak.

“We only have a tour guide ID card and nothing more,” she lamented.

Jamshid Hamzehzadeh, the head of Iran Hotel Association, said the government bailout for tourism businesses is 120 million rials (about \$2,800) for each employee that must be repaid over two years with a 12-percent interest rate.

“This sum is only enough to provide financial compensation for two or three months of an employee so that the government needs to offer loans at low interest rates like five percent instead of 12 to tourism industry and consider a five-year period for the repayment of

loans with a one-year moratorium period,” Hamzehzadeh explained.

The government has allocated a 750-trillion-rial (about \$18 billion) package to help low-income households and small- and medium-sized enterprises suffered by the coronavirus concerns.

Optimistic forecasts, however, expect Iran to achieve a tourism boom after coronavirus contained, believing its impact would be temporary and short-lived for a country that ranked the third fastest-growing tourism destination in 2019.

Latest available data show eight million tourists visited the Islamic Republic during the first ten months of the past Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2019).

Avoid overtourism and try these hidden gems

Eight incredible places in Iran most tourists don't know about

If you are kind of a traveler who dislikes overtourism, willing to infuse money into local economies, supporting conservation projects and local artisans, and building bridges across cultures, you may find your destination here in this page.

Below are eight fascinating places for avid travelers:

■ Kal-e Jenni Canyon

Jinni Canyon, or as local people say Kal-e Jenni, is one of the most mysterious and stunning valleys in the country situated in South Khorasan province.

Located some 30 kilometers north of the city of Tabas, a bunch of palm trees and marches in a wide valley, mark the scenic start of the journey, however, romance mixes with horror as the trip continues.

This name consists of two parts: Kal + Jinn. 'Kal' is referred to any valley which has been formed by water stream in the long run. And according to the Oxford Dictionary, 'Jinn' is “an intelligent spirit of lower rank than the angels, able to appear in human and animal forms and to possess humans.”

There are many reasons to attribute this 16-kilometer-long valley to jinn. Firstly, many mysterious-looking arcs, columns, and walls in the canyon which are basically made by erosion but local people could not find a better constructor than jinn for them.

The next reason is related to wind. When wind sweeps through the valley, it makes strange sounds due to the structure of walls which can really make you think that there are supernatural entities living around. Also, pebbles will hit your face as you walk in the valley in windy weather; locals believed that jinn are throwing the pebbles to defend their territory.

■ Korshahi Castle

Korshahi Castle, or the “Castles of Thieves”, is a centuries-old structure located in the northeast of ‘Abuzeyd-Abad’ town in Isfahan province.

It is one of the important castles of Sardar Hussein Kashi, one of the bandits and outlaws during the Reza Khan Pahlavi era. The traces of his battles with the government forces can still be observed here.

Korshahi is one of the surviving monuments of the Mongols era which has witnessed the bravery of desert people against the invasion of Mongol armies. During their fight, the soldiers sheltered in this castle and Mongols began to siege it, believing that the Iranian fighters would soon surrender because of the lack of water and food. But the interesting point is that Korshahi fort was built in a location with the shortest distance from the ground waters. So, fighters could reach the water after less than 5 meters drilling and they managed to defeat Mongols within a few days after that.

Korshahi castle is the only monument in the heart of this desert and has access to the water. Besides, the cool and breezy climate of the region makes it a perfect environment for tourists to enjoy the starry sky of the desert.

■ Pamenar Village

Pamenar is a quiet village, 40 kilometers away from Dezful city in Khuzestan province. It is located between Dez and Karkheh dams and so enjoys a lush, beautiful nature. Because of the low altitude of the village, the



People visit Kal-e Jenni Canyon in an undated photo.

earth and the sky seem united during the sunset and this creates a dreamy landscape. This also makes the stars to look brighter at nights and you can enjoy the beauty of the sky in this tranquil environment.

In addition to its diverse, amazing nature, the village has a well-known castle and a cemetery that attracts many tourists each year. Another special attraction of Pamenar village is the lake of Dez Dam. It is one of the most beautiful lakes in Iran and has a spectacular island with an area around 60,000 meters. Tourists who choose spring for traveling to Pamenar will have the opportunity to see thousands of red anemone flowers surrounding the lake.

■ Shadegan Wetland

A rich habitat for wildlife, Shadegan Wetland is situated southwards of a town of the same name in Khuzestan province. This wetland illustrates the biodiversity of Iranian people and geography. Arab-speaking residents of the area produce meat and dairy products for a living and you will see houses with round ceilings made of sugar cane in this wetland.

Animal life in the Shadegan ponds consists of two species of amphibians, five species of reptiles and some 150 species of birds. You will have the chance to observe pelicans and flamingos there. The area is also known for its birds of prey and an important spot for migratory birds. Shadegan is also home to 40 species of mammals, including Iranian wolf, river otter, jungle cat and wild boar.

■ Raghaz Canyon

Raghaz Canyon is located 30 kilometers from Darab town in Fars province and is known as the bride of Iran's valleys and canyons.

Raghaz is where the water and rock create unbelievable manifestations of nature. Each waterfall and pond of this canyon is different from another and bears its own beauty.

The pleasant sound of waterfalls, the opportunity of enjoying the exciting landing, climbing and swimming, as well as seeing the beautiful salmons in the clear ponds of Raghaz, are great reasons for visiting this strait.

■ Dalkhani Forest

Dalkhani Forest is one of the natural attractions of Ramsar city in Mazandaran province. This beautiful, semi-alpine forest, with a height of approximately 800 meters above the sea level, offers spectacular natural sceneries. Because of its height, Dalkhani could be a good choice for hikers and climbers and the thick fog in this forest create dreamy landscapes.

“The Corridor of Paradise” is the nickname given to this amazing forest due to its tall lush trees and pleasant climate. In mid-summer when the temperatures in the coastal cities of the Caspian Sea reaches up to 35 degrees, the Dalkhani Forest can be a great option for escaping the heat. During the summer, the temperature in this forest is very cool (around 18 degrees). If you are visiting the forest during the cold season, be sure to bring warm clothes, blankets and hot water to enjoy drinking tea or coffee.

■ Mamraz Lake

Situated some 12 kilometers away from Noshahr city in Mazandaran province, Mamraz Lake offers you breathtaking views with thousands of dried trees inside, which may seem scary at first glance.

Because of its horrific landscape and strange silence of the lake, it is known as “The Ghosts’ Lake”. The lake is 700 meters long and 300 meters wide and is listed as one of the Iran's National Heritage sites.

Next to the lake a lush forest is located and there are many dry tree trunks in the water, known as dead trees. The water of this lake is very clear and the reflection of the trees' images on the lake adds to the beauty of the site. It is a pristine area and a spectacular natural attraction which is less known to tourists and adventurers.

■ Rainbow Valley

The entire of Hormuz Island, which is bounded by the Persian Gulf, is made of Rainbow Mountains and you can freely walk through most of the middle of it. But this spot is a good place to stop and check out all the colors. In close vicinity of Silence Valley, lies the mesmerizing valley of more than 70 shades of minerals, rendering the valley a perfect subject of Geology studies.

Rainbow Valley is a geologist's dream and an inspiration for artists and nature enthusiasts. Imagine a narrow valley with multi-hued earth and sand and colorful mountains in shades of red, purple, yellow, ochre and blue – the result of the uneven cooling of molten rock. On all sides, patches of color form geometric patterns. This awesomely photogenic natural site is at its best in the late afternoon.

Why corona lockdown did not bring Tehran cleaner air?

➡ The leading cause of air pollution in the capital is PM 2.5, PM 10 and Nitrogen Dioxide (NO2).

■ Tehran haunted by NOX

In recent days, a picture of the NOX condition in various cities around the world, including New Delhi, Tehran, London, Madrid, Los Angeles, Moscow, Milan and Prague, has been published.

The image, which shows the cities during the first to fifth days of April 2020, shows that nitrogen dioxide pollutants dropped in all the mentioned cities except Tehran due to the prevalence of COVID-19, quarantine conditions and reduced traffic on the streets, compared to the same period last year.

Hossein Shahidzadeh, the caretaker for Air Quality Control Company, told ISNA news agency that in Tehran, 35 percent of NOX pollutants are generated by mobile sources and 32 percent by power plants. Household, office, commercial, and industrial units each account for 14 percent and



8 percent, respectively.

The image shows a period when many employees returned to their jobs, besides, the traffic plan was canceled and the private cars were recommended to cut off the disease chain, he highlighted.

Shahidzadeh said that in previous years, NO2 pollutants was not seemed to be the main indicator of air pollution in Tehran. Therefore, during the new year, this pollutant is one of the main causes of pollution, even exceeding the PM concentration.

Stationary sources can be cited as another reason behind Tehran pollution, he said, adding, industries and factories located in the southern part of Tehran have the greatest role in increasing the concentration of pollutants in the capital by 20 units.

He further noted that due to the wind blowing from the south, west or south-west of Tehran, the weather in the city is affected by the pollution generated by these industrial units.

Iran practicing, learning corona-friendly lifestyle

➡ Initially, schools, universities, gyms, libraries and cinemas were closed. Moreover, sports events, concerts, Friday prayers, religious rituals and other social events and gatherings across the country were canceled.

Businesses with the highest risk of exposure to coronavirus were shut down, while those low-risk ones or the ones providing urgent services went on operating.

Anyone who has contracted coronavirus has been prohibited from going to work or to public places. Not informing the workplace about having been infected is considered a crime. For this, Health ministry founded an online service, titled 'Corona patients information, self-assessment and registration system,' urging Iranians to take an online test reporting their physical condition. In case of being recognized as a Covid-19 infected case, doctors could contact and guide applicants for treatment.

Toughest restrictive measures were taken during Nowruz holiday, when Iranians celebrate new Iranian calendar year and intercity trips surge remarkably (March 21- April 3) especially to populous cities such as Shiraz and Isfahan. All trips and commutes between provinces were restricted until April 20, allowing only residents to enter their cities, while educational centers and religious sites remained shut. Passengers in intercity roads and highways were screened for signs of infection including fever or in some cases were forced to return to their departure point. Intercity journeys dropped more than 70 percent, accordingly some reports say.

After Nowruz holidays, government offices across the country were allowed to resume operation with two-thirds of their personnel present at their workplace.

The government has also taken some coronavirus-dependent measures in customs services, which meant to facilitate supply of goods and medicine under the pandemic. Thanks to the applied policies, Iranians face no dearth of goods in hypermarkets, malls, etc. and grocery shelves have not been empty under the outbreak.

To address the needs of educational system under the outbreak, which is expected to extend for upcoming months and may even continue till the next Iranian educational year (late September), the government urged schools and universities to try online training system. Ministry of Education could manage to establish a homegrown free-messaging application, named as Student Educational Network (abbreviated in Farsi as SHAD), to provide Iranian school students with virtual education services. As reported, some 7.2 million students have joined the messenger forming 1.7 million virtual online classes. However, those in deprived areas can not have access to such facilities, yet.

To help encourage Iranians to stay at home and also to assist teachers and students with the new online educational method, telecommunication ministry offered some specific

(in some cases free) Internet packages. The ministry has also sought to improve the infrastructure and backbone of Internet in Iran.

Underscoring Iranian population's health as of its highest priority, the administration vowed to focus the livelihood of the people, small businesses and low-income families.

The Leader of the Islamic Republic, on April 6, permitted the government to withdraw one billion euros from National Development Fund Of Iran (NDFI) to combat the lethal coronavirus in the country. Accordingly, besides its contractionary budget, restricted international monetary transactions and low oil revenues under US sanctions, it kicked off providing coronavirus rescue packages to low-income households and struggling businesses affected by the negative economic consequences of the pandemic over the past two months. The process of paying loans from 52 billion toman to all eligible businesses in 10 categories –provided that during the fight against coronavirus, they have not laid off their workers- started from mid-April and will continue until mid-June.

According to an announcement made by ministry of energy, Iranians can postpone paying their water, electricity and gas bills for a three-months period ending on May 20.

The Central Bank of Iran (CBI), for its part, has reduced working hours of banks and urged customers to go to the banks only if necessary. Banks and financial institutions are urged to curtail operations and take effective precautionary hygiene measures. CBI has, in addition, taken some measures to facilitate banking transactions at home, encouraging people to use electronic payment instruments instead of banknotes, which are one of the main ways the contagious disease spreads. The central bank has sought to improve infrastructure for contactless payment via QR codes and digital wallets. To scaffold coronavirus-hit small businesses, the banking system is going to offer low-interest-rate facilities to more than four million people to compensate the financial damages resulted from the coronavirus outbreak.

■ Society's spontaneous moves:

Along with the state-run decisions, came the nations' spontaneous moves.

Iranians formed various campaigns and circulated different hashtags across the Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, the most popular of which were #WeStayHome, #WeWillDefeatCoronavirus, and #AllAgainstCoronavirus. They posted videos and pictures of their home activities under the hashtag, sharing their self-quarantine experiences.

#KindLandlord was the hashtag formed to encourage landlords to postpone or cancel receiving rents from the tenants due to spanner the lethal virus threw in the wheel of Iranian businesses and earnings. Some landlords generously welcomed the move.

Parents started baking bread at home with their children; they also tried cutting their children's hair at home.

Those who started work-from-home experiment shared cute images of their new remote working style. Some posted videos lamenting about how the outbreak has obliged them to wash and disinfect whatever they buy even packages of snacks, bread, biscuit and ice-cream.

Staying at home brought up some difficulties, too. According to some unofficial statistics, Iranian couples have had more quarrels while some report a higher rate of domestic violence.

Iranian artists play a significant role in accompanying people under the outbreak. Those whose concerts were canceled started to play and sing on Instagram live streams, in many cases for free, for their fans. Some singers, with cooperation of Tehran municipality, sold tickets for online concerts.

Due to Covid-19 outbreak, for the first time in Iran, a movie was streamed online without being screened in cinemas.

After the applied policies to restrict travels and implement more restrictive measures to stop the spread of coronavirus, ministry of cultural heritage, tourism and handicrafts, for its turn, tried a new platform to assist Iranians enjoy their leisure time at home, in particular during Nowruz holidays. It took advantage of social networks to advertise virtual tours to Iran's picturesque tourist sites and unique architectural phenomena.

Iranians have taken several spontaneous, unique and praise-worthy measures to prove their unity and care for each other in tough days. They formed large number of volunteer groups in various cities across the country to combat the lethal virus. Groups of volunteer students, clergies, Basiji and Jihadi forces, etc. have undertaken various activities, donating their time, skills, and materials, to beat the deadly virus. They have produced face masks and antiseptics in mosques and houses, disinfected ATMs, public places and streets, distributed anti-coronavirus products and basic goods baskets in deprived areas, and also joined medical staff in clinics and hospitals to assist them.

Iranian nation and government got united again when on April 9, the Leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for all and everyone to execute a maneuver titled as 'Equality and Sincere Assistance' as of Saturday, in a bid to show sympathy and provide sincere assistance to the needy and the poor in society. The maneuver, which is scheduled to be performed by the end of the lethal virus outbreak in Iran, seeks to receive cash aid from Iranian charities and philanthropists and deliver them to those low-income earners of the society.

As of April 20, which marks the first day of the second Iranian calendar year, Ordibehesht, Rouhani administration started removing some specific anti-coronavirus restrictions. The move has made some concerns about a new wave of the disease hitting the country in near future.

Iranian researchers warn of 'Covi-Flu' effect on global economy, sustainable development

SOCIETY **TEHRAN** — The dangers of co-infection of Covid-19 and influenza A “Covi-Flu” to the global economy and sustainable development is closer and more devastating than it might look, according to an essay by Iranian researchers published by British Medical Journal.



Amirhossein Takian, Mohsen Aarabi and Hajar Haghighi analyzed Covid-19's effect on the global economy and what it means for the sustainable development agenda and universal health coverage, which was published on April 20.

“As the global coordinator of the current pandemic, WHO should, now more than ever, strengthen its mission to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable, through advocating universal health coverage among its member states. Specific treatments and a vaccine for Covid-19 seem at least one year away.

In a few months, when the flu hits, many nations face co-infection of Covid-19 and influenza A “Covi-Flu”, having to deal with the impact of seasonal influenza at the same time as the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis.

Strengthening communities with surveillance systems built into primary health care; providing extra financial resources; expanding insurance coverage; increasing public awareness; ensuring sufficient medicines, diagnostics and equipment are available; and recruiting more healthcare staff are the essential steps towards universal health coverage needed in many countries over the next few months to prepare for Covi-Flu.

Most importantly better governmental stewardship for creating strong and resilient health systems is required, a whole-of-government approach that must target all social determinants of health, and emergency investment in healthcare research and innovation.

We are all in this together and need to act now. The dangers of “Covi-Flu” to the global economy and sustainable development is closer and more devastating than it might look,” according to the essay.

Iranian charities donate \$83m to support COVID-19 relief

➡ Also, more than 410 billion rials (nearly \$9.7 million) has been provided by non-governmental organizations and charities, 250 billion rials (nearly \$6 million) by public volunteer groups and 870 billion rials (nearly \$20 million) by private companies and enterprises within the framework of social responsibility, he explained.

As a result of problems in the health sector to provide equipment and supplies for the coronavirus curb, 350 national, provincial and international non-governmental organizations have called for the lifting of sanctions in a spontaneous move, in a statement, she stated.

The statement was sent to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and was well received around the world, and some other countries took action and protested to the world, she concluded.

WORDS IN THE NEWS

Russia: civil instead of military service

(July 23, 2003)

The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has signed a decree on the organisation of civil service as an alternative to military service. The right to alternative service was decided almost ten years ago but parliament passed a law to this effect only last year. This report from Stephen Dalziel.

Article fifty nine, paragraph three, of the Russian Constitution makes it clear that if military service is **contrary to a citizen's beliefs**, he can **opt for** alternative, civil service. But ever since the Constitution was adopted in 1993, this right has existed **more in theory than in practice**. The Mayor of Nizhny Novgorod, Yury Lebedev, set up a system at the start of last year whereby **would-be conscripts** could work as **orderlies** in local hospitals. After just a few months, federal authorities - under pressure from the army - stopped the scheme.

The law, which was passed over a year ago, but which comes into effect only on the first of January two thousand and four, **will do little to** convince Russians that performing alternative service will be preferable to simply **dodging the draft** into the army. Instead of two years military service, civil service will last for three and a half years. Instead of being allowed to serve close to home, alternative service will be carried out far away, and possibly on a military base. Such civil conscripts could well be subjected to the kind of **bullying** which may have helped persuade them to avoid the army in the first place.

■ Words

contrary to a citizen's beliefs: differently to what a person strongly believes to be right

opt for: choose

more in theory than in practice: more as an idea than as something that actually happens

would-be: potential, possible

conscripts: people who are legally obliged to join the army

orderlies: junior assistants (usually in hospitals)

will do little to: will not help to

dodging the draft: avoiding military service

be subjected to: have to endure, experience

bullying: hurting and intimidating people

(Source: BBC)

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

A ◀ ▶ ☞

Lake Urmia water level keeps rising

The level of water at Lake Urmia is on the rise, as increased by a 1.7 billion cubic meters compared to the previous year, according to the studies conducted by the Lake Urmia restoration program committee.

The lake is expected to reach its ecological level (1,274 meters) within 10 years by completing the restoration plans which started four years ago.

Farhad Sarkhosh, head of the Lake Urmia restoration program's office in West Azarbaijan province, said the lake's level has reached 1,271 meters, adding the figure has increased by 68 centimeters compared to last year, according to the latest survey.

He said that the lake surface area has reached 2,828 square kilometers, adding that the figure is increased by 689 square kilometers compared to the same period last year.

روند صعودی تراز دریاچه ارومیه

تراز دریاچه ارومیه روند صعودی به خود گرفته است به طوری که حجم آب دریاچه در مقایسه با سال گذشته یک میلیارد و ۷۰۰ میلیون مترمکعب افزایش یافته است.

دریاچه ارومیه از اواسط دهه ۱۳۸۰ شروع به خشک شدن کرد و بنا بر آمار بین‌المللی تا سال ۲۰۱۵ میلادی حدود ۸۰ درصد از مساحت آن خشک شد. این دریاچه در قالب طرح‌های احیا قرار است ظرف مدت ۱۰ سال از ۱۳۹۴ به تراز اکولوژیک خود (یک‌هزار و ۲۷۴ متر) برسد.

به گزارش ایرنا، فرهاد سرخوش رئیس دفتر استانی ستاد احیای دریاچه ارومیه در آذربایجان غربی با اشاره به ثبت تراز یک‌هزار و ۲۷۱ متر و ۳۰ سانتی‌متری طبق آخرین پایش برای دریاچه ارومیه اظهار داشت ارتفاع دریاچه نسبت به سال گذشته ۶۸ سانتی‌متر بیشتر شده است.

وی با بیان اینکه مساحت دریاچه به ۲ هزار و ۸۲۸ کیلومتر مربع رسیده، بیان کرد این رقم نسبت به زمان مشابه سال گذشته ۶۸۹ کیلومتر مربع افزایش نشان می‌دهد.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“mono-”

■ **Meaning:** one, alone

■ **For example:** he was reciting some of the great **monologues** of Shakespeare.

PHRASAL VERB

Put away

■ **Meaning:** to return something to the place where it is usually kept

■ **For example:** Please put away the dictionary when you've finished using it.

IDIOM

Deep pockets

■ **Explanation:** A person or organization who has deep pockets has a lot of money

■ **For example:** Andy's business is not doing well at the moment. He says he needs a friend with deep pockets!

Youths clash with police in new night of trouble in Paris suburbs

Youths clashed with police in suburbs around Paris early on Wednesday, the fourth consecutive night of trouble as strict lockdown rules to tackle the coronavirus have heightened social tensions.

In Villeneuve-La-Garenne north of the capital, riot police ran into a housing estate complex to quell unrest after rubbish and debris had been set on fire, Reuters reported.

Police used shields to protect themselves from broken glass hurled at them while other residents looked on from their windows as the police shone torchlights onto the high-rise blocks.

In Nanterre, further to the west, the streets were littered with the charred remains of cars that had been set on fire, and broken glass from a vandalised bus-stop.

Unrest was also reported in the Clichy district just north of the Paris city boundary.

Officials at the Paris police department could not be immediately reached for comment.

Trouble first broke out in Villeneuve-La-Garenne last weekend, after a motorcyclist was injured in a collision with an unmarked police car during a check.

Police, who have launched an enquiry into the incident, said they had wanted to question the rider who had been seen speeding the wrong way down a street without a helmet.

France's 'banlieues' - high-rise housing estates on the outskirts of major cities - have long been flashpoints of anger over social and economic grievances. In 2005, unrest lasted three weeks after two youths died fleeing police in a northern Paris suburb.

Pakistan PM Imran Khan to take coronavirus test

mran Khan has agreed to get tested for the novel coronavirus after a well-known philanthropist was tested positive for the Covid-19, days after meeting the Pakistan prime minister, his doctor said.

Faisal Edhi, the son of late philanthropist Abdul Sattar Edhi and chairman of the Edhi Foundation, met Khan last week, India Today reported.

Imran Khan's personal physician and CEO of Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, Faisal Sultan, told the media that Khan would undergo Covid-19 test.

"Prime Minister Khan will undergo test of the coronavirus to show that he is a responsible citizen of this county," Sultan said. "We will follow all protocols in place and make recommendations accordingly." The protocols recommend self-isolation for people who meet those tested positive for the coronavirus.

Pakistan on Tuesday reported 16 more deaths from the coronavirus, taking the country's toll to 192, while the number of confirmed infections spiked to over 9,000.

It is not clear how Khan will run the government if he was asked to go into quarantine.

Khan is currently working as per routine and also chaired a meeting of Cabinet.

Earlier, Saad, the son of Faisal Edhi, told the Dawn newspaper that his father started showing symptoms last week, soon after meeting Khan in Islamabad on April 15.

"The symptoms lasted for four days before subsiding," Saad said.

He said that his father was currently in Islamabad and was doing better.

"He has not been admitted to any hospital and is self-isolating," he said.

Faisal Edhi had met Prime Minister Khan to hand over a Rs 10 million cheque for the premier's coronavirus relief fund. The Edhi Foundation was founded by the late Abdul Sattar Edhi and is the leading charity organisation in Pakistan.

Spain says one of Europe's most-wanted ISIL fighters arrested

Spanish police detained one of Europe's most wanted fugitive ISIL terrorist group fighters in the southern town of Almeria, the government said.

The Egyptian man, who has fought in Syria and Iraq, was hiding in an apartment with two other people who were also arrested and were being identified by police, the interior ministry said in a statement late on Tuesday.

The man has appeared in gory propaganda pictures of IS crimes, the ministry said.

"The detained man spent several years in the Syria-Iraq area and presents peculiar personality features such as an extremely violent criminal profile which caught the attention of police and intelligence services in Europe," the statement added, without disclosing his identity.

Johnson under fire over handling of coronavirus crisis

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced a call on Wednesday for an inquiry into his government's handling of the coronavirus crisis after failing to fully explain partial death data, limited testing or the lack of equipment for hospitals.

Johnson initially refrained from approving the stringent controls that other European leaders imposed as the coronavirus spread, but he later closed down the country when projections showed a quarter of a million people could die in the United Kingdom, AP reported.

Since the lockdown, though, the government has given conflicting explanations of why it failed to join a European Union ventilator scheme and admitted there have been problems getting health workers enough protective equipment.

"Once we are through this crisis, there will of course need to be an independent inquiry to officially review the government's response to the pandemic," Ed Davey, acting leader of the opposition Liberal Democrats, said in a statement.

"The inquiry must have the strongest possible powers given the shocking failures on protective equipment for staff and the slow response of the government - to get to the truth and to give Boris Johnson the opportunity to answer the increasingly serious questions."

Opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer has also said the government was slow to respond and that at some point the United Kingdom will have to look back at the crisis.

Starmer's spokesman said on Wednesday he believes serious mistakes have been made and that ministers should be held accountable.

Iraqi parliament to hold confidence vote on new govt. next Tuesday: MP

An Iraqi lawmaker says the Arab country's parliament will hold a vote of confidence on prime minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government next week.

"Kadhimi will submit an official request to hold a confidence vote session within the next two days," Fadel Al-Fatlawi, a member of the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance, told Arabic-language al-Maalomah news agency in an exclusive interview on Wednesday.

He added that the intelligence chief "has completed a large part of his line-up for the next government, and he is still in political consultations with various (parliamentary) blocs to ensure its passage through the legislature."

Fatlawi noted that the Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohamed al-Halbousi, has set next Tuesday (April 28) as the date for the session to vote on Kadhimi's cabinet.

On April 9, Iraqi President Barham Saleh officially tasked Kadhimi with forming a government after the 53-year-old director of the country's National Intelligence Service received the endorsement of the majority of the top political figures.

"I will work tirelessly to present Iraqis with a program and cabinet that will work to serve them, protect their rights and take Iraq towards a prosperous future," Kadhimi wrote on his official Twitter page.

He would replace caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who stepped down last November following demonstrations against corruption, staggering youth unemployment and poor public services, which erupted in the capital Baghdad and then quickly spread to other cities.

Kadhimi has underlined that Iraq's sovereignty will be a "red line" and that he would not compromise on it at all.

■ **'No disputes with PM-designate over withdrawal of U.S.-led forces'**

Separately, Saad al-Saadi, a senior member of the Fatah parliamentary coalition, dismissed reports that there are disagreements between a number of Iraqi political parties with prime minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi about the pullout of U.S.-led military forces from the country.

"The reports that there are disputes between Shia political blocs and Kadhimi regarding the evacuation of foreign



troops from Iraq are inaccurate, and that there are no such disagreements. The issue is among the top priorities of the next government," Saadi told Arabic-language Baghdad Today news website on Wednesday.

He added, "It was agreed that the (parliamentary) resolution about the removal of foreign forces from the Iraqi soil will be included in the next government's plan. We are currently planning to present this motion to other political factions. Therefore, there are no disputes and the evacuation of U.S. forces is among the principled issues agreed with Kadhimi."

According to Press TV - Iraqi lawmakers unanimously approved a bill on January 5, demanding the withdrawal of all foreign military forces led by the United States from the

Australia urges probe into origins of coronavirus, France says not now

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought support for an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic in phone calls with U.S. President Donald Trump and the German and French leaders, Canberra said on Wednesday.

But French President Emmanuel Macron told him the urgency was to beat the pandemic before looking for who was at fault, a French official said.

Australia's push for an independent review of the origins and spread of the pandemic, including the response of the World Health Organization (WHO), has drawn sharp criticism from China, which has accused Australian lawmakers of taking instructions from the United States,

reuters reported.

The new coronavirus, believed to have emerged in a market in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, was first reported by China to the WHO on Dec. 31.

WHO informed member states of the outbreak on Jan 5 and warned publicly a week later that there was "limited" human-to-human transmission. WHO officials arrived in Wuhan on Jan. 20, after the virus had spread to three other countries. It went on to declare a global emergency on Jan. 30.

The virus has since infected some 2.3 million people globally and killed nearly 160,000, according to Reuters calculations.

Morrison said on Twitter on Wednesday he had "a very constructive discussion" with

Trump on the two nation's responses to COVID-19 and the need to get economies up and running.

"We also talked about the WHO & working together to improve the transparency & effectiveness of the international responses to pandemics," he tweeted.

The White House has been fiercely critical of China and the WHO, and has withdrawn U.S. funding from the UN agency.

Morrison also spoke to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Macron by phone about the role of the WHO, his office said.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has repeatedly said that the UN agency will evaluate its handling of the pandemic after it ends and draw the

appropriate lessons, as it does after all emergencies.

"WHO wants this more than any organisation because we want to learn from our mistakes, from our strengths and move forward. But for now the focus should be on fighting this virus," Tedros told a briefing earlier this month.

Macron told Morrison now was not the time for an investigation.

"He says he agrees that there have been some issues at the start, but that the urgency is for cohesion, that it is no time to talk about this, while reaffirming the need for transparency for all players, not only the WHO," an Elysee official told Reuters on Wednesday.

Palestinians need unified national strategy against Israel: Hamas



The Palestinian Hamas resistance movement says Israeli coalitions and alliances should give Palestinians a powerful incentive to speed up efforts to draw up a unified national strategy against the Tel Aviv regime.

In a statement on Tuesday, Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas spokesman, stressed that such a national strategy must be based on resistance to confront Tel Aviv and its schemes, defend the Palestinians' rights, and safeguard their interests.

His remarks came just a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his election rival, opposition leader Benny Gant, reached an agreement to form an "emergency" coalition administration to end months of unprecedented political deadlock within the regime, Press TV reported.

"Such Israeli coalitions with extremist agendas, which competed and agreed with each other to obliterate our Palestinian people's rights, annex their lands, and establish a Jewish state, will never frighten us," the Hamas spokesman said.

"This confirms that all the wagering on the so-called peace process with this entity in the region is a losing bet and

illusion marketing," Barhoum added.

Netanyahu, the leader of right-wing Likud party, and Gantz, the leader of centrist Blue and White alliance, issued a joint statement after their agreement, according to which the newly-formed coalition is to serve as an "emergency government" for an initial six months.

During this six-month period, laws unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic could not be introduced, it said.

The three-year deal would also 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, who has been consistently in power for the past 11 years, is under criminal indictment in three corruption cases, including bribery, fraud, and breach of trust.

Under the coalition agreement, Netanyahu will be prime minister for 18 months, and Gantz will take over afterwards.

Three previous elections—in April and September 2019 and in March this year—ended inconclusively as no party could secure the necessary 61 seats in the 120-seat Knesset to form a so-called government. Netanyahu's bloc won 59.

Biden says he would pick Michelle Obama as running mate 'in a heartbeat'



Presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden said in a new interview that he would have no hesitation picking former first lady Michelle Obama to be his running mate, but added that he doubts she is interested in the position.

"I'd take her in a heartbeat," Biden told Pittsburgh's KDKA on Monday when asked if he'd choose Obama if she said she would be willing to be on the ticket with him, The Hill reported.

"She's brilliant. She knows the way around. She is a really fine woman. The Obamas are great friends," Biden added.

Biden, however, said that he doesn't think she is interested in the position.

"I don't think she has any desire to live near the White House again," he said.

Biden said he's still in the process of deciding whom to pick. He again committed to choosing a woman but did not commit to choosing a woman of color.

"I'll commit to that [it will] be a woman because it is very important that my administration look like the public, look like the nation. And there will be, committed that there will be a woman of color on the Supreme Court, that doesn't mean there won't be a vice



president, as well," Biden said.

The former vice president, who served under former President Barack Obama, has previously said that he would like Michelle Obama as his running mate.

At an Iowa campaign stop in January, he said he "sure would like Michelle to be the vice president."

Several names have been speculated as potential running mates for Biden, including some of his former primary opponents who have shown interest in the position.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) said last week in an interview with MSNBC's Rachel Maddow that she would say yes if Biden asked her to be vice president, and Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) said last week she would be "honored" if she were being considered as Biden's running mate.

Former Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams has also said she would like to serve as vice president.

Abrams told Elle magazine last week she would make an "excellent" running mate for Biden.

Biden also confirmed earlier this month that he is considering Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D) for the spot.

AFC Champions League to go ahead: Windsor John

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Windsor John, general secretary of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), said that the confederation is determined for the AFC Champions League to go ahead.

The football events are postponed in Asia the coronavirus pandemic.

In an interview with Saudi Arabian newspaper Ariyadiyah, Windsor John has said the competition will be played since they still have time.

“The competition will resume in August and AFC consider playing the rest of the competition in single-legged format,” he said.

Asked him about the resumption of the domestic leagues, the AFC top official said, “Asia is a big continent and the Asian countries differ in terms of conditions, so we let the local authorities to take decision about their leagues,” Windsor John.

The Champions League, the region's premier club competition, and the second-tier AFC Cup were both halted in March as the pandemic's spread forced governments to impose strict travel restrictions.

FIFA will continue to assess the situation in relation to COVID-19 and will decide whether further changes to the schedule of FIFA World Cup 2022 qualifiers are required, always with the aim of protecting the health and safety of all individuals involved.



FFIRI to provide ‘model contract’ for clubs



S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Football Federation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) tries to find a solution to prevent the increase of contractual complaints against Iranian clubs.

Financial problems, poor contract management, club officials' reneging on their promises, and the power some agents seem to have on the Iranian football clubs, have led to the signing of unprofessional contracts and, as a result, lodging formal complaints by the foreign players and coaches against Iranian teams at FIFA.

According to an FFIRI's lawyer, there are more than 60 legal cases against Iranian teams at FIFA's Disciplinary Committee, some of which have reached the voting stage, and the sides are on alert, as reported by ISNA.

Many teams from the Iran Professional League (IPL), the First Division League, as well as the Football Federation itself, are the cause of these disciplinary cases.

In most cases, they have exacerbated the situation by breaking the financial promises they made to the foreign players and coaches who have worked in Iranian football.

In recent years, Iranian teams have been hit hard with the transfer bans handed out by FIFA.

However, they have not yet learned from these punishments, and the number of such cases has increased in different seasons.

Following this, the Iranian Football Federation has been trying to solve the problems of the teams by holding meetings since the new Acting Secretary General, Mehdi Mohammad Nabi, took office. And they have found effective ways to prevent the increase of the disciplinary cases of the teams.

Jamshid Noorshargh, head of the FFIRI Players' Status Committee, said a “Model Contract” would be drafted shortly within the framework of a professional and standard contract as well as following international law.

Drafting a model contract means that the Iranian football federation will reduce the number of clubs referrals to the disciplinary committees of the FFIRI and FIFA by providing a grand model of a standard contract that includes the basic dos and don'ts during the cooperation of the parties.

Nabi: We are waiting for FIFA's decision to resume the league



S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — The Acting Secretary General of the Iranian Football Federation has said that the continuation of the Iran Professional League (IPL) matches depends on FIFA's decision on the matter.

Mehdi Mohammad Nabi talked about the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) plan to resume the league after the suspension caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

“Football is suspended all over the world. FIFA, AFC, as well as Iran's Coronavirus Combat and Prevention Headquarters have comments in this regard. They have to hold meetings on this issue and tell us the result.

“We are also reviewing it in the Executive Committee of the FFIRI and the League Organization. We hope to complete suspended league season at all levels,” Nabi said.

“FIFA's order was that we should wait until further notice, and we will do so. The AFC has also made offers for the 2020 AFC Champions League, and the Iranian League Organization has reviewed this.

“IPL teams are not permitted to return to training until May 4. That's what Coronavirus Combat and Prevention Headquarters

has ordered. Whenever we decide to start the league, we give the teams three weeks to train. We will provide information once we receive an official letter from FIFA or AFC,” he added.

Iranian authorities have extended the postponement of all sports events in the country until May 20 due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Also, the spokesperson for Sports Medicine Federation of Iran announced that it will make a decision on whether Iran professional soccer league will resume next month.

Reza Saeidi said “The health of sportspersons is important for us. All sporting events have been suspended until May 20 and we will make a decision on May 4 about the resumption of the Iran soccer league.”

Until April 11, the virus mortality in the country was rising daily, however, reports indicated that death toll faced a sharp decline over the past 8 days. The same also happened for the new cases of the virus, which are reducing from over 3,000 newly diagnosed cases daily to 1,300 day by day.

Coronavirus crisis presents opportunity for Saudi's Newcastle project

A Saudi-backed takeover of Newcastle United appears to be nearing completion at a time when the rest of the football industry is on its knees due to the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

For Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the crisis presents a commercial opportunity and a chance to break into the lucrative Premier League.

But the potential £300 million (\$370 million) deal, which will reportedly see the Saudi fund take an 80 percent stake in the club, is facing fierce opposition from human rights groups and one of Saudi's regional rivals.

The Premier League bubble is close to bursting as clubs scramble to avoid losing hundreds of millions in broadcast rebates if the season is not completed and a

deep recession threatens income from gate receipts, merchandise and sponsorship.

As a result, transfer fees are expected to drop sharply while wages will also be depressed, with even the world's wealthiest clubs now hastily arranging pay cuts or deferrals with their star players.

■ Rights concerns

The spectre of a Saudi takeover throws another spanner in the works for the league's governance at a time of crisis.

Critics have accused Saudi Arabia of “sports washing”, saying the government uses sport as a way of distracting attention from its human rights record.

Global rights group Amnesty International wrote to Premier League chief executive Richard Masters on Tuesday, warning the competition “risks becoming a

patsy” unless it takes a serious look at the rights issue.

“If the crown prince, by virtue of his authority over the Public Investment Fund, takes control of Newcastle United, we are questioning how that can possibly be positive for the reputation of the Premier League,” Felix Jakens, Amnesty UK's Head of Priority Campaigns and Individuals at Risk, told AFP.

The Newcastle bid comes just months after five people were sentenced to death over the 2018 murder in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist who had been critical of the Saudi regime.

The murder, described as a “rogue” operation by Riyadh, tipped Saudi Arabia into one of its worst diplomatic crises and tarnished the reputation of the crown prince, who is the de facto ruler of the country. (Source: AFP)

Magnus Carlsen's reaction to beating Alireza Firouzja underlines fiery fight for chess perch

Magnus Carlsen seems to sense the growing power of 16-year-old chess phenom Alireza Firouzja and the long-term threat Firouzja poses to his chess supremacy.

Their rivalry has exploded lately: No. 1 Carlsen narrowly edged Firouzja in a controversial World Blitz 2019 matchup in which his rival accused him of cheating; Firouzja returned the favor earlier this month at the Banter Blitz Cup before Carlsen beat him again at the Magnus Carlsen Invitational on Monday.

Carlsen's reaction to this week's victory over No. 21 Firouzja — who still remains a step behind the world's best overall — provided a look into the intensity of a one-on-one battle that could define chess in the coming years.

“Truth be told, I wanted to crush him today,” Carlsen said in a postmatch interview. “A narrow win wouldn't make up for the fact that I actually lost to the guy. ... The fact that (I didn't sweep him) pissed me off.”

The World Blitz 2019 finish established a level of animosity between Carlsen and

Firouzja. After Carlsen won via time, Firouzja accused him of speaking under his breath as a means of distraction. Firouzja appealed the decision and video captured him enraged at his appeal being denied.

“He was talking,” Firouzja insisted to a judge. “He's talking during the game. He's saying something in Norwegian, I don't know what he's saying.”

Carlsen fell to Firouzja in the Banter Blitz Cup last week — a competition he was considered a heavy favorite to win. The

final game of the match is being widely considered an instant classic.

Carlsen's 2.5-1.5 match win against Firouzja on Monday in the Magnus Carlsen Invitational, meanwhile, restored his supremacy over Firouzja — for now. It's an advantage he clearly cares about beyond a one-off round robin tournament triumph. Carlsen is nowhere near ready to cede control of his perch atop the chess world, but Firouzja is on a mission to chase him down. (Source: Sporting News)

Kolakovic thanks Iran for the ‘wonderful adventure’

MNA — Igor Kolakovic published a post on his Instagram page to bid farewell with Iran after working for three days as the head coach of the National Volleyball Team.

“My dear associates, my dear players, federation employees. My dear Iranian friends! Adorable Iranian people! After three years of full effort, sweat, sadness, laughter, tears, beauty and joy, the moment of departure from Iran came,” he wrote on Tuesday.

The message came after the Iranian Volleyball Federation announced on Tuesday that the Montenegrin coach's contract has been officially canceled.

“This wonderful adventure, a wonderful experience, was interrupted earlier than I expected. But it doesn't matter anymore. Nothing can diminish my beautiful memories of the time we spent together in the constant struggle for the success of the Iranian team. You will forever be in my heart because of your courage, intellect, emotions, and respect that you have shown every day.”

“I look forward to our possible meetings wherever we are,” he added.

Kolakovic's contract had been penned till the end of the 2020 Olympics but as the major event has been postponed for a year and national events are in a state of limbo due to the pandemic, the federation decided to terminate the agreement with mutual consent.

Iran's Para Athlete Mohammad Yari Recovers from Coronavirus

TASNIM — Iranian para athlete Ali Mohammad Yari has recovered from COVID-19.

The discus thrower self-quarantined himself for two weeks at home after he tested positive for the disease.

Rouhollah Rostami, who won a gold medal in Rio 2016 powerlifting event, is another Iranian Paralympic athlete who has tested positive for the coronavirus.

Iran Olympic silver medalist Ehsan Hadadi had also been diagnosed with COVID-19 but has fully recovered from the disease.

Iran's total death toll from the new coronavirus outbreak rose to 5,297 on Tuesday, according to a health ministry spokesman.

The total number of infections reached 84,802, he said.

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 organizing 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-Musal-lam, 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.”

Mohammad Mousavi Chosen in PlusLiga's Team 2019-20

TASNIM — Iran international volleyball player Mohammad Mousavi has been picked in the PlusLiga's Team 2019-20.

Mousavi had been previously chosen as the best defender of the PlusLiga season.

Setter: Marcin Janusz (Trefl Gdansk)

Outside Hitter: Pawel Halaba (Trefl Gdansk), Nicolas Szerszen (MKS Slesk Malow Suwalki)

Opposite Hitter: Bartosz Filipiak (Trefl Gdansk)

Middle Blocker: Norbert Huber (PGE Skra Belchatów), Seyed Mohammad Mousavi (Indykpol AZS Olsztyn)

Libero: Michal Potera (MKS Bedzin)

Trainer: Michal Winiarski (Trefl Gdansk)

The 2019-20 PlusLiga was the 84th season of the Polish Championship (20th season as professional league - PlusLiga) organized by Polish Volleyball League SA under the supervision of Polish Volleyball Federation.

Iranian female referee eager to officiate at World Cup

PLDC — Iranian female futsal referee Zari Fathi has stated that she will officiate at the FIFA Futsal World Cup.

She has previously officiated the Asian Women's Futsal Championship and the World's Students Futsal Games.

Now, Fathi is going to make a splash in her career, officiating at the biggest stage of the sport.

“When I started my career, my goals were small but I am looking for the big goals and want to officiate at the FIFA Futsal World Cup,” Fathi said.

The women's futsal league has been postponed due to the coronavirus outbreak and she says staying home in the best way to stop this outbreak.

“I stay home and train to keep my readiness. Aerobic exercise can help the athletes to stay fit,” she said.

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GUIDE TO
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Adopt generosity, and avoid vain severity and oppression; for, severity compels people to emigrate, and oppression incites revolt, and puts an end to your rule.

Imam Ali (AS)

Iranian Academy of Arts to display treasure trove during home quarantine

A R T TEHRAN — The Iranian Academy of Arts plans to gradually place collections of priceless artworks from its treasury on view by way of online exhibitions to enrich people's time during the home quarantine.



A painting by Mansur Qandriz, a pioneer of the Saqqakhaneh School.

Each exhibition will run for one week. The first one has been dedicated to displaying 25 paintings from the pioneers of the Saqqakhaneh School, a neo-traditional style of art that began in the 1960s and derives inspiration from Iranian folk art and culture.

Paintings by Nasser Ovissi, Mansure Qandriz, Sadeq Tabrizi, Masud Arabshahi, Hossein Zenderudi and Faramarz Pilaram have been selected to be showcased at the exhibition.

The school takes its name from saqqakhaneh, a public drinking place located in the old districts of Iranian cities and Islamic holy sites. Saqqakhanehs are usually embellished with motifs representing people's traditional beliefs and their enduring feelings about the religious sites.

Actor Hosseini, colleagues set up Pol Media to distribute Iranian, international films

A R T TEHRAN — Iranian actor Shahab Hosseini, director Kurosh Ahari and producer Alex Bretow have teamed up to form the company Pol Media to distribute Iranian and international films within the U.S. and other countries.



Actor Shahab Hosseini (L), director Kurosh Ahari (C) and producer Alex Bretow pose in an undated photo. (Hollywood Reporter/Maury Phillips)

"Pol", which literally means "bridge" in Farsi, aims to "bridge the gap" between Iranian and international art, culture and cinema with that of the U.S., the Hollywood Reporter announced on Tuesday.

Pol Media will distribute Iranian and other international films both within the U.S. and abroad while also producing live events, including appearances from Iranian and international actors and filmmakers, as well as other artistic, cultural and cinematic programs.

Hosseini is mostly famous for his role in Asghar Farhadi's "The Salesman", which brought him the Palme d'Or for best actor at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016.

He also received France's Chevalier of the Legion of Honor (Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur) medal in February.

The medal awarded by the French government is one of the most coveted trophies in the world of art and culture.

Filmmaker and producer Ahari most recently directed the horror-thriller "The Night" starring Hosseini and helmed the award-winning short "Generations".

Bretow produced "The Night" and "Generations" as well as the award-winning Iranian short "Numbness".

Drawing "National Heroes" embellishes stamp to salute Iranian medical staff

➔ "The healthcare staff members are in direct contact with death these days in the hospitals and they actually have turned into our heroes, and this made me create a design in which I put them beside the soldiers," he explained.

Zakeri, however, lamented that the State Post Company has misused his drawing on the postage stamp, which has probably been prepared in a hurry.

"The original design had been published by an Iranian news agency, and then I found out that a stamp with my original work had been published by the post company and was unveiled by President Hassan Rouhani during a ceremony.

"If the original work had been saved, the stamp would surely have been better, but with changes in the color and adding the image of the virus, the originality has been damaged. I believe a stamp enjoys international recognition and should be made with better and more detailed attention," he said.

"I think the presidential office probably ordered the post company to publish a stamp to encourage doctors and nurses in the battle with coronavirus and the company selected my work and ordered the designers to publish a stamp using it," he said.

The drawing has been selected from a Zakeri's collection on the aftermath of coronavirus pandemic.

This collection also features a drawing of a homeless person during these days.

"Economy is the main thing these days, and the issue to commence economic activities is quite necessary. I made a design based on this idea showing a person in the subway who wears a piece of bread on his face instead of a mask to show that the economy can save us first-- not a mask. If there is no economy, the mask will be of no use," he noted.



This combination photo shows graphic designer Alireza Zakeri's original drawing "National Heroes" and a postage stamp bearing the picture.

Overseas fans make themselves up like characters in Iranian artist's paintings



A remake of a painting by Iranian artist Afarin Sajedi.

CULTURE TEHRAN — Dozens of Afarin Sajedi's fans in across the world have made themselves up to resemble the characters in a collection by the Iranian painter to show their interest in her artworks and challenge the coronavirus isolation.

She has posted the twin pictures of her paintings and fans on her Instagram page, mentioning that she has received them mostly from people from Russia.

During these days of home quarantine, people are wisely spending their time indoors transforming themselves into famous paintings, and despite the surreal atmosphere and the unusual elements of Sajedi's works, the art lovers have made the movement using their creativity.

"My great tendency in art is the contemporary people and their concerns about the past," she had once told the Persian service of Honaronline.

"I have recreated the history with the help of modern techniques, focusing on topics such as the art of the Renaissance and combining them with the nightmares of contemporary man," she said.

"I later tried damaged portraits. I did not mean to show the physical damages but the mental damages, and gradually I added the modern elements and depicted a person who might seem sad but is not weak and signs of power is observed in his/her portrait," she explained.

She noted that she has used different types of elements in her works, however, what are seen more often in her works are fish motifs.

"Making use of any item besides a portrait reflects the feelings and thoughts of a person that a visitor cannot see. They show the inner feelings of the person who has been seen sinking into silence," she remarked.

Pandemic and chill: Netflix adds a cool 16M subscribers

BERKELEY, Calif. (AP) — Netflix picked up nearly 16 million global subscribers during the first three months of the year, helping cement its status as one of the world's most essential services in times of isolation or crisis.

The quarter spanned the beginning of stay-at-home orders in the U.S. and around the world, a response to the coronavirus pandemic that apparently led millions to latch onto Netflix for entertainment and comfort when most had nowhere to be but home.

Netflix more than doubled the quarterly growth it predicted in January, well before the COVID-19 outbreak began to shut down many major economies. It was the biggest three-month gain in the 13-year history of Netflix's streaming service.

The numbers — released Tuesday as part of Netflix's first-quarter earnings report — support a growing belief that video streaming is likely to thrive even as the overall U.S. economy sinks into its first recession in more than a decade.

"Our small contribution to these difficult times is to make home confinement a little more bearable," Netflix CEO Reed Hastings said while speaking to investors during a video call from a bedroom.

Investor optimism about Netflix's prospects propelled the company's stock to new highs recently, a sharp contrast

with the decline in the broader market.

Netflix's shares initially surged in after-hours trading after the first-quarter report came out, although they soon fell back. One reason: The strengthening U.S. dollar will likely depress the company's revenue from outside the U.S., which could dampen gains from some of its fastest growing markets.

Currency effects also limited Netflix revenue growth to 17%, for a total of \$5.8 billion, even though the company ended March with nearly 183 million worldwide subscribers, a 23% increase from the same time last year. Netflix earned \$709 million in the first quarter, nearly tripling its profit from last year.

Netflix shares edged up by less than 1% in Tuesday's extended trading to \$435.69, leaving them below last week's record high of \$449.52.

Even though it faces plenty of competition, Netflix appears better positioned to take advantage of the surging demand for TV shows and movies largely because of its head start in video streaming.

Since beginning its foray into original programming seven years ago, Netflix has built up a deep catalog that can feed viewer appetites even though the pandemic response has shut down production on many new shows.

That stoppage could hurt Netflix as well, although analysts at Canaccord Genuity believe its video library will serve as

Movies from Iran line up for Media Library at Visions du Réel festival



A poster for "Life among War Flags".

A R T TEHRAN — The Visions du Réel, an international film festival underway in Nyon, Switzerland, is showcasing ten Iranian documentaries in its Media Library.

The Media Library provides an opportunity for films to get the attention of key industry professionals, including festival programmers and buyers.

Documentarian Mohsen Eslamzadeh is screening his latest acclaimed film "Life among War Flags" in this section.

The film is about the war in Afghanistan. Interviews with some ISIS members in the Taliban's secret prisons provide a fascinating chapter of the documentary. "Shadegan" directed by Ako Salemi about a day in the life of a 12-year-old fisherman on his boat in Shadegan Pond, Iran, is another highlight of the Iranian lineup.

The Iranian lineup also features Kamran Heidari's documentary "None of Your Business" about the life and death of Ebrahim Monsefi, a prominent popular musician in southern Iran.

"Asak" by Mehdi Zamanpur Kiasari is about an 80-year-old blind man in southern Iran, who makes stone pots to earn a living. Ehsan Moqaddasi's documentary "The Fire" about the role of fire in a religious ceremony in Iran will also be screened. "Debtor" by Mehdi Mahmudi is about rapper Mohammad, who is known as DEBTOR, in a village in northern Iran.

The Medial Library is also scheduled to screen "Scenes From A Separation", Vahid Sedaqat's documentary about Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning drama "A Separation".

"Blue Girl" by Keivan Majidi, "The House of Forgetfulness" co-directed by Sahand Sarhaddi and Farhad Qodsi and "A Few Days of Shirin" by Negin Ahmadi are also among the movies.

The Visions du Réel, which opened on April 17, is being organized online.

Iranian documentaries "Fish Eye" by Amin Behruzadeh and "The Silhouettes" by Afsaneh Salari are competing in the international section of the event running until May 2.

AT&T will make HBO Max free to some customers, sets May 27 launch

NEW YORK (Reuters) — AT&T Inc. announced on Tuesday that it will make its HBO Max streaming service free to some customers when it launches on May 27.

The HBO Max app will be pre-loaded on the AT&T TV set top box. HBO Max will also be included with the AT&T Internet 1000 plan - the fastest residential internet

the company provides - at no additional charge, and in AT&T-owned DirecTV's biggest package, DirecTV Premier, among other forms of distribution.

AT&T Communications Chief Executive Jeff McElfresh declined to comment on how many AT&T subscribers the company expects will have access to HBO Max at no additional cost.

AT&T earlier told Reuters HBO Max will be available to 10 million AT&T customers who are also HBO subscribers in the United States at no extra charge.

HBO Max will enter a crowded streaming landscape dominated by Netflix Inc., Walt Disney co-owned Disney+, and Amazon.com Inc's Prime Video. It will include 10,000 hours of content from

AT&T-owned WarnerMedia brands and libraries such as Warner Bros, New Line Cinema and Cartoon Network.

The service will cost \$15 per month for non-AT&T customers. McElfresh said regardless of economic conditions related to the coronavirus outbreak, consumers should expect promotional offers for HBO Max.