

Iran Daily congratulates its readers on the Persian New Year, Norouz, and wishes a happy year for all. Our next issue will be published on April 4.

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Iran stresses need for lifting US 'cruel' sanctions against nations



The change of Chinese political culture in combating coronavirus



Premier League clubs to meet on Thursday to discuss strategy

Russia faces bigger budget deficit over oil prices



Russia's budget deficit could reach 0.9% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 at current oil prices, Finance Minister, Anton Siluanov told the upper house of parliament on Saturday.

The country's economy has been hit by a slump in global oil prices and the spread of the coronavirus, with the minister saying the latter was having the bigger effect as it complicated transportation, tourism and trade, Reuters reported.

Russia previously expected a 2020 budget surplus of 0.8% of GDP, but budget revenues from oil and gas at current prices are set to decline by about 2 trillion roubles (\$27.7 billion) compared with previous estimates, Siluanov said.

"With the current prices for energy resources, we will have a deficit of up to 1% of GDP. We estimate that it will be at 0.9% of GDP," the minister said, adding that all budget obligations would be met.

Russia has a rainy-day National Wealth Fund (NWF) made up of oil revenues accumulated in previous years. It is part of Russia's sovereign reserves and held 8.2 trillion roubles (\$113.5 billion), or 7.3% of the country's GDP, as of March 1.

The country will spend 600 billion roubles from this fund in 2020, including on a previously disclosed state plan to purchase a 50% +1 share in Sberbank, the country's largest lender, from the central bank.

Siluanov added that the finance ministry expects oil companies to add 500 billion roubles to the fund this year.

Oil prices have halved since the start of the year because demand has been hit by the coronavirus outbreak and after Russia and OPEC failed to reach a new deal on supply cuts.

Russia refused to support new deeper cuts and Saudi Arabia retaliated by opening its taps and pledging to pump record volumes on to the market.

Rouhani agrees with virus checkpoints in 11 provinces



International Desk

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday agreed with a proposal to set up checkpoints to control oncoming traffic in 11 provinces amid the outbreak of coronavirus in the country.

Rouhani said the proposal put forward by Health Minister Saeid Namaki at a teleconference with cabinet members is "useful" in curbing the spread of the virus in those hard-hit regions.

He said control teams should "act in a way that they do not cause traffic jam on the roads."

Authorities yet to announce where the checkpoints will be set up.

The president stressed the need for "transparent, clear and detailed information" on the fight against the coronavirus and warned against attempts to shatter calm in society.

Namaki said Saturday he expects major breakthroughs in combating the virus before the Persian New Year next week. He said the country is about to launch a "national mobilization against the coronavirus."

The program has already been launched in four provinces, seeking to identify infected individuals and quarantine them outside hospitals.

"Today, about 31,000 centers across the country are taking part in the program and we currently have 1,200 quick aid centers," he said.

Namaki added that special restrictions related to anti-coronavirus efforts were decided at the latest meeting of a national task force against the coronavirus.

The Health Ministry on Saturday said that the novel coronavirus has claimed 97 more lives, raising the country's total to 611, as the number of confirmed cases jumped again.

Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said that "1,365 fresh cases have been added to the number of confirmed infections in the past 24 hours", bringing the total to 12,729.

Jahanpour told a televised news conference that more than 4,300 of those with confirmed infections had recovered so far. The province of Tehran had the highest number of new cases with 347, followed by Isfahan with 155 and the northern region of Alborz with 134.

"Naturally, the number of confirmed cases will increase" even more as Iran steps up its laboratory sampling and tests, he said.

The outbreak in Iran is one of the deadliest outside of China, where the disease originated.

Since it announced the first deaths last month, Iran has shut schools, postponed events and discouraged travel ahead of Norouz, the country's New Year holidays.

It also closed mosques and religious shrines including the holy shrine of Imam Reza (PBHU) in the northeastern city of Mashhad.

But despite those and other measures including the cancellation of the main weekly Friday prayers, the number of deaths and infections has continued to grow. Iran's Leader on Thursday ordered the military to lead the battle against the outbreak. Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei instructed the security forces to bring their services together and expand efforts to combat the virus.

Acting on those orders, Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Baqeri chaired a meeting on Friday. Baqeri appeared in front of the cameras later to say a newly formed commission had been charged with overseeing the "emptying of shops, streets and roads" within the next 24 hours.

China offers assistance

Chinese President Xi Jinping said China will continue to provide as much assistance as it can to Iran for its fight against the COVID-19 outbreak.

Iranians to stay at home to welcome New Year, isolate new virus

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New rockets target Iraq base housing foreign troops

Iran summons Swiss envoy over Trump's claim

A fresh spate of rockets targeted an Iraqi base north of Baghdad on Saturday where foreign troops are deployed, Iraqi and US security sources said, in a rare daytime attack.

It was the 23rd such attack since late October on installations across Iraq where American troops and diplomats are based, with the latest rounds growing deadlier, according to AFP.

None of the attacks have ever been claimed but the US has blamed the Hashd al-Sha'abi, a network of popular fighters incorporated into the Iraqi military.

At least 33 rockets hit Iraqi air defense units at the Taji air base on Saturday, the country's military said, in one of the largest such volleys yet.

"The initial toll is two wounded Iraqi air defense personnel who are in very critical condition," said Tahsin al-Khafaji, spokesman for Iraq's Joint Operations Command.

The US-led coalition said three of its members were also wounded in the attack.

Taji is overcrowded with members of the US-led coalition, after units were moved to the airbase from other installations.

It came three days after a similar attack on the base killed two American military personnel and a British soldier - the deadliest such incident at an Iraqi base in years.

The US responded Friday with airstrikes on arms depots it said were used by Kataeb Hezbollah, a faction within the Hashd al-Sha'abi.

At least five members of Iraq's security forces and one civilian were killed, none of them members of the Hashd, according to Iraq's military.

Iran protest

Iran summoned the Swiss envoy, whose country represents US Interests Section in Tehran, to protest US President Donald Trump blaming Iraq for the Wednesday rocket attack.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Abbas Mousavi said Saturday that Markus Leitner was summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry a day earlier to be informed of Iran's "severe protest" over the remarks.

Mousavi said Washington's destructive policies and its role in current tensions were discussed during the meeting where Iran warned the Americans against any "unwise" actions.

"Trump can't deny his responsibility by making such baseless and dangerous accusations" against Iran, he added.

On Thursday, Trump claimed that the Wednesday rocket attack was carried out by attackers that "most likely looked like it could be backed by Iran."

No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. AFP and Press TV contributed to this story.

Countries bolster virus defenses as Spain cases spike

Governments around the world ramped up the battle against the new coronavirus on Saturday by shutting borders and promising cash injections, as Spain emerged as a global hotspot registering more than 1,500 new infections in just 24 hours.

A week that saw schools and businesses shut down indefinitely, millions of travelers barred from crossing borders, celebrities and politicians become infected and the whole of Italy locked down ended with a flurry of government announcements, AFP wrote.

US President Donald Trump declared a national emergency and announced a \$50 billion package, with similar measures being taken by governments from Austria to Canada on Saturday.

The president's 30-day ban on travelers from Europe also came into effect on Saturday, a day after the final plane loads of European passengers flew into Los Angeles.

European nations meanwhile ramped up border controls on Saturday, with foreigners forbidden from crossing into Russia from Norway and Poland, Denmark and the Czech Republic also announced stringent restrictions.

Squares and streets from Milan to Madrid were deserted on Saturday as government calls to stay at home were heeded by most - some Italians took to singing to each other from their windows to beat the social isolation, others organized rounds of applause.

The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed Europe as the epicenter of the pandemic on Friday after a dramatic slump in new cases in China, where the virus first emerged in December last year.

China registered just a handful of new infections on Saturday and most of the country's more than 80,000 confirmed patients have already recovered.

Attention instead has shifted to Spain, which has more than 5,750 cases, and Italy with more than 17,000.

The virus has infected more than 140,000 people globally and killed more than 5,000.

The human cost is rapidly being matched by the economic cost - financial markets endured a rollercoaster ride all week with spec-

tacular losses triggered by fears of a global recession followed by huge gains after government spending pledges.

Companies announced drastic measures to help tackle the virus - US tech giant Apple closed all of its stores outside China until March 27, with CEO Tim Cook saying he had learnt from steps taken in China.

British Airways meanwhile became the latest global firm to hint at drastic action to come, with CEO Alex Cruz telling staff to expect job losses.

Airlines have cancelled thousands of flights worldwide as COVID-19 decimates demand and countries, including the US ramp up travel restrictions, and several firms have hinted that bailouts could be required.

The troubled air industry must wait in line, however, with national governments struggling to cope with the costs and the EU already promising a raft of measures to protect the European economy and help Italy.

Any EU action is likely to be limited to reallocating unused funds, giving governments a free pass to bail out businesses and loosening rules on public debt and deficits.

As economies reel and finance experts mull the impact, governments are also facing up to the public health dilemmas posed by the virus - whether to try to stamp it out entirely with drastic restrictions or try to manage its spread.

Britain had resisted imposing any wide restrictions, but the media reported on Saturday that a ban on large gatherings would come into force from next weekend.

On Saturday, the Philippines introduced a night-time curfew in Manila, Saudi Arabia became the latest country to ban international flights and New Zealand said international travelers would have to self-isolate on arrival.

South Africa, meanwhile, has become the first sub-Saharan country to repatriate citizens from China - 146 South Africans who were working and studying in Wuhan city arriving back in their homeland on Saturday.

Japan was forced to deny claims that the Tokyo Olympics could be called off as well, after Trump said "maybe they postpone it for a year".