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Rouhani defends government's performance

Political Desk

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday that his government has made 'very positive measures' in economic and manufacturing infrastructure since the beginning of the current Iranian year — which began on March 20, 2016.

"Establishing security, advancing economic plans through public support, acquiring self-sufficiency in wheat, succeeding in production and exports, compensating for previous setbacks in the energy sector, marking good growth in food, agriculture, transportation as well as tourism sectors, and inaugurating dams and new power plants are among these important measures," Rouhani told reporters on the sidelines of the last cabinet session in the current year.



president.ir

He said the government's measures have been in line with the principles of the 'resistance economy' outlined by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

The Leader introduced the general policies of 'resistance economy' in February 2014, which are mainly aimed at

boosting the national economy by reducing dependence on foreign products.

Rouhani said his government has also reduced dependence on petrodollars to comply with the Leader's guidelines.

The president said the resistance economy should continue in a bid to achieve its objectives.

Further in his remarks, the chief executive called for establishing stronger unity on the eve of the Persian New Year.

"We can achieve the objectives of our Islamic establishment by [strengthening] unity, solidarity and brotherly ties," he said.

Rouhani said the Islamic Republic has managed to establish calm and security despite the ongoing problems in the Middle East.

Dutch vote in key test for far-right

Millions of Dutch voters went to the polls Wednesday in a key test of the "patriotic revolution" promised by far-right MP Geert Wilders, as final opinion polls showed his support deflating.

Following last year's shock Brexit referendum, and Donald Trump's victory in the US, the Dutch vote is being closely watched to gauge support for populism in Europe ahead of key elections in France and Germany this year, AFP reported.

Wilders voted in a school in The Hague, mobbed by television cameras, just after final polls



Geert Wilders Mark Rutte

showed he was trailing the Liberal VVD party of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

"Whatever the outcome of the election today the genie will not go back into the bottle. And this patriotic revolution, whether today or tomorrow, will stay," Wilders said.

Amid the tussle between Rutte and Wilders, many of the 12.9 million eligible voters were still hesitating between 28 parties in the running.

"This is a crucial election for The Netherlands," Rutte said as he voted. "This is a chance for a big democracy like The Netherlands to make a point... to stop this domino effect of the wrong sort of populism."

Rutte is bidding for a third term as premier of the country — one of the largest economies in the eurozone and a founding father of the European Union.

Final polls appeared to show Rutte consolidating a lead over Wilders, crediting the VVD with 24 to 28 seats — well down on its 40 outgoing seats.

After months leading the polls, Wilders has slipped recently and was seen barely clinging onto second place with between 19 and 22 MPs — up on the 12 MPs his Freedom Party (PVV) had before.

Wilders has pledged to close the borders to Muslim immigrants, shut mosques, ban sales of the Qu'ran and leave the EU.

"I see this rightwing populism making gains and I will not live in such a world," said Esther Zand, 52, who voted for Labour. "He's a rather irritating gentleman," she added of Wilders.

South Korea to hold election May 9; prosecutors summon ousted Park

South Korea said on Wednesday it will hold an election on May 9 to choose a successor for former president Park Geun-hye, who was removed from office in a historic court ruling last week over a widening corruption scandal.

Prosecutors said on Wednesday Park — the first democratically elected president to be removed from office in South Korea — would be summoned for questioning on Tuesday into the influence-peddling scandal, Reuters reported.

The Constitutional Court dismissed Park from office on Friday when it upheld a parliamentary impeachment vote in December.

Park has denied any wrongdoing. Her lawyers said in a statement they would cooperate.

After she left the presidential Blue

House on Sunday, she issued a statement hinting of defiance, saying: "It will take time, but I believe the truth will be revealed."

A special prosecution team had accused Park of colluding with a friend, Choi Soon-sil, to pressure big businesses into contributing to foundations set up to



REUTERS

support her policies and allowing Choi to influence state affairs.

Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, who has been acting president since the impeachment vote, said he would not run in the election.

Minister of the Interior Hong Yun-sik promised the vote would be the most clean and transparent ever.

"This election is unprecedented in our history," Hong told a briefing, referring to the short campaign period.

Hwang had emerged in opinion polls as a top conservative candidate even though he had not declared an intention to run. The scandal has undermined support for the ruling conservatives, and Hwang's decision would appear to bolster the chances of a prominent liberal, Moon Jae-in, who is leading in opinion polls.

UK's Fox says commissioned work on Iran ties will help develop trade

British Trade Minister Liam Fox said on Wednesday he had commissioned work from his department to look at how to normalize "effective payment channels" with Iran to try to open up trading opportunities.

Britain is seeking new and deeper trade relations with countries outside the European Union to strengthen its hand in divorce talks with the bloc and is targeting countries in the Middle East among other areas, Reuters reported.

Fox told a parliamentary committee that he expected to receive the findings of the report at the end of this month.

Iran has signed a flurry of deals with Western companies over the past year since the easing of international sanctions on Tehran after an accord was reached over its nuclear program.

Major global banks have so far shied away from handling Iranian-related business, citing the ongoing risk of violating ongoing US sanctions.

Central Bank of Iran (CBI) announced in June 2016 that a few small European banks were among businesses that had links to the country, including Germany-based Europaisch-Iranische Handelsbank AG and some small Italian lenders.



REUTERS

Dozens killed in Damascus bomb attack

Two suicide bombings hit Damascus Wednesday including an attack at a central courthouse that killed at least 32 people, as Syria's war entered its seventh year.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blasts, the second wave of deadly attacks in the capital in less than a week after twin bombings killed 74 on Saturday, AFP wrote.

Wednesday's first attack saw a suicide bomber rush inside the building and blow himself up when police tried to prevent him from entering the courthouse in the center of Damascus, state media reported.



AFP

A police source said that 32 people were killed and 100 wounded. The second blast hit a restaurant in the western Rabweh neighborhood, wounding 25 people, the source said.

"We were terrified because the sound of the explosion was enormous," a lawyer who was in the courthouse during the first attack said.

"We took refuge in the library which is on a higher floor," the lawyer said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "It was a bloody scene."

State television broadcast scenes from the building showing blood smeared on the floor of the lobby but also splattered across its ceiling.

It interviewed a man receiving treatment with a bandage over his eye who said the attacker was wearing a military jacket.

Damascus was already reeling from Saturday's bombings, which mainly killed Iraqi pilgrims in the city to visit Shia shrines.

That attack was claimed by former Al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front, part of a terrorist alliance that controls large parts of the northwestern Idlib Province.

Terrorists suffered a series of reversals during the sixth year of the war, including being forced from their onetime stronghold of east Aleppo in December.

The loss was an especially difficult blow to terrorists who had imagined marching on Damascus in the early days of the war.

The conflict began in 2011, killing more than 320,000 people, with over the half the country's population displaced either within Syria or becoming refugees.

The war has also ravaged the country's infrastructure and set the economy back decades.