

NEWS IN BRIEF

Black Sea grain deal renewed for two months



REUTERS - Russia confirmed on Wednesday that a deal to allow Ukraine to export its grain safely across the Black Sea, despite the Ukraine War, had been extended for two months.

Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the deal had been extended to help countries in need but added that Russia's overall assessment of the situation regarding the deal had not changed.

On Thursday, Russia threatened to quit the arrangement, which was agreed upon last July with the help of the United Nations and Turkey, unless a list of conditions were met.

"The extension of the grain deal is for two months. Thus, there is a chance, not in words, but in deeds, to help ensure global food security. First of all, to help the most needy countries," Zakharova told reporters in a video briefing.

The Russian conditions were designed to counter the effect of some of the economic sanctions imposed by the West after Russia sent its armed forces into Ukraine.

Energy crisis cost UK £29b more in 2022



BLOOMBERG - The surge in wholesale electricity prices last year forced UK consumers to pay more than double the amount for power than they did before the crisis, according to a study by University College London.

Generators in Britain earned £49.5 billion (\$61.7 billion) in revenue during 2022, compared with an average of £20.5 billion in 2018 and 2019, the study said.

About 70% of those extra tariffs went to gas-fired power plants and renewable-power companies.

"The exploding costs to consumers over the last year highlight the need to disentangle the UK's electricity market from the volatile prices of fossil fuels," said Michael Grubb, a professor at the UCL Institute for Sustainable Resources and one of the report's authors.

The figures are indicative of the historic cost-of-living crunch facing the UK, where the Bank of England is warning of persistent inflation, which now tops 10%.

Iran, Russia ink customs accord

A new customs agreement between Iran and Russia to facilitate trade and develop transit was signed between the heads of the customs administrations of the two countries.

Mohammad Rezvani-far, deputy minister of economy and head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA), met with Ruslan Davydov, the head of the Federal Customs Service (FCS), in Tehran on Wednesday to conclude the agreement, Mehr news agency reported.

Referring to the areas of cooperation between the cus-

tom of the two countries and their development, Rezvani-far maintained, "By updating the agreements signed between the two countries and developing new agreements, we will achieve a new roadmap for expanding cooperation."

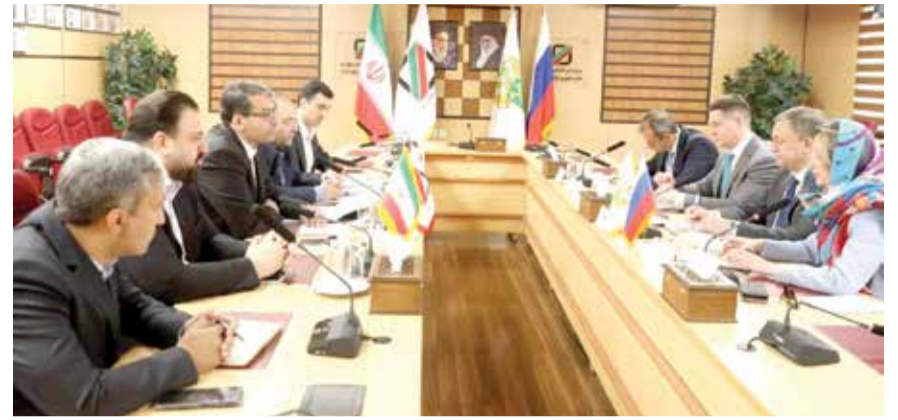
The IRICA chairman further said, "In addition to facilitating trade between the two countries, Iran's customs is ready to provide special services and facilities to Russian authorized economic operators within the framework of a green customs corridor."

He added, "Considering

that the Iranian customs has been picked as a regional training center for the World Customs Organization (WCO), we can have continuous and active cooperation with Russian customs in the field of training and education."

Ruslan Davydov, for his part, welcomed suggestions made by Iran's customs chief, highlighting the importance of "facilitating and speeding up customs affairs and helping economic operators with the aim of increasing the volume of trade between the two countries."

The FCS chief further point-



ed out that "an increase in the number of goods such as technological goods that are exchanged in the green customs corridor will lead

to an increase in the volume of trade transactions." Attaching great importance to the tripartite agreement between Iran, Russia, and

the Republic of Azerbaijan in the field of transit, Ruslan Davydov stated, "Our goal is to develop the transit capacity."

Iran profits heavily from Shell's Iraqi gas project



MAPNA, a Tehran-based company, is the biggest beneficiary of a power plant poised to supply a Shell-backed gas project in Iraq, showing the perva-

sive presence of Tehran's business interests in its neighbour and putting the UK group at odds with the West's shifting geopolitical priorities in the Middle East.

Basrah Gas Company, which is 44-percent-owned by the London-listed energy major, will become a major consumer of power from Rumaila Independent Power Plant in southern Iraq when the gas company's new facility starts operations in June, according to documents seen by the Financial Times and three

people involved in the contracts.

The Rumaila plant is owned by Jordan-based Shamara Holding but was built by Tehran-based MAPNA Group, which is entitled to 78 percent of the revenue from electricity sales.

Shell and Basrah Gas both said they had no dealings with MAPNA.

There is no indication that payments from Basrah Gas for power from the Rumaila plant, made via Iraq's Ministry of Electricity, will violate US or European

sanctions on dealing with Iran.

However, MAPNA's role in the power plant reflects the extent to which companies close to the Iranian regime have become embedded in the fabric of the Iraqi economy.

"Iran's interests and influence run deep into the Iraqi state and its ministries," said Renad Mansour, director of the Iraq initiative at Chatham House.

"Its long-term investments and networks ensure it remains the most influential

foreign power."

Iran's reach is especially entrenched in energy, where 20 years after the US-led invasion, chronic under-investment and corruption have left Iraq heavily reliant on imports of Iranian gas and electricity, which provide more than a third of its power needs.

This is not only an issue for Shell. Several international oil companies including BP and Exxon-Mobil run oilfields in Iraq that pull power from Iraq's national grid.

Moscow, Tehran discuss oil supplies under swap agreement



SHANA

Russia and Iran are discussing oil supplies under a swap agreement, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Wednesday, adding that Iran is interested in deliveries of oil products to the country's north.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander No-

vak arrived in Iran on Tuesday on a two-day visit, during which he met with Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji and expressed confidence that progress will soon be made on new oil and gas projects in the country, Russia's Sputnik reported.

"We are implementing

projects to develop oil fields in Iran. We have outlined new projects that we discussed with you today, on which I am sure we will achieve progress in the near future, including the development of oil fields, gas fields, mutual deliveries of oil, and oil products," he said.

Iran gas exports to Iraq in 2022 rose by 4% to \$4b

Iran exported \$4 billion worth of gas to neighboring Iraq in the last Persian calendar year of 1401 (March 21, 2022, to March 20, 2023), according to the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

The value of trade exchanges with neighboring Iraq increased from \$10.096 million in 1400 (March 21, 2021, to March 20, 2022) to \$10.501 million in 1401, showing a four percent growth compared to the previous year, Tasnim news agency wrote.

The total volume of trade exchanges between Iran and Iraq (non-oil exports and imports) exceeded 27,437 tons, valued at \$10.501 million, from March 21, 2022, to March 20, 2023, IRICA added.



Meanwhile, Iran's balance of trade with Iraq hit \$9.974 billion during the period, the report read.

Natural gas, ferrous bars, tomatoes, components of steam-operated turbines, light lubricants, byproducts except for gasoline, kitchenware, iron ingot, and polyethylene were the main products exported from Iran to Iraq in this period, IRICA continued.

Missing link of North-South Corridor

Thus far, notable transit routes such as Bandar Ab-

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to the lengthy route and insufficient funds.

Preceding President Raesi's visit to Russia, discussions arose during the meetings of expert delegations in Moscow, a gathering which I had the privilege of attending, where the Russians announced intentions to earmark a credit line for transportation projects in Iran. Within the meetings held between the two del-

egations, the Iranian representatives effectively convinced their Russian counterparts to incorporate the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway within this designated credit line.

Subsequently, when President Raesi embarked on his journey to Moscow, this proposal found its place on the agenda and received Moscow's endorsement during the bi-

lateral talks between the two countries' leaders. Following this, Russian expert delegations made multiple visits to Iran, inspecting the Rasht-Astara railway region, culminating in the signing of the crucial and strategic railway construction contract.

Essentially, this railroad represents the missing link within the INSTC, allowing countries across

East and Southeast Asia, as well as the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, to make use of it and thereby generating substantial revenues for Iran.

Moreover, the operation of this railway will enable Iranian exporters and traders to reach their target markets with reduced costs, heightened security, and increased efficiency. Presently, my hope rests upon the strong determi-

nation shared between the Iranian and Russian governments to foster cooperation, urging the swift implementation of the Rasht-Astara railway construction plan. The realization of this endeavor will not only augment regional countries' focus and reliance on this transit corridor but will also yield significant economic benefits for Iran.