

Head of Georgian church to visit Iran

TEHRAN - Catholicos-patriarch of all Georgia Iliya II is to pay an official three-day visit to Iran from May 27-31 at the invitation of head of the Islamic Culture and Communications Organization (ICCO) Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Taskhiri. The invitation was submitted by Iran's ambassador to Georgia Abolfazl Khazaie in a meeting in which Iliya II said he was eager to visit Iran and hold talks with senior Iranian officials. He said the visit would be the first by a Georgian Catholicos-patriarch to Iran in the 2000-year-old history of the Georgian church. Iliya II, who assumes his post for 35 years and as a senior religious figure in Georgia, stressed the need for expansion of Tehran-Tbilisi ties to the best possible level. He said the ties can be promoted through dialog among religions.

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Chabahar to host seminar on promotion of exports, transit

TEHRAN - A seminar on expansion of exports and transit of goods is to be held in Chabahar port, southeast Iran, given the impact of exports and transit of goods in national economy.

Deputy head of the Ports and Shipping Office in Sistan-Baluchestan Province Siyavash Rezvani said that the seminar would be held in June to survey exports and transit of goods from Chabahar port.

Features of Chabahar port in exports and transit of goods, barriers to the development of Chabahar port, role of Chabahar port in national and regional economy, capacities for promotion of exports and transit of goods from the port and Sistan-Baluchestan Province would be among the topics that would be discussed at the seminar.

Extra government revenues from fuel price hikes to be spent on public welfare

TEHRAN - The government has directed the Management and Planning Organization (MPO) to provide a report on the impacts of annual fuel price hikes on the purchasing power of Iranian families and whether the fund has been properly channelled to development projects and employment, a report published by the MPO said on Wednesday.

The report said that the MPO should offer executive procedures by the end of the current Iranian year (March 2002) to channel the fund coming from the annual rise in fuel prices to development projects, employment and social welfare services, IRNA reported.

The MPO will put forward plans to improve consumption pattern, replace fuels with less pollutant and environment friendly and high efficiency substances, on the one hand, and an executive procedure for a systematic channelling of the fund to social welfare services, on the other.

The executive procedure will go into effect once approved by the cabinet, it said.

The mechanism should envisage executive procedure requiring government agencies to channel the extra revenues to specified organizations in charge of rendering social services and supporting the poor.

The MPO has also been authorized to offer proposals to earmark part of the subsidies being spent annually on foodstuff to humanitarian organizations enabling them to support the poor by creating an advanced welfare umbrella, the report said.

Council awaiting official word on renaming street

TEHRAN - The Tehran City Council was waiting for word from Foreign Ministry on a proposal to change a street name which has been one of the sticking points in Iran-Egypt relations, the head of the council Mohammad Atrian-Far said here on Wednesday.

Members of the council were said on Monday to have agreed to a proposal to change the name of the street from Khaled Es-lambouli to either 'Intifada (popular Palestinian uprising) Martyrs' or 'Mohammad ad-Durra', a young Palestinian who was shot dead by the Israeli troops while huddling beside his father for shelter from bullets, IRNA reported. The council, Atrian-Far said, will agree to rename the street if asked by the Foreign Ministry which "will certainly include

the decision, saying the move was "a positive step". The London-based Arab daily 'Al-Sharq al-Awsat' Wednesday quoted a high-ranking Egyptian official in Cairo as saying that the step contributes in underlying the

goodwill to improve and develop Egyptian-Iranian ties that will serve the interests of both countries.

The Egyptian official pointed out this move will convince the public opinion in Egypt about the Iranian government's desire to strengthen ties with Egypt and to open a new page in relations between the two countries.

Tehran-Cairo ties have significantly warmed since June of last year when President Mohammad Khatami spoke over phone with his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak, the first such conversation by the presidents of the two countries since they broke ties in 1979 after Egypt signed the Camp David peace treaty with Israel.

The Khatami-Mubarak phone contact was the first high-level contact between the two countries in more than two decades.

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Iran playing key role in Lebanon's agriculture, economic projects

TEHRAN - Iran has in March-April this year made significant contribution to implementing agricultural and economic projects in south Lebanese liberated territories, said an official in Beirut on Wednesday.

Director of Iranian Agricultural Jihad Ministry's representative office in Beirut Kheyroddin Parvin told IRNA that his office had on March 23 distributed medicines and pesticides among 1,200 farmers of the liberated areas. Parvin said that on March 21, a fish farming project came on stream in southern Lebanon.

On April 23, he added, Iran handed over gymnasium equipment to Lebanese officials.

On May 4, Iran offered 11 automatic pesticide spraying systems to officials of 11 cooperatives centers in the Lebanese liberated regions, he said.

Parvin went on to say that about 200,000 roes had also been offered to a Lebanese company for distribution among fish farming

cooperative unions.

In another development, Iran's Education Minister Hossein Mozaffar and his Lebanese counterpart Abdel al-Rahim Murad on Wednesday agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding for mutual cooperation in various educational fields.

The memorandum of understanding was to be signed on Thursday at the final round of talks between the two sides.

Mozaffar arrived in Beirut on Wednesday on a three-day official visit and is to meet Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, National Assembly Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

He is also to break the ground for construction of Iran's cultural complex in Beirut.

While in Lebanon, the Iranian minister is to visit some educational and research centers as well as ancient monuments in the country.

Islamic Consultative Assembly survey reasons behind plane crash

TEHRAN - The Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis) Wednesday surveyed reasons behind the catastrophic crash of the Yak-40 in which Minister of Roads and Transportation and seven members of were killed last Thursday.

The issue was debated during the session of the Majlis Development Commission and in the presence of the temporary caretaker of the Ministry of Roads and Transportation Mohammad Sadeq Afshar, IRNA reported.

Head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Mohsen Mirdamadi and Managing Director of the Civil Aviation Organization Behzad Mazaheri were among the participants in the meeting.

Members of the commission posed several questions regarding the reason why the plane had detoured from its

original Tehran-Gorgan path towards Sari, the bad weather conditions, the pilots, flight permit, capabilities of the Faraz Qeshm airlines and flight facilities.

Technicians of the Civil Aviation Organization and the Roads and Transportation Ministry offered answers, some of which were regarded as convincing whereas some others needed further technical knowledge that were postponed till receiving information from Russia about the plane's black box.

It was said at the session that the meeting was arranged both to find out the real causes behind the disastrous crash and to figure out how to avoid, or decrease the possibility of occurrence of similar incidents in the future.

Afshar assured the MPs that the ministry had already delivered all the necessary information regarding the issue to the fact finding mission of the Majlis.

He said the ministry would check observation of all the necessary standards more carefully in order to

lower the possibility of occurrence of such incidents in the future.

Head of the National Security and Foreign Policies Commission said that such painstaking surveys can help the country learn about the points of strength and weakness.

Mirdamadi said, "the tragic crash is definitely the result of certain deficiencies and what we need to spot is where such deficiencies are.

"Are they within our aviation service, due to the plane's own systems, the pilot's mistake, or the passengers' urgent need to fly under any conditions?" he asked.

Meanwhile, head of the Civil Aviation Organization explained the reason why the pilot had changed the normal route of the flight towards Sari.

Mazaheri referred to the current Dhrs 100 million budget for air safety coverage of the Tehran and Shiraz international airports, admitting that the safety standards of the country's airports are unfortunately far

below the international standards.

The Civil Aviation Organization later announced that it has halted flights between the central city of Shahroud and Tehran following the crash.

The head of the Shahroud airport Mahmoud Zolfagari said that all weekly flights of Yak-40 between the two cities had been cancelled early this week.

"Given the recent crash of a Yak-40, public demand for such flights has plunged," he said, adding his company was not planning to establish flights with other passenger planes.

The Russian-made Yak-40, leased from Armenia by Faraz Qeshm airlines, crashed outside the northern city of Sari on Thursday, killing all 30 passengers and crew on board.

UNESCO to record Iran's Norouz rituals

TEHRAN - Head of Anthropological Research Center, affiliated to the Cultural Heritage Organization (CHO), Mohammad Mir-Shokraie said on Wednesday that for the first ever, Norouz rituals in Iran will be put in list of UNESCO's global heritage as ancient cultural and spiritual rituals of Iran.

Mir-Shokraie told IRNA that to meet the important goal, two national and international seminars have been held and several books and pamphlets as well as research documents and reports on Norouz in Iran and other countries, where the rituals are observed, have been sent to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

He said that per coordination and agreement reached between the UNESCO officials, Norouz rituals will most probably be registered as a national and regional ritual this year.

He added that UNESCO has also received proposals to place ceremonies observed in Iran during the lunar mourning months of Moharram and Safar on the list of its rituals.

Documents pertaining to observation of Moharram and Safar ceremonies are featured in films, photos, books and reports.

The official said that Persepolis historical palaces, Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan and Choghazanbil Temple in Khuzestan Province have been put in the list of the UNESCO monuments.

Tehran-Caracas named sister cities

TEHRAN - On the basis of an agreement signed by the mayors of Tehran and Caracas, the two cities were named sister cities with the objective of enhancing cooperation and expanding bilateral ties.

Tehran Municipality's public and international relations office reported here Wednesday that the agreement was signed during Caracas mayor's visit to Tehran, IRNA reported.

The need to expand ties between the two municipalities was underlined in the agreement signed by the mayors of Caracas and Tehran, Freddy Bernal Rosales and Morteza Alviri respectively, at a ceremony attended by the presidents of Iran and Venezuela.

Organizing cultural events, support for Tehran-Caracas friendship institute, exchange of experience,

technical know-how, as well as technologies of urban construction and management, exchange of specialized delegations and arranging training courses were among other areas of cooperation stipulated in the agreement.

Meanwhile, the mayors of Tehran and Caracas underlined the need to arrange meeting of OPEC member countries to discuss international approaches on urban affairs.

The Caracas mayor proposed an assembly be established to coordinate ties between the two cities, which was welcomed by Morteza Alviri.

Iranian striker signs deal with German Bochum

TEHRAN - German second division football squad VFI Bochum signed Iranian international and reserve Hamburger SV striker Vahid Hashemian to a two-year deal, the German press reported in Berlin Wednesday.

Terms of the deal which runs through 2003 were not released.

Hashemian played sporadically in only 12 matches for Hamburg in the just-concluded Bundesliga season and was often criticized by his coach Frank Pagelsdorf for his weak performance.

Bochum was relegated this season to the second division for the fourth time in its club history.

Iran, Russia sign news cooperation agreement

TEHRAN - The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) and Russian information agency Ria-Vesti signed a memorandum of understanding here on Tuesday for mutual cooperation in news exchange. The memorandum was signed by the head of the Ria-Vesti Alexy Zhidakov and Managing Director of IRNA Fereydoon Verdinejad. The two sides also discussed issues of mutual interest. According to the agreement, the two news agencies will cooperate and study ways of utilizing modern multi-media technology and online services on the Internet. The multi-plank agreement also calls on the two agencies to set up training courses for their staff.

The agreement further calls on the two sides to employ their influences to forge closer professional relations between the Organization of

Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA) and Association of the Caspian Sea News Agencies (ACSN). Zhidakov also invited Verdinejad to visit Moscow, saying this could help with the implementation of the agreement signed by IRNA and Ria-Vesti as well as exploration of new fields for mutual cooperation.

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Iran stands third in Armenia's foreign trade list

TEHRAN - Iran's Ambassador to Yerevan Mohammad-Farhad Koleyani said volume of economic transactions between Iran and Armenia stood at Dhrs 1.3 billion over the past 10 years. Koleyani told provincial Export Promotion Committee meeting in Tabriz that presently Iran stands third in Armenia foreign trade list.

He said that Armenia handles about 19 percent of its foreign trade through Iran. Iran plans to remove certain barriers on export of goods to the country so as to raise volume of transactions by 35 to 40 percent, he added, IRNA reported.

The official said Iran's annual non-oil commodities' exports to Armenia stands at about 120 million dollars.

He said variety of consumer, agricultural and chemical products as well as foodstuff constitute Iran's main exports to Armenia. He referred to various measures adopted by Iran's embassy to Yerevan to expand bilateral political, economic and cultural relations among programs of Iran's embassy in Yerevan. He said it would be important for both sides to upgrade bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, Governor General of East Azarbaijan Yahya Mohammadzadeh told the meeting that it is planned to increase role of the East Azarbaijan Province, especially its capital city Tabriz, in export of goods to Armenia.

Mohammadzadeh put volume of transactions between East Azarbaijan and Armenia at about 36 million dollars last year.

Algerian energy minister:

Natural gas, world's fastest growing source of energy

TEHRAN - Natural gas is becoming the world's fastest growing source of basic energy, IRNA quoted Algerian Minister of Energy and Mines Chakib Khelil as saying in an interview with Tehran Times.

Several countries, including Algeria, have a bright future because of abundant

natural gas reserves, he added.

Countries participating in Tehran's ministerial 'gas exporting countries forum', account for half of the world's gas exports and the forum will never be turned into a cartel like OPEC, continued Khelil, who was here to attend the first ministerial meeting of the GECF, which

wrapped up on Sunday.

"Algeria has some gas reserves of 5,677 billion cubic meters and supplies 22 percent of the world's supply and 18 percent of Europe's," noted Khelil, who is the current president of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

This forum, Khelil said, would help his country as well as others "to understand the challenges posed by the development of a world gas market and, in particular, the threats posed by its rapid and unorganized exploitation by gas producers and exporters".

Since natural gas is the cheapest and the cleanest source of energy, he believed that it would provide the answer to many environmental issues which are being raised worldwide against too much use of fossil fuels.

safeguarding public votes, a sensitive issue

TEHRAN - Head of the central board for supervising the 8th presidential elections Ali Moqahaq said Wednesday that 85,000 inspectors had been selected to monitor the upcoming presidential elections. Moqahaq told a group of officials serving at elections supervisory boards in Kerman Province, south of Iran, that safeguarding public votes is a sensitive issue and it is believed that if there are restrictions in the decision making process, the turn out at the polls will be low, IRNA reported. Government should have trust in the public while people should also make certain of government's trust in them, said the official, adding, public confidence would emerge when people see the effect of their votes on election results.