

Foreign Ministry Spokesman  
Called the Silence and Inaction of  
The Responsible Int'l Bodies and  
The Claimants of Human Rights  
In the West Regarding the Daily  
Crimes of the Zionist Regime  
Painful and a Source of Shame

# IRAN NEWS

Following Some Iraqi Officials' Use  
Of a Fake Name "Arabian" for the  
Historical "Persian Gulf" Name,  
Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman  
Criticized Iraqi Officials for Distortion  
Of History and Called Iraqis to  
Respect Int'l Geographical Names

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## Israel Real Source of Proliferation in Region

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva has slammed the Western countries for supporting the Israeli regime, "the real source of proliferation in the region".

Addressing the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva on Thursday, Ali Bahraini noted that the West has long blocked efforts to establish a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East.

"The international efforts to establish a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East, that was first initiated by Iran in early 1970s, has been effectively blocked by the US and its allies as part of their support toward the real source of proliferation in the region, i.e., the Israeli regime that keeps accumulating all kinds of WMD without being a party to any international legally binding disarmament instruments and without being subject to any accountability, safeguards or verification mechanism," said the envoy.

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## Leader Says Arrogant Powers' Attacks Aimed At Islam

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei strongly condemns the desecration of the Holy Quran "under the slogan of freedom of speech."

Ayatollah Khamenei's remarks were posted on the Leader's Twitter account.

"The insane desecration of the Quran, which is committed under the slogan of freedom of speech, shows the Arrogant Power's attacks are aimed at Islam itself & the Quran," read the Leader's message.

"The Quran is shining more brightly every day & the future belongs to Islam despite the Arrogant Power's plots," the Leader's message added, noting, "All freedom-seekers of the world should stand by Muslims in confronting the wicked plot of insulting sanctities and spreading hate."

The Iranian Foreign Ministry has also vehemently denounced the act of sacrilege in Sweden, saying the move was a clear example of hatemongering and violence against Muslims.

Meanwhile on Thursday and in a message to the 29th National Prayer Conference, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution stated that being able to hold this conference after two years is a source of joy and is a blessing.

The following is the full text of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei to the 29th National Prayer Conference in Tehran which was read out on Thursday morning.

In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon our Master, Prophet Muhammad, and upon his Pure Progeny, particularly the remaining Vestige of God on earth

Conducting this auspicious conference after it had been suspended for two years is a source of joy, and God willing, it will also bring blessings. Any intellectual, practical effort to show the value of prayer and to honor this blessed religious obligation is a step toward illuminating people's hearts and will bring warmth to their lives.

The remembrance of God, which prayer is the perfect manifestation of, frees the heart and soul, and it also enriches society. Vital connections in a happy, prosperous society, such as friendship, forgiveness, kindness, empathy, sympathy, helpfulness, benevolence, and the like are strengthened by the propagation and establishment of prayers. The rows [of worshippers] in the group prayers create the interconnected rows of social activities. The warm, enthusiastic centers in the mosques nurture the associations for cooperation in society. When prayer is performed while keeping God's presence in mind, it illuminates all areas of a person's life, and it enriches the world and the hereafter of both the individual and society.

A person who prays – whoever or wherever he or she may be – benefits from prayers according to his or her individual capacity, but at the same time, teenagers and young people are ahead of other people in this regard. The benefit they gain from a prayer that is recited with attention and humility is more than others. The heart of a young person is more prepared for reaching the stage of "Falah [prosperity]," which the call to prayer encourages us to hasten toward.

Parents, teachers, professors, counselors, and advisors must keep in mind this relationship that exists between prayer and the youth. They also need to understand the responsibility they must fulfill in this regard.

Schools, universities – especially the universities for training teachers – television and radio stations, and other cultural institutions are among the main audiences who must "establish the [obligatory] prayer."

I ask the Almighty God to grant everyone success.

## Illegal Foreign Presence in Syria Creates Ideal Grounds for Terror

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) calls for an end to the illegal presence of foreign forces in Syria, saying the occupation continues to violate the UN Charter and international law while creating fertile grounds for terrorism to flourish.

Amir Saeid Iravani made the remarks in a statement before the United Nations Security Council on "the situation in the Middle East: Syria" in New York.

"Terrorism continues to pose a serious threat to Syria and the region; however, the presence of foreign forces in the north of Syria under the pretext of combating terrorism should not be used to violate and undermine Syria's national sovereignty, and territorial integrity," he said. He urged "all uninvited foreign forces" in Syria to leave the country with no precondition or delay in a bid to create conducive grounds for ending the crisis there.

Pointing to Israel's continuous acts of aggression against Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, he emphasized that the Security Council must compel the regime to immediately end its "wrongful acts," which are happening despite Damascus' repeated requests from the world body to explicitly condemn such crimes.

"We strongly condemn the Israeli regime's recent terrorist attacks on Damascus International Airport on 2 January, which constituted a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and endangering regional and international peace and security," the Iranian diplomat said.

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## 10-Month Exports Figure Reaches Historic High of \$45.3b

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's customs office (IRICA) director says non-oil exports from the country rose to an all-time record of some \$45.3 billion in the 10 months to January 20.

Mohammad Rezvani said that exports from Iran in March-January had increased by 2.93% compared to the same previous period. Rezvani said the \$45.3 billion figure does not include Iran's exports of crude oil as well as shipments of mazut, kerosene, technical and engineering exports, suitcase transfer of goods to other countries and exports of electricity.

He said average value per metric ton (mt) of exports from Iran had increased by \$55 or 14.31% to \$440 per mt year on year in March-January.

Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) was responsible for a large chunk of Iranian exports in the 10 months to late January, Rezvani told IRICA's website, adding that LPG exports from Iran had amounted to \$6.8 billion or some 15.4% of total exports from the country over the period.

China was the largest customer of Iranian export shipments in the March-January period with some \$12.6 billion worth of purchases, followed by Iraq at \$8.9 billion and Turkey at \$6.6 billion, he said.

## NIOC to Issue Oil Bonds to Finance Iran's Upstream Projects

IRAN NEW ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Iran's state oil company the NIOC says the government will soon begin to sell oil bonds to secure the investment needed in large-scale oil and gas projects in the country.

Mohsen Khojasteh Mehr said that oil bonds planned to be unveiled by the National Iranian Oil Company in the near future will be denominated in foreign currencies and will be eligible for direct exchange with crude oil shipments.

"The NIOC can even store crude oil at aboveground tanks for delivery to the bond holders as soon as a tradable shipment is ready," Khojasteh Mehr told reporters, adding that the bonds will have no maturity date. He described the oil bond issuance plan as a "national scheme" that will enable the NIOC to secure the cash flow needed in its upstream projects.

The official, who also serves as a deputy oil minister, said Iran's High Council on Money and Credit has authorized the oil bond issuance scheme by the NIOC.

## Assailant Arrested After Attack On Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Police in Tehran say they have arrested a man who shot dead a security guard and injured two others after entering Azerbaijan's embassy in the Iranian capital on Friday morning.

"The person entered the Azerbaijani embassy this morning and started shooting with a firearm, killing one person and injuring two others," Tehran Police Chief Brigadier General Hossein Rahimi said.

"The police took immediate action and arrested the assailant," he said, adding that an investigation is underway.

According to the Tehran police chief, the attacker entered the embassy with two young children. "In the initial investigation, the attacker stated that his motivation was personal and family problems," Gen. Rahimi said. Azerbaijan's foreign ministry released a statement, stating that the head of the security service of the embassy was killed in the shooting which happened around 8:30 local time (0500 GMT).

"An individual with a Kalashnikov rifle attacked the security post and killed the head of security," reads a statement by the ministry, according to Trend News Agency. Azeri media outlets have identified the victim as Orkhan Asgarov.

"Two embassy guards were also wounded in preventing the attack. Their condition is satisfactory," it added, noting that the attack was under investigation.



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## Construction of North-South Corridor, Gov't's Policy

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Vice president for political affairs reacting to rumors on Caspian Sea developments, emphasized that Iran's interests are fully secured, adding that the construction of North-South Corridor is our own government's policy.

Reacting to the rumors, Mohammad Jamshidi wrote on his website, "It is the Islamic Republic of Iran government's policy to construct the North-South Corridor both for transit and for energy transfer objectives."

He added that in recent interactions, especially in a phone talk between President Ebrahim Raisi and his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin, we pursued the implementation of that macro-scale project.

"If they had brought up the issue of water borderline, they would have heard the same thing that we said face-to-face with Putin: Securing Iran's interests is only possible by drawing the water borderline."

## Desecration of Holy Quran Insult to All Religions, Humanity

**IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK**

**TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says the desecration of the Holy Quran and disrespect for Islam's Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are an insult to all Abrahamic religions and humanity.**

Addressing a conference in Tehran on Thursday, Raisi slammed the desecration of the Holy Quran in European countries that claim to be the flag-bearers of freedom and human rights. "This heinous act and similar cases that are carried out in the name of freedom of expression are actually considered the worst type of insult to humanity," he said.

He added that no one in the world accepts such insulting acts "as they are at odds with the freedom of expression and block freedom of expression in human societies."

A notorious Swedish-Danish extremist, Rasmus Paludan, received permission from Sweden's government to burn the Muslim holy book in front of the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm on Saturday.

The Iranian president emphasized that insulting the Holy Qur'an and divine religions is a disgusting hateful and rejected act.

He said the Europeans, who claim to advocate human rights, must feel responsibility to give response to the public opinion and Muslims around the world about their sacrilegious moves.

The President considered paying attention to prayer and developing a luminous culture of performing prayer at all levels of the Islamic society as a comprehensive solution to overcome the current problems and stated, "Real prayer worshippers are not dragged to corruption and unhealthy administrative relations".



Speaking at the 29th Assembly Congress of Prayer, Raisi thanked the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution for his enlightening message to the prayer assembly, as well as appreciating the efforts and words of Hojatoleslam val-Moslemin Qeraati in the ceremony, saying, "Prayer is the highest manifestation of morality".

The President stated, "Perhaps none of the other gifts of God to mankind is as effective as prayer in excellence and improving the individual and society".

The President stated that thanks to the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the order and advice of all divine prophets to prayer and the praying community have received good attention, and stated, "We should appreciate all the efforts that have been made during this period to pay attention and offer prayers".

The President stated that paying attention to prayer today is the key to independence, freedom and keeping the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran alive, and said, "The attacks on people who pray show that prayer is a central issue in the country".

Raisi pointed out, "Saying prayers and paying attention to the prayer culture of the society, people and our country have protected us from seditions and conspiracies since the beginning of the victory of the revolution".

## FM Censures France's Role in Stoking Recent Riots as Unfriendly



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's foreign minister has censured the stance of France and other European countries in instigating riots in the country, warning that Tehran's response to hostile measures will be "effective" and "immediate."

Hossein Amirabdollahian made these remarks in a phone call with his French counterpart Catherine Colonna on Wednesday evening, in which they discussed bilateral ties as well as the French government's role in stoking recent deadly riots in Iran.

The top Iranian diplomat criticized the stance of France in "instigating riot" in Iran as "unfriendly".

Slamming the meddlesome remarks of some French officials, he said Tehran "always prefers the path of dialogue and diplomacy, however, as you can witness, in [case of] a confrontational approach, our measures are immediate, effective, and reciprocal."

The remarks came hours after the Iranian foreign ministry slapped sanctions on dozens of EU and UK individuals and entities on Wednesday in a tit-for-tat move.

The move came two days after the European Union announced sanctions on more than 30 Iranian officials and organizations connected to recent deadly riots in the country, which were triggered by the death of a young Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, last September.

Criticizing the "unconstructive" measure of the European Parliament with regard to the IRGC, Amirabdollahian stressed the IRGC has had an "important role in maintaining regional security and truly fighting against terrorism."

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is closely monitoring the EU behavior and will take its next steps accordingly," added the top diplomat.

"Do not repeat the failed Trump's policy of sanctions," he advised the French FM.

Amirabdollahian also slammed Charlie Hebdo's insult to religious sanctities, noting that the desecration of the Holy Qur'an in Sweden and the Netherlands is in line with the same approach.

## Tehran Blasts Silence on Holy Quran Desecration

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The secretary of Iran's High Council for Human Rights and the Judiciary chief's deputy for international affairs has blasted the "deafening silence" of the so-called rights advocates on desecration of the Holy Qur'an by a notorious Swedish extremist, saying the sacrilegious move is a clear example of hate-mongering against Muslims.

Kazem Gharibabadi made the remarks in a post on his Twitter account on Wednesday, following a recent anti-Islam move by a hardline Swedish politician to burn a copy of the Holy Qur'an in Sweden's capital of Stockholm.

"The deafening silence of the so-called champions of human rights vis-à-vis the desecration of the Holy Quran is a blatant illustration of incitement to hatred and the proliferation of violence against Muslims," Gharibabadi wrote. "Such behaviors have nothing to do with the right to freedom of opinion."

Sweden's right-wing leader Rasmus Paludan on Saturday received permission from his country's government to burn the Holy Qur'an in front of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm. He was being protected by the Swedish police while committing the sacrilege, which has opened the floodgates of protests in the Muslim world.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry vehemently denounced the act of sacrilege in Sweden, saying the move was a blatant example of spreading hatred and violence against Muslims.

## Tehran, Astana Stress Expanding Annual Trade to \$3b

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - An Iranian economic official said after meeting with Kazakh economic officials in Astana that Tehran and Astana eye increasing annual bilateral trade to \$3 billion.

"One of the topics we discussed was the issue of transit and logistics and the Kazakh side's investment in the south of the country in Bandar Abbas," the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce of Iran and Kazakhstan Amir Abedi said in an interview with national Iranian TV on Thursday after the two countries held their 18th round of the joint economic commission, which started in the Kazakh capital.

The Iranian economic official added that "as regards banking issues, there were good talks and agreements

were made between the two countries."

He also said that in the field of trade, it was agreed that Iran will hold an exhibition in Kazakhstan next year to showcase its products.

According to Abedi, the Iranian side brought up the issue of agriculture and the exports of agricultural machinery to the Eurasian country.

He added that increasing bilateral trade to up to \$3 billion, which needs a roadmap as it is a strategic topic was also stressed.

He added that the two sides agreed to form committees that will hold sessions to follow up on the implementation of the agreements every three months.

## IRIB Unfazed by Western Sanctions

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) has downplayed Western sanctions against the country's national broadcaster, stressing that the media corporation is unfazed by the embargo and committed to its mission.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting in the capital Tehran, Peyman Jebelli said the sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union in different forms have failed to stop the national broadcaster from continuing its work.

"Following the imposition of the sanctions, we sought to establish communications with non-European satellite providers," said the IRIB chief. "Our work has not stopped by any means." He noted that the state broadcaster has been dealing with the issue of sanctions for years, stressing that the work needs to be done at two different levels in order to neutralize the West's restrictive measures.

"Firstly, executive bodies need to undertake their own tasks as regards legal and administrative challenges. We experience many difficulties in the production of programs and their subsequent broadcast," Jebelli pointed out.

"After the European Union ordered European satellites not to provide any services to us and we (IRIB) were banned from operating on European satellites, we tried to establish good communications with non-European satellites.

"Thank God, we have managed to maintain the coverage of some of our flagship channels such as al-Alam and Press TV, but through non-European satellites," the IRIB chief underlined.

In December last year, French satellite operator Eutelsat notified Press TV, the IRIB's flagship international news network, of its plan to take it off the air, weeks after the European Union imposed sanctions on the popular media network.

## Tajikistan's Somon Air to Launch Flights to Tehran

**IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK**

TEHRAN - Tajikistan's Somon Air will launch flights from Dushanbe to Tehran, the capital of Iran, on January 31, 2023.

According to the air carrier, a departure from Dushanbe is scheduled at 14:30, from Tehran - at 17:20 local time.

The duration of the flight from Dushanbe to Tehran is 2 hours and 50 minutes, flights will be operated on Boeing 737-800 and Boeing 737-900 aircraft.

Tajik Somon Air is a member of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), which has been successfully operating internationally since 2008.

Currently, the air carrier is operating flights to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Germany, the UAE, Turkey, Russia, China, and India.

## Iran Alloy Steel Co Among Top 100 Companies

**IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK**

TEHRAN - Iran Alloy Steel Company ranked 25th in the top 100 Iranian Companies of the Year Ranking Conference (IMI-100) which was held at IRIB Conference Hall Last week.



According to reports in the conference which was held Industrial Management Institute (IMI), Iran Alloy Steel for several consecutive year was chosen as one of the top 100 companies of the year of the country.

The organizers after evaluating 33 performance factors of 500 companies named the top 100 companies and Iran Alloy Steel Company ranked 25th among the top 100 companies.

The ceremony was held in presence of some of state officials like Minister of Economy and the top companies of the year were chosen and honored.

## PGSOC 2nd Top Companies in Country

**IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK**

TEHRAN - Persian Gulf Star Oil Company (PGSOC) ranked second top companies of the country during the 25th Top 100 Iranian Companies of the Year Ranking Conference (IMI-100) which was held in Tehran by Industrial Management Institute.



According to reports, Persian Gulf Star Oil Company due to its considerable performance last year was chosen as the second top companies of the country among 100 big companies.

The company inspired by observing its organizational duty and transparency of its activities achieved this success.

The conference, IMI-100, is aimed at promoting transparency in the business climate and competitive climate among top companies of the country and the primary base of this completion is the amount of sales of the participating companies in the competition and their impact on the national economy.

## Iran Calls on Iraq to Respect Historical "Persian Gulf" Name

TEHRAN (IP) - Following some Iraqi officials' use of a fake name 'Arabian' for the historical 'Persian Gulf' name, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered the action of the Iraqi officials contrary to the principle of good neighborliness and friendly relations between the two countries and called on Baghdad to respect International geographical names.

Earlier, the arrangement of the 25th Football competitions of the Persian Gulf Arab states Cup in Iraqi city of Basra brought about numerous criticisms, so the Iranian football federation issued a protesting statement on Saturday, which was handed over to the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA).

The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nasser Kanani, stated on Thursday that the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Baghdad had previously protested against this action, and the General Legal Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by sending an official note, considered this action by Iraq unacceptable and called on Iraq to respect the International geographical names.

Kannani also said that it is expected that the Iraqi authorities would pay attention in using the correct name for this water area which is emphasized by the United Nations and clarified: the name of the Persian Gulf has been used in documents, maps, and travelogues for thousands of years, so the old texts have the same name and the creation of baseless words does not change this fact.

Kannani further emphasized: "The 'Persian Gulf' name with its rich history is a unity symbol for all countries in the region and it should not be distorted to get others' attention.



# In the Top 100 Iranian Companies of the Year Ranking Conference It Was Announced Fakoor Sanat Tehran Co. Beyond Goal Settings

## Moving Up 26 Places in Ranking With Increasing Productivity



Today's unstable conditions of the country's economy have made it very difficult for manufacturing and industrial companies to reach and reach their visions and goals, and even caused many companies to stop pursuing their development plans, but there are still companies in the country. Despite all the foreign stonewalling and internal self-sanctions, they shine not only for the benefit of the country's economy and national interests, but also advance the vision and position they have drawn for themselves in the future. Among these companies, one can point out Fakoor Sanat Tehran Company (FST) which was able to create pride and honor in 25th Top 100 Iranian Companies of the Year Ranking Conference organized by the Industrial Management Institute (IMI). In fact, Fakoor Sanat Tehran Engineering Company and Mohammad Vahid Sheikhzadeh were once again included in the list of top 100 companies and managers of the year of Iran, but Engineer Shaikhzadeh was recognized as the CEO of one of the 5 leading companies and Fakoor Sanat Company was recognized among the 10 fastest growing companies. But what is proud is that this company, by focusing on profitability and increasing productivity, has been able to improve by 26 places in the rankings and reached 67 comparing to its 93rd place in the last year's rankings. It is interesting to note that being among the top 80 Iranian companies was a vision drawn by this company until 1405, but Fakoor Sanat Tehran Engineering Company was able to improve its place in the ranking and move to among the top 70 this year and this achievement was gained 4 years sooner than the set schedule.

### The Level of Maturity of Companies Is an Important Factor of Being a Leader

Fakoor Sanat is the only contracting company that is among the top 100 companies among banks, petrochemicals, steel and other manufacturing companies, and the teamwork spirit, innovation and human capital in this company have created a very good brand of Fakoor Sanat Company in the country. In the ranking of the Industrial Management Institute in 2019, this company was also ranked 99th among the top 500 large and influential companies in the country's economy and was also awarded with the title of the leading company. In the ranking of Iranian calendar year of 1400, this company was able to rank 93rd among the top 100 companies in Iran by focusing more on improving performance and increasing productivity. But now this company is among the top 70 most influential companies as well as 10 leading companies. The main criterion in selecting leading companies is the change in the sales rank of the companies in the list of the top 100 companies in Iran during the last four years, among them is the presence of the company's information in the IMI-100 ranking for at least the last three years, and the non-negative change in the company's sales rank in the last year. And the company's loss pointed out. This is while after the above steps, the list obtained is reviewed by a committee of industry and business environment experts and 10 companies that have obtained the best results are identified and introduced as leading companies. In selecting the leading companies, this committee pays special attention to the maturity level of the companies. In the case of mature companies, the positive change in sales rank is even more important while maintaining the position. In fact, the purpose of the Industrial Management Institute as a sub-category of the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade is to provide ratings that are completely optional and voluntary by companies to test themselves, to produce information on large economic enterprises and to clarify the business environment, the extent of the impact of companies on the national economy. And the expansion of competition between companies.

### Sales of Fakoor Sanat Co. Almost Doubled Comparing to Last Year

In this regard, the vice president of market development of Fakoor Sanat Tehran Engineering Company says: "The method of selecting 10 leading companies is based on a series of criteria that are taken into consideration by the Industrial Management Organization. Among them, we can mention the change of sales rank in the last 4 years as the main parameter." Sohail Bagharian stated: If a company participates in the rating competition for 3 consecutive years, its sales rating is not negative and it is not loss-making during this period, it will be among the leading companies. Finally, there is a committee where industry experts are present and validate the results obtained and based on that, the results are announced. In any way, not only in 1400, but also this year, according to the survey of the Industrial Management Organization and according to the sales figure of 116 thousand 22 billion Rials and other parameters, we were among the 10 leading companies in the country. The important point is that the number of sales of Fakoor Sanat Co. has been almost doubled compared to last year. The vice president of market development of Fakoor Sanat Co. also stated: "Our goal in our strategic plan was to gradually reach the rank of 80 to 85 among the top 100 companies of Iran by 1405. But due to the favorable performance of the company in the fiscal year 1400, our ranking went beyond what we had seen in the vision, and finally we were able to reach a higher position."

### You Are Big Companies!

In this regard, the manager of the Industrial Management Institute on Monday addressed Iran's top companies and said: "You are big companies because in the year of production, knowledge-based and job creation, you have played a role in the development of production and domestication of products and services in the country's economic sphere, creating employment and entrepreneurship and causing development. You have created productivity, technology and innovations that have become unique and added value, and you have been customer-oriented, export-oriented, and you have worked tirelessly to maintain your position and rank and improve it by being profitable while addressing social responsibility and removing deprivations." Abolfazl Kiani Bakhtiari noted: "In exploring the reasons for the superiority of Iran's top companies in these 25 years, lessons have been extracted that will be a beacon for others." Kiani Bakhtiari added: "These companies have established an ideal organizational culture and have a cohesive work group, they have had competent and desirable corporate management, they have employed developed and intelligent human resources and they have been diligent in maintaining them. They have done business future research and favorable scenarios, but in order to become bigger and compete internationally, they are forced to pay attention to global trends."

### Objectives of Ranking Companies

In this year's conference, the vice president of consulting and research of the Industrial Management Institute and the director of the center for ranking top companies of Iran also mentioned company size and growth, profitability and performance, productivity, export, liquidity, debt and market among the main categories of IMI-100 for evaluating companies. Each one contains different indicators. Majid Darwish added: "In addition to showing the position of each company in public lists, the position of the company in the relevant industrial group is also determined."





## China Says Covid Deaths Down by Nearly 80%

BEIJING (Dispatches) - The number of daily Covid-19 deaths in China has fallen by nearly 80 per cent since the start of the month, authorities have said, in a sign that the country's unprecedented infection surge may have started to abate.

A wave of virus cases has washed over the world's most populous nation since Beijing abruptly ended its zero-Covid policy last month.

Beijing's figures are believed to only represent a fraction of the true toll, given China's narrow definition of a Covid death and official estimates that swathes of the population have been infected.



## German Arrested for Allegedly Passing on Intelligence to Russia

BERLIN (Dispatches) - A German citizen was arrested at the Munich airport on suspicion of treason for allegedly colluding with an intelligence service employee to pass on intelligence to Russia, the prosecutor general's office said.

The man, identified as Arthur E., was arrested on Sunday upon arriving in Germany from the United States, the prosecutor said in a statement. He is said to be an associate of Carsten L., an employee of the German foreign intelligence service (BND) who was arrested in December on suspicion of spying for Russia.

Arthur E., who is not a German intelligence employee, is believed to have passed on to the Russian intelligence service information he had obtained from Carsten L., according to the prosecutor's statement.



## Strikes Disrupt French Fuel Deliveries, But Participation Waning



PARIS (Dispatches) - Protests against French government plans to raise the retirement age had a muted impact on the energy sector on Thursday, the first day of 48-hour strikes, lowering hydropower output and curbing some refinery deliveries.

In electricity, supply from the Belleville 1 nuclear reactor was lowered 1 gigawatt (GW) due to the strike, data from operator EDF showed. Hydropower supply was unaffected after dropping by 1.7 GW earlier, the data showed.

That's compared to a steep fall in power production during a nationwide day of strikes on Jan. 19, when output was down some 6.6 GW, roughly 10% of the country's total, forcing France to import power from neighbors.

Spot electricity prices for Friday rose slightly, as an expected drop in demand and rise in wind supply offset some uncertainty linked to the two-day walk-out call by trade unions.

At oil refineries, strike participation also waned, although deliveries were partially disrupted.

An Elabe poll for BFM showed 72% of the French are against the pension reform. It is too soon to say who will win the showdown between unions and the government.

More than a million people marched through French cities on Jan. 19 in a boon for unions. A second nationwide day of strikes, across all sectors, is planned for Jan. 31.

In the energy sector, unions had previously said they expect industrial action to intensify on Feb. 6, when a 72-hour strike is scheduled to start and possibly be renewed.

Meanwhile, the government, which lacks an absolute majority in parliament, is still not sure it will get all the votes it needs to push through the pension reform from the conservative Les Republicains.

Amid a cost-of-living crisis fuelled by inflation, another question is how long and how often workers can afford to strike.

"Oil workers are against this (pension) reform but they don't want to be on the front line," said a CGT union representative for Exxonmobil.

"The goal is to keep pressure on the government and to encourage workers from other sectors to mobilize ... (but there is) nothing spectacular planned at our sites, no well-organized pickets or blockages," the union representative added.

A spokesperson for Esso, whose two French refinery sites are run by ExxonMobil, said only truck loading operations were suspended at Fos, with everything else operating normally.

A union representative added that production at the Port Jerome site was slightly impacted.

TotalEnergies also said fuel shipments were disrupted at its La Mede, Donges, and Normandy sites, but added it continued to make sure petrol stations were supplied. It added its refinery site at Feyzin was not affected.

The strike ended at the Dunkirk site, however, and shipments are expected to resume.

A CGT union representative for TotalEnergies estimated that around 60% of union members were on strike on Thursday across all sites, down from at least 70% last week.

So far, the industrial action has not had a significant impact on wholesale European refined product prices, as the market awaits whether refinery output will be curtailed.

Any disruption to diesel production in Europe would boost prices, especially ahead of a Feb. 5 EU ban on oil products imports from Russia, a major supplier to the continent.

## Russian Missiles Hit Ukraine Energy Infrastructure



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian forces fired dozens of missiles at Ukraine in a blistering wave of strikes targeting energy infrastructure, a day after Germany and the United States pledged heavy tanks for Kyiv.

The latest wave of attacks came as the Kremlin said Moscow perceived the tank deliveries "as direct involvement in the conflict" and Ukraine conceded it was facing mounting pressure from Russian troops on the eastern front.

On a road near the eastern frontline city of Bakhmut, a team of medics welcomed the long-awaited promise of heavy tanks. "This should have happened sooner, and in bigger quantities," a doctor called Liza told AFP, adding that she was "very thankful."

On Wednesday, the United States announced it will provide 31 Abrams tanks to help Ukraine repel Russia's invasion, mirroring a similar move by Germany.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said on Thursday that Leopard tanks pledged by Berlin will arrive in "late March, early April."

Training of Ukrainian troops on German Marder infantry fighting vehicles will start in the next few days, he added, and "a little later" for the Ukrainian soldiers who will be trained on the Leopard.

In Kyiv, the Ukrainian army said its forces had destroyed 47 out of the 55 missiles launched by Russia in a new wave of attacks on Thursday.

Russian missiles killed one person and wounded two more in the capital, said Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko.

The 55-year-old man was killed by fragments of a missile that was shot down by Ukrainian air defence systems, city officials said.

Since October, Russia has been launching regular mass strikes against energy infrastructure across Ukraine, with temperatures currently near zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit).

Energy Minister German Galushchenko accused Russia of seeking to "create a systemic failure in Ukraine's energy system."

### Thousands Rally for Invasion Day Protests on Australia Day Holiday

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Thousands of Australians marked the country's national day celebrations with rallies in support of Indigenous people, many of whom describe the anniversary of the day a British fleet sailed into Sydney Harbour as "Invasion Day".

In Sydney, the capital of New South Wales - Australia's most populous state - social media showed a large crowd gathered at an "Invasion Day" rally in the central business district, where some people carried Aboriginal flags and an Indigenous smoking ceremony took place.

Similar protests took place in other Australian state capitals, including in South Australia's Adelaide where around 2,000 people attended, according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Speaking at a flag-raising and citizenship ceremony in Australia's capital, Canberra, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese honoured the nation's Indigenous people, who have occupied the land for at least 65,000 years.

"Let us all recognise the unique privilege that we have to share this continent with the world's oldest continuous culture," Albanese said.

While it was a "difficult day" for Indigenous Australians, there were no plans to change the holiday's date, he said.

An annual poll by market research company Roy Morgan released this week showed nearly two-thirds of Australians say Jan. 26 should be considered "Australia Day", largely unchanged from a year ago. The rest believe it should be "Invasion Day".

Amid the debate, some companies have adopted flexibility around observance of the holiday. Australia's largest telecoms company, Telstra Corp Ltd, this year gave its staff the option to work on Jan. 26 and take another day off instead.

"For many First Nations peoples, Australia Day ... marks a turning point that saw lives lost, culture devalued, and connections between people and places destroyed," Telstra chief executive officer Vicki Brady wrote on LinkedIn.

## EU Wants to Send More Migrants Away

STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - European Union ministers sought ways to curb irregular immigration and send more people away as arrivals rose from pandemic lows, reviving controversial ideas for border fences and asylum centers outside of Europe.

EU border agency Frontex reported some 330,000 unauthorised arrivals last year, the highest since 2016, with a sharp increase on the Western Balkans route.

"We have a huge increase of irregular arrivals of migrants," Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson told talks among the 27 EU migration ministers. "We have a very low return rate and I can see we can make significant progress here."

Denmark, the Netherlands and Latvia were among those to call for more pressure through visas and development aid towards the roughly 20 countries - including Iraq and Senegal - that the EU deems fail to cooperate on taking back their nationals who have no right to stay in Europe.

Only about a fifth of such people are sent back, with insufficient resources and coordination on the EU side being another hurdle, according to the bloc's executive.

The ministerial talks come ahead of a Feb. 9-10 summit of EU leaders who will also seek more returns, according to their draft joint decision seen by Reuters.

"The overall economic malaise makes countries like Tunisia change from a transit country to a country

where locals also want to go," said an EU official. "That changes things. But it's still very manageable, especially if the EU acts together."

That, however, is easier said than done in the bloc, where immigration is a highly sensitive political issue and member countries are bitterly divided over how to share the task of caring for those who arrive in Europe.

The issue has become toxic since more than a million people crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 in chaotic and deadly scenes that caught the bloc off guard and fanned anti-immigration sentiment.

The EU has since tightened its external borders and asylum laws. With people on the move again following the COVID pandemic, the debate is returning to the fore, as are some proposals previously dismissed as inadmissible.

Denmark has held talks with Rwanda on handling asylum applicants in East Africa, while others called for EU funds for a border fence between Bulgaria and Turkey - both ideas so far seen as taboo.

"We are still working to make that happen, preferably with other European countries but, as a last resort, we'll do it only in cooperation between Denmark and, for example Rwanda," Immigration Minister Kaare Dybvad said on Thursday.

Dutch minister Eric van der Burg said he was open to EU financing for border barriers.



## Trump Seeks to Shift His Idling White House Campaign Back Into Gear



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Donald Trump will seek to kick his campaign for the 2024 Republican nomination into gear this weekend, with a pair of campaign stops in key early-voting states more than two months after he announced his intention to run.

The appearances in New Hampshire and South Carolina are an opportunity to address complaints from some fellow Republicans that his intended rematch with Democratic President Joe Biden has gotten off to a slow start, but they may also illustrate a weakening grip on the party.

Key South Carolina allies U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham and Governor Henry McMaster are expected to join Trump in an event at the state capitol, but some other well-known Republicans are staying away. They include two with possible White House ambitions of their own, former Governor Nikki Haley and U.S. Senator Tim Scott.

That is a sign that some key Republican donors and activists are looking for other options to challenge an expected Biden re-election campaign, including Haley as well as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, according to interviews with a dozen party officials, donors and strategists this week.

"I do not hear any state elected officials or big donors too excited about Trump," said one person who played a major role in Trump's previous campaigns in South Carolina. "The names that I hear them excited about are DeSantis and Haley."

About a year out from the start of party nominating contests, Trump carries some powerful advantages into his campaign. Polls regularly show him as the leading choice among Republican voters and his four turbulent years in the White House give him a tremendous advantage in name recognition.

He has been a prodigious fundraiser since leaving office, though his primary fundraising vehicle Save America is registered to fund Trump's political allies but not his own campaigns.

Watchdog groups have already accused Trump of illegally using his Save America war chest to help his presidential bid.

The nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center in November asked the Federal Election Commission to probe Save America's transfer of money to the Make America Great Again Inc, known as MAGA Inc, which is registered as an independent super PAC but is staffed by former Trump aides and is expected to spend money supporting Trump's campaign.



## Venice Recruits Next Generation In Flooding Fight

VENICE (Dispatches) - As rising waters fuel fears that Venice may one day be entirely submerged, local children are being educated on how to protect the lagoon, a fragile ecosystem threatened by climate change.

On Torcello, an island located in the northern part of the lagoon, around 40 five-year-olds this week attended an outdoor lesson on the shores damaged by the waves from motorboats speeding to and from Venice.

As part of an initiative from UNESCO, the UN cultural agency, they splashed in the mud, made fish from recycled papier mache, took samples of sea water and drew pictures of the nature around them.

"We want the children to learn to observe nature and the lagoon, to learn to understand it, to love it and learn how better protect it," said programme coordinator Francesca Santoro.

Venice is one of the world's most extraordinary cities, a UNESCO heritage site that draws millions of tourists each year.

The landmark St Mark's Square is regularly flood by "acqua alta", high water events caused by abnormally high tides, providing good photos for visitors but threatening the city's foundations.

UNESCO warned in 2021 that it might place Venice on its endangered list, saying there was a need to manage tourist numbers. The city avoided that indignity by agreeing to ban large cruise ships in the lagoon.

With the education initiative, UNESCO hopes to encourage the next generation to think more deeply about how Venice can be preserved -- and take action.

The project is part of a wider UNESCO educational programme launched in 2019, sponsored by luxury fashion brand Prada. Dubbed "Sea Beyond", it is dedicated to the preservation of the sea and involves school children across the world.

The Venice scheme is backed by Georg Umgiesser, director of research at Venice's ISMAR-CNR institute of marine science, who believes this kind of hands-on experience with the lagoon will help people understand the impact of rising water levels.

"As a result of subsidence in Venice and rising waters, the average sea level has risen by 30 centimeters (12 inches, or 1 foot) in the last 150 years and is expected to rise by another 50 centimeters by the end of the century," he told AFP.

St Mark's Square, located in the lowest part of the city, is always first to flood, said the German oceanographer, who has lived in the Italian city for 40 years. "In 2100, half of Venice risks being under water," he warned.

The long-awaited MOSE flood defence system has been in place since October 2020, raising sluice gates to protect the lagoon when the waters in the Adriatic Sea reach 110 cm above normal levels.

But this system was developed in the 1980s, before the acceleration of global warming. There are questions as to whether it will be enough to protect Venice in the decades to come.

"The MOSE was designed to close a maximum of 50 times a year," said Umgiesser. "If sea levels continue to rise at this rate, from 2100, it would need to be triggered 300 to 400 times a year."

At that point, the lagoon would essentially be closed off, preventing the exchange of water with the sea, which is essential for biodiversity.

Another solution would be to raise Venice above the waves by 30 to 50 cm by injecting sea water into the foundations of the city, but for now this idea remains entirely theoretical.

In the meantime, Jane da Mosto, head of environmental non-profit We Are Here Venice, is relying on salt marshes in the lagoon to slow the acqua alta and ease the currents.



## Europe's JUICE Spacecraft Ready to Explore Jupiter's Icy Moons

TOULOUSE (Dispatches) - Europe's JUICE spacecraft is all ready to embark on an eight-year odyssey through the Solar System to find out whether the oceans hidden under the surface of Jupiter's icy moons have the potential to host extraterrestrial life.

For now, the Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (JUICE) is in a white room of its manufacturer Airbus in the southwestern French city of Toulouse. But its days on this planet are numbered.

Soon the spacecraft will be put in a container, wings carefully folded away, ahead of travelling to Europe's spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana off the coast of South America in early February.

From there, one of Europe's most ambitious space missions ever is scheduled to launch in April.

The scientists and engineers in Toulouse who have spent years working on the project are clearly emotional at the thought of saying goodbye to what they call "the beast".

They finally unveiled the six-tonne spacecraft to journalists on Friday -- showing off its 10 scientific instruments, antenna 2.5 metres (eight feet) in diameter for communicating with Earth, and vast array of solar panels which still need to be tested one last time.

As a parting gift, a commemorative plaque was mounted on the back of the spacecraft in tribute to Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei, who was the first to spot Jupiter and its largest moons in 1610.

Volcanic Io and its icy siblings Europa, Ganymede and Callisto were "the first moons discovered outside of our own," said Cyril Cavel, the Airbus project manager for JUICE.

Cavel carried a copy of Galileo's "Sidereus Nuncius", the first treatise based on observations made through a telescope.

More than 400 years later, JUICE will give a far clearer image of Europa, Ganymede and Callisto, before becoming the first spacecraft to orbit around one of Jupiter's moons.

It will be the first European space mission that ventures into the outer solar system, which begins beyond Mars.

Jupiter is more than 600 million kilometres (370 million miles) from Earth and JUICE will take a circuitous path before its scheduled arrival in July 2031.

The spacecraft will travel a total of two billion kilometres, using the gravity of Earth -- then Venus -- for a boost along the way.

"It's like a catapult that gives us momentum to Jupiter," said Nicolas Altobelli, JUICE project scientist at the European Space Agency (ESA).

The extra travel time will allow JUICE's solar panels -- which cover an area of 85 square metres, the largest ever built for an interplanetary spacecraft -- to soak up as much power as possible.

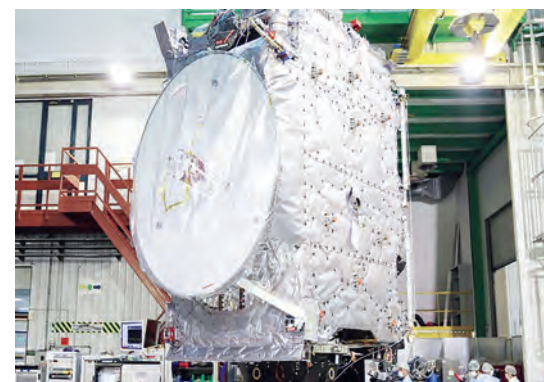
It will need that power once it crosses the "frost line" between Mars and Jupiter, when temperatures could drop to minus 220 degrees Celsius.

Then JUICE will need to carefully hit the brakes so it can slip into Jupiter's orbit. For that part, it's on its own.

"We will follow the manoeuvre from Earth without being able to do anything -- if it fails, the mission is lost," Cavel said.

From Jupiter's orbit, the satellite will make 35 flybys of Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. Then it will enter the orbit of Ganymede, the largest of the three, before eventually falling to its surface.

JUICE's ice-penetrating cameras, sensors, spectrometers and radars will probe the moons to determine whether they could be habitable to past or present life.



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## Chinese Buyers Returned for French Barley This Month

HAMBURG (Dispatches) - Chinese buyers are thought to have booked at least several large vessels of French barley this month, swelling a French export program as merchants ship out a previous round of sales from last year, European traders said.

China has become a major export market for French barley in recent years. As one of the few European barley origins approved for import by Beijing, France has attracted extra demand during a trade dispute between China and Australia. In the latest deals, Chinese importers bought five to six panamax cargoes of some 60,000 tonnes each for shipment in the coming months, three traders said.



## China Offers Sri Lanka Debt Moratorium

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - The Export-Import Bank of China has offered Sri Lanka a two-year moratorium on its debt and said it would support the country's efforts to secure a \$2.9 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, according to a letter reviewed by Reuters. Regional rivals China and India are the biggest bilateral lenders to Sri Lanka, a country of 22 million people that is facing its worst economic crisis in seven decades.

India wrote to the IMF earlier this month, saying it would commit to supporting Sri Lanka with financing and debt relief, but the island nation also needs the backing of China in order to reach a final agreement with the global lender.

However, China's Jan. 19 letter, sent to the finance ministry, may not be enough for Sri Lanka to immediately gain the IMF's approval for the critical loan, Sri Lankan sources with knowledge of the matter said.

According to the letter, China EximBank said it was going to provide "an extension on the debt service due in 2022 and 2023 as an immediate contingency measure" based on Sri Lanka's request.

"You will not have to repay the principal and interest due of the bank's loans during the above-mentioned period," the letter said, adding China EximBank wanted to expedite the negotiation process with your side regarding medium and long-term debt treatment in this period.

By end-2020, Sri Lanka owed China EximBank \$2.83 billion or 3.5% of the island's external debt, according to IMF data.

In total, Sri Lanka owed Chinese lenders \$7.4 billion, or nearly a fifth of public external debt, by end-2022, calculations by the China Africa Research Initiative showed.

"The bank will support Sri Lanka in your application for the IMF Extended Fund Facility (EFF) to help relieve the liquidity strain," China's letter added.

An IMF spokeswoman confirmed the IMF's management received India's commitment but did not comment on the Chinese letter.

Sri Lanka's foreign and finance ministries and China's foreign ministry did not respond to questions from Reuters.

One Sri Lankan source, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the confidential discussions, said the country had hoped for a clear assurance from Beijing along the lines of what India provided to the IMF.

"China was expected to do more," the source said, "This is much less than what is required and expected of them."

In a letter directly addressed to the IMF, India said last week that the financing or debt relief provided by Export-Import Bank of India would be consistent with restoring debt sustainability under the IMF-supported program.

Another government source with direct knowledge of the talks told Reuters that Sri Lanka would likely share China's letter with the IMF and seek their opinion on its contents to gauge if stronger assurances were needed.

## Germany Revises Forecasts, Projected to Narrowly Avoid Recession in 2023

BERLIN (Dispatches) - The German government has revised up its economic forecast with Europe's largest economy now expected to narrowly avoid recession this year as inflation eases, according to its annual economic report published.

It said gross domestic product was forecast to grow by 0.2% this year, up from the autumn forecast of a 0.4% decline.

Inflation is seen at 6% in 2023, down from the previous 7% forecast, as energy prices ease following the initial shock of the energy crisis triggered by the Ukraine war.

"There are no signs of a significant recession, which many observers have long considered inevitable," Economy Minister Robert Habeck said in the report.

While the energy crisis and central banks' interest rate hikes are making the German government cautious for this year, Habeck said the crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine was now manageable. "Germany has proven its resilience and has done very well economically," he said. He added that the initially very pessimistic scenario, with a historic downturn feared in the event of a gas shortage, had been averted.

"Energy supplies remain secure and stable," he said. But the task now is to become even more energetically independent, he said.

German unemployment is seen at 5.4% in 2023, slightly above the 5.3% seen in 2022, the report said.

"Companies are also regaining confidence," the Economy Ministry said.

On Wednesday, the closely watched IFO business climate index recovered further driven by considerably less pessimistic expectations.

Machinery equipment investment was also forecast to grow by 3.3% in 2023, following 2.5% growth the previous year, according to the government forecast.

Despite the improved outlook, headwinds remained. Export growth is expected to slow to 2.2% this year after an increase of 3.2% last year, the report said. Among the biggest challenges for the economy are the war in Ukraine and its economic consequences, the weaker economic situation globally, persistently high energy and consumer prices and the security of gas supplies, it added.



## India's 2023/24 Budget Likely To Be Cautious, Cutting Deficit

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - The Indian government will present a budget on Feb. 1 that will likely put deficit reduction ahead of vote-winning spending, even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks towards seeking a rare third term of office in 2024.

Officials and economists said the large size of recent deficits and a need to gain investor confidence was forcing fiscal caution on the government, overriding the contrary priority of spending to support a weakening economy.

In pulling back the deficit, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's budget for the financial year beginning April 1 will also help hold inflation below the top of the central bank's target range, 6%.

As India faces weakening demand for its exports from the slowing economies of trading partners, its own growth is still recovering from the damage of pandemic controls.

During the pandemic, India had to spend billions of dollars to provide food to the poor, cheap loans for small businesses and free vaccines, pushing the fiscal deficit to a record 9.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020/21.

Debt issuance soared, and some of those bonds are maturing and must be refinanced, further limiting the government's room for manoeuvre.

"The upcoming budget faces acute policy trade-offs between nurturing a nascent growth recovery and diminishing fiscal space with challenging debt dynamics," Madhavi Arora, economist at Emkay Global Financial Services, said.

The federal government is likely to cut its fiscal deficit to between 5.8% and 5.9% of GDP in 2023/24 from the 6.4% of 2022/23, other officials have said. The deficit will remain much larger than the 4% to 4.5% of GDP that was usual for decades.

The government now hoped to return to those historical levels by 2025/26, said two officials who were familiar with budget planning but asked not to be named.

The international slowdown will hold down growth in nominal GDP - real growth plus inflation - to about 11% for 2023/24 from an estimated 15.4% for 2022/23. That will lead to lower growth in tax collection.

Just a year away from elections, the government may be unable to raise more funds by stepping up the pace of selling state-run companies, a generally unpopular measure.

Sitharaman will therefore have little room to provide significant tax breaks for the salaried class and will have to substantially lower subsidies that help the poor.

"The government's promised fiscal consolidation path will require a Herculean effort over the next few year," HSBC economist Pranjal Bhandari said, adding that cutting budget deficits would be necessary for controlling inflation.

## Egypt Economic Growth This Year Seen Quicker Than Gov't Forecast



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Egypt's economy will grow 4.8% in the current fiscal year, faster than predicted by the government, but will not meet government targets over the medium term, a Reuters poll showed.

The predictions follow the approval last month of a \$3 billion financial rescue package from the International Monetary Fund, sought after the war in Ukraine hit tourism, raised commodity prices and prompted foreign investors to pull about \$20 billion out of Egypt's financial markets.

Median forecasts in the Jan. 9-24 Reuters poll of 18 economists for the fiscal year ending on June 30 were above the 4.0% growth the government predicted in a Nov. 30 letter of intent to the IMF.

However, for the subsequent three years, the poll predicted growth of 4.5%, 5.3% and 5.4%, less than the government's medium-term outlook.

"Over the medium term, as immediate pressures abate and with the implementation of our structural reform agenda, growth is projected to increase to between 5-1/2% and 6%," the government said.

Callee Davis of Oxford Economics Africa doubted Egypt would reach that, as it was unlikely to raise as much funds as projected over the next four years through its privatisation drive. This would result in growth slowing to 1.4% this fiscal year and 3.0% over the medium term, Davis said.

"We also see government investment-driven growth slowing as infrastructure projects requiring dollar investment are put on the backburner," she added.

The poll forecast annual urban consumer price inflation climbing to 13.4% in 2022/23 and 16.6% the following year before settling at 8.8% in 2024/25. This would put it back within the central bank's target range of 5%-9%.

Egypt's annual inflation rose to 21.3% in December, its highest in five years, the state statistics agency CAPMAS said this month, driven up by a weakening currency and import controls.

## Brazil's Economy to Stay Weak

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Brazil's slowing economy will likely remain weak in 2023 as a planned spending drive by newly-elected President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva risks keeping already-high borrowing costs elevated for longer, a Reuters poll of economists found.

Lula's government, which took power on Jan. 1, is increasing the size of welfare programs well beyond strict budget limits to address deeply-rooted social problems. Former President Jair Bolsonaro's government did not keep within those rules either.

However, many investors and analysts fear a new wave of planned spending could put Brazil's debt on even more unsustainable path and stir inflation, which is dropping after a long series of interest rate rises.

Heeding their worries, the central bank is set to keep benchmark rates high for a long time, but that may amplify an economic slowdown and stoke tensions with the government.

Growth is forecast to recede sharply to 0.8% in 2023 from 3.0% last year, according to median estimates of 44 economists polled between Jan. 9 and Jan. 20. The growth forecast for this year was unchanged from an October poll, with 2022 upgraded from 2.7%.

"The main reason for our negative outlook is in regards to the fiscal policy that is being implemented," Tomas Goulart, an economist at Novus Capital, said. His growth forecast for this year was just 0.5%.

With a possible reinstatement of taxes on fuels to help pay for extra spending measures "inflation will be around 5.0% in 2023 and the central bank won't be able to lower its Selic rate, reducing growth for the next years," he added.

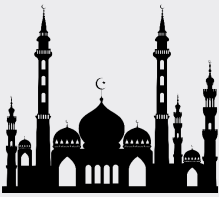
This month, bank chief Roberto Campos Neto cited a likely restoration of taxes on fuels as one of the main factors behind his forecast of 5.0% inflation in 2023 - an outcome that would exceed the 4.75% objective for a third year.

Finance Minister Fernando Haddad presented a fiscal scheme to appease market concerns. Still, he said it was only a list of proposals that Lula had yet to approve and were prone to "frustrations", as well as more unexpected outlays.

Domestic markets, which have remained calm recently, could be tested after the Southern Hemisphere summer break and Carnival holidays, as the government begins to press lawmakers to vote on a tax reform in the first-half.

"There are risks of higher inflation with the pass-through (to consumer prices) of a more depreciated exchange rate in case of sharper fiscal deterioration," Mauricio Nakahodo, senior economist at MUFG, said.





PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)

■ Evening (Maghreb)

■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)

■ Tomorrow's Sunrise

12:17

17:46

05:40

07:06

5. It is He Who made the sun to be a shining glory and the moon to be a light (of beauty), and measured out stages for her; that ye might know the number of years and the count (of time). Nowise did Allah create this but in truth and righteousness. (Thus) doth He explain His Signs in detail, for those who understand.

Surah 10. Jonah (5)

UNESCO Sounds Alarm Stating Odesa a "World Heritage in Danger" Site

PARIS (Dispatches) - The United Nations cultural agency UNESCO said that it had designated the historic center of Odesa, a strategic port city on Ukraine's Black Sea coast, a World Heritage in Danger site.

The status, awarded by a UNESCO panel meeting in Paris, is designed to help protect Odesa's cultural heritage, which has been under threat since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and enable access to financial and technical international aid.

Odesa has been bombed several times by Russia since its invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

In July 2022, part of the large glass roof and windows of Odesa's Museum of Fine Arts, inaugurated in 1899, were destroyed.

In a statement UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay said that Odesa, "free city, world city, legendary port" had made its mark on cinema, literature and the arts and was thus "placed under the strengthened protection of the international community." The city has frequently been described as the 'pearl of the Black Sea'

"As the war continues, this inscription reflects our collective determination to protect this city from greater destruction," Azoulay said in a statement.

The First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska has been campaigning hard for this decision, saying back in September, "I also hope that our friends in the EU will contribute to an important step: adding the historic center of Odesa to the UNESCO World Heritage List .... Our cities and our people deserve worldwide recognition."


Earlier on Wednesday, UNESCO inscribed the Landmarks of the Ancient Kingdom of Saba, Marib in Yemen and Rachid Karami International Fair-Tripoli in Lebanon to its list of World Heritage in Danger sites.

Since the beginning of the war, UNESCO has been deploying emergency measures for Ukraine under its mandate for education, culture, science, information and communication.

The debate over Odesa, however, took hours as Russia unsuccessfully tried to have the vote postponed.

Founded in the final years of the 18th century, near the site of a captured Ottoman fortress, Odesa's location on the shores of the Black Sea allowed it to become one of the most important ports in the Russian empire.

Its status as a trading hub brought significant wealth and made it one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Eastern Europe.



The city's most famous historic sites include the Odesa Opera House, which became a symbol of resilience when it reopened in June 2022, and the giant stairway to the harbour, immortalised in Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 silent film Battleship Potemkin.

Although the city suffered significant damage in World War Two, its famed central grid square of low-rise 19th century buildings survived mostly intact.

Odesa was one of Ukraine's main tourist hubs before Russia's invasion. War changed all that, as the Black Sea became a battlezone. Sea mines still occasionally wash up near the city's shoreline.

Ukraine is home to seven World Heritage sites, including the St. Sophia Cathedral and related monastic buildings in the capital Kyiv.

Under the 1972 UNESCO convention, ratified by both Ukraine and Russia, signatories undertake to "assist in the protection of the listed sites" and are "obliged to refrain from taking any deliberate measures" which might damage World Heritage sites.

To this date, none of the six cultural sites have been damaged by the war — the seventh site being ancient and primeval beech forests, the UNESCO said. Some damage has been noted to more than 230 cultural buildings in the country, it added.

On its website, UNESCO describes Odessa as the only city in Ukraine that has entirely preserved the urban structure of a multinational southern port town typical of the late 18th-19th centuries.

Israel Real Source of...

FROM PAGE 1

Israel, which pursues a policy of deliberate ambiguity about its nuclear weapons, is estimated to possess 200 to 400 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, making it the sole possessor of non-conventional arms in West Asia.

The illegitimate entity has, however, refused to either allow inspections of its military nuclear facilities or sign the NPT.

What has emboldened Tel Aviv to accelerate its nuclear activities, according to observers, is the support from the United States and Europe, the two parties most critical of Iran's peaceful nuclear program.

The envoy also the long stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament can be resolved if nuclear weapon states show "political will" for observing their obligations.

"The CD's decades-long stalemate, which has prevented it from fulfilling its mandate, could be reversed if all members, particularly the Nuclear Weapons States, demonstrate political will and live up to their commitments on the nuclear disarmament," he said.

"We stress the unequivocal undertaking of the Nuclear-Weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament," stressed the diplomat.

Elsewhere, the Iranian envoy rejected the accusations that representatives of the European Union and Germany had leveled against Iran in the conference on January 24 about alleged drone deliveries to Russia and Iran's missile program.


Referring to the war in Ukraine, the envoy said "Iran's position has been clear and consistent" since the start of the conflict.

"Iran supports any efforts to find a peaceful solution to this conflict," he said, adding, "We categorically reject unsubstantiated and baseless claims that Iran has transferred unmanned aerial vehicles for use in the conflict in Ukraine."

Bahraini also rejected the allegations made by Europeans about Iran's missile program. "The EU and German representative tried to give a self-serving narrative of the Security Council Resolution 2231 in order to falsely establish a link between their baseless allegations against Iran with Resolution 2231," he said.

"The text and spirit of resolution 2231 have nothing to do with Iran's defensive missile program, as our missiles are not designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons because we don't need such missiles and because we don't have nuclear weapons," he highlighted.

Mountains Around the World Are Gradually Losing Their Snow



PARIS (Dispatches) - Several mountain ranges around the world are experiencing a drastic drop in snowfall due to climate change. A new study conducted in the Italian Alps estimates the loss of snow cover in these mountains at 5.6 per cent per decade between 1971 and 2019, which is equivalent to 36 days less snow cover annually.

Winter sports enthusiasts have no doubt noticed that snow is becoming increasingly rare, even at high altitudes. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies warning of the loss of snow cover on mountain peaks. The latest study, conducted in Italy and published in the journal Nature, estimates, for example, that in one part of the Alps, the loss of snow cover between 1971 and 2019 amounts to 5.6 per cent per decade.

According to the same study, the average seasonal snow depth (November-May) has decreased by 8.4 per cent over the last 50 years. Currently, the duration of current snow cover is 36 days less than the long-term average, which represents an "unprecedented reduction of snowpack duration over the last six centuries," the study notes. The results highlight "the urgent need to develop adaptation strategies and start thinking about a reform of some of the most sensitive socio-economic sectors" in this "region where the economy and culture revolve, to a large extent, around winter," the authors of the work conclude.

This isn't the first study to demonstrate the decline in snow cover on mountain peaks around the world. A study published in 2020 showed, among other things, that in 78 per cent of the world's mountain areas, snowfall decreased between 2000 and 2018, with an August 2022 study extending the findings through 2020. On a time scale, this would be equivalent to an average of 15 fewer days of snow cover in a year since the 1980s, estimates the study, which was conducted in mountainous regions of North America, Europe and Eurasia.

Another study published at the end of 2022 and carried out in one of Switzerland's largest ski areas also examined whether there will still be snow in the month of December in the coming decades. The verdict: snowmaking could guarantee a 100-day ski season until the end of the century, at least in the higher parts of the resort (i.e., from 1,800 meters above sea level).

But given the current climate scenario, the production of artificial snow is not a viable long-term solution. In addition to being criticized for the astronomical quantities of water it requires, this technique requires specific meteorological conditions in order to work well. It must not be too hot or too humid, so that the water that is sprayed can cool and freeze in the air before falling as snow.

Rapid Development Is Main Threat to Big Carnivores

PARIS (Dispatches) - Declines in populations of big carnivores like lions, tigers and wolves may be driven more by rapid human economic development than habitat loss or climate change, according to a new study.

The researchers hope the findings could help to improve policies for protecting carnivore populations, which have been driven to the brink of extinction in many parts of the world.

The study found that faster economic development was linked to a quicker decline in carnivore populations.

"In the midst of rapid development, people appear to become less tolerant of carnivores, conflicts explode, and we suspect that incidences of poaching and persecution rocket," lead author Thomas Johnson said in a press release.

Some carnivores are poached for their meat or for the wildlife trade, while others like lions may be killed if they pose a threat to someone's livelihood -- such as their cattle -- or their life, Johnson told AFP.

"These human elements are actually having a far greater impact than the habitat loss elements," Johnson said.

Traditionally, habitat loss has been considered the primary threat to carnivore populations, but the researchers said that was "dwarfed" by human development.

The study, published in Nature Communications, concluded that as human communities become wealthier and socioeconomic growth slows, carnivore populations can recover.

The authors said this was partly due to better habitat protection, but mainly because people start to care more about the animals and have less of a desire -- and need -- to kill them.

"What you want is this growth to slow before [the carnivore population] completely vanishes, so there's at least an opportunity to recover," Johnson said.

Grey wolf populations have already rebounded in Europe, growing 1,800 percent since the 1960s thanks to an improved quality of life and slower economic development on the continent, according to the researchers from the University of Reading.

That recovery is not only happening in protected parks but also in wild areas.

Brown bears and lynxes are also starting to recover in Europe, Johnson said, while tiger populations in India have similarly started to rebound.

But several parts of Africa did not support the overarching findings -- the continent has not seen rapid development but its carnivore populations have declined -- and Johnson said this may be because much of the population decline occurred decades ago under colonial regimes.

The findings present an inherent tension between prioritising human development versus protecting carnivores, and Johnson suggested that wealthier nations -- responsible for much of large carnivore decline -- could support less developed nations through targeted financial support.

This could include paying communities in biodiversity hotspots enough to earn a living, while promoting conservation.

"If you lock people into poverty, people will never live alongside biodiversity," Johnson said, adding that he hopes policy will move beyond treating carnivore loss as a narrow issue.

"My real hope is we start thinking about this as a socioeconomic problem, as well as an environmental problem."

The work looked at 50 species of carnivores in over 80 countries over the last 50 years.

Carnivore populations have seen dramatic declines globally in the last century, with lions and tigers absent from more than 90 percent of their historic range.

In the United Kingdom, many local carnivore species such as lynx, wolf and bear have already been hunted into extinction.

Illegal Foreign Presence...

FROM PAGE 1

In letters addressed to the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the president of the Security Council on January 2, Syria condemned in the strongest terms the latest missile attack by the Israeli regime against the Arab country's civilian infrastructure, which temporarily put the Damascus International Airport out of service.

Iravani once again reiterated Iran's steadfast position that the ongoing crisis in Syrian must be resolved in accordance with principles of international law, saying, "A political solution based on a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process facilitated by the UN is the only way to end the crisis."

He added that the settlement of the Syrian crisis through a political process must fully respect the national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the country.

He once again threw Iran's weight behind the Constitutional Committee's work, "which must continue in accordance with its procedures and without foreign interference or artificially imposed timelines."

Iran supports the constructive engagement of all negotiating parties for Astana peace talks and the UN special envoy "in order to effectively resolve differences over the Constitutional Committee meeting" Iravani said, adding, "We also support the Special Envoy's interaction with Syrian authorities, which is required for the political process."

Since January 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been mediating peace negotiations between representatives of the Syrian government and opposition groups in a series of talks held in the Kazakh city of Astana and other places, including Sochi. The talks are collectively referred to as the Astana peace process.

Referring to the increasingly dire humanitarian situation in Syria, the Iranian diplomat said his country "welcomes the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2672, which extends the cross-border mechanism for an additional six months, and regards this action as an important step toward addressing Syria's pressing needs, particularly in light of the harsh winter conditions" while emphasizing that such a mechanism is "only temporary in nature."

"Political conditions should not prevent humanitarian aid from reaching those in need, and all parties must strictly adhere to the basic principles governing humanitarian assistance while maintaining neutrality and transparency," Iravani pointed out.

He stressed the importance of the lifting of unilateral coercive measures imposed on Syria, particularly those targeting ordinary people and patients, warning that such illegal actions hinder the implementation of the resolution, "making humanitarian aid more difficult to deliver, and even delaying the return of refugees and internally displaced people."

He further urged the international community to increase funding for the humanitarian effort in Syria, particularly considering the harsh winter conditions.

Iran supports Syria's regional standing and improved diplomatic relations, the envoy said, adding that Tehran believes that a "safe, secure, and prosperous Syria benefits the Syrian people, the region, and the global community."



## Joelinton Fined £29,000 On Drink-Driving Charge

LONDON (AFP) - Newcastle midfielder Joelinton has been fined £29,000 (\$36,000) and banned from driving for a year after admitting to a charge of drink-driving. The Brazilian failed a breath test in the early hours of January 12 which showed he had 43 milligrams of alcohol per 100 milliliters of breath, above the legal limit of 35 milligrams. Joelinton said he had drunk two glasses of wine earlier in the evening. District Judge Paul Currer calculated the fine based on documents showing his weekly wage was £43,000.

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## Rahm Eyes Rare Hat-Trick At Torrey Pines

SAN DIEGO (Dispatches) - Jon Rahm is aiming to join an elite club when he tees it up at the PGA Tour's Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines in southern California tomorrow looking for a third straight victory. The in-form Spaniard has made a flying start to 2023, winning the season-opening Sentry Tournament of Champions in Hawaii before claiming The American Express in California last weekend.

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## SPORTS

SATURDAY JANUARY 28, 2023

# Sixers Hold Off Simmons And Nets, Lillard Sinks 60

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Philadelphia 76ers won their grudge match against Ben Simmons and the Brooklyn Nets 137-133 as Damian Lillard erupted for 60 points in Portland's victory over Utah.

After an acrimonious split from Philadelphia last year, Simmons returned to his former home to face a hostile reception from the Sixers crowd.

The game marked the first time that Simmons has faced former team-mate Joel Embiid since his trade to Brooklyn last February that sent James Harden to Philadelphia.

Simmons left Philadelphia last year after locker-room tensions with Embiid, and the lingering bad blood was evident from the outset.

The high-scoring first quarter was dogged by trash-talking as the sides scored 41 points apiece and gave up a combined 13 fouls.

Despite his team coming away with the win, Sixers coach Doc Rivers was unhappy with Philadelphia's "emotional" approach to the game.

"There's a difference between intensity, playing with emotion and being too emotional," Rivers said afterwards.

"I thought our side honestly were on the wrong side of that a lot tonight. We have to be better at handling our emotions."

Tyrese Maxey led the Sixers' scoring with 27 points, while Embiid finished with 26 and Harden 23. Seth Curry led Brooklyn's scorers with 32 points while Kyrie Irving added 30. Simmons was restricted to 12 points.

In Portland, Lillard bagged the fourth 60-point performance of his career as the Trail Blazers won a thrilling shoot-out with the Utah Jazz 134-124.

Lillard nailed nine three-pointers while shooting 21 of 29 from the field as Portland improved to 23-25 in the Western Conference standings.

"That was incredible," Blazers coach Chauncey Billups said of Lillard's performance. "You don't get to see that very often."

Klay Thompson added 24 points while Poole finished with 21 points. Ja Morant led the Memphis scoring with 29 points.

In Los Angeles meanwhile, Anthony Davis returned from a 20-game injury absence for the Lakers with 21 points in their 113-104 win over the San Antonio Spurs.

LeBron James added 20 points while Patrick Beverley chipped in with 18. In other games, Giannis Antetokounmpo's 33-point haul helped the Milwaukee Bucks score a 107-99 victory over the Western Conference-leading Denver Nuggets.

Antetokounmpo delivered a dominant display which also included 14 rebounds and three steals as the Bucks took full advantage of the absence of Nikola Jokic to defeat Denver. Aaron Gordon led the Nuggets' scoring with 26 points.



Lillard is one of only six players in NBA history with multiple 60-point games. Wilt Chamberlain holds the record with 32 60-pointers, while Kobe Bryant achieved the feat six times.

The other players on the list are Michael Jordan (5), Elgin Baylor (4) and Harden (4). "Even when things weren't going our way, I always felt I could get us back in the game," Lillard said afterwards.

"When you get in that type of zone you feel like you can control the outcome." Elsewhere Wednesday, Jordan Poole hit a go-ahead layup with 2.4 seconds remaining to give the NBA champion Golden State Warriors a thrilling 122-120 victory over the Memphis Grizzlies in San Francisco.

A frenzied clash between the two Western Conference rivals saw Stephen Curry ejected for only the third time in his career.

Curry was tossed out of the game with 1min 14 remaining after throwing his mouthguard in frustration after a rushed three-point attempt by Poole.

However Poole made up for it with his game-winning layup to seal victory in a see-saw clash that saw no fewer than 24 lead changes.

Despite the ejection, Curry led the Warriors' scoring with 34 points, making 10 of 19 from the field.

Klay Thompson added 24 points while Poole finished with 21 points. Ja Morant led the Memphis scoring with 29 points.

In Los Angeles meanwhile, Anthony Davis returned from a 20-game injury absence for the Lakers with 21 points in their 113-104 win over the San Antonio Spurs.

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## Italian Prosecutors Probe AC Milan's 1.2b Euro Sale



MILAN (Dispatches) - Milan prosecutors are looking into last year's 1.2 billion euro (\$1.3 billion) sale of AC Milan to U.S. private equity fund RedBird Capital from U.S. fund Elliott, a judicial source said.

Confirming earlier Italian media reports, the source said Italy's tax police are requesting documents from accountants and advisers involved in the deal, adding that no specific people or companies were under investigation.

The probe, which revolves around alleged embezzlement, originates from a complaint by Blue Sky Financial Partners, a minority investor holding an indirect stake of 4% in the Serie A club, the source said.

Blue Sky had previously accused Elliott of violating its rights by engaging in "behind closed doors" talks to clinch a sale of the seven-time European champions and it has challenged the deal also in Luxembourg and in the United States.

Elliott, which took over the club in 2018, billed Blue Sky's legal actions as "frivolous and vexatious", meaning it believes they have no reasonable basis in fact or law.

RedBird and Elliott had no immediate comment when contacted by Reuters on Thursday, while Blue Sky did not respond to a request for comment.

AC Milan, who last year won the Serie A title for the first time in 11 years, are currently second in the league. They were for a long time owned by media magnate and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who sold the club in 2017.

## Sabalenka, Rybakina March into Australian Open Final Showdown

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Aryna Sabalenka and Elena Rybakina will clash in the Australian Open women's final after both won in straight sets in the last four in Melbourne.

Wimbledon champion Rybakina defeated two-time Melbourne winner Victoria Azarenka 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 at a blustery and chilly Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne.

Belarusian Sabalenka then marched into the championship match with a 7-6 (7/1), 6-2 win over Magda Linette.

The 24-year-old Sabalenka will be a slight favourite to win the title, for what would be her first major crown, and promises to be a bruising showdown between two hard-hitters.

"I'm super happy, super happy that I was able to get this win," said the fifth seed after reaching her first Grand Slam final.

"Magda's an unbelievable player. She played really great tennis."

Sabalenka has been in the form of her life since arriving in Australia.

She won the Adelaide International warm-up tournament and has now extended her unbeaten streak to 10 matches, not losing a single set in any of them.

But it was Poland's Linette, contesting her first major semi-final aged 30, who was out of the gate fastest, breaking to love in the opening game and holding for an early lead.

Sabalenka was being made to work hard and showed all her new-found patience to get back on terms with a break of her own, to love, for 2-2 and the set went to a tiebreak.

Sabalenka timed her moment perfectly to up the aggression, and the decibel level, racing to 4-0 with a scream.

An ace that barely clipped the line stretched it to 5-0 and she closed out comfortably after 51 minutes, having smacked 20 winners to just seven from Linette.

"I would say that I didn't start really well," admitted Sabalenka.

"And then on the tiebreak I kind of found my rhythm and just started trusting myself, started going for the shots. It was great tennis from me in the tiebreak."

# Russian, Belarusian Athletes Offered Opportunity to Compete at Asian Games



On Wednesday, the International Olympic Committee said a pathway for the return of athletes from the two countries to competition "under strict conditions" should be further explored.

"The OCA believes in the unifying power of sport and that all athletes, regardless of their nationality or the passport they hold, should be able to compete in sports competitions," the OCA said in a statement.

"The OCA has offered to give eligible Russian and Belarusian athletes the opportunity to take part in competitions in Asia, including the Asian Games."

KUWAIT CITY (Dispatches) - The Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) said it has offered to let Russian and Belarusian athletes take part in the Asian Games, a first step towards them competing at the Paris 2024 summer Olympics.

The Asian Games are Olympic qualifiers and the move could help athletes from the two countries compete at Paris 2024. Qualifiers for the Paris Olympics in some sports have started with many more taking place throughout the year.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, many sports bodies have moved events and suspended Russian teams or athletes while sponsors have ended contracts in protest against the war.

Belarus is a key staging area for the invasion, which Russia calls a "special military operation".

In a call with IOC President Thomas Bach in December, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy opposed the idea of Russian athletes taking part under any kind of neutral banner at the 2024 Summer Games.

The Hangzhou Asian Games, which could not be hosted last year because of COVID-19, will be held in the Chinese city from Sept. 23 to Oct. 8 2023.

## Man United Crush Forest to Close in on League Cup Final



NOTTINGHAM (Dispatches) - Marcus Rashford scored a dazzling solo goal as Manchester United beat Nottingham Forest 3-0 in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final to virtually book a place at Wembley next month.

The England man, enjoying a purple patch following the World Cup, netted his 18th goal of the season in the sixth minute to silence an expectant crowd at the City Ground.

New United loan signing Wout Weghorst scored his first goal for the club just before half-time, to put the visitors in total control, and Bruno Fernandes added gloss to the scoreline late on.

Erik ten Hag's men are hot favourites to reach Wembley as they seek to end their six-year trophy drought, with either Newcastle or Southampton lying in wait.

"I'm happy with the performance and I think over 90 minutes we controlled it," Ten Hag told Sky Sports.

But he highlighted a disallowed Forest goal in the first half, warning his side could not afford to let opponents back into the match when they were in charge.

The Dutchman was careful to avoid any hint of complacency ahead of the second leg at Old Trafford on February 1.

## English Clubs Surpass \$2b Transfer Spend for First Time in 2022

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - English soccer clubs spent over \$2 billion (RM8.5 billion) on new signings in 2022 for the first time, FIFA's Global Transfer Report revealed, with the number of international transfers of male and female players reaching record numbers.

There were 20,209 international transfers in men's professional soccer in 2022, representing an increase of 11.6 per cent compared to 2021 and even exceeding the levels of 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of the 2,843 transfers that included fees, the top 100 were responsible for almost 50 per cent of all money spent, with English clubs again topping the list. For the first time, their total outlay exceeded \$2 billion, reaching a record high of almost US\$2.2 billion.

"The two-year negative trend in clubs' spending on transfer fees was turned around in 2022, with last year's total outlay reaching \$6.5bn, an increase of 33.5 per cent compared to 2021, yet still below the all-time high of 2019," Emilio Garcia Silvero, FIFA's Chief Legal and Compliance officer, said.

Women's professional football continued to grow in 2022. The number of international transfers last year was almost double the figure of 2018.

