

Iranian Border Guard Forces Have Started a Major Drill in the Country's Southern Waters With the Aim of Boosting the Capacities of the Force to Counter Maritime Smuggling and Piracy

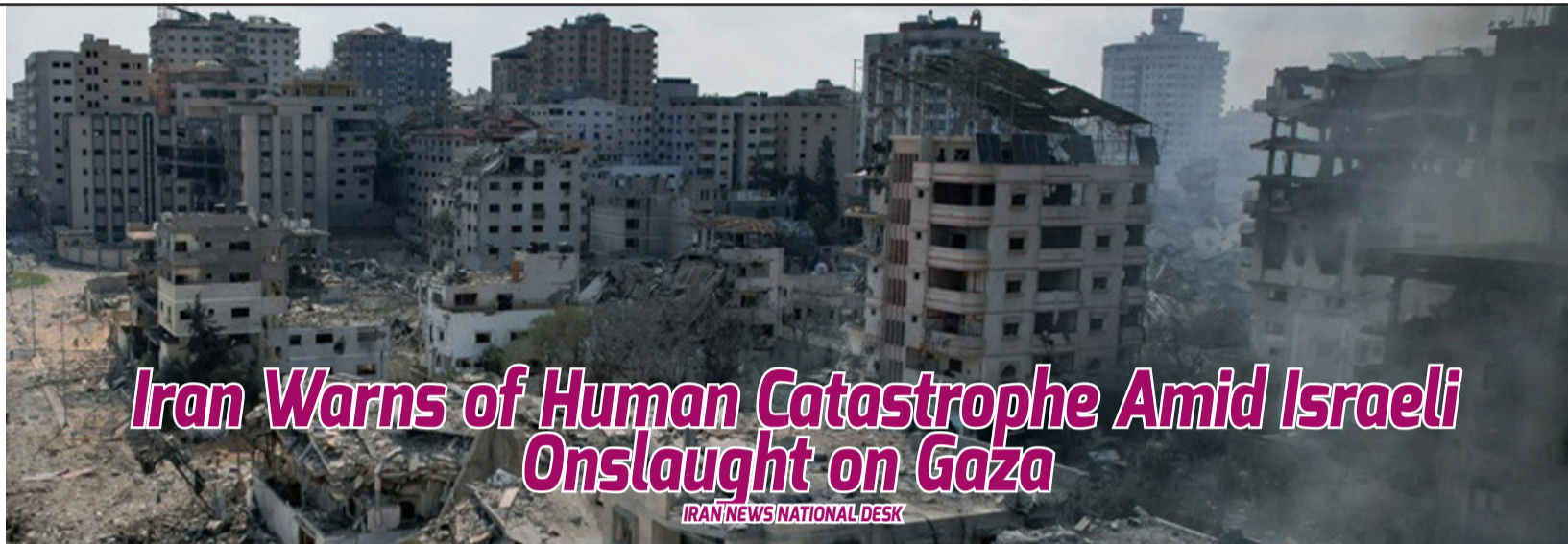
# IRAN NEWS

Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji Arrived in Moscow on Wednesday With the Aim of Developing Bilateral Relations and Participating in the Russian Energy Week (REW) International Forum

VOL. XXIX, No. 7835 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

THURSDAY OCTOBER 12, 2023 - MEHR 20, 1402



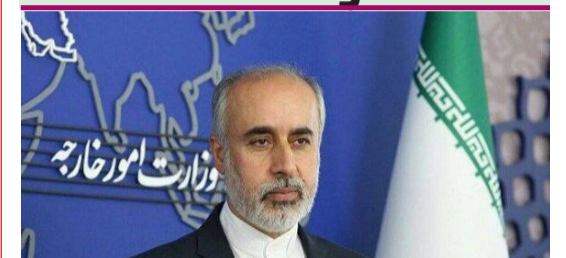
## Iran Warns of Human Catastrophe Amid Israeli Onslaught on Gaza

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister has warned of a "human catastrophe" amid ongoing Israeli aggression on the besieged Gaza Strip, calling on the United Nations to adopt immediate measures to prevent the occupying regime from perpetrating further crimes and rights violations against Palestinians. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian raised the alarm in a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday as he pointed to the recent developments in Palestine and the Israeli regime's decades-long aggression on Palestinians. Amir-Abdollahian touched on the plight and suffering of the Palestinian people at the hands of the illegal entity over the past seven decades, blaming Western countries, led by the United States, for the dire situation in Palestine. "During the past seven decades, the occupying Zionist regime without paying the slightest attention to the laws and norms of international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights, and while enjoying all-out support from the United States of America and the West, which protect this regime against any legal charges and punishment, has committed the most heinous war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide against the oppressed people of Palestine," the top Iranian diplomat said in the letter. Amir-Abdollahian pointed to Operation Al-Aqsa Storm by the Palestinian resistance groups against Israel and described the Hamas-led military action as a natural reaction of the Palestinian people in defense of their most basic rights. The Iranian foreign minister also underlined the Palestinians' right to self-defense against the occupying regime in accordance with the UN Charter and international law. "The legitimate right to defense is an inherent right that is clearly recognized in the United Nations Charter and international law," Amir-Abdollahian wrote. "The Palestinian nation, as a nation that has been unjustly deprived of the fundamental right to determine its own destiny and is exposed to attacks and violations

of human rights and human dignity at any moment, unequivocally has the right to defend itself and resist occupation and aggression." In his letter to the UN chief, Amir-Abdollahian warned about the indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by the Zionist regime in the battle against the Gaza Strip and raised the alarm about the dangers of laying a full siege around the coastal area by cutting water supply and humanitarian aid. "With an overview of the inhumane actions and blatant threats of the Zionist officials in recent days... I deem it necessary to warn against the occurrence of a major human catastrophe in occupied Palestine and highlight the responsibility of the United Nations and the secretary general to support the oppressed people of Palestine and to prevent the aggressor regime from continuing the violence, bloodshed and destruction in Gaza," he said. Amir-Abdollahian noted that the only solution to the Palestinian issue is to end the Israeli occupation, recognize the right of the oppressed Palestinian people to determine their own destiny and the formation of an independent Palestinian state with al-Quds as its capital. Israeli officials have ordered a total blockade of Gaza to compensate for heavy losses suffered during Operation Al-Aqsa Storm launched by the resistance movement Hamas on Saturday. The resistance group in the besieged Gaza Strip has fired over 5,000 rockets at the occupied territories. Israeli media outlets report that more than 1,000 settlers and troops have been killed and a lot more injured as a result. Hamas said that its operation came in response to Israel's violations at al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied East al-Quds and growing settler violence. Rights groups and international organization have criticized the Israeli regime for its indiscriminate bombing of Gaza and its siege on the territory which has left people without water, electricity and other basic supplies.

## Tehran Reacts to Final Statement of EU-PGCC Meeting

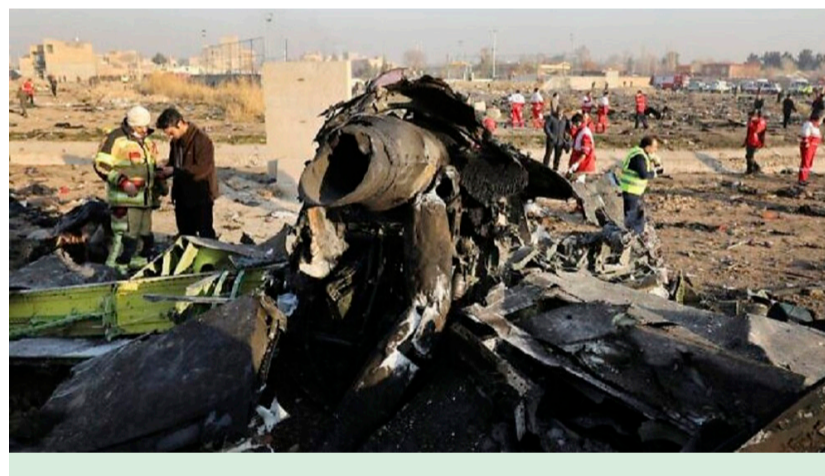


TEHRAN (MNA) - Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani rejected and condemned the inclusion of some baseless content in the final statement of the EU-PGCC Joint Council and Ministerial meeting. Kanaani made the reaction on Wednesday, once again emphasizing that the principled and permanent position of Tehran is that the three Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, the Greater, and Lesser Tunbs are eternal parts of Iran. Referring to the destructive record of the intervention of some European countries in the Persian Gulf region during different periods and the sale of billions of dollars of weapons and munitions to the region in order to continue regional tensions and gain commercial benefits, he considered the development process of the recent months in the region as promising and in line with the interests of all the countries of the region. He also considered the continuation of diplomacy and dialogue as the best way to strengthen cooperation in the direction of common interests and strengthen the stability and security of this region. Recalling the security-building role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the real fight against terrorism, as well as strengthening and consolidating maritime security, he considered sustainable regional security to be dependent on the strengthening of bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the countries of the region, regardless of inappropriate interventions of extra-regional forces. Rejecting some contents of the statement about Iran's nuclear activities and defense capability, he said that the Islamic Republic of Iran has always adhered to international laws and obligations and to its constructive cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency based on the Safeguard Agreement.

## World Religion Leaders Urged to Find Ways for Stopping Act of Burning Holy Quran

F.Taherpoor

ASTANA - Head of Center for Interreligious and Intercultural of the Islamic Republic of Iran urged Leaders of World and Traditional Religions to Condemn burning of the Holy Quran in the strongest way possible and to join hands to find the ways and means of preventing the repetition of this hateful tension-causing act. Addressing the 21st Meeting of the Secretariat of Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on Wednesday, Dr. Ali Akbar Ziaee touched upon some of the goals of the Center for Interreligious and intercultural Dialogue of the Islamic Republic of Iran and promoting unity and solidarity among the leaders and followers of divine religions with the aim of facing the spiritual and political crises of the world collectively is the priority number one of the center. Establishing and promoting greater cooperation and consensus with religious institutions and personalities as well as organizing and participating in dialogues to promote the actualization of justice and social rights of the followers of the religions are of the other goals of the center, Ziaee added. He then said that the final statement of the 7th Congress categorically emphasized freedom of speech, respecting each other and not using religion for political purposes, noting that thus the act of burning the Holy Quran by some people with political motives is completely contrary to these principles and should be condemned in the strongest possible way and the leaders of the world and traditional religions should join hands to find the ways and means of preventing the repetition of this hateful and tension-causing act because creating any kind of religious tensions on purpose is like a fire on ready-to-ignite firewood and it may easily get out of control and have irreparable consequences. Ziaee further urged the Congress to adopt appropriate and effective approaches toward the existing challenges of the new and expressed hope that this meeting would achieve its greatest objectives.



## Iran Outdoes Regional States in Oil, Gas Exploration



TEHRAN (Shana) - Iran has surpassed regional countries in oil and gas exploration since the 13th administration took office two years ago, said the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) managing director. Mohsen Khojastehmehr added three oil fields, Hirkhan in northeastern province of Golestan, Tengoo and Genavch in southwestern province of Bushehr, and one gas field, Cheshmeh Shour in northeastern province of Khorasan Razavi, have been discovered in the two-year period, increasing the country's recoverable liquid hydrocarbons by more than 2.6 billion barrels. The NIOC CEO said 3D seismic data acquisition operations have jumped by more than 300 percent under the 13th administration when compared with surveys carried out during the previous years, indicating Iran has excelled in the region's oil and gas exploration, the Farsi-language daily "Iran" reported. Last week, Oil Minister Javad Owji said Iran stood top among regional countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, in terms of exploration. All wells drilled for exploration purposes under the 13th administration have contained hydrocarbon, meaning the exploration success rate has stood at 100 percent, he continued. Given the latest discoveries, the reserve replacement ratio for liquid hydrocarbon is 87 percent, mentioned the minister, explaining it means if 100 barrels of crude oil and gas condensates are produced in Iran and consumed inside the country or exported to other countries, 87 barrels of that output have been replaced by newly-discovered deposits.

## Israel Seeks to Raze Besieged Gaza Strip, Massacre Its Residents

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has warned that the Israeli regime is seeking to raze the entire Gaza Strip and massacre its residents. Speaking with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on the phone on Tuesday night, Amir-Abdollahian censured Israel's barbaric decision to impose a "complete" siege on Gaza and prevent electricity, food, water and fuel from reaching the strip. He said the occupying regime is seeking to massacre resilient Gazans through such measures. "What is happening in Palestinian territories is a direct response to [Israeli prime minister Benjamin] Netanyahu's radicalism and extremism, and the injustice done to Palestinian people," the Iranian foreign minister told Lavrov. Lavrov, for his part, condemned the Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip and underlined the need for cessation of hostilities as soon as possible and a ceasefire between the two sides. "In recent years, lots of big achievements have been made in the region like the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, normalization of ties with Syria, and resumption of diplomatic relations between Syria and Turkey, all of which took place without the involvement of the United States," the top Russian diplomat said. He emphasized that the Americans are trying to bring all the affairs in the region under their control while regional countries possess innovative initiatives at their disposal. Separately, Amir-Abdollahian voiced Iran's preparedness to dispatch essential medical and humanitarian aid, particularly foodstuff and bottled water, to Gaza in coordination with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations. During a telephone conversation with his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, the top Iranian diplomat called for immediate action from Muslim countries to help Palestinians living in Gaza amid a total siege of the impoverished enclave. "The Iranian Red Crescent Society is ready to provide necessary humanitarian aid, including water, food and medicine, to the people of Gaza with the help of Egypt and Muslim countries, through cooperation with the ICRC and Red Crescent Societies," Amir-Abdollahian said. Shoukry, for his part, condemned the Tel Aviv regime's relentless bombardment of the Gaza Strip and massacre of civilians, stressing the need for an immediate ceasefire and stoppage of attacks from both sides. He noted that there will be coordination through the United Nations as regards the dispatch of humanitarian aid from Muslim countries to the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, the Iranian foreign minister called for Muslim states' serious action against heinous Israeli crimes in Gaza during a telephone conversation with Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah al-Jaber Al Sabah. Amir-Abdollahian underscored the need for an emergency foreign ministerial meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), voicing Tehran's readiness to host such an event. He also emphasized the need to send drinking water and food to the Gaza Strip as soon as possible. Al Sabah, for his part, underlined his country's unwavering support for the Palestinian nation, saying it is important for both sides to prevent the escalation of violence and save the lives of civilians. Kuwait supports any initiative aimed at the restoration of peace in Gaza and backs any meeting aimed at such a purpose, he added.



## Official Expects Iran-Belarus Trade to Hit \$400m in Two Years

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPO) Mehdi Zeighami has expressed hope that the annual trade between Iran and Belarus will reach as much as \$400 million within the next two years. Zeighami made the remarks on the sidelines of the 16th Iran-Belarus Joint Commission session which was held in the Iranian capital on Tuesday. The commission session was co-chaired by Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Abbas Aliabadi and his Belarusian counterpart Aleksandr Rogozhnik. Zeighami referred to a preferential trade agreement in place between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and plans to turn it into a free trade agreement in the

near future, noting that the agreement could give a more rise to the volume of trade between Iran and Belarus and other Eurasian nations. During today's commission session, the two sides explored ways for further cooperation in different areas such as exports and imports of agricultural products and machinery, mining and public transportation vehicles, medicine and pharmaceuticals, and petrochemical products. They also had discussions over sports cooperation. In the end, the two ministers signed a memorandum of understanding.





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ISSN 1024-6053 P.O. Box: 15875-8551  
Address: No 13, Pajouhesh St., Golestan II St,

Golestan St. Marzadaran Blvd., Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran  
Distributed by: Cities of Iran Cultural and Artistic Institute  
Managing Director: *Fereydoon Taherpour Asl*



## Russian Forces Close in on East Ukraine's Avdiivka

KRAMATORSK (Dispatches) - Russian forces closed in on the frontline town of Avdiivka in east Ukraine on Tuesday, as Kyiv warned Moscow was stepping up strikes in an attempt to encircle it completely. The Russian attacks come after months of a slower than expected Ukrainian counteroffensive, launched this summer to claw back territory lost during Moscow's invasion. Avdiivka is an industrial town that had a pre-war population of around 31,000. An estimated 2,000 remain. It is symbolically and strategically important to Kyiv, lying just north of the Moscow-controlled city of Donetsk that was seized by separatist forces in 2014. Avdiivka has since become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance against Moscow, with Kyiv clinging on there despite relentless Russian attacks during the Kremlin's almost 20-month long offensive. Local officials told AFP that Moscow's forces launched an artillery attack on the town in the morning and were firing incessantly. "For over a year, there has been the danger that (Avdiivka) can be occupied, but now the situation has worsened rapidly," said Vitaliy Barabash, head of the town's administration. He said Russian forces were trying to besiege the eastern town using "all means." "Our Avdiivka is under massive attacks by Russian artillery and aviation," presidential aide Andriy Yermak later said on social media. The Ukrainian army said in a briefing that Russia had "intensified offensive actions in Avdiivka" and that Moscow's forces had deployed tanks and armoured vehicles. "Our defenders repelled all enemy attacks and prevented the loss of lines and positions," it said. Russian forces control territory to the south, east and north of Avdiivka. The attacks came as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky held talks on grain and security with Romanian counterpart Klaus Iohannis, after Moscow struck areas of Ukraine close to the Romanian border. On his first visit to the NATO country since Russia invaded Ukraine in February last year, Zelensky said the strikes near the border were "a threat, not only to our state". Since exiting a deal allowing safe grain shipments via the Black Sea, Moscow has ramped up strikes on Ukraine's southern regions, including Danube river ports near Romania. Last month,



Romania found drone debris several times near its border with Ukraine, prompting authorities to build air raid shelters for one border village. Zelensky and Iohannis discussed how to increase Kyiv's grain exports being shipped out via Romania, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine hindering the country's access to the Black Sea. "A grain corridor from Ukraine through Moldova to Romania will soon be operational," Zelensky announced. The pair said they signed a bilateral declaration on security and transport cooperation. During a press conference, Zelensky also said Ukrainian pilots would train at an F-16 pilot training centre to be created in Romania. In an interview on French television later Tuesday, Zelensky expressed concern that the international community was turning away from the war in Ukraine in the face of the "tragedy" that has befallen Israel following the Hamas attacks there. "I don't wish to make any comparisons. There is a terrible war going on in our country. In Israel, many people have lost their loved ones. These tragedies are different, but both are immense," he said. Zelensky warned, however, that if "international attention risks turning away from Ukraine, and that will have consequences". Germany on Tuesday announced an additional one billion euros (\$1.1 billion) in military aid

for Ukraine, in a race to step up weapons deliveries ahead of winter. The "winter package" includes an extra Patriot air defence system, as agreed between Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Zelensky last week. Russian President Vladimir Putin meanwhile prepared to leave Russia for the first time this week since the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for him in March. The ICC issued the warrant for Putin for the war crime of illegally deporting Ukrainian children to Russia, with its members expected to make the arrest should he step foot on their territory. The Russian leader is due to travel to Kyrgyzstan -- which is not a member of the ICC -- for a summit of a Moscow-led alliance later this week. But rifts among Moscow's ex-Soviet allies have been emerging in recent months, with many rattled by the Ukraine invasion. Bishkek announced that Armenian leader Nikol Pashinyan would skip the summit, amid a growing rift between Yerevan and Moscow. Pashinyan has criticised Moscow's role in the Karabakh crisis, with Russia unwilling to intervene when Azerbaijan launched a lightning operation to regain control of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region. Pashinyan visited a European summit last week after Armenian lawmakers moved to join the ICC, angering Moscow.

## U.S. Cuts Niger Aid as France Starts Troop Pullout



PARIS (Dispatches) - France has begun withdrawing troops from Niger after being ordered out by coup leaders as the United States on Tuesday cut off more than \$500 million in assistance to the insurgency-hit Sahel nation. Washington declared that Niger's military had staged a coup on July 26, overthrowing a democratic government seen as a key bulwark against Russia. "Any resumption of US assistance will require action ... to usher in democratic governance in a quick and credible timeframe," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. The United States, along with West African nations and former colonial power France, had been pressing the military to restore President Mohamed Bazoum. "We're taking this action because over the last two months, we've exhausted all available avenues to preserve the constitutional order in Niger," a senior US official added. The United States is keeping about 1,000 military personnel in Niger, but they are no longer actively training or assisting Niger forces, another US official said. They will continue to work to monitor threats from jihadists. The French army move kicks off a complex and fraught process that Paris expects to be completed by the end of the year, drawing the curtain on another French anti-jihadist operation in Africa. "The first troops have left," the spokesman for the French chief of staff told AFP, confirming an announcement Monday by Niger's military leadership, which said the 1,400-strong French contingent would start leaving Tuesday. French soldiers withdrew from their bases with the first convoy to be escorted out by the country's post-coup regime in the "direction of Chad", authorities in Niamey said. "The troops based in Ouallam have left their base today. These are the operations for the departure of the first ground convoy in the direction of Chad, escorted by our defence and security forces," Niger's new rulers, which took power at the end of July, said in a statement on national television. Earlier on Tuesday, an AFP journalist saw a convoy of soldiers with trucks transporting equipment and armoured vehicles from western Niger arrive in the capital Niamey. A French defence source said a first group of soldiers considered a priority for evacuation for health or humanitarian reasons flew out of Niger on Monday. Niamey had spoken of convoys of troops being escorted out of the country overland by the Nigerien army, without saying where they would go. According to security sources, they are expected to head towards Chad over more than 1,600 kilometres (1,000 miles) to the capital N'Djamena, where French forces in the Sahel command are based. The withdrawal was expected to cause logistical headaches for the French, with few safe routes out of a region plagued by myriad jihadist groups. Niger's land borders with Benin and Nigeria have been closed since the coup. Around 1,000 French troops were stationed in Niamey, with another 400 deployed at two forward bases in the north-west, near Mali and Burkina Faso, a hotbed of insurgent activity. France had reinforced its presence in Niger, adding armoured vehicles and helicopters to the drones and fighter jets that were already deployed. It is the third time in 18 months that French troops have been sent packing by a former African colony, dealing a severe blow to France's influence on the continent and prestige on the international stage. France's ambassador to Niger was also given his marching orders by the leaders of the coup that toppled the French-backed president. Niamey's military rulers had labelled the announcement of France's diplomatic and troop withdrawals in September as a "step towards the sovereignty of Niger". Mali and Burkina Faso, which have also undergone coups in the past two years, have also turned their backs on France, accusing it of a colonialist attitude and of failing to effectively combat jihadists. Mali has pivoted towards Moscow, bringing in mercenaries from the notorious Wagner group.

## Gaza Hospitals Overwhelmed by Air Strikes and Siege



GAZA CITY (Dispatches) - Doctors and nurses at Gaza's overwhelmed Al-Shifa hospital were busy treating hundreds of casualties from Israeli air raids as the Palestinian health ministry warned of a "catastrophic situation". Akram al-Haddad, 25, was visibly distraught at the bedside of his one-and-a-half-year-old nephew. The baby, Abd al-Rahman al-Dos, was injured in an air strike that killed 17 people including another relative, a four-year-old boy. Dos and his parents survived the bombing that destroyed the family's Gaza City home, but the baby required urgent medical intervention, said the doctor treating him. The doctor, Abdallah, who asked to be identified by his first name only, said that "he needs an emergency surgery for his head injury, but must wait until an operation room is available." However, a free room might not be enough to save Dos. "We need to ensure there's electricity supply and that we have the necessary equipment" before starting any operations, said Abdallah. "We have a list with many names of wounded patients waiting their turn. Some of them lost their lives due to a lack of resources." Emergency room doctor Mohammed Ghoniem told AFP the medical teams had dealt with "large numbers of casualties, most of them women and children, arriving at the same time". Medical supplies, including oxygen tanks, were running low in the blockaded coastal enclave, Ghoniem said, and "we have an electricity and water crisis". The doctor was interrupted by the arrival of a new group of wounded; three women, two children, an elderly man

and two young men were admitted to the emergency room. Nearby, a staff member was comforting Umm Rama al-Hassaneh, who was lying on a hospital bed next to her four children, aged three to six, all wounded in an Israeli air strike that hit their Gaza City neighbourhood of Sheikh Ridwan. The family home was badly damaged when a neighbouring house was targeted by Israeli warplanes, Hassaneh told AFP. "They bombed the house," she said. "I was injured and the children were injured, and we were taken here. We're waiting to be treated." The Gaza health ministry has said that 765 people have been killed and 4,000 wounded by Israeli strikes since Saturday. Israel was retaliating following a Hamas assault in the south of the country in which the militant group killed more than 900 Israelis and foreigners and kidnapped dozens more. The health ministry warned that a shortage of medical supplies and medications would lead to a "catastrophic situation" in the Gaza Strip. Eight hospitals were "not sufficient to meet the needs" of the Gaza strip, which has a population of 2.3 million, the ministry said. The Israeli defence minister declared on Monday a "total siege" against the Gaza Strip, with "no electricity, no water, no gas" for the enclave. The United Nations' human rights chief Volker Turk said on Tuesday that the siege was banned under international law. The Israeli bombardment has rendered the Beit Hanoun hospital inoperative and damaged Al-Shifa hospital's neonatal unit.

## Britain to Return Asylum Seekers to Barge

LONDON (Dispatches) - Britain said on Tuesday it would return asylum seekers to a barge on its southern coast as opponents of the policy argued in court that such housing was unlawful. In an embarrassment for the Conservative government's immigration policy, legionella bacteria was detected in the water system of the Bibby Stockholm barge in August, just days after dozens of asylum seekers had been moved on. Following safety tests, the government has started sending letters to asylum seekers confirming they will be moved to the barge, an interior ministry spokesperson said. The government wants to cut the 8 million pounds (\$9.8 million) per day bill of housing migrants in hotels while asylum claims are processed.

## Russia Fails to Return to UN Rights Body After Losing Vote

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Russia failed in its bid to return to the United Nations' top human rights body on Tuesday, with rivals winning considerably more votes at the General Assembly in an election seen as a key test of Western efforts to keep Moscow isolated. In the secret ballot, Russia won 83 votes versus 160 for Bulgaria and 123 for Albania, which had competed against it in the same eastern Europe grouping for two seats on the Geneva-based Human Rights Council for a three-year term beginning on Jan. 1. "UN member states sent a strong signal to Russia's leadership that a government responsible for countless war crimes and crimes against humanity doesn't belong there," said Louis Charbonneau, United Nations director at Human Rights Watch. Russia was ousted from the council 18 months ago in a U.S.-led diplomatic push following its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A U.N.-mandated investigative body said in March that Russia had committed a wide range of war crimes in Ukraine such as wilful killings, torture and the deportation of children. The International Criminal Court has also accused Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova of the war crime of illegally deporting hundreds of Ukrainian children. The Kremlin rejects the accusations and the court's jurisdiction. A senior Russian official accused the United States of deploying unmatched efforts to ensure Russia remained out of the Human Rights Council. "The United States campaigned for Albania," Maria Zabolotskaya, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, was quoted as saying by RIA news agency. "Such a campaign directly aimed against us is unprecedented." Amid some signs of Ukraine war "fatigue", some diplomats earlier said Russia had a reasonable chance of getting voted back onto the council. "It was not even that close in the end," said Richard Gowan, the U.N. Director of the International Crisis Group. "I think Western diplomats may



have been overstating the risk of a Russian win to keep UN members on their toes." China and Cuba were also among the winners of Tuesday's vote, drawing objections from human rights defenders. Juan Pappier, deputy director for the Americas at Human Rights Watch, wrote on X in the run-up to the vote that Cuba was unfit to be a member of the Council. "Its record of systematic human rights violations speaks for itself," he wrote.

## Slovakian Kingmaker Backs Fico Coalition

BRATISLAVA (Dispatches) - The likelihood of Slovakia's next government being led by former premier Robert Fico, who wants to halt Slovak military support for Ukraine, increased on Tuesday when the leader of the leftist HLAS party said he would only consider a coalition with Fico. HLAS holds the key to the formation of a new coalition government following an election on Sept. 30 in which Fico's SMER-SSD party emerged as the largest party but short of a majority. Fico is also opposed to Western sanctions on Russia. HLAS leader Peter Pellegrini said he favoured a coalition with Fico's party and the pro-Russian far-right SNS party over an alternative four-party coalition with conservative and liberal parties that have pledged to stay the current course on Ukraine and have more positive views on more EU integration. "I am convinced that it will be most possible within this three-strong coalition (with SMER-SSD and SNS) to realise our social democratic policy and push through most of our programme," Pellegrini told a news conference broadcast on the party's Facebook account.