

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian During His Meeting With Ismail Haniyeh, the Head of the Political Bureau of the Hamas, Said Everyone's Assessment of the Gaza War Is That the Israeli Regime and the U.S. Did Not Gain Anything on the Battlefield

IRAN NEWS

Iran Were Crowned as Champions at the 2023 Junior World Weightlifting Championships, Held in Guadalajara, Mexico, With Winning 5 Gold, 9 Silver and one Bronze Medals and Scoring 660 Points

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Leader: Heavy Loss of Oct.7 Will Not Be Compensated by Israel's Bombings



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has said that the heavy loss of October 7 will not be compensated by the bombings and it will shorten the life of the usurping regime. The Supreme Leader's remarks were published on his X account in Hebrew language. Ayatollah Khamenei in his message warned that the end of the life of the Zionist regime is imminent. According to Resaneh Negar, the text of the Supreme Leader's message reads that the heavy loss of the Zionist regime on October 7 will not be compensated by these bombings. He pointed out that it will shorten the life of the usurping regime and this cruelty will not go unanswered.

Commander Vows IRGC's Crushing Response to Any Threat



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Major General Hossein Salami said the IRGC is at the peak of power and dignity today and is ready to give a crushing response to enemy threats. Addressing a ceremony in the central city of Yazd on Thursday, Major General Salami said, "At any point where the enemy seeks to target and threaten Muslims' honor and dignity, the IRGC and Basij (volunteer forces) will be present and give a crushing response to the enemies." He added that the IRGC and Basij tighten the noose around the enemies' necks and make the field so insecure for them that they will see no way out. Referring to the adversaries' plots against the Islamic Republic, the senior commander said the world arrogance has entered war with Iran in various fields, including the economy. The economic sanctions imposed on the country are a clear example of the enemies' threats against the Iranian nation, he stated. All of these enemy pressures and threats are aimed at imposing its ominous political objectives, he added. However, thanks to the efforts of the IRGC and Basij, these plots have been foiled one after another over the past years, Major General Salami went on to say. He also vowed the IRGC would continue to make efforts with all its capacity to ensure the security and welfare of the Iranian nation.



Israel Suffered Humiliating Defeat in

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says Israel suffered a "humiliating defeat" at the hands of the Palestinian nation and resistance as they managed to "incapacitate" the regime in its bloody war on the besieged Gaza Strip. Raisi made the remarks in an address to a meeting of Iran's Assembly of Experts on Thursday on the 48th day of Israel's aggression against Gaza, which has failed to secure the occupying regime's declared objective of eradicating the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas. "The Zionists first declared that they wanted to occupy Gaza and destroy the resistance, but they achieved none of their objectives. What remains from the Zionist regime's killing of women and children and destruction of people's homes is the global hatred towards this regime," he said. "If we want to make an analysis after over 40 days... we must say that the enemy suffered a humiliating defeat and that the Palestinian people and resistance scored a great victory." The Iranian chief executive also hailed the self-confidence of the Palestinian people, saying they demonstrated a "golden scene of resistance" before the eyes of the world through their resilience against Israeli crimes. "The resistance managed to incapacitate the fake regime and frustrate it with no air, naval and ground forces, but trust in God... The power of faith can overcome evil," he emphasized. Today, Raisi added, people across the world come to the streets crying out for a just world order that can defend the oppressed. He also noted that the Israeli atrocities in Gaza showed to the world the veracity of the Islamic Republic's position on Palestine. "The Iranian nation always shouted that Palestine is right, and now everyone understood that they (the Israelis) massacred the people of Gaza and Palestine through racial discrimination and racism under the all-out support of the U.S. and the West." Meanwhile on Wednesday Raisi said that the Israeli regime has fallen short of realizing all of the goals that it had sought by launching its ongoing war against the Gaza Strip. The chief executive made the remarks in an interview in Tehran on Wednesday with representatives of five Arabic-language television networks, namely Lebanon's al-Manar, Iraq's al-Etejah TV, and the Palestinian al-Aqsa TV and Palestine Today as well as Yemen's al-Masirah. "Israel did not achieve any of its goals of occupying Gaza and eliminating the resistance," he said. Still referring to the war waged by the Israeli regime, Raisi said, "What the Zionist regime has done shows that it has grown desperate in the face of the Palestinian resistance." The regime launched the war on October 7 following an operation, dubbed al-Aqsa Storm, by the territory's resistance groups, which killed some 1,200 Israeli settlers and military forces and led to the captivity of hundreds more. Raisi described the operation as the Palestinian people's "legitimate defense of their right," which was prompted by their growing "impatience with [the Israeli regime's] incessant oppression." "A nation, whose home is usurped, whose family members are imprisoned and martyred, and whose farms are destroyed, enjoys the right to legitimate self-defense" by whatever logical standard, the president said. The Palestinian operation, Raisi added, inflicted "military, security, and intelligence defeat" upon the Israeli regime. The president, meanwhile, pointed to the regime's killing of more than 14,500 Palestinians so far during the war, saying, "Killing of women and children does not translate into victory." The massacre of women and children "has created an unprecedented atmosphere of anti-Zionist hatred across the world," Raisi concluded.

Resistance Will Emerge Victorious in Gaza War Against Israel

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Secretary General of the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah says he is confident that resistance will emerge victorious and the Israeli regime will suffer a decisive defeat. Nasrallah made the remarks in a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in the Lebanese capital Beirut on Thursday, during which they discussed the latest developments in the region, particularly in Palestine and Lebanon. Nasrallah hailed resistance of people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and reiterated the resistance's full readiness in various fronts. Amir-Abdollahian, for his part, outlined Iran's diplomatic efforts and consultations over recent weeks about possible ways to help the Palestinian people and stop the Israeli regime's war crimes against civilians in the Gaza Strip. The Iranian foreign minister said the agreement reached between Israel and Hamas on the humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and the captive swap deal were the result of the Palestinian people's resistance and Israel's desperation in the face of the resistance. According to Iran's Ambassador to Beirut Mojtaba Amani, Nasrallah and Amir-Abdollahian also held talks about possible future events in the region, efforts to stop Israel's atrocities against Gaza, possible scenarios regarding the war as well as the world's collective responsibility regarding "the historic and determining development." On Wednesday, Amir-Abdollahian held talks with Secretary General of the Gaza-based Islamic Jihad movement Ziad al-Nakhala, deputy chief of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip Khalil al-Hayya, and other officials from the groups in the Lebanese capital city of Beirut. During the meeting, the sides discussed the latest field developments in the Gaza Strip, a temporary truce in



the territory and means to extend it as well as the dispatch of humanitarian aid to the oppressed Palestinian nation. Meanwhile Amir-Abdollahian earlier said six weeks of heroic resistance of the oppressed Palestinian people in Gaza has proved that time is not on Israel's side if the war drags on, stressing that the global public opinion would see the occupying regime and the US as the main losers. Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks upon his arrival in the Lebanese capital Beirut, where he is expected to discuss the recent developments in the region, including the Israeli regime's war on the Gaza Strip, with Lebanese authorities. "Without a doubt, the future of Gaza and the future of Palestine will be decided only by the Palestinian people," the top Iranian diplomat said. "We have heard from the resistance leaders in the region that the finger of the resistance will remain on the trigger until the Palestinian people's rights are fully restored and their fight has achieved its goals," he added. Amir-Abdollahian further noted that he is in Beirut "to consult with high Lebanese authorities about how to maximize security in the region and how to restore Palestinian rights."

Gaza Ceasefire First Step in Palestinian Victory



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran says a temporary humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza is "the first step towards stopping the war crimes of the child-killing Zionist regime against Palestinian citizens, women and children." "This development is the result of more than 45 days of indescribable endurance of the resistant people of Palestine and the historical struggle and standing of the resistance warriors and the first step of victory," Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said Thursday. A breakthrough four-day truce in the war will start on Friday morning and an exchange of captives and prisoners will follow hours later. Kanaani said Iran will continue diplomatic consultations with regional and international sides to support the oppressed people of Palestine and its joint efforts with friendly and aligned countries in order to take immediate measures to maintain the ceasefire and "stop the mass killing machine of the Zionist regime and provide urgent relief to the homeless people of Gaza". Israel has killed more than 14,800 people, including over 6,150 children, in Gaza since October 7. Qatari foreign ministry spokesperson Majed Al Ansari said Thursday Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails will be released on Friday, adding a list of names has been approved, without saying how many. "The Palestinian nation proved that it will take the decision to determine its destiny and homeland into its own hands, both on the battlefield and in the political arena, and will show an appropriate and decisive answer to any ill-considered, aggressive and short-sighted plan and action of the usurping Zionist regime and its supporters," Kanaani said.

Iranian Security Forces Thwart Terrorist Attack in Zahedan



ZAHEDAN (IP) - The police chief of Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province announced the security forces thwarted the attack of a terrorist group on the road of Zahedan to Khash against a Law enforcement patrol unit. Brigadier General Doostali Jalilian, chief police commander of Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province, said on Thursday that the Police Forces of Zahedan were attacked by a terrorist group at the Zahedan-Kash road when they were on patrol operation. According to General Jalilian, terrorists planted a booby trap on the road and detonated it when the "Rangers unit of police" who were on the patrol operation. "After the blast, terrorists started shooting at police forces from several directions," he added. Brigadier General Jalilian said that the police rangers took a tactical stance and put terrorists under heavy fire which led to terrorists leaving their positions. A chase operation is underway by security forces in the province. Fortunately, none of the police rangers suffered any injuries. The police commander of Sistan and Baluchistan province said: "Terrorists have been pursued and efforts to punish the perpetrators of this terrorist act continue."

IRAN NEWS



Red Meat Production Rises

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Production of red meat in Iran stood at 38,760 tons in the seventh month of the current Iranian calendar year (September 23-October 22), showing a 29 percent fall compared to the same month in the past year, the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) reported. As reported, beef and veal had the lion's share in the country's red meat output during the seventh month with 19,656 tons, followed by lamb and mutton with 14,731 tons, goat meat with 3,321 tons, and red meat from other livestock with 1,052 tons. Supply of red meat in the seventh month also fell two percent from the sixth month. In mid-July, the chairman of the National Union of Light Livestock Producers stressed the need to support domestic producers of red meat. Afshin Sadr-Dadras said that the subsidy that is allocated to support consumers for imported meat should be allocated to support domestic production. He reiterated that the country's livestock industry needs serious support, adding that if the problem of the livestock industry is not taken seriously, due to the lack of liquidity of the producers, there is a possibility of a decrease in production in the second half of the current Iranian calendar year (September 22, 2023-March 20, 2024).

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

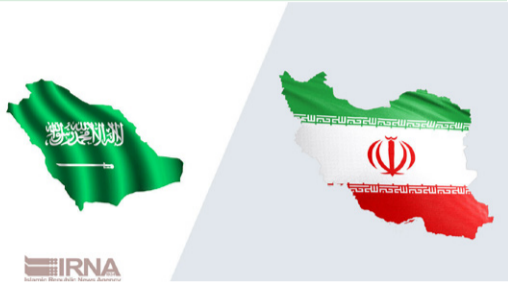
Non-Oil Export to Kazakhstan Rises 12% in 7 Months



TEHRAN - Iran's non-oil export to Kazakhstan increased by 12 percent in value 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 \$104.412 million to Kazakhstan in the seven-month period of this year. He also announced that Iran imported commodities valued at \$42.882 million from Kazakhstan during the first seven months of this year, with 51 percent drop year on year. The value of Iran-Kazakhstan annual trade also rose 20 percent in the past year. During a meeting between the former Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Gholam-Hossein Shafeie and Kazakhstan's Deputy Minister of Trade and Integration Kairat Torebayev, in late April, the two sides discussed the ways for the expansion of trade ties between the two countries. In the meeting held at the place of ICCIMA, Shafeie emphasized the special position of Kazakhstan as a trade partner for Iran and said the presence of the two countries in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) pacts has opened new doors for the development of economic relations,

and the private sectors of the two countries should take advantage of this opportunity. Emphasizing that paying attention to rail, road and sea transportation infrastructure should be a priority of the two countries, the ICCIMA former head stated: "The most important problem in the way of improving the level of trade cooperation between Iran and Kazakhstan is the issue of transportation. Solving this issue requires the will of the authorities of the two countries. The future of transit between the two countries can be bright due to Kazakhstan's connection to China and Iran's access to the open waters of Southeast Asia, provided that the infrastructure for exploiting this opportunity is available." Back in last November, Iran and Kazakhstan inked a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the expansion of cooperation in the agriculture and trade fields as well as industries, logistics, transportation and technology transfer in Tehran. The MOU was signed by Javad Sadati-Nejad, the former Iranian agriculture minister, and Zhumangarin Serik, the deputy prime minister and minister of trade and integration of Kazakhstan, who visited Tehran on top of a Kazakh delegation. As reported, the effort of the two countries in order to increase the value of bilateral trade to about one billion dollars, based on the agreements of the presidents of the two countries, is considered in the MOU.

Tehran Meeting Assesses Trade Opportunities With Saudi Arabia



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Officials from Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPOI) and representatives of the private sector have held a meeting to identify and assess trade opportunities between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia. The meeting took place in the capital Tehran on Wednesday, according to TPOI. Mohammad Sadeq Qannadzadeh, a senior official at the organization, said that proper planning is needed in order for the removal of obstacles in the way of trade ties between Tehran and Riyadh, given the fact that their relations have been resumed following a years-long halt. He said that an initial agreement has been reached with the Saudi ambassador to Tehran that the process to develop mutual trade and economic ties is implemented within stages. At the first stage, the first meeting of Iran-Saudi Joint Economic Commission will be held in Tehran, the official said without specifying the date of the meeting. He added that a second meeting would most likely happen in Saudi Arabia. The next stage would see trade delegations from both sides taking part in exhibitions held in the two countries, according to the official. Iran and Saudi Arabia resumed their diplomatic ties in March 2023 under a China-brokered deal. They had cut relations in 2016 over protests in Iran against the kingdom's execution of prominent cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.



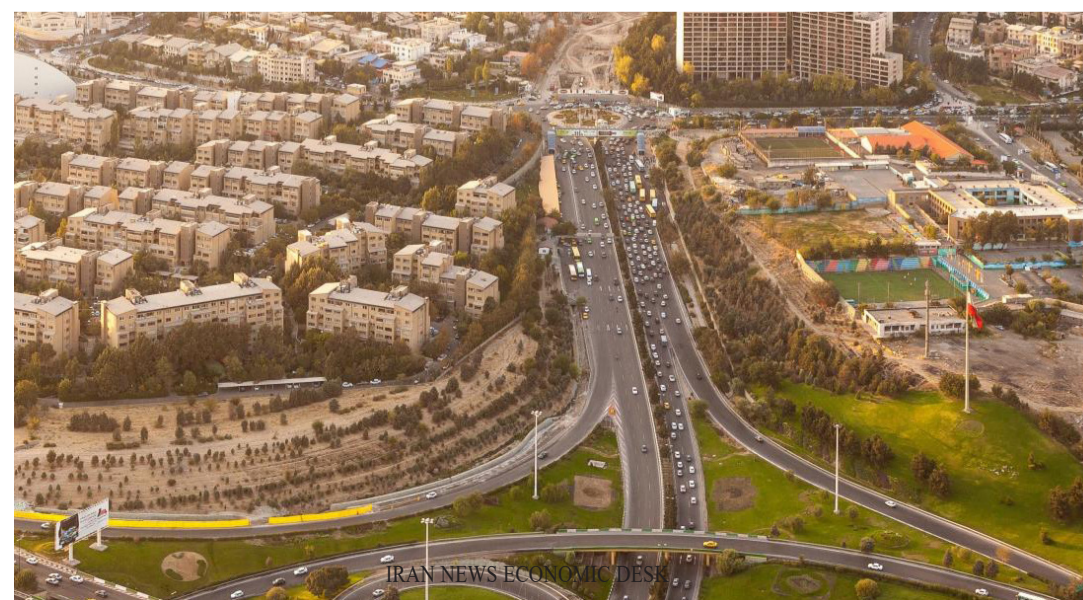
MP Urges Suspension of Court Verdict Tied to UAE-Israeli Firm

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A member of the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) has urged the judiciary and the public prosecutor to suspend a court verdict that would potentially benefit Israeli stakeholders in a UAE-based company. Mostafa Mir-Salim, the representative of Tehran in the Parliament, raised concern over the legal implications of a case involving an Israeli-Emirati company called FRESH FRUITS, which has recently been involved in fruit imports to Iran. The verdict could lead to the seizure of a trillion rials in favor of FRESH FRUITS. "Any form of collaboration with the occupying regime in Palestine, whether in the form of importing Israeli goods or benefiting Israeli companies, is explicitly prohibited by law, and if some individuals within the country have engaged in such activities with the misuse of the authorities' lack of awareness, they must be dealt with accordingly," he told IRNA on Wednesday. When asked which authority should address the issue, Mir-Salim said that judicial authorities must conduct a thorough investigation to ascertain who has "filed a complaint in domestic courts and what their connections with Zionists might be." He suggested that the public prosecutor should also intervene in the case in light of the sensitivity of the matter.

IRU, Iranian Road Transport Sector Rally Behind Road Safety

TEHRAN - IRU (International Road Transport Union) and Iran's public and private road transport sector have held a hybrid conference on road safety, professional qualifications and the transport of dangerous goods. To support road safety, regional integration and further professionalise Iran's road transport sector, IRU, together with the Road Maintenance and Transport Organisation (RMTO) and IRU member ICCIMA, organized a hybrid conference, titled "Setting-up Iran as a road transport professional excellence hub to drive progress and sustainability". IRU Secretary General Umberto de Pretto said, "We are delighted to witness the exemplary initiative taken by Iran's road transport sector to establish harmonised professional qualification standards." "We look very much forward to working together to make IRU's internationally recognised standards available to the Road Maintenance and Transport Organisation and its partners to train, assess and certify all Iranian commercial road professionals," he added. Daryush Amani, Deputy Minister of Transport and the president of RMTO, said, "Iran's road transport sector is pursuing key measures to align itself with the highest internationally recognised training, examination and professional certification standards. We're going beyond traditional training to enhance the

professional qualification of Iranian drivers, benefitting from IRU's expertise and capacity." The Iranian Technical and Vocational Training Organization highlighted how innovative content and training methodologies, standards and best practices would enhance standards and harmonise safe and professional transport practices, including the implementation of the maximum legal driving time of nine hours per day. On the transport of dangerous goods, IRU also emphasised the importance for Iran to join the Agreement on the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road (ADR). With today's increasing awareness of safety, security and environmental challenges, road transport operators and drivers must comply with existing and anticipated regulations. The IRU Academy Transport of Dangerous Goods programme is tailored to the practical needs of road transport companies and their drivers, preparing them for ever-demanding market and regulatory conditions. The conference, which was attended by over 150 participants from the public and private Iranian road transport sectors, was the result of the long-standing collaboration between IRU, RMTO and ICCIMA, which was strengthened with the signature of an addendum to their Memorandum of Understanding in February 2023.



Iran Urges Independent States to Help Stop Genocide in Gaza



TEHRAN (IRNA) - An Iranian diplomat has referred to the Israeli regime's killing of women and children in the Gaza Strip and called for efforts by independent countries to halt genocide and war crimes against the defenseless people in the besieged area. Ali Baqeri Kani, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, who is visiting Manila to take part in the seventh meeting of the joint consultative committee between Iran and the Philippines, met with Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines Enrique Manalo on Wednesday morning. The Iranian diplomat described sixty years of amicable interaction and cooperation between the two nations as the best support for upgrading mutual relationships in the future. The secretary of foreign affairs of the Philippines, for his part, recalled his recent meeting with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, adding that his country is keen on expanding ties with Iran, particularly in various economic sectors. Manalo also described the devastating events in Gaza, as well as the massacre of Palestinian women and children as profoundly disturbing and declared that the Philippines opines that the war in Gaza should come to an end as soon as possible. The seventh joint consultative committee meeting on political, economic, and cultural affairs between Iran and the Philippines was held in Manila on Tuesday after a seven-year interval.

12m Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Month

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



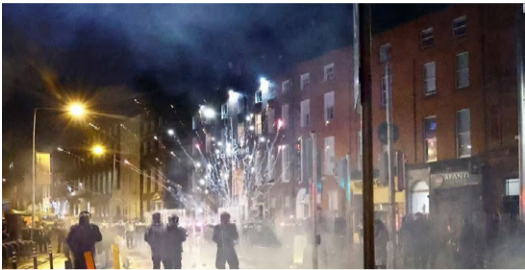
TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) in last Iranian calendar month of Aban witnessed trade of 12,238,762 tons of commodities and 357 vehicles with a total trading value of nearly \$3b on its physical market. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor, trade of 9,870,000 of commodities and 357 vehicles valued at nearly \$2b. On this floor the IME sold 5,423,210 tons of cement, 2,091,000 tons of iron ore, 1,769,896 tons of steel, 540,000 tons of sponge iron, 97,220 tons of zinc, 39,325 tons of copper, 28,560 tons of aluminum, 2,000 tons of cast iron, 1,000 tons of coke, 800 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 250 tons of lead. Moreover, the exchange saw trade of 2,160,633 tons of commodities worth more than \$1b on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor. Items traded on this floor included 639,750 tons of vacuum bottom, 652,735 tons of bitumen, 455,000 tons of polymeric products, 190,000 tons of lube cut, 135,628 tons of chemicals, 52,765 tons of sulfur, 27,655 tons of oil, 14,674 tons of petroleum products, 1,440 tons of feedstocks, 1,300 tons of waterproofing materials and 1,000 tons of slop wax. Last was the IME's side market on which the exchange traded 113,580 tons of goods.

Incoming New Zealand PM Forms Three-Party Coalition Gov't

WELLINGTON (Dispatches) - New Zealand's incoming conservative prime minister said that an agreement to form a three-party coalition government had been reached, 40 days after the country went to the polls. Christopher Luxon's National Party, which secured 48 seats in the 123-seat parliament in last month's general election, needed the support of the conservative ACT and populist New Zealand First parties to form a government. After protracted talks, Luxon said negotiations had "concluded" and the agreement now needed to be ratified by the three coalition partners. "At which point, I'll talk again to the governor general and formally confirm that we're able to form a government," he told reporters in Wellington. A formal signing ceremony was expected to be held on Friday morning, Luxon said, "so that we can get the show moving and get this country going forward". Luxon said he then plans to reveal the ministers in his new coalition government. ACT leader David Seymour and NZ First head Winston Peters are both in the running to be deputy prime minister. Luxon said an official swearing-in ceremony is slated for Monday.



Riots Erupt in Dublin After Children Stabbed



DUBLIN (Dispatches) - Three young children were among five people injured in a knife attack in Dublin that sparked riots in the city centre and which police have not yet ruled out any motive over, including whether it could be terror-related. Public transport was suspended and patients advised not to travel to a nearby maternity hospital unless absolutely necessary after clashes between riot police and anti-immigrant protesters, who arrived at the scene of the attack beside the main thoroughfare of O'Connell Street. A double-decker bus was burned to the ground in front of the Daniel O'Connell statue at the head of the street and windows were smashed at a nearby Holiday Inn hotel and McDonalds restaurant. A Footlocker store was looted. "They are disgraceful scenes. We have a complete lunatic, hooligan faction driven by far right ideology engaged in serious violence," Police Commissioner Drew Harris told reporters after deploying 400 officers to restore public order. A police car was also burnt out. Such rioting is almost unprecedented in Dublin. There are no far right parties or politicians elected to parliament, but small anti-immigrant protests have grown in the last year. The government is reviewing security around parliament after a recent protest trapped lawmakers inside. Harris said all lines of inquiry related to the attack remained open, contradicting a senior officer who had earlier told reporters that police were satisfied the incident was not terror-related. "I'm not going to speculate any further in respect of a terrorist motive. Until we're sure what the motive is, we have to keep an open mind as to why this happened," he said. A five-year-old girl was receiving emergency treatment after sustaining serious injuries in the stabbing. A man in his late 40s, also being treated for serious injuries, was arrested by police who said they are not looking for any other suspect. Police said it appeared the man attacked a number of people on Dublin's Parnell Square shortly after 1330 GMT. Members of the public intervened at an early stage of the attack. A woman in her 30s was also being treated for serious injuries while the two other children, a five-year-old boy and six-year-old girl, suffered less serious injuries. The boy has been discharged from hospital. "There was complete and utter pandemonium, women wailing, men screaming and crying," Anthony Boyle, 31, an IT consultant who lives on the road and was passing by told Reuters. The scene was still sealed off shortly before 1800 GMT when a group of around 50 anti-immigrant protesters briefly broke through a police barrier. Some shouted "get them out" and one kicked the wing mirror off a police car. Another was draped in an Irish flag. A larger crowd then began throwing objects and firing fireworks at riot police in helmets and shields, once they were deployed, and the rioting spiraled out of control. The crowds began to disperse around 2100 GMT.

Gaza Truce Appears to Hold Initially



DOHA (Dispatches) - There were no reports of bombings, artillery strikes or rocket attacks as Israel and Hamas started a four-day ceasefire in Gaza on Friday, the first pause in a 48-day-old war that has devastated the Palestinian enclave. The truce began at 7 a.m. (0500 GMT), involving a comprehensive ceasefire in north and south Gaza, the release of 13 Israeli women and child hostages by the militants later in the day and aid to flow into the besieged enclave. A number of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons were to be freed in exchange. A Reuters correspondent near the northern part of Gaza heard no Israeli air force activity overhead, and saw no tell-tale contrails typically left by Palestinian rocket launches. Lebanon's Al-Mayadeen TV reported that since the start of the truce, no sounds of bombing were heard in Gaza. Sirens sounded in two Israeli villages outside the southern Gaza Strip, warning of possible incoming Palestinian rockets. There was no immediate confirmation of any launches, however. Fighting had raged on in the hours leading up to the truce, with officials inside the Hamas-ruled enclave saying a hospital in Gaza City was among the targets bombed. Both sides also signalled the pause would be temporary before fighting resumes. The Indonesian hospital was reeling under relentless bombing, operating without light and filled with bedridden old people and children too weak to be moved. Gaza health officials said. Al-Jazeera quoted Mounir El Barsh, the Gaza health ministry director, as saying a patient, a wounded woman, was killed and three others injured. Additional aid would start flowing into Gaza and the first hostages, including elderly women, would be freed at 4 p.m. (1400 GMT), with the total number rising to 50 over the four days, Qatar's

foreign ministry spokesperson Majed Al-Ansari said in Doha. Hamas-affiliated Shehab news agency reported that fuel trucks were entering the Rafah crossing once the truce was underway. Egypt has said 130,000 litres of diesel and four trucks of gas will be delivered daily to Gaza when the truce starts, and that 200 trucks of aid would enter Gaza daily. Palestinians were expected to be released from Israeli jails, the Qatari spokesperson told reporters. "We all hope that this truce will lead to a chance to start a wider work to achieve a permanent truce." Hamas confirmed on its Telegram channel that all hostilities from its forces would cease. But Abu Ubaida, spokesperson for Hamas' armed wing, later referred to "this temporary truce" in a video message that called for an "escalation of the confrontation with (Israel) on all resistance fronts", including the Israeli-occupied West Bank where violence has surged since the Gaza war erupted almost seven weeks ago. Israel's military said its troops would stay behind a ceasefire line inside Gaza, without giving details of its position. "These will be complicated days and nothing is certain," Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari said. "Control over northern Gaza is the first step of a long war, and we are preparing for the next stages," he added. Israel had received an initial list of hostages to be freed and was in touch with families, the prime minister's office said. In an Arabic-language social media post, an Israeli military spokesperson warned Palestinians: "The war is not over yet. The humanitarian pause is temporary. The northern Gaza Strip is a dangerous war zone and it is forbidden to move north. For your safety, you must remain in the humanitarian zone in the south."

Car Blast Near Niagara Falls Shuts Down U.S.-Canada Crossing



NIAGARA FALLS (Dispatches) - A car erupted into a fireball at a U.S.-Canada checkpoint near Niagara Falls on Wednesday, killing the two occupants, triggering border closures and sparking a massive security alert on the eve of a major holiday. The regional FBI field office concluded the blast, which occurred around 400 miles (640 kilometers) northwest of New York City, was not linked to terrorism. Witnesses described seeing a car traveling at high speed before it crashed into a checkpoint barrier and exploded into flames. The blast happened at the major Rainbow Bridge crossing near Niagara Falls with nothing left of the vehicle which was incinerated except for the engine, according to New York Governor Kathy Hochul. Confirming the two fatalities, she suggested the vehicle may have been from western New York state. The victims' identities have not yet been made public. Authorities on both sides of the border activated emergency responses and images showed access roads to the crossing swarming with emergency service workers and vehicles. The White House said President Joe Biden had been briefed and was closely following developments. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told parliament "this is obviously a very serious situation." "We've seen this car coming down towards the border and he was flying - over 100 miles an hour," Mike Guenther, a Canadian visiting the United States, told CBS News. The car then swerved and "hit the fence, went flying up into the air," he said. "He went up into the air and we just seen the fireball and that's all we could see. It was just covered in smoke everywhere." The incident came on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday, one of the busiest US travel days when millions of Americans take to the roads and skies. Rainbow Bridge - among the busiest crossings between Canada and the United States - has 16 vehicle lanes and is normally open around the clock, according to US Customs and Border Protection. Hochul said that debris was spread across as many as 14 of the lanes following the incident. Three other nearby border crossings had been closed in the aftermath of the incident, but had since reopened, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said. On the U.S. side, Niagara Falls State Park, which attracts millions of visitors every year, was closed until further notice according to the park service. Canada's Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc said "any time... (infrastructure like) a border crossing sees this kind of violent circumstance, it's a source of concern for" U.S. and Canadian authorities. Trudeau's office said he had been briefed and was in contact with U.S. law enforcement. The regional FBI field office located in the city of Buffalo, New York said a search had revealed "no explosive materials, and no terrorism nexus was identified." It added that the matter had been turned over to local police as a traffic investigation. Multiple witnesses reported hearing a loud explosion and seeing a large cloud of smoke near the inspection station. Canadian Chorkor Millionaire was accompanying friends back across the border into his home country when they heard a loud boom. There was a vehicle "caught up in flames, thick smoke all of the sudden," he told AFP, adding: "Everybody was terrified." New York City Mayor Eric Adams said that officers of the city's police department, the country's largest, had deployed to the border crossing to assist the investigation. Dramatic videos showed thick plumes of black smoke rising from a conflagration at the crossing.



Dutch Far-Right Wilders Courts Rivals After Shock Victory in Legislative Elections

THE HAGUE (Dispatches) - Far-right firebrand Geert Wilders faced an uphill struggle to woo rivals for a coalition government after a "monster victory" in Dutch elections that shook the Netherlands and Europe. His PVV (Freedom Party) won 37 seats in parliament, more than doubling his share from the last election and outstripping opponents, according to near complete results. A left-wing bloc trailed far behind on 25 seats, with the centre-right VVD on 24, a catastrophic result for the party of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte. Wilders, 60, now has the daunting task of trying to form a working coalition, courting rivals that categorically ruled out serving in a PVV-led government before the vote. The unexpected landslide win prompted immediate congratulations from fellow far-right leaders in France and Hungary but will likely raise fears in Brussels - Wilders is anti-EU and wants a vote on a "Nexit" to leave the bloc. Although he softened his anti-Islam rhetoric during the campaign, the PVV programme pledges a ban on the Koran, mosques and Islamic headscarves and Muslim community leaders in the Netherlands were quick to voice concern. "I don't know if Muslims are still safe in the Netherlands. I am worried about this country," Habib el Kaddouri from the SMN association of Moroccan Dutch, told local agency ANP. Lizette Keyzer, a 60-year-old business manager from Enschede in the east of the Netherlands, said she had "heart palpitations" when the exit poll results came out. The country "is going in a right-wing direction. We hope that this does not completely become the case," added Keyzer. Addressing cheering supporters in The Hague after exit polls, Wilders doubled down on his anti-immigrant rhetoric, saying the Dutch had voted to stem the "tsunami" of asylum-seekers. "The PVV can no longer be ignored," he cried, urging other parties to do a deal with him. But it is not clear how he can scrape together the 76 seats he needs for a majority in the 150-seat parliament. Former European Commissioner Frans Timmermans, whose Green/Labour bloc came in second, immediately ruled out cooperation, saying it was now their job to "defend democracy" in the country. Anti-corruption champion Pieter Omtzigt, whose New Social Contract party scored 20 seats, seems content to play a role and indicated he was

"available" for talks, admitting they wouldn't be easy. Dilan Yesilgoz, who led the centre-right VVD to a disappointing 24 seats, was coy on election night, saying Wilders would have to see if he can forge a coalition. She first opened the door to Wilders joining a VVD-led government but has stressed she would not serve under him. Diederick van Wijk from the Clingendael Institute told AFP the Netherlands was now in "uncharted territory" after the "landslide victory" of Wilders. "A Prime Minister Wilders could be within reach," he said. The Dutch lurch to the far-right comes after Italy elected Georgia Meloni as prime minister. Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban hailed "winds of change" after the exit poll, while France's Marine Le Pen cheered his "spectacular performance." And although Wilders pledged he would be prime minister "for all the Dutch", his anti-Muslim rants in the past have earned him the sobriquet "Dutch Trump" - also a reference to his dyed, slicked-back hairstyle. He was found guilty of discrimination in 2016 after leading a crowd chanting for "fewer" Moroccans in the Netherlands and has previously likened the Koran to Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf", saying both books should be banned. With hallmark Wilders rhetoric, the PVV manifesto says: "Asylum-seekers feast on delightful free cruise-ship buffets while Dutch families have to cut back on groceries." "We want less Islam in the Netherlands and we will achieve that through: less non-Western immigration and the introduction of a general halt to asylum," says the programme. A "binding referendum" would be held on a "Nexit" - the idea of the Netherlands leaving the EU. The PVV also calls for an "immediate halt" to development aid. On foreign policy, the parallels to Trump are clear. "Netherlands first," trumpeted the manifesto. Dutch media were left agog by the margin of Wilders' victory. "No one expected this, not even the winner himself," said the Trouw daily. Even the usually unexcitable NOS public broadcaster called it a "monster victory", a phrase that featured in several media. The Financieel Dagblad said the result "turns politics in The Hague on its head" while the NRC daily describes it as a "right-wing populist revolt that will shake the Binnenhof to its foundations", referring to the government quarter in The Hague.



China Slows Venezuela Crude Buys

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - The suspension of U.S. sanctions on Venezuelan oil has rattled its biggest customers, China's independent refiners, who are now holding off on making new purchases amid wide discrepancies in offer prices, trading sources say. The independent refiners have for years bought Venezuelan oil at steep discounts, but since Washington lifted sanctions in mid-October for six months, global energy firms and trading houses Vitol, Gunvor and Trafigura have gradually resumed purchases. Sellers and Chinese buyers are now struggling to agree on prices, two China-based sources said. China's purchases have also slowed amid low seasonal demand for asphalt - a key product made from Venezuela's heavy crude. "The market is in disarray," said a manager at a Chinese independent refinery, who, like other sources, declined to be named as he is not authorized to speak to the media. Independent refiners, known as teapots, account for a fifth of China's oil purchases, and more than half of its asphalt production. They have mainly relied on deeply discounted sanctioned oil from Venezuela - as well as Iran and Russia - as feedstock. Since the US sanctions were suspended, the discount range has become unpredictable, the sources said. Offers for Venezuelan cargoes arriving in China in early 2024 are coming in with discounts of \$9 to \$19 a barrel to ICE Brent, an unusually wide range. When it was sanctioned, Venezuelan crude traded at about \$20 a barrel below ICE Brent on a delivered-ex-ship (DES) basis in China for October delivery, the sources added. The refiners are also waiting to see what state-owned PetroChina will do. PetroChina is seeking to buy up to 8 million barrels per month of Venezuelan crude from PDVSA, Reuters reported early this month, but has yet to seal a deal, traders and company sources said. "Buyers are staying put despite expectations of higher prices and tighter supply, as they are waiting to see if and when PetroChina will come back to the market," the refinery manager said. PetroChina, PDVSA and the Venezuelan oil ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Before the U.S. imposed sanctions in 2019, subsidiary PetroChina Fuel Oil Co was the key seller of Venezuelan oil to independent refiners. Independent refiners like Venezuelan heavy crude for its high yield of road-paving material asphalt at about 60%, versus around 45% for Iranian oil. Also, refiners can import the oil as diluted bitumen, without using precious crude import quotas, according to traders and analysts. However, China's diluted bitumen imports in October fell to 801,402 metric tons, the lowest since May, official data showed, and inventories are hovering near 2023's peak of about 1.54 million tons, according to data compiled by China-based energy consultancy Longzhong. China's demand for heavy crude could rebound before March, when construction resumes in warmer weather. Independent refiners may then be forced to switch to more costly heavier oil sourced locally or from Iran, Iraq or Canada if Venezuelan oil remained expensive, the traders said.

North Korea to Deploy New Weapons to Border

PYONGYANG (Dispatches) - North Korea said Thursday it would deploy new weapons and stronger armed forces to the border with the South, as Seoul's spy agency said Pyongyang had received Russian help to successfully put a military spy satellite into orbit. Tuesday's launch of the "Malligyong-1" was Pyongyang's third attempt at securing a military eye in the sky after two failures in May and August. North Korean state media claimed within hours of the launch that leader Kim Jong Un was already reviewing images of US military bases in Guam. Seoul's National Intelligence Service told lawmakers the launch had been a success but cautioned it was too early to say if the satellite was working as Pyongyang claimed, adding the North had been given "feedback" by Russia after Kim met Russian President Vladimir Putin in September. "After the summit with Putin, the North provided Moscow with the blueprint and data relevant to the first and second satellite launches. Russia in turn analysed those data and provided the North with feedback," the agency told lawmakers, according to a briefing by MP Yoo Sang-bum. While the North claims the satellite is already functioning, the NIS - which collected and analysed debris from one of Pyongyang's failed launches, finding it had no military utility - said it was unlikely. "Given it usually takes three years for satellite development, the current claims do not guarantee the North's satellite capability" - unless Pyongyang actually makes public those Guam base photos it mentioned," Yoo said. After the launch, Seoul partially suspended a five-year-old military accord and deployed "surveillance and reconnaissance assets" to the border, in what defence chief Shin Won-sik said Thursday was an "essential measure" to defend against the nuclear-armed North's growing threats. North Korea's defence ministry on Thursday called Seoul's

moves "reckless" and said it would also suspend - in full - the deal, saying Pyongyang "will never be bound" by the agreement again and would immediately beef up its own border security. The North would now "deploy more powerful armed forces and new-type military hardware in the region along the Military Demarcation Line," the ministry said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency. The North also fired a ballistic missile early Thursday, Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said, adding that the launch had not been successful. The ballistic missile launch is a harbinger of things to come, said Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies. "In order to show that their suspension of the agreement does not amount to just empty words, it is expected that there will be a demonstration of force by violating the maritime border, deploying coastal artillery ... and launching various missiles," he said. "As a result, there will be increased possibility of accidental armed clashes along the Military Demarcation Line and an increase in the possibility of these accidental armed conflicts escalating into war." North Korea's Kim personally oversaw the satellite launch, state media photographs showed, and later reviewed images of US military bases in Guam, purportedly sent by the country's new eye in the sky. Pyongyang's defence ministry repeated Thursday that the satellite launch was part of its "right to self-defence" and dismissed the "extremely hysterical" response from the South in particular. South Korea "must pay dearly for their irresponsible and grave political and military provocations that have pushed the present situation to an uncontrollable phase," the ministry continued. KCNA has said the satellite will begin a formal reconnaissance mission on December 1. 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. The launch also appears to kick off a space race on the peninsula, experts said, with Seoul planning to launch its first spy satellite via a SpaceX rocket later this month.





Celtics Bounce Back to Beat Bucks

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Boston Celtics got back to winning ways with a 119-116 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks in their top-of-the-table NBA Eastern Conference clash as the Dallas Mavericks thwarted an incredible LeBron James-inspired comeback to beat the Los Angeles Lakers 104-101. The Celtics kissed goodbye to a six-game winning streak on Monday after crashing to an upset defeat against the lowly ranked Charlotte Hornets. But Boston ensured there was no chance of a repeat against Giannis Antetokounmpo and the visiting Bucks in Wednesday's showdown at the TD Garden, taking control of the contest in the first quarter to clinch a wire-to-wire win. The Celtics were in charge after jumping out to an early 10-0 lead, and although the Bucks rallied in the fourth quarter to get within single digits, Boston regrouped and closed out victory. Boston's Jaylen Brown scored 26 points with support from Jayson Tatum, who finished with 23 points, 11 rebounds and four assists. Kristaps Porzingis added 21 points on a night when no fewer than seven Boston players posted double-digit points totals as the Celtics preserved their unbeaten home record to improve to 12-3. In other games on Wednesday, the Lakers fell just short of completing a remarkable comeback from a 20-point deficit against Dallas in Los Angeles. The Lakers appeared to be dead and buried trailing 91-71 at the start of the fourth quarter. But James spearheaded a superb rally with 16 fourth-quarter points which helped the Lakers sneak into a 101-99 lead with just over a minute remaining. Yet James's former Cleveland team-mate Kyrie Irving rescued the Mavs with a clutch three-pointer to put Dallas back ahead 102-101, and then added two late free throws to seal victory. Irving finished with 28 points while Luka Donic added 30 for Dallas. James, who missed a last-gasp three-point effort that would have forced overtime, finished with 26

points. In Phoenix, Golden State's Chris Paul was ejected against his former club as the Suns won a roller-coaster battle with the Warriors 123-115. After trailing by five in the first quarter, the Suns cut loose in the second, outscoring Golden State 37-16 to lay the foundations for victory. Paul was tossed in the closing moments of the first half after a tirade at game official Scott Foster. Phoenix star Kevin Durant scored 32 points against his former club to set up the win, with Devin Booker adding 25. Klay Thompson led the Golden State scoring with 23 points, including six three-pointers. In Florida, meanwhile, the in-form Orlando Magic took down the reigning NBA champion Denver Nuggets 124-119. Franz Wagner (27) and Paolo Banchero (23) combined for 50 points as Orlando overcame a nine-point deficit early in the fourth quarter to outscore Denver 42-31 in the final frame to seal victory. Nikola Jokic led the Denver scoring with a 30-point triple double that included 13 rebounds and 12 assists. In Minneapolis, the Minnesota Timberwolves maintained their recent run of good form with a 112-99 defeat of the Philadelphia 76ers. Anthony Edwards led Minnesota with 31 points while Karl-Anthony Towns added 23 points with 11 rebounds and three assists. In Atlanta, Trae Young poured in 43 points for the Hawks in a 147-145 overtime thriller against the Brooklyn Nets. Mikal Bridges finished with a career-high 45 points, 10 rebounds and four assists for Brooklyn, but Young rattled in 14 points in overtime to seal Atlanta's win. In San Antonio, the Los Angeles Clippers' Kawhi Leonard scored 26 points in a triumphant 109-102 return to his former club. French star Victor Wembanyama led San Antonio's scorers with 22 points. The game featured an unusual incident in the second quarter, with San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich grabbing a courtside microphone to appeal to Spurs fans to stop booing former player Leonard.

Maguire Accepts Ghana MP Apology for Mockery



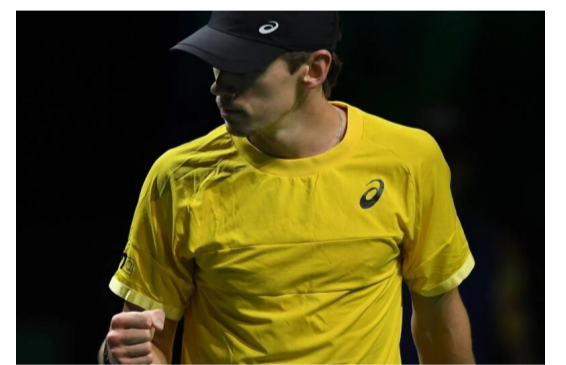
ACCRA (Dispatches) - Manchester United footballer Harry Maguire yesterday accepted the apology of a Ghanaian MP who mocked him during a parliamentary debate on the budget last year. Opposition lawmaker Isaac Adongo compared Vice-President Mahamadu Bawumia's economic management of the embattled West African nation to Maguire's performance on the pitch. In an address shared widely on social media last year, Adongo compared Bawumia to Maguire, who he described as "the biggest threat at the centre of the Manchester United defence". The reference was part of a wider speech accusing Bawumia of mismanaging the economy and inflicting hardship on citizens. Ghana is grappling with its worst economic crisis in a generation brought on by spiralling public debt, which has triggered rampant inflation and weakened the local currency. In a similar debate on the 2024 budget on Tuesday, Adongo said Maguire had "turned the corner" and took back his analogy. "I now apologise to Harry Maguire," Adongo said. "He is a transformational footballer... now scoring goals for Manchester United." Maguire accepted the apology in a post on X on Wednesday. "See you at Old Trafford soon," he wrote, referring to the home of Manchester United. But he did not relent his criticism of Bawumia, accusing him of "roaming" around the International Monetary Fund (IMF) "with a cup in hand". Ghana's government turned to the IMF for help last year. The Fund approved a three-year, US\$3 billion (RM14 billion) programme in May, with an immediate disbursement of US\$600 million. Bawumia heads the government's economic management team as has been selected as the ruling party candidate for 2024 elections.

Djokovic Sets Up Tasty Sinner Clash in Davis Cup Semis

MALAGA (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic steered Serbia into the Davis Cup semi-finals as he beat Cameron Norrie 6-4, 6-4 to secure a 2-0 triumph over Great Britain, setting up a mouth-watering clash with Italy's Jannik Sinner. Italy defeated the Netherlands 2-1 and will face Serbia in the second semi-final on Saturday in Malaga, after last year's runners-up Australia face Finland Friday. World number one Djokovic played with his typical relentless quality and then rebuked British fans at the end of the match as they tried to drown out his victory speech with drums. After Miomir Kecmanovic edged Jack Draper 7-6 (7/2), 7-6 (8/6) in the opening singles rubber, 24-time Grand Slam winner Djokovic outclassed the resilient Norrie. Djokovic, who beat Sinner to win the ATP Finals on Sunday in Turin before flying to the Costa del Sol, celebrated his landmark 400th week at number one with a straight sets win - before the captains agreed not to play the redundant doubles rubber. Around 5,000 British fans outnumbered the Serbs at the sold-out Martin Carpena arena but the relentless Djokovic silenced them with his 21st consecutive Davis Cup singles victory. "Learn how to respect people, learn how to respect players, learn how to behave yourselves," Djokovic told a group of fans with a drum after, who he said had disrespected him the whole game. "The entire match pretty much, there was disrespect but it's something I have to be prepared for in the Davis Cup," Djokovic told reporters. "It's normal that fans step over the line and in the heat of the moment you react too and in a way show that you don't allow this kind of behaviour." Djokovic's tennis did the talking as usual on the court, breaking to lead 3-2 in the first set and serving out, before doing so again in the first game of the second set, decisively. Djokovic said earlier this week winning the competition is one of his "greatest goals" in a year where he has lifted seven titles, including three Grand Slams. The veteran star was part of Serbia's only Davis Cup triumph in 2010 and his country eliminated 10-time champions Britain, who faced an uphill struggle after Kecmanovic defeated Draper in two tie-breaks. Britain, without the injured Andy Murray and Dan Evans, were hoping Draper could give them a cushion. Serbia captain Viktor Troicki selected Kecmanovic over the higher ranked Laslo Djere and the world number 55 raised his game in return. Draper staved off two set points to hold for 5-5 but unravelled in the first tie-break, double faulting twice and miscalculating a drop shot to hand the Serbian the set on a plate. The near-flawless Kecmanovic triumphed in the second set when Draper lashed a forehand wide and then pushed a return into the net.



Australia Clinches Davis Cup semis Spot



MALAGA (Dispatches) - Australia produced a stunning comeback to beat the Czech Republic 2-1 and set up a Davis Cup semi-final clash with Finland. Last year's runners-up almost crashed out in the last eighth but Alex de Minaur pulled Australia back from the brink by beating Jiri Lehecka 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 7-5 in the second singles rubber. The world number 12 levelled the tie after Tomas Machac defeated Jordan Thompson 6-4, 7-5 in the opening battle and forced a deciding rubber, won by Wimbledon 2022 doubles champions Matthew Ebden and Max Purcell. They defeated the returning Lehecka and Adam Pavlasek 6-4, 7-5 on a rollercoaster night for the team with the second most Davis Cup wins in the competition's history, 28, behind only the United States. Despite their rich history Australia have not won the competition since 2003 and looked set for elimination with Lehecka serving for the tie against De Minaur, who dug deep to find a new level to keep his country's dream alive. "I just told myself to keep fighting, keep playing till the last point, you never know, sometimes you get your chances," said De Minaur. "I got a little sniff. I was able to roll with it. I think my reputation kind of is quite strong when it comes to these types of situations, it kind of precedes me - maybe I won that match because of that today." The only time the Czech Republic have beaten Australia in 10 clashes was in 1975, but the three-time champions came extremely close in Malaga. "We were one game from going home, for him to fight back and win that match is one of the best comebacks I've ever seen," said Ebden. Australia captain Lleyton Hewitt has been one of the most critical of the controversial updated Davis Cup format which began in 2019, and Green and Gold fans were outnumbered by Czech supporters at the Martin Carpena arena. Over two-thirds of seats were filled, although the atmosphere could not match surprise package Finland's win over reigning champions Canada on Tuesday, willed to life by a few thousand noisy Nordic fans. Machac, 23, slapped a forehand winner down-the-line to break Thompson in the first game and it was enough to secure him the first set. The second was just as tight and when Machac broke for 5-4, Thompson immediately battled back to pull level, breaking the Czech for the first time in the match. Machac broke again though with a passing shot and clinched the match with another forehand winner.

Verstappen Rejects Idea of Hamilton Move to Red Bull

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen rejected the notion, rumoured and reported in recent days, that his Red Bull team were considering approaching Lewis Hamilton to partner him in a dream line-up. Red Bull boss Christian Horner was quoted in the British media this week claiming that Hamilton's management team has "reached out" several times, adding that "earlier this year there was an inquiry about whether there would be any interest". But both Verstappen and Hamilton, speaking to reporters ahead of Sunday's season-closing Abu Dhabi Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit, scotched the idea that the Briton was on the move from Mercedes. "It's not happening," said Verstappen who has already wrapped up a third successive title. "There's no point to make up stories if it's not happening. I wouldn't mind, but it doesn't matter. I don't want to put it particularly on Lewis. There's so many great drivers and sometimes it just doesn't work out like that. Hamilton also distanced himself from Horner's claims that he "reached out" before agreeing to extend his contract with Mercedes. "I don't really know where that story has come from," said the seven-time champion. "I know it's come from Christian but I don't really understand what he's been talking about. No one, as far as I'm aware, from my team has spoken to him. I haven't spoken to Christian in years." Hamilton added that Horner had approached him earlier this season. "I just congratulated them on an amazing year and said that 'Hopefully soon I'll be able to fight against you guys in the near future'. That was it. So I'm not really sure, I think he's just stirring things." He admitted, however, that he would like to compete with Verstappen in equal machinery. "Yes, 100 percent, I'd be more than happy to race against him in an equal car," he said. "Red Bull has done an amazing job and it's an incredible team - any driver would love to drive for such a great group of people. I think moving from a car that's not so great to a winning car, from my perspective, that's not the dream. The dream is to start where we (Mercedes) are and build up to then winning. And that's why I've stayed at Mercedes." Verstappen heads into Sunday's race bidding for a record-increasing 19th win in 22 races this year. A 54th career victory would carry him beyond four-time champion Sebastian Vettel in the record books, sitting behind only Hamilton (103 wins) and Michael Schumacher (91). It would also give him

an opportunity to break Jim Clark's 40-year-old landmark record for percentage of laps led in a season. Clark's record of 71.4 per cent of laps led has stood since 1963 but is likely to fall to Verstappen who has led 75.06 per cent of this year's laps. "Abu Dhabi always brings back good memories for me and the team," said

Verstappen. "It's been a long but successful season this time and I'm looking forward to a break and some free time. The team has worked incredibly hard and everyone deserves a good rest and time with their friends and families. So it's the last push for the year and I'm hoping to end this season on a high."

