

Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali Said That Large Amount of Trade Between Tehran and Moscow Is Done Through Their National Currencies, rial and Ruble Respectively

Referring to the 5-Hour Talks Between the Presidents of Iran and Russia in Moscow, the Top Iranian Diplomat Said That an Important Part of the Negotiations Was Focused on the Issue of Palestine

## 2 DOMESTIC

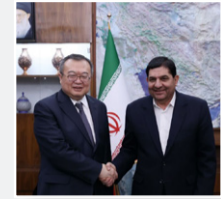
### VP Terms Zionist Regime's Crimes in Gaza as Genocide

> SEE PAGE 2

## 3 INTERNATIONAL

### Denmark Adopts Law Banning Burning of Quran and Other Holy Texts

> SEE PAGE 3



### G7 Claims Against Iran "Bitter Historical Joke"



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has condemned "baseless" claims against it in a statement of G7 leaders after their virtual meeting, saying some members of the group are the main cause of instability and insecurity in the region and the world. The Wednesday statement of the G7 members, comprising Japan, the U.S., Britain, Germany, France, Italy and the EU, called on Iran "to refrain from providing support for Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other non-state actors" and "never develop a nuclear weapon." Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani on Thursday strongly condemned the claims which he said resembled "a bitter historical joke", as he reiterated the country's position regarding nuclear weapons. "As it has been announced many times, nuclear weapons have no place in the defense doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said. Kanaani said the nuclear activities of the Islamic Republic are "completely transparent, peaceful and within the framework of Iran's rights and obligations based on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty". Tehran "has fulfilled all its obligations in this regard, and this matter has been confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency many times", he added. Kanaani also reiterated the "responsible role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in establishing and strengthening peace, stability and security in the region". "The claims made by the Group of Seven are similar to a bitter historical joke, because some members of this group with a dark history of colonialism, the design and implementation of destructive and interventionist policies, as well as military actions in West Asia and other geographical regions, are the main cause of instability and insecurity, not only in the region, but throughout the world." The G7 statement had called on Iran to use its influence with resistance groups to de-escalate regional tensions. Kanaani said, "It has been clearly stated many times that the resistance groups in the region make decisions and act to confront and respond to the war crimes and genocide of the child-killing Zionist regime based on their own judgment and based on the principles, priorities and interests of their country and people and don't take orders from anyone." The spokesman also condemned the full-scale military support of the US and the UK for Israel in the war on Palestine and emphasized the need to hold them accountable for their "participation in the war crimes and genocide of the Palestinians by the Zionist regime in Gaza and the West Bank". "The Group of Seven cannot shirk its responsibility and full-fledged partnership and support for the barbaric crimes of the Zionist regime just by condemning a few Zionist settlers," he added. In their statement, the G7 leaders had condemned "the rise in extremist settler violence committed against Palestinians, which undermines security and stability in the West Bank". But they supported Israel's apocalyptic invasion of Gaza under what they described the regime's "right to defend itself and its people against Hamas".



### Raisi Urges Immediate Stop to Israeli Genocide on Russia Visit

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi has called for an immediate stop to the Israeli "genocide and crimes against humanity" in the besieged Gaza Strip as he met his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Thursday. President Putin greeted his Iranian counterpart in the Kremlin, where their talks centered on the Israeli invasion and expanding relations between Tehran and Moscow. "Gaza is a land where a child is martyred every ten minutes, so it is necessary to stop these bombings as soon as possible and find a quick and immediate solution," President Raisi said, adding "what is happening in Palestine is a genocide and a crime against humanity". "The Zionist regime's crime in Gaza is supported by the US and Western countries, and it is unfortunate that international organizations and organizations claiming to advocate human rights have lost their effectiveness," he added. President Raisi said, "What is afflicting humanity today is unilateralism and the unjust global system, and its manifestation can be seen in Gaza." Putin received Raisi a day after visiting the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, where he discussed Gaza and Ukraine and efforts by Russia and OPEC to boost oil prices. "We were ready for your flight to land in Tehran to host you," Raisi told Putin, to which the Russian leader responded, "When I was flying over Iranian airspace, I wanted to land directly in Tehran and have a meeting, but I was told that the Iranian president was going to Moscow." The Iranian president touched on strong relations between the two countries, saying there is definitely room to further develop them. "Iran and Russia have good cooperation in the field of energy, agriculture and knowledge-based activities, but better steps can be taken for the interests of both countries and their governments." "I am very happy to be your host in Moscow. It is important that today we exchange views on regional issues, especially the situation in Palestine," President Putin responded. He also touched on growing trade and economic cooperation between the two countries, saying under the current plan, the signing of a free trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union mission is on Russia's agenda. "The relations between the two countries are developing rapidly. I would be grateful if you could convey our best wishes to the Eminent Leader [Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei], because he supports our relations." President Putin cited transportation and energy, for which the two sides have signed contracts to build railways and develop oil and gas fields. "We also have good relations in the field of education, because Iranian and Russian students study in each other's universities, and we actively work in all fields to move forward." Putin said, "My colleagues informed me that an exhibition was held in Iran between October 4 and 7 and the Russian participants of the exhibition were very happy to talk with their partners." President Raisi, who was visiting Russia on the official invitation of President Putin, was welcomed by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak and Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko at Moscow's Vnukovo International Airport on Thursday. The main agenda of his one-day trip include consultation on bilateral issues, including economic interactions, as well as discussion on regional and international issues, especially the issue of Palestine and developments in Gaza.

### Palestinian Nation on Verge of Genocide, Extermination



TEHRAN - Iran has called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to hold the Israeli regime accountable for its underway genocidal atrocities across the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Iran's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Zahra Ershadi made the remarks in New York on Thursday. She was speaking before the 22nd Session of the Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute, the 1998 treaty that created the court. "A whole nation that has been subject to oppressive occupation for more than 75 years is on the verge of genocide and extermination," she said, referring to the Palestinian nation. "Every day that passes without accountability, innocent civilians, including children and women, are being killed and slaughtered, with their lands being confiscated and their homes getting destroyed," noted the envoy. Ershadi called the attention of the tribunal to the Israeli regime's October 7-present war on Gaza that has killed upwards of 17,200 people and injured more than 45,000 others. Over 7,000 people are missing under the rubble, presumably dead, since the regime launched the war -- in response to an operation staged by the territory's resistance outfit, she said. "Half of the enclave is leveled, with no place being spared. Hospitals, mosques, churches, schools, and other purely civilian infrastructures have not been immune, with many hundreds of people being brutally slaughtered inside these places. In fact, no quarter is given." According to the envoy, the atrocities committed during the past weeks across the coastal sliver, include all the constituting elements of the most serious crimes, namely genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The regime has also ramped up its aggression across the West Bank, killing hundreds of others across the occupied territory since the day when it started bringing Gaza under the unrelenting war. "This is while, after nearly a decade, the case regarding the 'situation in the State of Palestine for atrocities committed in the occupied Palestinian territory' is open before the ICC without any tangible progress," Ershadi said. She advised that the court apply the same level of attention, activity, and resources it applies to other situations, to the situation in Palestine, to avoid perceptions of double standards and selective justice, and to refuse judicial politicization of the proceedings. The Iranian official also took to task the Israeli regime's supporters and enablers for their emboldening the occupying regime "to continue its atrocity crimes with an absolute sense of comfort." The United States, the regime's foremost Western ally, has supplied it with more than 10,000 tons of military equipment since the beginning of Gaza war.

### Israel Can't Cope With Prolonged War in Gaza Strip



TEHRAN - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says Israel cannot withstand a prolonged onslaught against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, stressing that the regime's prime minister is intent on continuing the war solely for personal interests. Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks as he addressed a gathering at the premises of the Iranian Foreign Ministry in the capital Tehran. The occupying regime, from military and political perspectives, cannot manage a war for a sustained period of time, the general pointed out. Salami went on to highlight that 30% of jobs in the occupied lands have been lost as a result of Israel's war against Hamas and other Gaza-based resistance groups, emphasizing that the onslaught is also costing the Israeli regime's economy around \$260 million every day. The main reason behind the continuation of the Gaza war is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's personal interests, the IRGC chief said, noting Israel exhibited a weak and humiliating response in the face of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm. He underscored that Palestinian resistance groups have so far employed only a small fraction of their capabilities. "Zionists and Americans do not act rationally... Palestinian generations have learned whom they should fight against... The oppressed Palestinian nation will win final victory," Salami said.

### Iran Seeks to Enhance Economic cooperation with Pakistan.

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Hassan Nourian, the Consul General of the Islamic Republic of Iran, has expressed the enduring and robust diplomatic relations between Iran and Pakistan. Addressing a meeting at the North Karachi Association of Trade & Industry (NKATI), the Consul General underscored the profound cultural ties between the two nations, especially in Balochistan, where mutual cultural affinities define the shared border. President NKATI Faisal Moiz Khan, Vice President Naem Haider, Asfer Hussain, Chairman of the Diplomatic Committee and members also attended the meeting. The Consul General revealed plans to expand economic collaboration between Iran and Pakistan. Nine border markets are operational, and an additional six are set to open, spanning a substantial 900 km. This strategic move aims to amplify economic activity and trade between the two nations. Hassan Nourian proposed organizing a single-country exhibition in Tehran and other Iranian cities to showcase the quality of Pakistani products, fostering awareness among Iranian consumers. Pledging support to the North Karachi Association, he committed to providing crucial trade and exhibition information, strengthening bilateral ties. Highlighting the ease of travel, the Consul General assured a straightforward visa process for Iran, encouraging more frequent exchanges. Acknowledging the current trade balance favoring Iran, Nourian expressed a steadfast commitment to achieving a more equitable distribution of imports and exports. "The signing of Memorandums of Understanding with key chambers of commerce signifies a deepening economic collaboration, establishing a Business Council for Pak-Iran. Additional MoUs for counterparts in Iran aim to foster greater economic cooperation," he added. To address trade hurdles, CG urged the establishment of a direct payment channel by creating a Pak-Iran Bank, simplifying payment procedures. Emphasizing the need for a "Barter Trade



System" in essential commodities, he aims to foster a more efficient and mutually beneficial trade relationship. Drawing attention to the Gas Infrastructure Pipeline, the Consul General called upon Pakistan's government to expedite discussions to enhance energy infrastructure. These developments signal a new era of strengthened diplomatic and economic ties between Iran and Pakistan, promising increased collaboration and prosperity for both nations. In a momentous event, Faisal Moiz Khan, President of the North Karachi Association of Trade & Industry, warmly welcomed His Excellency Hassan Nourian, Consul General of Iran, marking a significant milestone in Pakistan-Iran relations. Khan emphasized the historical alliance, citing Iran as the first country to recognize Pakistan post-independence. Addressing the ongoing efforts to enhance connectivity, the NKATI President detailed infrastructure projects, including upgrading the Quetta-Taftan highway and establishing new border crossing points. Negotiations on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project underscored the commitment to deepening politico-economic engagement and fostering mutual trust. He outlined a robust strategy to boost the trade relationship, emphasizing the diversification of traded goods, active negotiation of trade agreements, and attracting foreign investment. The strategy also focuses on streamlining customs procedures and border facilitation, with considerations for secure financial mechanisms and alternative payment methods. "Cultural exchange, sustainable trade practices, and regular dialogues between trade officials are highlighted components of the strategy. Market research and investments in educational programs underscore a commitment to a well-equipped workforce and informed decision-making." Faisal Moiz concluded by stating that these initiatives aim to create a foundation for a robust and mutually beneficial trade relationship, contributing to the prosperity and development of both Pakistan and Iran. The collaborative effort reflects a shared vision for a more interconnected, sustainable, and prosperous future.

### Iran Hails UN Chief's Push to Stop Israeli War on Gaza



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry welcomed the United Nations secretary-general's move to wield his power under Article 99 of the UN Charter to urge the Security Council to halt the Israeli regime's onslaught on Gaza. In a statement on Thursday, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani welcomed Antonio Guterres' move to utilize his powers under Article 99 of the UN Charter, saying, "As highlighted by the Secretary-General in his letter, the severity of the attacks on Gaza, the targeting of civilians - especially children and women - the destruction of civilian infrastructures, including hospitals, and the forced displacement of a significant portion of Gaza's population to other areas within the strip, pose a threat to both peace and regional security." Kanaani regarded the UN secretary-general's plea to the Security Council to stop the Zionist regime's assaults and facilitate immediate and comprehensive relief for the people of Gaza as a wholly appropriate action in line with the top UN official's legal duties and authority. "Even in such circumstances, such a request stems from his moral obligations and humanity," the Iranian spokesman noted. Regarding the information outlined in the UN secretary-general's letter to the chairman of the Security Council that illustrate the grave deterioration in Gaza, Kanaani stressed the urgent need for all pertinent governments and international bodies to take swift and concerted action to halt the occupying regime's attacks and crimes and to provide support to the oppressed people of Gaza, the Foreign Ministry's website reported. He emphasized that the primary responsibility for this lies with the United Nations Security Council, which holds clear legal obligations to promptly prevent aggression and threats against international peace and security. Kanaani highlighted that it is the Council's duty to act swiftly.

# IRAN NEWS



## Illegal Immigrants Will Be Returned to Afghanistan

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Interior Ahmad Vahidi once again emphasized that the citizens of Afghanistan who are living in Iran illegally should be returned to their country. Vahidi did not name a group or a country, but he added that the "enemy" wants to start anti-Afghan sentiments by creating a conflict between Afghans and Iranians. Vahidi emphasized that Tehran also has plans for immigrants with documents. "When the Taliban came here, I told them that you should prepare the ground for them (Afghan immigrants) to return to their country. After all, everyone should return to their own lives. You should come up with a mechanism for their return, and they said to give us some time," said Vahidi. "Different countries and organizations should continue their humanitarian aid to the refugees who need help, regardless of the internal conditions of Afghanistan," said Asifa Stanikzai, a women's rights activist.

## Cancelation of German, French Inspectors' Activities Iran's Legal Right



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The spokesman of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran said the country terminated the activities of some Western inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency in accordance with its legal rights. "We exercised our legal and legitimate right to revoke the activities of (IAEA) inspectors from Germany and France," Behrouz Kamalvandi said. "Unfortunately, however, because of a biased report by the Agency's (IAEA's) director general, and his failure to refer to this legal right of our country," there was a propaganda campaign and media hype launched against Iran, he deplored. Every country has the right based on Article 9 of the Safeguards Agreement to accept or reject the proposed inspectors of the IAEA and can also change its decision after accepting them, Kamalvandi noted. This sovereign right is not limited to Iran but belongs to all countries and they exercise it in some cases, he stressed. As for IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi's remarks about a nuclear agreement with Iran other than the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Kamalvandi said no one but the IAEA chief has so far talked about a JCPOA 2 and such a stance is strange and unexpected. Grossi has recently said talks with Iran may need a new framework. "Trying to put (it) back into the JCPOA box wouldn't work," Grossi said. "You can still call it a JCPOA, but it should be a JCPOA 2.0 or something because you have to adapt."



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

## VP Terms Zionist Regime's Crimes in Gaza as Genocide

TEHRAN - Vice-President of Iran Mohammad Mokhber has criticized the international community for not bearing its responsibility towards massacre of the children and women in Gaza, describing what is happening in the Palestinian lands these days as genocide and crime against humanity. Mokhber made the remarks in a meeting held in Tehran with the visiting Head of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party Liu Jianchao. In the meeting, Mokhber appreciated China for its stance on the Gaza events and its support for the Islamic Republic to become a member of the BRICS emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). As the vice-president underlined, Iran is ready to prepare the ground for further investment and economic ties between the two countries. Mokhber referred to the 25-year document on comprehensive cooperation between Iran and China as a good ground for serving the two countries' national interests. He expressed hope that mutual agreements would be implemented as the two are following up the issue. For his part, the Chinese official pointed out to exchange of delegations between Beijing and Tehran as an indication of expansion of cooperation. Censuring the U.S. unilateral sanctions, Jianchao called for finding proper ways to upgrade the level of bilateral ties. Earlier, the Chinese official and his 12-member delegation met with the head of Iran's house of political parties Qodratoli Heshmatian in Tehran and reviewed promotion of cooperation based on mutual respect. Meanwhile

Iran's top security official hailed the role China has played in the United Nations Security Council to support the oppressed people of Palestine. Ali Akbar Ahmadian, who serves as Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), said in a meeting with visiting Head of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party Liu Jianchao that Iran and China can join hands to form a united global front against the Israeli atrocities in Gaza. "The Zionist regime's war machine in Gaza has to be stopped through multifaceted international efforts," said Ahmadian in the meeting. He also emphasized the need for upgrading political, economic and trade relations between Iran and China based on a 25-year partnership agreement signed between the two countries, which sets out general strategies and guidelines for bilateral cooperation. The Chinese official, for his part, said his country is ready to expand its cooperation with Iran in all fields based on the strategic partnership deal. He described Iran as a connecting bridge between East and West of the world and said the country is a major component in China's global transport project known as One Belt One Road. He also appreciated Iran's role in maintaining peace and stability in the Western Asia region and said that Beijing supports Iran's policies to guarantee sustainable security in the region. The senior Chinese diplomat said that the United States continues to play a negative role in many parts of the world by sticking to its interventionist policies, adding that Iran and China should cooperate to confront US unilateralism.

## Very Horrific Days Await Israel



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Despite the Israeli regime's ongoing attacks against the Gaza Strip, Iran's foreign minister said that the Gaza-based Palestinian resistance is bringing increasingly worsening battleground conditions to the aggressor. The resistance has so far faced the regime's aggression with a powerful response, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said in a phone call with Qatari counterpart Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani. Given the current trend, the upcoming days are going to be horrific for the invading Israeli forces, the top Iranian diplomat added. Israel began the genocidal war on Gaza on October 7 after the territory's resistance groups launched an operation against the occupied territories earlier that day in response to the regime's decades-long campaign of bloodletting and devastation against Palestinians. Amir-Abdollahian's remarks came a day after Hamas declared that it had worked out a major defensive plan in the face of the Israeli onslaught. "We are sure that we will emerge victorious out of this war," Ali Baraka, head of Hamas' National Relations Abroad, told Lebanon's al-Ahed news website. He added that the Israeli military had failed dismally to attain any of its declared objectives, including the destruction of Hamas, the release of Israeli captives, and the permanent displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. The Iranian and Qatari officials, meanwhile, condemned the regime's crimes against women and children in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, where the regime has also intensified its deadly violence against Palestinians. They urged prompt international action towards immediate cessation of the regime's war crimes and genocide against the Palestinian people and its flagrant violation of international law, and emphasized the need for extensive transfer of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. Elsewhere in their remarks, the top diplomats expressed support for the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' efforts aimed at cessation of the Israeli regime's attacks against the people of Gaza.

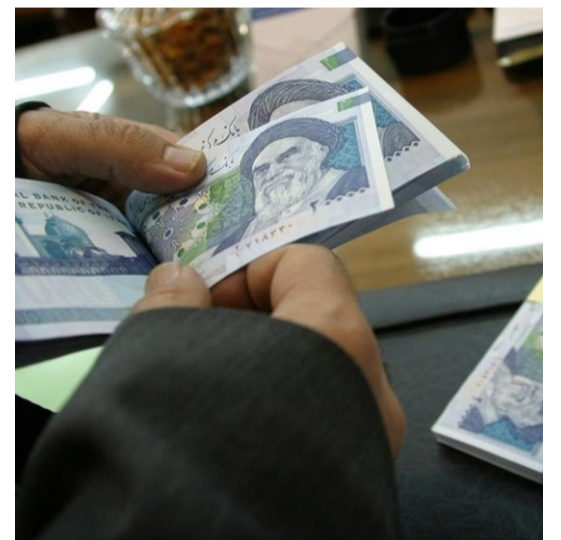
## Iran, Tajikistan Discover Agro Experience Alternate

DUSHANBE (Dispatches) - Tajikistan's Minister of Agriculture, Qurbon Hakimzoda, and Iran's Ambassador to Tajikistan, Alireza Haghghian, mentioned the alternate of experience within the agricultural sector. During the assembly, each side expressed eager curiosity in fostering productive cooperation and implementing the phrases outlined within the Memorandum between the Ministry of Agriculture of Tajikistan and the Ministry of Agriculture of Iran on agricultural cooperation. This consists of collaboration in seed farming, animal husbandry, poultry farming, fisheries, in addition to incorporating Iranian improvements in agricultural product packaging. Moreover, the discussions encompassed issues

associated to the import of agricultural equipment and different industry-related issues. The collaboration between Tajikistan and Iran is rising stronger. On November 8, 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, accompanied by a high-level political and financial delegation. During the go to, Iran and Tajikistan signed 18 paperwork outlining cooperation. These paperwork cowl a commerce and financial roadmap for the two nations from 2023 to 2030, the abolition of visa necessities, joint efforts to fight drug trafficking, transportation and transit agreements, emergency administration methods, the institution of a joint free commerce zone, cultural and academic initiatives, and extra.



## Iran, Oman Officials Encourage Trade in Local Currencies



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran and Oman's Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Development both emphasized the importance of strengthening monetary ties between the countries by using their national currencies in commercial transactions rather than the dollar. CBI Chief Mohammad Reza Farzin highlighted the historical context of economic ties between the two countries, stating, "We welcome any action that leads to the expansion of monetary and banking cooperation between Iran and Oman." Farzin emphasized the importance of bolstering monetary and banking connections alongside other bilateral relations. He suggested specialized sessions between banking and economic bodies as a means to increase financial transactions, acknowledging new prospects in recent Iran-Oman relations. Oman's Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Development Qais bin Mohammed Al Yousef, for his part, emphasized strengthening monetary and banking relations to ease trade, pointing to Oman and Iran's economic potentials. Al Yousef highlighted the significance of using national currencies in economic collaborations, noting a 41% trade volume growth in the current year's first eight months. He stressed the importance of infrastructure development and Omani investment participation in Iranian projects, particularly in the energy and gas sectors. He also expressed Oman's readiness to boost economic cooperation through various methods, emphasizing the necessity of financial transfers to achieve mutual investments and collaborations.



## Egypt Urged to Unconditionally Open Rafah Crossing to Allow Gazans Access to Basic Needs

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has urged Egypt to "unconditionally" open the Rafah crossing to allow the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip immediate access to medicine, food, and fuel. "It is highly expected that top authorities in Egypt will open the Rafah border crossing unconditionally to send medicine, food and fuel to the entire Gaza [Strip]," Amir-Abdollahian said in a post on X on Wednesday. "Today, the eyes of the women and children of Gaza, who are without water, medicine, or food, are on the Rafah border and [they are waiting for] Egypt's decisive decision," he wrote. The Rafah border, located in the south of the Gaza Strip, is one of two main crossings for inhabitants of Gaza and the only crossing that is not directly controlled by the Israeli regime. All goods and humanitarian aid cross through the Rafah border. But because of the blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel, the border has only intermittently been open to Palestinians. Palestinians have accused Egypt of bolstering the Israeli blockade of Gaza by refusing to reopen the Rafah crossing.

### Italy Officially Withdraws From China's Belt and Road Project

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Italy has withdrawn from China's vast Belt and Road infrastructure initiative, more than four years after becoming the only G7 nation to sign up to the strategy. The long-expected decision was communicated to Beijing three days ago, according to Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera, which first broke the news. The newspaper reported that neither side has published an official communication, at the request of the Chinese side. An Italian government source confirmed to French press agency AFP that Rome had pulled out. The source gave no details beyond saying it was done in such a way as to "keep channels of political dialogue open." Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has long been opposed to Italy's participation in an initiative viewed by many as an attempt by Beijing to buy political influence, and whose benefits to Rome were limited. The deal was due to be automatically renewed in March 2024 unless Italy opted out by the end of this year. But Meloni and her hard-right government were also wary of provoking Beijing and risking retaliation against Italian companies.



### Armenia, Azerbaijan Agree to Take Steps Towards Normalization



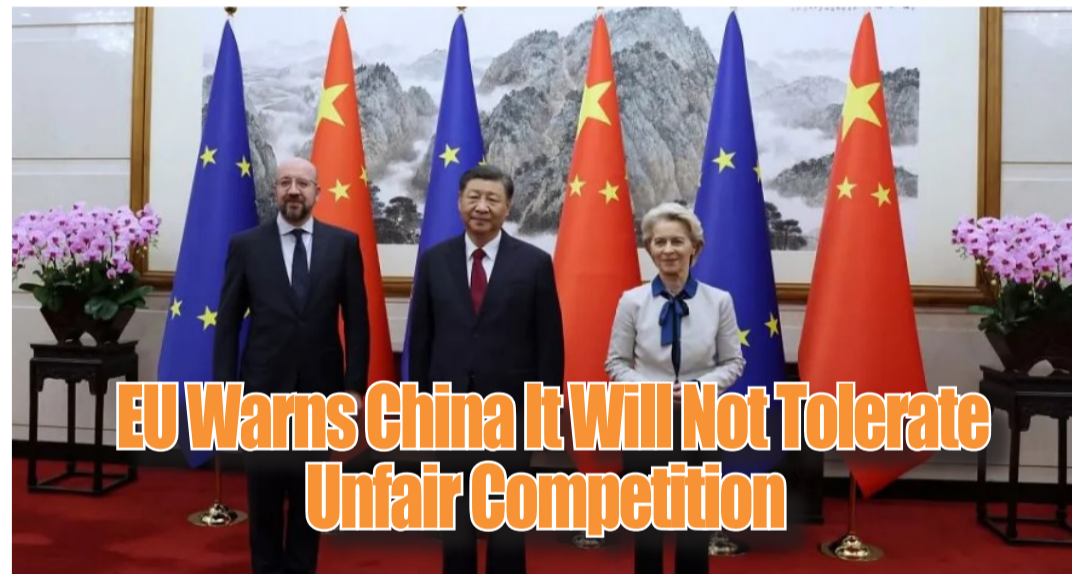
YEREVAN (Dispatches) - Arch-foes Armenia and Azerbaijan said Thursday they would exchange prisoners of war and work towards normalising their relations, in a joint statement hailed by the European Union and the United States as a breakthrough after three decades of conflict over disputed territory. The Caucasus neighbors have long fought over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which Azerbaijan reclaimed after a lightning offensive against Armenian separatists in September. Both countries have said a peace agreement could be signed by the end of the year, but peace talks -- mediated separately by the European Union, the United States and Russia -- have seen little progress. The two sides agreed in Thursday's joint statement to seize "a historical chance to achieve a long-awaited peace in the region." "The two countries reconfirm their intention to normalize relations and to reach the peace treaty," the statement said. Baku will free 32 Armenian prisoners of war, while Yerevan will release two Azerbaijani servicemen, according to the statement. They also agreed to continue discussions on "more confidence building measures, effective in the near future." As a sign of good faith, Armenia announced it was withdrawing its bid to host UN-led climate talks next year, paving the way for Azerbaijan's candidacy. The annual negotiations on fighting climate change, known as COPs, rotate among regions and were due to be hosted by an Eastern European country in 2024 after this year's COP28 in Dubai. "As a sign of good gesture, the Republic of Armenia supports the bid of the Republic of Azerbaijan to host (COP29) by withdrawing its own candidacy," the statement read. "Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan do hope that the other countries within the Eastern European Group will also support Azerbaijan's bid to host." A grouping of Eastern European nations must unanimously choose the COP29 host, but Russia is reportedly opposing an EU member holding the event as tensions with the bloc run high during the war in Ukraine. Non-EU countries Armenia and Azerbaijan were both seen as candidates, but Baku's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh has escalated tensions with Moscow. Armenia's foreign ministry said Yerevan had "responded positively to the offer of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to organize the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington." EU Council President Charles Michel praised the statement, calling it a "key step." "Delighted to welcome a major breakthrough in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations as they issue a joint statement," he wrote on social media. The United States also welcomed the steps by the two countries. "This commitment represents an important confidence building measure as the sides work to finalize a peace agreement and normalize relations," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a statement Thursday.



### Denmark Adopts Law Banning Burning of Quran and Other Holy Texts

COPENHAGEN (Dispatches) - Denmark's parliament on Thursday adopted a law criminalizing the "inappropriate treatment" of religious texts, effectively banning Holy Quran burnings after a series of desecrations of Islam's holy book sparked anger in Muslim countries over the summer. The bill, which prohibits "inappropriate treatment of writings with significant religious importance for a recognized religious community", was passed with 94 votes in favor and 77 opposed in the 179-seat Folketing. "We must protect the security of Denmark and the Danes. Therefore, it is important that we now have better protection against the systematic insults we have seen for a long time," Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard said in a statement. In practical terms, it will be forbidden to burn, tear or otherwise defile holy texts publicly or in videos intended to be disseminated widely. Those who break the law, which will be evaluated after three years, risk a fine or up to two years in prison. Over the summer, Denmark and neighboring Sweden became the focus of anger across several Muslim countries after a slew of protests involving burnings and desecrations of the Quran. Nearly a thousand protesters attempted to march to the Danish embassy in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone in late July following a call by firebrand cleric Moqtada Sadr. In response to the worsened security situation, the Scandinavian country temporarily tightened border controls, but returned to normal on August 22. Between July 21 and October 24 this year, 483 book burnings or flag burnings were recorded in Denmark, according to national police figures. Initially announced at the end of August, the bill was amended following

criticism that its first draft limited freedom of expression and would be difficult to enforce. It was originally planned to cover objects of significant religious importance. The first draft was also criticized by some -- including politicians, artists, media and freedom of speech experts -- as a return to a blasphemy law that Denmark abolished in 2017. During a lengthy debate in parliament ahead of the vote, opposition lawmakers railed against the government, accusing it of sacrificing freedom of expression. "It is a betrayal. A huge failure on the part of the government," Inger Stojberg, leader of far-right Denmark Democrats, told parliament. In 2006, a wave of anti-Danish anger and violence erupted in the Muslim world following the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed. "Imagine that we are becoming the generation that curtailed freedom of speech. I hadn't actually thought this would be -- and certainly not after the Muhammad crisis. Back then, we stood firm," Stojberg said. In neighboring Sweden, the government has condemned desecrations of the Quran at protests while upholding the country's constitutionally protected freedom of speech and assembly laws. It has vowed to explore legal means of stopping protests involving the burning of holy texts in certain circumstances. Denmark is not the only European country to have banned burnings of the Quran. According to Denmark's justice ministry, eight European countries -- Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland and Romania -- do so to varying degrees. In Greece, for example, the burning of a sacred text can be banned if the act takes place in or near a religious site.



### EU Warns China It Will Not Tolerate Unfair Competition

BEIJING (Dispatches) - "Competition needs to be fair. We insist on fair competition within the single market, therefore we also insist on fair competition from companies that come to our single market," the European Commission president told reporters in Beijing. Her warning came following the first in-person meeting between EU leaders and President Xi in five years. But despite the high stakes of the summit, happening amidst heightened geopolitical tensions and an increasingly fraught trade relationship, no new commitments emerged from either side. The EU is concerned that Beijing's import restrictions and generous subsidies for China-based firms are putting European companies at an unfair disadvantage, inflating the bloc's massive trade deficit with China. China is the EU's biggest trading partner, with trade in goods amounting to a staggering €2.3 billion every day. But EU imports from China now exceed its exports by almost €400 billion. This deficit has grown tenfold in the past 20 years and doubled over the past two years. According to von der Leyen, "such imbalances are just unsustainable." "I'm glad that we agreed with President Xi that trade should be balanced between the two of us," she added. Discussions on redressing trade imbalances with Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang were in-depth and delved down into the facts and figures, von der Leyen said, although no concrete measures to address the imbalances immediately emerged from the meeting. "We expect China to take more concrete action to improve market access and the investment environment for foreign companies," European Council President Charles Michel, also present at the meeting, said. According to Chinese state television, Premier Li had told both EU leaders that China opposes the "politicisation" of economic and trade ties. The EU has adopted a "de-risking" approach amid fears that its entrenched reliance on China for critical materials used in cleantech applications could erode its industries and jeopardize its security. This means using the EU's trade and domestic defence tools, such as its ongoing anti-subsidy probe into low-cost China-made electric cars that are flooding the EU market. Von der Leyen insisted de-risking is not

"exclusive to China" and highlighted that Beijing's so-called self-reliance strategy is similar to the EU's plan. She also emphasised the bloc was not looking to de-couple its economy from China's as it has done from Russia's in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Both von der Leyen and Michel used their trip to urge Xi to do more to crack down on sanctions circumvention, where Chinese firms are suspected of indirectly feeding the Kremlin's war campaign in Ukraine. The bloc suspects that everyday products -- including those made in the EU -- that include components needed to manufacture drones, missiles and artillery shells are being re-exported to Russia through China. Member states have been pushing to include sanctions on Chinese companies suspected of facilitating sanctions circumvention in the EU's 12th package of sanctions, currently under negotiation. A senior EU official said that while the overall export of high-priority battlefield items from China to Russia has declined, the latest data suggests exports of so-called "dual-use goods" that could be redirected for military purposes are on the rise. According to Michel, the EU has identified a list of companies "suspected of playing a role in circumventing sanctions." Von der Leyen said that China's position on the war in Ukraine will "also define" EU-China relations. China has taken a neutral stance on the war and proposed a 12-point peace plan for Ukraine in March this year, but has refrained from severing ties with Putin. Leaders also broached the thorny issue of the ongoing war in the Middle East and the complex path to lasting peace in the region. "We agree that getting lifesaving aid to the most vulnerable must be a top priority," Michel said. The EU is the biggest donor of aid to the Palestinian territories and has quadrupled its humanitarian aid to €100 million this year in response to the crisis engulfing the Gaza Strip. China's response fades in comparison, offering \$2 million (€1.86 million) in additional humanitarian assistance since the conflict erupted in October. A senior EU official said that the summit was an opportunity for von der Leyen and Michel to put pressure on China to scale up its humanitarian response.



### Ukraine Says Russian Forces Use Aviation, Keep Pushing on Avdiivka

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian forces relied heavily on aerial attacks on Thursday in their slow-moving campaign to win control of eastern Ukraine and resorted to new smaller attack groups in pressing to capture the beleaguered town of Avdiivka. Moscow has focused its attention on the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk since failing to advance on Kyiv in the early days of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It has set its sights since mid-October on Avdiivka, a gateway to the Russian-held regional centre of Donetsk -- 20 km (12 miles) to the east. The town has resisted capture while coming under sustained enemy fire. "For the second day in a row, occupying forces have been actively using kamikaze drones and aviation. And the number of combat clashes has significantly increased," Ukrainian military spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun told national television. Russian losses were mounting sharply in terms of both men and equipment in the southern theatre of operations, he said. Ukraine's General Staff, in its evening bulletin, said its forces had rebuffed 15 attacks in Avdiivka and nearby villages, in addition to 34 attacks reported in its morning account. Media outlet Espresso TV said Russian forces were pressing from the north but had made no inroads into the "industrial zone" outside the city centre. Ukrainian serviceman Andriy Shyshuk said the new Russian tactic involved sending groups of up to five men into action and, with the backing of armoured vehicles and air cover, opening up bursts of heavy fire as they advance. Shyshuk said the Russian forces had made little progress. He echoed President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's call for more fortifications around towns and other defensive points, but said this should be done by "engineering units, not assault units." Fortifications were erected around Avdiivka after Ukrainian forces recaptured the town from Russian-financed separatists who seized it briefly in 2014 as they captured chunks of eastern Ukraine.

### Greece, Turkey Vow to Work on Improving Relations



ATHENS (Dispatches) - Greece and Turkey on Thursday restarted high-level talks to reduce chronic tensions in their relations as the Turkish president visited Athens for the first time in six years. "There is no problem that cannot be solved between us," Recep Tayyip Erdogan said during a media appearance with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, adding that he wanted to turn "the Aegean into a sea of peace and cooperation." "We want to further develop the positive momentum in our relations," Erdogan said. Erdogan was in Athens for the first time since 2017 after a long period of tension marked by disputes over migration, energy exploration in the Aegean and territorial sovereignty. Erdogan had earlier questioned century-old treaties that set out Aegean sovereignty, and Turkish and Greek warplanes regularly engage in mock dogfights in disputed airspace. The discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean has further complicated ties, with Ankara angering Athens in 2019 by signing a controversial maritime zone deal with Libya. Last year, Erdogan accused Greece of "occupying" Aegean islands and threatened: "As we say, we may come suddenly one night." The tension prompted Mitsotakis to announce a military buildup in naval and air force equipment, and sign defensive agreements with France and the United States. But relations have improved since February, when Greece sent rescuers and aid to Turkey after a massive earthquake killed at least 50,000 people. On Thursday, Mitsotakis acknowledged that relations had been "dangerously threatened" in past years but were now on a "calmer path." "I feel a historic debt to utilise the opportunity to bring the two nations side by side, as are our borders," Mitsotakis said. The two leaders agreed on a roadmap for political dialogue, low-level fields of cooperation and confidence-building steps, the Greek prime minister said. Greek and Turkish ministers held a meeting of the high cooperation council, a bilateral body that last convened in 2016. "The fact that we are holding the high cooperation meeting today after seven years is a sign of our good will," Erdogan said. "I think that we will not take such a break for the next meeting and that it would be beneficial to meet at least once a year," he added. Mitsotakis said Athens had agreed with the European Union to grant seven-day visas to Turkish citizens to visit nearly a dozen Aegean islands. Greece and Turkey also signed a non-binding declaration of friendship and will work towards doubling their bilateral trade to \$10 billion (9.3 billion euros). The declaration said the two states would refrain from aggressive statements and take steps to reduce military tension. "We are two neighboring countries that share the same sea, the same geography, the same climate and even the same culture in many areas," Erdogan said.

### Putin Visits Saudi Arabia, UAE on Middle East Tour

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Saudi Arabia after visiting the United Arab Emirates, making a rare trip abroad as Moscow seeks to reassert itself on the global stage. It is only the third trip the Russian leader has taken outside the former Soviet Union since he invaded Ukraine, following visits to Iran and China, and comes as Moscow seeks to bolster its influence in the Middle East. Putin was seen greeting the country's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, before the two briefly sat down for televised talks. "Nothing can prevent the development of our friendly relations," Putin told Prince Mohammed, inviting the Saudi royal to visit Moscow. "It is very important for all of us to exchange information and assessments with you on what is happening in the region. Our meeting is certainly timely," Putin said. Prince Mohammed said bilateral cooperation had "helped remove many tensions in the Middle East and contributed to enhancing security" -- and would continue to do so in the future. The Kremlin said ahead of the meeting that the two would discuss oil markets, as well as ways to promote de-escalation in the war in Gaza. Since March, Putin has been wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court over the invasion of Ukraine. He skipped the BRICS summit in August in South Africa, which recognises the

ICC, to avoid causing a "political show", and missed the G20 summit in India in September. But neither the UAE nor Saudi Arabia have signed the ICC's founding treaty, meaning they are not obliged to arrest him. The Russian leader was earlier welcomed with a full cavalry escort and motorcade in the UAE, where he met President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. A national air show team drew a Russian flag with coloured fumes in the sky. "Today, thanks to your posture, our relations have reached unprecedented levels," Putin told his counterpart at the presidential palace, saying the UAE was "Russia's main trading partner in the Arab world". Bilateral trade hit a record \$9 billion last year, according to the Kremlin, and Putin said "a number of projects" were underway in the oil and gas sector. The UAE is currently hosting the COP28 UN climate talks, but the Kremlin did not specify whether Putin attended any related events. With Moscow largely adapted to Western sanctions thanks to rebounding oil revenues, and its military fending off a Ukrainian counteroffensive in recent months, analysts say Putin may be sensing reviving fortunes. "Putin has certainly been speaking more confidently now than any time since the war began," said Nigel Gould-Davies, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.





## Man City Slump to Fourth After Defeat at Villa

LONDON (Dispatches) - Champions Manchester City lost further ground in the Premier League title race when they went down 1-0 at Aston Villa after Liverpool beat bottom club Sheffield United. Leon Bailey's deflected strike after a surging run in the 74th minute sealed Villa's club record-equalling 14th successive home league win as they moved above City into third place. City, who have now gone four league games without a win, could have few complaints as they were comprehensively outplayed in all departments by Unai Emery's side in Birmingham. It was Emery's first victory against a Pep Guardiola side at the 14th time of asking. Liverpool eased to a 2-0 victory over Sheffield United for whom Chris Wilder was back in the technical area after returning on Tuesday following the sacking of Paul Heckingbottom. Virgil van Dijk's first-half volley and a late effort by Dominik Szoboszlai were enough for Jurgen Klopp's side who closed the gap on leaders Arsenal to two points. Arsenal, who enjoyed a last-gasp 4-3 win at Luton Town on Tuesday, have 36 points from 15 games with Liverpool on 34, Villa on 32 and City in fourth spot on 30 points. Manchester United bounced back from the weekend defeat by Newcastle United with Scott McTominay's double securing a 2-1 victory against Chelsea at Old Trafford. The pressure is mounting on Nottingham Forest manager Steve Cooper after his side slumped to a 5-0 defeat at Fulham while Bournemouth eased further clear of the relegation places with a 2-0 victory at sliding Crystal Palace. Eighth-placed Brighton & Hove Albion beat Brentford 2-1. Guardiola spoke confidently ahead of the Villa game of City's quest for a record fourth successive Premier League title -- predicting his side would come out on top. But Wednesday's display will have given fresh impetus to all the clubs attempting to stop them. City managed only two goals attempts all game to

Villa's 22 as they produced a jaded-looking performance at Villa Park. Bailey deservedly won the game for his side when he surged forward and struck a shot that took a big deflection off Ruben Dias to leave keeper Ederson with no chance of making a save. Apart from a couple of efforts by Erling Haaland, both saved by Emiliano Martinez, City were anaemic. "Aston Villa were better, they played a fantastic game and we struggled. The better team won," Guardiola said. "We struggled in the first half especially. The second half was different but in the final third the final pass and the quality and the movement was not there." It was a momentous night for Villa and their manager Emery who has transformed the Midlands club in little more than a year since replacing Steven Gerrard. "We have to believe we are in the top four now," the Spaniard, who faces his old club Arsenal at the weekend, told Amazon Prime. "Tonight was fantastic but we have to stay steady for Saturday." Liverpool are now unbeaten in eight games, although they were made to work hard against Sheffield. "I would have taken 1-0 as it was nervy, each throw-in was the most dangerous situation, it was really difficult to defend but we came through that," Klopp said. "We take the three points and keep going, recover and go again." Manchester United's chequered season continues as they claimed a well-deserved win against Chelsea to sit in sixth place in the table with 27 points, three behind City. Chelsea are 10th on 19 points. McTominay netted his first goal in the 19th minute, firing in a rebound after Harry Maguire's shot was blocked. Cole Palmer levelled just before halftime when he threaded a left-footed shot through defender Victor Lindelof's legs and past keeper Andre Onana but McTominay headed the winner in the 69th minute from Alejandro Garnacho's cross.

## Kyrgios, Raducanu Missing From Australian Open Entry List



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Showstopper Nick Kyrgios and former US Open champion Emma Raducanu were notable absences Thursday from the 2024 Australian Open entry list, but Rafael Nadal and Naomi Osaka are set for their Grand Slam comebacks. Fiery Australian Kyrgios, the one-time world number 13, had knee surgery in January and then aborted plans to return at Wimbledon after tearing a ligament in his wrist. Australian Open boss Craig Tiley recently said he expected Kyrgios to be at the opening Grand Slam of the year in "some form" and he could be granted a wildcard. Briton Raducanu was also missing from the automatic entry list. The 21-year-old, who stunned the tennis world when she won the US Open as a qualifier aged 18, has been out of action since April after undergoing operations on both wrists and an ankle. She pulled out of her scheduled comeback at an exhibition tournament in Macau this month, but was targeting the beginning of 2024 for her return. Raducanu only has a protected ranking of 103, meaning she missed out on entry to Melbourne Park and will have to go through qualifying to earn a start or rely on other players dropping out. She could also get a wildcard. These are often reserved for Australians, but Dane Caroline Wozniacki, the 2018 Australian Open champion, was handed one when the first batch of seven were announced yesterday. Nadal and Osaka, as expected, will make their Grand Slam comebacks after both entered the lead-up Brisbane International. Spain's 22-time Grand Slam winner Nadal has not played since this year's Australian Open due to injury, and has a protected ranking of nine. Japan's Osaka gave birth to daughter Shai in July and has not played since September 2022, having also struggled with her mental health. She has a special ranking -- used by the Women's Tennis Association for players returning from pregnancy leave -- of 46. The Australian Open runs from January 14-28, with Aryna Sabalenka defending the women's title and Novak Djokovic the men's.

## Curry, Warriors Close Door on Blazers in Final Seconds

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry saved 22 of his game-high 31 points for the second half, capped by a clinching 3-pointer with 10 seconds remaining, and the Golden State Warriors rallied past the Portland Trail Blazers 110-106 in San Francisco. Draymond Green missed a triple-double by one assist and three Warriors came off the bench for 12 or more points as Golden State returned from a three-day break to outlast the Trail Blazers in their first of three meetings this month. Golden State won for the first time this season after trailing at halftime, having gone 0-7 in such contests previously. In his first game since suffering a torn ligament in his right thumb on opening night, Anfernee Simons poured in 28 points and Shaedon Sharpe had 26 points for the Trail Blazers, who lost despite outscoring Golden State 48-30 on 3-pointers. With Curry going 1-for-6 and Klay Thompson 0-for-4, the Warriors were just 2-for-16 from long range in the first half en route to a 55-48 deficit. Portland went on to lead by as many as 11 before Curry ignited a rally with 17 points in the third quarter, getting the Warriors within arm's length and setting up his late heroics. The Trail Blazers took their last lead at 100-99 on two Simons free throws with 3:43 remaining, but then scored just six points the rest of the way. Meanwhile, Jonathan Kuminga turned a pair of Green assists into layups, and Klay Thompson hit just his third hoop of the night, a layup that also came from Green, for a three-point advantage with 1:59 left. Then Curry, after Matisse Thybulle hit a 3-pointer to make it a one-point game with 51.1 seconds to go, drilled his difference-maker from beyond the arc to secure the win. Curry finished 5-for-13 on treys. Kuminga finished with 13 points, all in the second half, as did fellow reserve Dario Saric, while Moses Moody, another backup, added 12, Thompson 11 and Green 10 to go with 10 rebounds and nine assists. Simons shot 6-for-13 on 3-pointers, while Sharpe was 4-for-9. Jabari Walker contributed 12 points off the bench and Duop Reath had 10 for Portland, while Toumani Camara grabbed 13 rebounds before fouling out.



## Patriots Hold Off Steelers Rally to Snap Losing Streak



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tight end Hunter Henry celebrated his birthday with two touchdowns as the New England Patriots snapped their five-game NFL losing streak with a 21-18 upset of the Pittsburgh Steelers on Thursday. Henry hauled in two touchdown passes from quarterback Bailey Zappe in the second quarter as the Patriots raced into what turned out to be a decisive 21-3 lead at a frigid Acrisure Stadium in Pittsburgh. The Steelers threatened to reel in the New England lead after moving to within three points early in the fourth quarter, but the rally ran out of steam as New England hung on for only their third win of a disappointing season. "We started fast, put some points on the board and played from ahead, which is what we've been wanting to do," Henry, 29, said after the victory. "We were desperate to score some touchdowns and I was able to come up big tonight. I couldn't have done it without the other guys though." The Patriots improved to 3-10 for the season but remain firmly rooted to the foot of the AFC East behind Miami, Buffalo and the New York Jets. Thursday's victory provided some sweet relief for Henry and his team-mates however. "It feels good," Henry said. "It's been a long year, it's been a grind. But winning always feels good, and is always fun." This is a good taste for us and we've got to keep pushing." New England quarterback Zappe finished with three touchdowns and one interception with 240 passing yards, while opposite number Mitch Trubisky rushed for one touchdown and threw for another. The loss was a bitter blow to Pittsburgh's hopes of forcing their way into playoff contention, and came just four days after they lost at home to the Arizona Cardinals, another struggling team. The back-to-back losses mean that instead of a 9-4 record, the Steelers are 7-6 in the AFC North. "It's disappointing," Pittsburgh coach Mike Tomlin said. "We fought in the second half but came up short...this stings but we'll be back."

## Ukraine Very Concerned Over Russian Olympics Call

PARIS (Dispatches) - The Ukrainian government is "very concerned" by the call from sports federations and National Olympic Committees to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete at next year's Paris Olympics, its acting sports minister has told AFP. Matviy Bidnyi said Kyiv was concerned that the move gave the impression that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) "does not want to demonstrate the necessary leadership in the matter of Olympic fairness and justice." Bidnyi -- who replaced his former boss Vadym Gutzeit when he was fired in November -- was reacting after the request to the IOC on Tuesday considerably boosted the hopes of Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as neutral athletes in Paris. The IOC is yet to make a final ruling on whether competitors from Russia and Belarus, a key ally of Moscow in its Ukraine offensive, will be permitted to take part in the Games that run from July 26 to August 11. The IOC has said it will decide "at the appropriate time". Bidnyi said he hoped the IOC would act in as responsible a fashion as it has done on previous occasions since the war began when Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the invasion in February last year. "As aptly stated by President Volodymyr Zelensky: 'Obviously, any neutral flag of Russian athletes is stained with blood,'" said Bidnyi. "We count on a responsible decision and leadership of the IOC, which will not allow Russia to use sport for military propaganda. 'Even if it's sport under a neutral flag.' He cited how the IOC had decided not to formally invite Russia as a team to the Games and more recently that the IOC had shown "responsible leadership" by suspending the membership of the Russian Olympic Committee. "I remind you that Russia is the only country that

has violated the Olympic truce three times," said Bidnyi, referring to 2008, 2014 and 2022. "They do not respect the fundamental values of Olympism: excellence, respect, and friendship. Instead, we respect the principle of neutrality, but 'neutrality' is possible only in peacetime." "When there is a war and one nation with its passports is destroying another nation, then 'neutrality' becomes irresponsibility." Bidnyi said there was only one way that including Russian and Belarusian athletes was acceptable: "Refusal of the Russian passport -- this is the only possible way today for an athlete to prove Olympic excellence is his first priority, and the athlete does not take

on a share of responsibility for the killings of Ukrainians," said the 44-year-old. He said Ukraine welcomed the IOC's move to allow athletes who had previously competed for Russia to switch nationalities. "These athletes have proven by their actions that they do not support the Russian war," Bidnyi claimed that Ukraine's desire for Russian and Belarusian athletes to be banned has support from 40 countries. However, the threat to boycott the Paris Games appears to have receded as many Ukrainians have expressed their wish to strike a blow for their country by beating the Russians in the sporting arena.

