

Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani Has Said That Adversaries Have Ceased Their Threats Against Iran, Acknowledging the Nation's Robust Defense Capabilities

IRAN NEWS

The 9th Meeting of the Working Group of "ECO RiskCom" Regional Institute Was held in Tehran on Wednesday at the Initiative Taken by the Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Iran (ISIRI)

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Referendum Complete Solution to Palestinian Crisis



TEHRAN (MNA) - Emphasizing the right of the Palestinian people to determine their own destiny, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian considered a referendum to be the complete solution to the Palestinian crisis. "The dimensions of this idea have been officially registered by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the United Nations," Amir-Abdollahian said in a meeting with foreign ambassadors and heads and representatives of international organizations residing in Tehran. The meeting was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the aim of explaining the views, approaches, and actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran to help end the Zionist regime's aggression against Gaza and help maintain security in the region. While explaining Iran's point of view regarding the nature of the current crisis and supporting the oppressed Palestinian nation within the framework of their legitimate right to confront the occupation, the constructive efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran in various bilateral, regional and international dimensions to end the oppressive war against the Palestinian nation in Gaza and the West Bank, Amir-Abdollahian explained the lifting of the blockade of Gaza, the immediate sending of humanitarian aid and the prevention of the displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. He expressed hope that with the fruition of the efforts made to realize the ceasefire, the brutal killing of defenseless citizens, women and children of Gaza and the West Bank will stop. Emphasizing that the Al-Aqsa Storm operation was a completely Palestinian decision, the top Iranian diplomat said that the Zionist regime, in the shadow of its inability to confront the Resistance forces, took revenge on the defenseless people of Gaza and the West Bank, which resulted in committing genocide and the war crime and killing of more than 14 thousand Palestinian citizens, 70% of which were children, women and the elderly. Amir-Abdollahian, meanwhile, noted that the United States was, on the one hand, asking Iran to invite the Resistance groups defending Gaza to exercise self-restraint, and throwing all-out support behind the Israeli regime on the other. He called the two-sided US attitude "completely paradoxical." The foreign minister noted that Iran did not have any "proxy groups" in the region, suggesting that it was not up to the Islamic Republic to exert pressure on the Resistance outfits. He, meanwhile, reminded that the US was expecting the Resistance to exercise self-restraint, while itself had not stopped short of throwing military support behind the Israeli regime throughout the course of the war "even for a single hour."



Iranian Regime "knocked out" by Hamas' Al-Aqsa Storm

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says Israel was "knocked out" in Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, the largest military operation by Palestinian resistance groups against the occupying regime. Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks in a meeting with a group of Iranian athletes, sports personalities, and medal winners who participated in the 2023 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China. "If I am going to offer you a breakdown on the recent developments, it goes as, the Zionist regime was knocked out in Al-Aqsa Storm," the Leader said on Wednesday. "[The Palestinian resistance movement] Hamas, not as a government and country with ample facilities, but as a combatant group, managed to deal a knockout blow to the usurping Zionists with all those facilities." Ayatollah Khamenei hailed those athletes who expressed their support for Palestine and the Palestinian cause, and withdrew from competing with the occupying regime's representatives in Hangzhou's international sports tournament, saying the veracity of their act is now manifested more than ever before in the wake of Israel's genocide in Gaza. "Today, the whole world has realized why the Iranian athlete will not agree to face the Zionist side on the field," the Leader said. "Because [the athlete] is a criminal and he is doing sports and going to the field for a criminal state; [therefore] helping him is helping a terrorist and criminal regime." Stressing that the Israeli regime is still reeling from the burden and disgrace of a heavy defeat after Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, the Leader said, "Yes, they are flexing muscles; but where? This show of power has no value when it comes to the hospitals for patients in Gaza, to the schools in Gaza, to the heads of the homeless people of Gaza." Ayatollah Khamenei added, "It's as if an athlete loses on the field, and then in revenge for that loss, he attacks the fans of the opposing team, insults them and beats them up." Pointing to Israel's incessant shelling of Gaza over the past 47 days, the Leader said, "There is nothing more ignominious than what the Zionist regime has perpetrated. The Zionist regime's heavy defeat will not be compensated by these bombings; such bombardment campaigns will only shorten the life of the occupying regime; [and] this tyranny and cruelty will not go unanswered." Elsewhere in his address, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution censured the politicization of sports and the double-standard approach by certain international organizations: "They say sports is not political, but when they need to politicize sports, they politicize it in the worst way. At the slightest excuse, a country is banned from participating in all international sports events. Why? [Because] You fought somewhere; but they, themselves, ignore the 5,000 martyred children in Gaza," Ayatollah Khamenei said. The Leader stressed that they ban a country on the pretext of war while ignoring another country's war, war crimes, and even genocide.

Iran Dismisses European Troika's Accusations



TEHRAN - Iran's ambassador to the United Nations called the accusations of the representatives of the European Troika against Iran baseless and said that the European Troika has falsely accused Iran of not complying with the obligations of the JCPOA. In a letter to the UN Secretary-General and Chinese ambassador to the UN who serves as the rotating chairman of the UN Security Council, the Iranian permanent ambassador to the United Nations dismissed the European accusations, adding: "The European troika's accusation regarding Iran's JCPOA commitments are baseless." In their joint letter, the European Troika has deliberately published misleading and false information about Iran's obligations under the JCPOA and its peaceful nuclear program. Iravani clarified: "The permanent representatives of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in the United Nations previously on November 14, 2023, made baseless accusations against Iran and claimed that it violated the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015). While they have ignored the clear violation of the resolution by themselves." He added: "The Islamic Republic of Iran has always adhered to its obligations under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) and has provided maximum cooperation so that the International Atomic Energy Agency can effectively implement its verification activities in Iran. Iravani explained: "Iran's cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency in clarifying the origin of uranium particles containing 83.7 percent U-235 enabled the agency to confirm that there were no deviations in this regard." He also said that the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency in his September 2023 report (Gov/2023/39), confirmed Iran's explanation about the origin of such particles, and the agency confirmed that there was no indication of the accumulation and collection of nuclear material enriched above 60%. Pointing out that in November 2022, Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency of its intention to enrich uranium at Fordow through advanced centrifuges, Iravani noted: "This decision was taken in the framework of Iran's corrective measures in response to the non-compliance of other parties to the JCPOA obligations and in accordance with their rights based on the NPT and CSA." He added: "The Islamic Republic of Iran strongly emphasizes that the members of the NPT treaty should not refrain from exercising and enjoying their inalienable rights based on this treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination."

Tehran Urges IAEA to Refrain From Politicizing Iran Case



TEHRAN - Iran's nuclear chief has urged the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to refrain from politicizing the country's nuclear file, saying Tehran has approved 120 inspectors of the UN nuclear watchdog to enter the country. The IAEA has criticized Iran's decision to withdraw the accreditation of several of its inspectors, announced in September, saying the move "directly and seriously affected" the agency's work. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a Wednesday cabinet session, Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said some of those inspectors have not come to Iran for years. "And secondly, according to Article 9 of the statute, we are entitled to accept or reject the inspectors that are introduced," he said. He further explained that the basis of the IAEA's duties regarding Iran is the 2015 nuclear agreement, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and UN Security Council Resolution 2231. "Iran's actions are carried out within the framework of the Safeguards Agreement, and the International Atomic Energy Agency also supervises these activities," Eslami added. Elsewhere in his remarks, the AEOI chief said the excavation operation for the main reactor building of the Karun nuclear power plant will be carried out in the coming days, followed by the concrete pouring phase.

BRICS Leaders Call for Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza

TEHRAN - The leaders of the BRICS countries, in the final statement of their meeting, which was held in the form of a video conference with the presence of the main members, at the suggestion of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, the Islamic President of Iran, called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. In their statement, the heads of the BRICS countries called for an independent and transparent investigation into the war crimes committed in the Gaza Strip in accordance with international standards and emphasized that the dire humanitarian situation, especially in the Gaza Strip and other occupied Palestinian territories, is a cause for concern. In this statement, the heads of the BRICS countries also condemned the brutal actions against the Palestinians, called for the immediate release of the hostages, and supported efforts to immediately end hostilities, protect civilians, and send humanitarian aid to Gaza. "We condemn violent actions against civilians, including war crimes, attacks on civilian infrastructure, as well as all provocative and destructive actions," it added. In the final statement of the meeting of the leaders of the BRICS countries, it is stated: "We demand the establishment of an immediate humanitarian, durable and stable ceasefire that will lead to the cessation of hostilities, the establishment of peace and security in the Gaza Strip based on international laws and the United Nations Charter." This statement further added that emphasizing the importance of preventing the escalation of the conflict in the Gaza Strip, "We call on all parties involved to exercise maximum restraint and call on those who have influence over them to end the conflict and immediately establish a ceasefire and establish peace." At the end, the heads of the BRICS countries, by condemning any forced migration of Palestinians individually or collectively from their lands, either to Gaza or to neighboring countries, emphasized that a just and permanent settlement of the conflict between the Zionist regime and Palestine is possible only through peaceful means. Meanwhile in the event President Ebrahim Raisi told leaders of the BRICS group of emerging economies that members of the organization should move to designate the Israeli regime as a terrorist entity because of the



extensive crimes it has committed in the Gaza Strip over the past weeks. "It is necessary that this fake regime be recognized as a terrorist regime and its army be regarded as a terrorist organization," Raisi said. The plea was part of seven proposals submitted by the Iranian president to a virtual BRICS summit held at the organization's headquarters in South Africa on Tuesday. The summit was convened at Iran's request to discuss the ongoing conflict in Palestine where the Israeli regime has killed more than 13,000 people in Gaza as part of a relentless war to confront resistance fighters in the territory. In his address to the meeting, Raisi said that BRICS members should unite their efforts to break an Israeli siege on Gaza and facilitate safe delivery of humanitarian aid to the territory, where more than 2.3 million people are in a dire humanitarian situation. He also said that BRICS members should help set up an inquiry into Israel's use of banned weapons in the Gaza war, including its use of white phosphorus bombs against the civilian population living in the territory. The Iranian president further called on members of the bloc to recognize the right of the Palestinian nation to self-defense against the Israeli aggression as well as its struggle to liberate lands occupied by the Israeli regime over the past decades. "With regards to the constant crimes [committed] by and the racist nature of the fake Israeli regime, free nations [of the world] expect all governments especially BRICS members to immediately put the issue of the severance of political, economic and military ties with the regime high on the agenda," he further said. Raisi also said Iran will support a move by several BRICS countries to lodge a complaint against Israel in the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the crimes it has committed in Gaza. However, he said that the prosecution in the ICC should also cover the United States and its support for the Israeli regime's killing of children in Gaza. BRICS stands for the initial letters of the names of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the five countries that initially formed the bloc to counter the Western hegemony. Iran and five other nations joined the grouping in January 2023.

CBI Chief Says Banking Talks With Saudi Arabia Underway



TEHRAN (MNA) - The governor of the Central Bank of Iran Mohammad Reza Farzin said that talks with Saudi banking officials are underway to expand bilateral economic relations. Farzin made the comments after attending a cabinet meeting chaired by President Ebrahim Raisi on Wednesday while talking to reporters at the Presidential compound in downtown Tehran. Referring to the fundamental changes in the license of the foreign currencies exchange shops, announced this action in line with the Central Bank's greater supervision and said, "The new law and regulations for the approval of the exchange shops will be announced soon." The Governor of the Central Bank also pointed to the economic relations with Saudi Arabia and noted that banking relations will facilitate Tehran-Riyadh economic relations. He said that the Iranian and Saudi banking officials are holding negotiations, "the result of which will be announced once the banking negotiations between the two countries are finalized." He further said that the deposit interest rate has been announced to the banks, stressing that the banks that act outside of the Central Bank regulations are violators and their cases will be reviewed by the disciplinary committee. "The government does not intend to change the deposit interest rates," he concluded.

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Iranian Parliamentary Delegation Heads to Russia

TEHRAN (IP) - Led by the Head of the Iran-Russia Parliamentary Friendship Group, the Iranian parliamentary delegation left Tehran for Russia. Upon the official invitation of the Russian officials, the Iranian delegation, led by Ebrahim Rezaei, left Iran for Russia. The Iranian delegation will meet with Russian parliamentary and government officials. The Iranian and Russian sides will discuss issues such as improving the level of parliamentary relations and strengthening economic, commercial, and political cooperation. The issues of mutual interest will also be among the key terms of discussion in the meeting between the Iranian and Russian parties.

Iran, Saudi Arabia to Hold Economic Meeting



TEHRAN (IP) - Finance Minister announced that an economic meeting between Iran and Saudi Arabia is expected to take place by the end of this year. Speaking on the sideline of the cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi, added that the meeting follows the agreements that had been previously made between Tehran and Riyadh. The minister also said despite the severed economic relations between the two nations, both states have expressed a desire to strengthen economic relations at the Riyadh summit. He also urged further actions by Iran's Central Bank to stabilize the market. Pointing to this year's budget proposal, he noted that tax evasions had been identified, resulting in an increase in Iran's tax revenues. As a result, pressure on the middle and weak classes of society would not increase.



TEHRAN (IRNA) - First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber says the Islamic Republic is taking "preliminary steps" to promptly begin construction work on joint railway projects with Russia as part of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). "The preliminary steps and obtaining the necessary permits for the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway have been carried out by the Iranian side, and we hope that with the cooperation of the Russian side, the construction of this important railway line in the North-South corridor will begin as soon as possible," he said on Tuesday during a meeting with Russian presidential aide Igor Levitin. Iran and Russia view the 162 km (100-mile) railway along the Caspian Sea shoreline as a crucial component of the INSTC, a corridor facilitating connectivity between India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, and other nations through railways and sea routes. Pointing to

another major joint project, Mokhber said the design proposals and contracts for the Astara-Bandar Abbas railway have also been reviewed by both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia. He said this railway project can play a significant role in increasing the volume of trade and transit exchanges along the North-South corridor. "The commitments of the Iranian side in constructing the rail lines in this corridor have been fully observed and are being implemented. Both the private sector and governmental investors from both countries need to promptly engage in the construction of this corridor," the vice president stated. Igor Levitin, in turn, said Russia will seriously pursue the construction of the North-South corridor in coordination with the Iranian side. He said a working group was being established to examine "the roadmap for cooperation" between Iran and Russia in this regard.

Iran's Exports to China up 25% in One Month



TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's export of products to China in October 2023 grew 25 percent compared to a month earlier, China's Customs Office data showed. According to the data, the total value of trade exchanges between Iran and China was \$12.02 billion from January to October 2023, showing a 10 percent down compared to the same period last year. The value of trade exchanges between Iran and China from January to October 2022 was \$13.33 billion. China exported \$8.28 billion worth of products to Iran from January to October 2023, registering a nine percent hike compared to last year's corresponding period. China had exported more than \$7.61 billion worth of products to Iran from January to October 2022. Iran exported \$3.74 billion worth of products to China in the first 10 months of the current year (January to October 2023). China imported over \$5.72 billion worth of products from Iran from January to October 2022, China's Customs Office added.



Tehran, Islamabad Act as Great Barriers to Extra-Regional Bad Actors

ISLAMABAD (IRNA) - A number of Pakistani foreign policy experts and intellectuals have said that Tehran and Islamabad, as two important regional actors, are great barriers to attempts by third parties seeking to disrupt the security of the region. Prominent figures in the field of foreign, diplomatic and economic relations attended the Iran-Pakistan relations seminar hosted by the Pakistan Council on Foreign Relations (PCFR) in the city of Karachi. During the seminar, they praised the active role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in defending the values of the Islamic world, especially the Palestinian issue. They also emphasized the need for synergy between the two friendly and neighboring countries to strengthen all-round cooperation, especially in defending the oppressed nations of the region, including Palestine. "Fortunately, relations between the two neighboring countries, especially the cordial relationship between the people of the two countries, are always supported by their governments," Hassan Habib, head of Pakistan's Foreign Relations Council, said. He also censured the West's double standards in the Palestinian issue and praised Iran's promising role in regional issues. Iran's ambassador in Islamabad and its consul general in Karachi, as well as the consuls general of Russia, Oman and Turkey, and a group of former diplomats of Pakistan also attended the meeting.

Iran Non-Oil Export to Afghanistan Up 4%

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The value of Iran's non-oil export to Afghanistan increased by four percent during the first seven months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-October 22), as compared to the same period of time in the past year, the spokesman of the International Relations and Trade Development Committee of Iran's House of Industry, Mining and Trade announced. Ruhollah Latifi said that Iran exported non-oil commodities worth \$975.528 million to its neighbor Afghanistan in the seven-month period of this year. The economic adviser of the Iranian president's special envoy in Afghanistan affairs said Iran has a 35 percent share in Afghanistan's import market, which is a considerable figure in bilateral trade ties. Mohammad-Mehdi Javanmard-Ghasab stated that Tehran and Kabul enjoy high capacities to expand bilateral trade relations, especially in the fields of technical engineering services, transportation, and transit. The economies of Iran and Afghanistan can complement each other, he said, adding that the two countries need a long-term strategic plan to take advantage of these conditions optimally. Turning to Iran's 35 percent share in Afghanistan's market, Javanmard-Ghasab stressed that the country is seeking to export technology, technical know-how as well as technical and engineering services to Afghanistan. Increasing the production of Iranian products in Afghanistan is also on the agenda, he

emphasized. According to Mohammad Ghanadzadeh, the deputy head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), the trade between Iran and Afghanistan has increased by 20 percent in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 21). Ghanadzadeh said Iran is ready to cooperate with Afghanistan in the country's development and reconstruction projects. Noting that Iran is Afghanistan's top trade partner, the official put the two country's trade in the previous Iranian calendar year at \$970 million. He said Iran and Afghanistan have previously had an annual trade of \$3.0 billion, but Afghanistan's political instability, the lack of infrastructure at border crossings, and the unpreparedness of customs have hindered the development of trade between the two countries. Stating that TPO is pursuing the signing of a preferential trade agreement with Afghanistan, the official said the negotiations in this regard are moving forward and the lists of the desired goods of the two countries, especially in the agricultural sector, have been exchanged for further investigation. Iran and Afghanistan, two neighbors with many commonalities, believe that the current level of their mutual economic and trade ties is not satisfactory, and they should pursue the development of these ties more seriously. In this regard, the Iranian and Afghan governments are taking some prominent measures to boost trade between the two countries.



Iran, Oman Ink Cooperation Agreement for Boosting Trade Ties



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Officials from Iran and Sultanate of Oman signed a cooperation agreement for enhancing bilateral ties in the fields of trade and economy. It was inked between the Arvand Free Zone Organization and the Iran-Oman Joint Chamber of Commerce following a visit by a high-ranking delegation of Iranian free zones to the Sultanate of Oman. Vice President and Secretary of Free Industrial-Trade and Special Economic Zone Hojjatollah Abdolmaleki in his visit to Oman was accompanied by CEOs of Iran's free zones organizations. He held talks with the chiefs of free zones, the trade minister, heads of chambers of commerce and economic activists of Oman. Given the trade opportunities and commonalities that exist at the Arvand Free Zone, a cooperation agreement was inked between the Arvand Free Zone Organization and Iran-Oman Joint Chamber of Commerce in line with enhancing the level of trade exchanges between the two countries. Under the agreement, the two sides emphasized developing cooperation in the field of export and also exchanging investors in the areas of exports, production and rebranding.

Covid-19 Variant Maintains Threat

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Covid-19 remains a threat as a virus variant has been spreading steadily around the globe, the World Health Organization said. "This virus, SARS-CoV-2, is circulating in every country right now and it still poses a threat," WHO expert Maria Van Kerkhove said. "We have to remain vigilant because the virus is circulating, evolving and changing," she told a discussion on the WHO's social media channels. Van Kerkhove was the WHO's technical lead during the coronavirus pandemic that struck in 2019 and is now the UN health agency's interim director for epidemic and pandemic preparedness and prevention. There are currently three variants of interest (XBB.1.5, XBB.1.16 and EG.5) and six variants under monitoring -- a lower level of concern. One of the six, BA.2.86, is being moved up to become a variant of interest.



Sweden Mulls Laws Allowing Gov't to Deport Immigrants



STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - Sweden said Tuesday it wanted to introduce new requirements that would allow the deportation of asylum-seekers and immigrants for substance abuse, association with criminal groups or statements threatening Swedish values. Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson's minority rightwing government came to power a year ago -- with backing from the far-right Sweden Democrats (SD) -- vowing to crack down on immigration and crime. "A prerequisite for successful integration is that people who want to live in Sweden also adhere to basic norms and live in an honest and well-behaved way," Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenengard told a press conference held with SD. Rights groups have yet to comment on the initiative. Paulina Brandberg, Minister for Gender Equality, told reporters the government would review Swedish legislation to determine if there were specific grounds for revoking residence permits. However, she listed potential examples of "shortcomings in lifestyles," including benefits fraud, debt, a dishonest livelihood, substance abuse, as well as association with criminal networks or violent and extremist groups "threatening basic Swedish values." Brandberg said the review would also look into "whether it's possible and appropriate to include statements that seriously threaten basic Swedish democratic values." "If there is something other than these democratic values you wish for, or even actively work against what Sweden stands for, then it is simply not here you should live," Brandberg said. "A basic principle of Swedish immigration law is that only Swedish citizens have an unconditional right to reside in Sweden," Ludvig Aspling, migration spokesman for the Sweden Democrats, told reporters. Former judge Robert Schott was appointed to head the review, which is to report by mid-January 2025. Speaking to public broadcaster Sveriges Radio, Justice Minister Gunnar Strömmer also announced a probe looking at increasing powers on revoking citizenship. This could entail situations where a person had committed serious crimes, such as terrorism, or cases where a person had either used threats, lies or bribes to obtain citizenship. In some cases, canceling someone's Swedish citizenship could render them stateless. "I myself see no objection to it. But it's part of a review, and we'll see what it comes up with," Strömmer told the radio. Sweden has taken in large numbers of immigrants since the 1990s, primarily from conflict-torn countries including the former Yugoslavia, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iran and Iraq.

U.S. Reviewing Possible Terrorist Designations for Houthis



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States is reviewing "potential terrorist designations" for Yemen's Houthi group in response to its seizure of a cargo ship, White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday. Kirby's comment was significant because one of the Biden administration's first acts after taking office in January 2021 was revoking terrorist designations of the Houthis over fears the sanctions they carried could worsen Yemen's humanitarian crisis. The Houthis, who have been sending drones and long-range missiles at Israel in solidarity with Hamas, seized the Galaxy Leader cargo ship on Sunday in the southern Red Sea, describing it as Israeli-owned. Kirby called the Houthis' seizure of the vessel a "flagrant violation of international law" in which "Iran is complicit." "In light of this, we have begun a review of potential terrorist designations and we will be considering other options as well with our allies and partners as well," Kirby said at a White House press briefing. He called for the immediate release of the ship and its international crew. The Bahamas-flagged car carrier is chartered by Japan's Nippon Yusen. It is owned by a firm registered under Isle of Man-headquartered Ray Car Carriers, which is a unit of Tel Aviv-incorporated Ray Shipping, according to LSEG data. Iran has denied involvement in the seizure of the ship, which the car carrier's owner on Monday said was taken to the Houthi-controlled southern Yemen port of Hodeidah. Yemen erupted in civil war after the Houthis, members of the Zaydi sect of Shi'ite Islam, seized the capital Sanaa in 2014. A Saudi-led coalition intervened the following year. Although a U.N.-brokered ceasefire collapsed in October 2022, Yemen has enjoyed relative calm as the Houthis and Saudi Arabia negotiate a settlement. The country remains the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with some 21.6 million people - about two-thirds of the population - dependent on aid, according to the United Nations. The Trump administration blacklisted the Houthis a day before its term ended, prompting the United Nations, aid groups and some U.S. lawmakers to express fears that sanctions would disrupt flows of food, fuel and other commodities into Yemen. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Feb. 12, 2021, revoked the designations in "recognition of the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen."



GAZA (Dispatches) - Israel and Hamas announced a deal on Wednesday allowing at least 50 hostages and scores of Palestinian prisoners to be freed, while offering besieged Gaza residents a four-day truce after weeks of all-out war. In the first major diplomatic breakthrough in the war, Palestinian militants will release during a four-day truce 50 women and children kidnapped during their October 7 raids. After weeks of Qatar-brokered negotiations, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet approved the truce accord Wednesday after a near-all-night meeting, in which he told ministers this was a "difficult decision but it's a right decision." The cabinet's sign-off was one of the last stumbling blocks after what one U.S. official described as five "extremely excruciating" weeks of talks. Hamas released a statement welcoming the "humanitarian truce" and said it would also see 150 Palestinians released from Israeli jails. "The resistance is committed to the truce as long as the occupation honors it," a Hamas official told AFP. Hamas gunmen carried out on October 7 a cross-border attack, the worst in Israel's history, that left around 1,200 people dead, most of them civilians, according to the Israeli government. Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups also took an estimated 240 Israelis and foreigners hostage, among them elderly people and young children. Israel declared war on Hamas, vowing to bring the hostages home and to destroy the militant group. It launched a major bombing campaign and ground offensive in Gaza, which, according to the Hamas government in the territory, has killed 14,100 people, thousands of them children. Israel said that to facilitate the hostage release it would initiate a four-day "pause" in its six-week-old air, land and sea assault of Gaza, while it stressed that the agreement did not spell the end of the war. For every 10 additional hostages released, there would be an extra day's "pause", the Israeli government said. Sources from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another militant group that took part in the October 7 attacks, had earlier told AFP the truce would include a ceasefire on the ground and a pause in Israeli air operations over southern Gaza. The negotiations have involved the US Central Intelligence Agency,

Israel's overseas spy agency Mossad, Egyptian intelligence, and leaders in Doha, Cairo, Washington, Gaza and Israel. A senior U.S. official said three Americans, including three-year-old Abigail Mor Idan, were among the 50 earmarked for staggered release from Thursday. U.S. President Joe Biden said he was "extraordinarily gratified that some of these brave souls... will be reunited with their families once this deal is fully implemented." Qatar's foreign ministry confirmed the deal, saying that "a number of Palestinian women and children detained in Israeli prisons" would be released in exchange for the hostages. "The starting time of the pause will be announced within the next 24 hours and last for four days, subject to extension," the ministry said. Ahead of the Israeli cabinet vote, Netanyahu had faced criticism from within his right-wing coalition, some of whom thought the deal gave too much to the Palestinian militants. Hardline Minister for National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir signalled he would vote against the agreement, saying it should include the release of Israeli soldiers also taken by Hamas. But with dozens of families in Israel who are beyond desperate to have their loved ones returned home, and the Israeli public gripped by the hostages' fate, the government ultimately set aside any misgivings. Israel's hawkish Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said before the crunch meeting that he had won assurances that the deal would not spell the end of the war. "Immediately after we have exhausted this phase" he said, security operations would "continue in full force." In a statement, the Israeli government underscored that the truce agreement would not mean the end of the war in Gaza. Israel "will continue the war in order to return home all of the hostages, complete the elimination of Hamas and ensure that there will be no new threat to the State of Israel from Gaza," the government statement said. Earlier, Gaza resident Hamza Abdel Razeq said he would welcome any ceasefire agreement, hoping it would bring some respite for people who have endured Israel's bombing and expanding ground offensive. "The people are really suffering," he told AFP. "I believe it will pave the way for longer truces or even a total ceasefire."



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea said Wednesday it had succeeded in putting a military spy satellite in orbit after two previous failures, as the US led its allies in condemning the launch as a "brazen violation" of UN sanctions. A rocket carrying the satellite blasted off Tuesday night from North Phyongan province, flew along its designated path and "accurately put the reconnaissance satellite 'Malligyong-1' on its orbit," state-run news agency KCNA reported. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was on hand to witness the blast off, and congratulated the scientists and technicians behind the mission, it added. The United States quickly led condemnation of the launch as a "brazen violation" of UN sanctions and said it could destabilize the region. South Korea reacted by saying it would resume surveillance operations along the border with North Korea that had been suspended in 2018 as part of a Seoul-Pyongyang agreement to reduce military tensions, the Yonhap news agency reported. North Korea's previous efforts to put a spy satellite into orbit in May and August both failed. Seoul, Tokyo and Washington had repeatedly warned Pyongyang not to proceed with another launch, which would violate successive rounds of UN resolutions. Space launch rockets and ballistic missiles have significant technological overlap, experts say, but different payloads, and Pyongyang is barred by UN resolutions from any tests involving ballistic technology. Seoul's spy agency this month said Pyongyang appeared to have received technical advice from Russia, in return for sending at least 10 shipments of weapons for Moscow's war in Ukraine. KCNA said after this mission that "the launch of reconnaissance satellite is a legitimate right of the DPRK for strengthening its self-defensive capabilities" as the country confronts what it calls threats from South Korea and the United States. DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) is the official name for North Korea. The North plans to launch more satellites "in a short span of time" to step up its surveillance

capability on South Korea, KCNA said. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it was analyzing the launch and did not confirm if the satellite had in fact been placed in orbit. "North Korea's military satellite launch constitutes a provocative act that blatantly violates the UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting its use of ballistic missile technology as well as scientific and technological cooperation," the JCS said in a text message to reporters. Seoul has been saying for weeks that Pyongyang was in the final stages of preparation to launch another spy satellite, warning it would take "necessary measures" if it went ahead. The North's May attempt failed due to the "abnormal" startup of its second-stage engine, and the August bid due to an error in the "emergency blasting system" during the third-stage flight, according to Pyongyang state media at the time. Tuesday's "launch that came hours before its time window notification seems to underscore two things: Pyongyang's confidence in success and intention to maximise surprise factor to the outside world," Choi Gi-il, professor of military studies at Sangji University, told AFP. Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested in September after meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that his nation could help Pyongyang build satellites. Seoul and Washington have both subsequently claimed Pyongyang has been shipping weapons to Russia, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warning this month that military ties between North Korea and Russia were "growing and dangerous." Successfully putting a spy satellite into orbit would improve North Korea's intelligence-gathering capabilities, particularly over South Korea, and provide crucial data in any military conflict, experts say. North Korea has conducted a record number of weapons tests this year. Seoul, Washington and Tokyo have ramped up their defence cooperation in response, and on Tuesday a US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, arrived at South Korea's Busan Naval Base.



Civilian Death Toll in Ukraine Tops 10,000

GENEVA (Reuters) - More than 10,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine since Russia invaded in February 2022, with about half of recent deaths occurring far behind the front lines, the U.N. Human Rights Office said. The U.N. human rights mission in Ukraine, which has dozens of monitors in the country, said it expects the real toll to be "significantly higher" than the official tally since corroboration work is ongoing. This includes events in the first months after the invasion, such as the battle for control of Mariupol, where residents reported high civilian casualties. "Ten thousand civilian deaths is a grim milestone for Ukraine," said Danielle Bell, who heads the monitoring mission. "The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, now entering into its 21st month, risks evolving into a protracted conflict, with the severe human cost being painful to fathom," she said. The vast majority of the deaths have been caused by explosive weapons with a wide-area impact such as shells, missiles and cluster munitions, the United Nations said. Close to half of the deaths in the last three months have occurred far beyond the front lines, the U.N. said, attributing this to Russian forces' use of long-range missiles and the late explosion of abandoned ordnance. Older people who may be unable or unwilling to relocate to safer places make up a disproportionate fraction of those killed in Ukraine, the U.N. data showed. More than a third of the victims whose ages were confirmed were over 60, it showed, whereas this age group constitutes just a quarter of the total population. Moscow denies deliberately targeting civilians.

Dutch Voters Head to the Polls in Cliffhanger Election

THE HAGUE (Dispatches) - Dutch voters headed to the polls Wednesday for a nail-biting election too close to call that will transform the country's political landscape after Mark Rutte's record 13 years in power. Opinion polls have fluctuated wildly in the run-up to election day, with any one of the four top candidates in with a genuine shot at taking the helm of the EU's fifth-biggest economy. The stakes are high: the Netherlands punches above its weight in the European Union and on the world stage, a steadfast supporter of Ukraine and strict fiscal discipline in the eurozone. Could the Netherlands elect its first woman prime minister? Dilan Yesilgoz, leader of the centre-right VVD party and successor to Rutte, is hoping to cap a meteoric career by clinching the top job. Born in Turkey, the charismatic 46-year-old has taken a hard line on immigration, pledging to drive down refugee numbers -- a paradox to many as she arrived as a young girl following her asylum-seeking father. Hard-working and media-savvy with a strong presence on Instagram, Yesilgoz has shrugged off the fact she would make history as the first woman PM but told AFP at a recent rally: "It's about time." Yesilgoz immediately raised eyebrows by declaring a willingness to welcome anti-Islam firebrand Geert Wilders into a VVD-led coalition -- a radical departure from Rutte's policy. Wilders has sought to tone down some of his more headline views, even saying there were "bigger problems" than bringing down asylum numbers and that he could put some of his anti-Islam positions "in the freezer." His PVV party appeared to have some momentum in the final days of campaigning, enjoying a big spike in the polls, and he seems

likely to play some role in post-election jockeying. A Wilders win would be a political earthquake felt beyond the Netherlands but it is unclear who would accept to join a PVV-led coalition, making forming a government tricky. Pieter Omtzigt, a maverick MP and whistleblower, has thrown a massive spanner in the works with the creation of a completely new party, the New Social Contract (NSC). Dubbed "Saint Pieter" and considered by many a political Messiah for his crusade to clean up Dutch politics, he looked the clear favourite at one point. But his support appeared to have dipped in the final days of the campaign, hampered by uncertainty over whether he actually wanted the top job. He told AFP it was "secondary" who was PM, eventually relenting under daily questioning by saying he would lead a cabinet of experts, not politicians. If Yesilgoz, Omtzigt and Wilders are all on the right of the political spectrum, former European Commissioner Frans Timmermans is hoping to build a left-wing wall to keep them at bay. Architect of the EU's Green Deal, the 62-year-old brings experience, climate credentials, and a safe pair of hands to the campaign. He too saw a jump in support in the final days, with analysts saying left-wing voters were banding together with his Green/Labour party to prevent a right-wing coalition. Immigration, cost-of-living, and a crippling housing crisis especially affecting young Dutch voters have been the main election topics. Following Rutte's premiership -- tainted by so many scandals he became known as "Teflon Mark" for his ability to survive anything -- the Dutch are also looking for a change in governing style, say experts.



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Croatia Secure Euro 2024 Ticket, France Held by Greece

PARIS (Dispatches) - Croatia clinched the final automatic qualifying spot for Euro 2024 on Tuesday as Wales were forced to settle for a play-off place, while France had to come from behind to draw in Greece. Semi-finalists at the World Cup 12 months ago, Croatia knew they would qualify for next year's European Championship in Germany with a win against Armenia in Zagreb, but any slip-up would have allowed Wales to leapfrog them into second place in Group D. In the end it was a header two minutes before half-time by Ante Budimir that gave Croatia a 1-0 win to take them through, while Wales could only draw 1-1 with already-qualified Turkey in Cardiff. Croatia's prospects of automatic qualification had appeared in doubt when they lost to both Turkey and Wales in October, but they become the 21st and final automatic qualifier for the 24-team tournament next June and July. "We deserve to be at the Euro and we have a lot of time now to prepare for what awaits us there," veteran captain Luka Modric told UEFA.com. Wales will now go into the play-offs next March to determine whether they qualify for a third consecutive Euro. A draw this Thursday will decide whether they face Finland, Ukraine or Iceland in the play-off semi-finals. A victory in that would set up a final decider against Poland or Estonia, with three qualifying spots in total on offer in the play-offs. They beat Ukraine in a play-off to qualify for last year's World Cup. Rob Page's side needed to beat Turkey on Tuesday to stand a chance of overtaking Croatia, and they went ahead through an early Neco Williams goal. However, Yusuf Yazici's 70th-minute penalty earned Turkey a draw. "That level of performance is what we need to do. If we do that when we come back together in March we'll be ok," insisted Page. France

missed out on finishing with a perfect record in Group B as they drew 2-2 with Greece in Athens. Randal Kolo Muani's opener put France, with Kylian Mbappe rested from the starting line-up, in front late in the first half. Captain Tasos Bakasetas equalized for Greece soon after the break and Fotis Ioannidis then put them in front. However, Youssouf Fofana's powerful strike pulled France level again, and they appeared to be denied a certain winner at the death when Kingsley Coman's deflected cutback seemed to cross the goal-line before spinning back onto the post and out. But it was missed by the on-field officials, who had no goal-line technology to help them. "This is the international level. There was no qualification at stake obviously but there could have been," French coach Didier Deschamps complained to broadcaster TF1. "To have a ground with no goal-line technology -- because there isn't, because it's expensive -- obviously it is incoherent, but the officials have to put up with it," he said, adding that the VAR official could not give a goal if he was "only 99 percent sure" the ball had gone in. Greece, the 2004 Euro winners, do not qualify automatically but can still come through the play-offs. The Netherlands had already qualified from the same group before their 6-0 win over minnows Gibraltar in Faro, Portugal. Calvin Stengs of Feyenoord scored a hat-trick, with Mats Wieffer, Teun Koopmeiners and Liverpool's Cody Gakpo also netting. Romania and Switzerland had already qualified from Group I prior to their clash in Bucharest, which the hosts won 1-0 thanks to Denis Alibec's second-half goal. Israel, who will be in the play-offs, won 2-0 in Andorra in the same group, while Belarus beat Kosovo 1-0. The final draw for Euro 2024 will take place in Hamburg on December 2.



Pacers Out-Gun Hawks to Advance in NBA

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Indiana Pacers beat the Atlanta Hawks 157-152 in a rollicking NBA shootout on Tuesday to become the first team to reach the knockout stage of the league's new in-season tournament. Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton, who said this week the new tournament gave "more juice" to early-season games, scored 22 of his 37 points in the third quarter as the Pacers erased a 20-point first-half deficit. In the fourth quarter it was Buddy Hield who stepped up, scoring 13 of his 24 points as the Pacers came out on top of a furious back-and-forth finish. "It's good to clinch," Haliburton -- who also handed out 16 assists -- said after the Pacers improved to 3-0 in tournament play and locked up first place in East's Group A. "Buddy won us the game down the stretch, a lot of big buckets." Hield's three-pointer put Indiana up 152-150 with 1:20 remaining. After Saddiq Bey pulled Atlanta level with a layup, Hield drained another three-pointer for a 155-152 Pacers lead with less than a minute to go. Hield capped the outrageous scoring with an alley-oop dunk with five-tenths of a second remaining. Hield connected on nine of 11 from the field and made all six of his three-point attempts. Obi Toppin scored 21 points off the bench for Indiana and Benedict Mathurin added 19. Trae Young scored 38 points to lead the Hawks, who led by 20 in the second quarter. In later games, the Los Angeles Lakers had a chance to punch their ticket to the knockout rounds, and claim home court advantage in the quarter-finals, with a victory over the Utah Jazz. A road win for the Jazz, coupled with a loss for Phoenix against Portland, would see Utah advance. The quarter-finals will be played December 4-5, with winners advancing to semi-final games on December 7 and a championship match on December 9 in Las Vegas. It was a tight finish in Philadelphia, where Darius Garland scored 32 points to lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 122-119 overtime victory over the 76ers that kept alive the Cavs' hopes of advancing in the tournament via a wild card berth. Jarrett Allen scored 26 points and pulled down 13 rebounds while Max Strus made five three-pointers on the way to 20 points for the Cavs, who came through despite again playing without injured Donovan Mitchell and Caris LeVert. Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Joel Embiid scored 32 points and grabbed 13 rebounds and Tyrese Maxey added 30 points for Philadelphia, but the 76ers were eliminated from tournament contention.

Argentina Sink Brazil in World Cup Qualifier

RIO DE JANEIRO (Dispatches) - Argentina defeated Brazil 1-0 on Tuesday in an ill-tempered 2026 World Cup qualifying clash marred by pre-match crowd trouble that forced kick-off to be delayed. A 63rd-minute header from veteran defender Nicolas Otamendi secured victory for Argentina as the world champions bounced back from last week's defeat to Uruguay to beat their bitter South American rivals. The win at Rio's iconic Maracana Stadium leaves Argentina on top of the South American qualifying standings with 15 points from six games. Brazil's third defeat of qualifying, meanwhile, leaves the five-time world champions in sixth place with seven points from six games. "This group continues to achieve historic things," Argentina captain Lionel Messi said afterwards. "Maybe today wasn't the most important thing, but it was a nice win." Tempers had flared in the stands at the Maracana moments before kick-off, with Brazilian police seen using batons to drive back a block of Argentine fans at one end of the ground. Several Argentina players went towards the disturbances in an apparent attempt to plead for calm, with goalkeeper Emi Martinez attempting to jump into the seating area at one stage to confront a baton-wielding Brazilian police officer. Argentina's players led by Messi then returned to their dressing room as the clashes continued, with Messi appearing to say: "We're not playing, we're leaving." Messi later explained he had taken his team-mates off the field in the hope of cooling the atmosphere. "We went to the locker room because it was a way to calm everything down a little," Messi said. "We went to see how our families and people close to us were doing. And then we came back." The 2022 World Cup winners re-emerged onto the field shortly before 10pm local time and the match kicked off shortly afterwards, roughly 30 minutes later than the scheduled start time. The febrile pre-match atmosphere spilled onto the field when play finally got under way, with Brazil's Arsenal striker Gabriel Jesus being given a yellow card after just five minutes after clashing with Argentina's Rodrigo De Paul. The tense nature of the contest continued throughout a poor first half, with neither side creating much in the way of goalscoring opportunities in a game littered with niggly fouls. Brazil winger Raphinha was booked in the 14th minute for flinging an arm into the face of De Paul, and was lucky not to receive a second yellow five minutes later after catching Alexis MacAllister with a wild studs-up challenge. Brazil meanwhile failed to register a single shot -- either on or off target -- until a 38th minute free-kick from Raphinha that deflected wide for a corner. The only shot on goal from either side in the entire first half came on 44 minutes, when Brazil's Gabriel Martinelli lashed a muffed clearance from Argentina goalkeeper Martinez back

towards goal. Martinelli's shot was heading for the net but Argentina breathed a sigh of relief after defender Cristian Romero blocked the effort on the line.



Austria Outclass Euro 2024 Hosts Germany in 2-0 Win



VIENNA (Dispatches) - Austria outplayed a toothless Germany to win 2-0 in their friendly yesterday, ending their year on a high while piling more pressure on the embattled Euro 2024 hosts who had Leroy Sane sent off early in the second half. Marcel Sabitzer's low drive in the 29th minute put the dominant hosts, who have qualified for the Euros, in front with Germany posing no threat in attack and needing 32 minutes for their first shot on goal. Another quick passing move led to Austria's Christoph Baumgartner chipping the ball over keeper Kevin Trapp in the 73rd, with Germany down to 10 men following the 49th-minute red card for Sane. For Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann, who took over in September, it was the second straight loss after Saturday's 3-2 home defeat to Turkey, forcing him back to the drawing board seven months before the start of the Euros on home soil. Nagelsmann blamed a lack of unity within the team on the pitch while also criticising an "absurd rate of loss of possession in the first half." Austria shot out of the blocks and overwhelmed the error-prone Germans with a high-pressing game. While the hosts carved out several chances, including a golden opportunity for Michael Gregoritsch who failed to beat Trapp when one-on-one, Germany had to wait 32 minutes for their first effort towards goal. Three minutes earlier Austria had taken the lead with a four-pass counter attack that ended with Sabitzer threading a shot into the goal past two defenders and Trapp. The Germans brought on the experienced Thomas Mueller after the break but it was the Austrians who picked up where they had left off. German frustration boiled over in the 49th minute when Sane grabbed Philipp Mwene by the throat and shoved him to the ground following a foul, and was dismissed with a straight red card. It was his first red card in his 402nd game as a professional footballer for club and country. Germany's disappointing evening was complete when Baumgartner added a second goal, with Austria missing more chances late in the game.

Holder Canada Knocked Out of Davis Cup by Finland

MALAGA (Dispatches) - Canada's reign as Davis Cup champions was ended by outsiders Finland who produced a big shock on the opening day of the Final Eight in Malaga. Roared on by thousands of Finnish fans, Otto Virtanen and Harri Heliövaara beat Vasek Pospisil and Alexis Galameau 7-5 6-3 to move in to the semi-finals for the first time. Milos Raonic, playing in the event for the first time in five years, had given Canada the perfect start as he dispatched lowly-ranked Finn Patrick Kaukovalta 6-3 7-5 thanks to 18 aces. Both teams were hit by injuries with Canada's top-ranked player Felix Auger-Aliassime unable to take to the court while Finland's number one Emil Ruusuvuori was also ruled out. But 171st-ranked Virtanen stepped up for his country with an impressive defeat of fellow 22-year-old Gabriel Diallo to take the tie into a deciding doubles rubber. Virtanen again produced some stunning tennis while Canada's hopes were not helped by an injury to Pospisil who battled on. A service break in the eighth game of the second set proved enough and Finland sealed the win to set up a clash later this week against Czech Republic or last year's runners-up Australia. The Final Eight continues today with the Czechs taking on Australia when organisers, the International Tennis Federation, will hope the atmosphere matches that of the week's opening battle. Changes to the format of the historic competition in recent years following a now defunct alliance with Spanish investment company Kosmos have not been everyone's cup of tea, with the traditional 'home and away' ties largely replaced. But ITF president David Haggerty said the new format, featuring qualifiers spread across four cities in September to determine the Final Eight in Malaga, is the best formula. "The home and away format is not going to work and the players told us that in the past," he told BBC Sport. "It would not be a good competition if we went back to only home and away. Sometimes the loudest voices aren't always the majority." The near sell-out crowd certainly provided the sort of atmosphere that was sadly lacking in

some ties in September and the Finnish fans, many of whom are resident in Spain, will be out in force again on Friday. "Obviously it's a great moment now today and it's still not time to celebrate. We have the chance to go even

further," Finland captain Jarkko Nieminen said. "With this great feeling and confidence, it's really nice to step on court on Friday. It's incredible, the whole journey with these guys since I started as a captain."

