

Iran's Top Diplomat Hossein Amir-Abdollahian Said That All Countries Are Required to Show Support for the Palestinian Nation's Struggle for Freedom From the Israeli Occupation, and Make Efforts to Help Stop the Regime's Crimes in Gaza

# IRAN NEWS

Affirming the Kurdistan Regional Government's Commitment to the Implementation of a Security Agreement Between Tehran and Baghdad, the KRG's Interior Minister Gave an Assurance That Security Will Prevail Along the Common Border

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## Israel's Collapse Imminent



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Highlighting the growing hatred for the Zionist regime across the world, the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps said the Israeli regime will become extinct in the near future. The collapse of the fake Israeli regime is not too distant, a clear sign of which is that the Zionists are so weak that they cannot bear the existence of Palestinian women and children, Major General Hossein Salami said in an address to a cultural conference on Thursday. Lashing out at the Zionist regime for turning the hospitals of Gaza into battlefields and massacring defenseless women and children in Palestine, the IRGC commander said such atrocities have triggered global aversion to Israel. "The world's hatred of Zionists is not confined to Muslims anymore. People have rallied against Zionists even next to the White House and in the streets of London and Europe," he added. He also highlighted the moral, political and economic failure of the US as the main sponsor of Israeli crimes, expressing confidence that Palestine will soon emerge victorious thanks to resistance. Salami also said that the enemies are seeking to deprive Muslim nations of their rights. The commander was speaking on Thursday as he addressed a ceremony to honor 10,000 martyrs of East Azarbaijan Province. The ceremony took place in Tabriz, the capital of the western Iranian province. He said that an example of the enemies' attempts to deprive Muslims of their rights is the ongoing war against Palestinians in Gaza. Salami stated that the enemies bomb homes in Gaza and have turned hospitals into battlefields, and see their victory in killing civilians. But they have attracted public hatred in different countries as people of various nations have expressed support for the Palestinians and vented anger at the Israeli regime, the IRGC commander added. He also said that the authority of Islamic Iran is the lasting legacy of the martyrs, added: "Martyrs brought Iran to the peak of honor, and in the present time, in every part of the world when politicians and personalities are spoken to, they speak of Iran with respect." In remarks on October 3, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei slammed the Zionist regime as a cancer that will be eliminated by the Palestinians and regional resistance forces, warning the governments seeking to normalize ties with Israel that they are backing the wrong horse.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



## Martyrs Are Identity of Iranian Nation

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has described martyrs as the identity of the Iranian nation, saying that the nation should not put its identity into oblivion. The leader made the comment on Dec. 6 as he received organizers of a congress commemorating 10,000 martyrs of East Azarbaijan Province. The text of Ayatollah Khamenei's speech made during the meeting was published on Thursday as the congress kicked off in the provincial capital Tabriz. In his speech, the leader hailed East Azarbaijan as a cradle of martyrs and those sacrificing their lives, stressing that martyrs should not be put into oblivion because they are the identity of the Iranian nation. He said that commemorating martyrs is not merely aimed at recalling their memories, but it is a necessary measure which should be taken at short intervals. The commemoration ceremonies should pave the way for highlighting and transferring to the youth the outstanding characteristics of martyrs, including faith, martyrdom-seeking, devotion and courage, Ayatollah Khamenei added. He said that the spirit of the martyrs should also be introduced to the youth through poems, books and films, as they are the best role model for the young people. Ayatollah Khamenei noted that the young people should also be informed about the reason behind actions taken by the martyrs before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, as well as their sacrifices and courageous acts after the victory of the revolution. If this is done, the spirit of the martyrs will continue. He, meanwhile, called on official media outlets to do more efforts to help the youth understand the main reasons behind the Islamic Revolution, key figures and what the martyrs have done. Unofficial media available to people should be used in that regard as well, the leader added.

## Iran Downplays as Foolish U.S. Plans to Set Up Naval Task Force in Red Sea



TEHRAN - Iran's defense minister has downplayed as "foolish" U.S. plans to establish a maritime task force in the Red Sea with the apparent purpose of protecting Israel-bound vessels in the area. In a stern warning to the United States, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said in remarks published on Thursday that there is no room in the region for outsiders to establish a presence and maneuver. He also expressed confidence that the U.S. would never carry out such a "foolish" act because as it would cause numerous problems. "They (Americans) would not definitely do such a thing. If they intend to do such a foolish act, they will face plenty of problems," the Iranian official warned. The warning came after the Pentagon said last week that it is ready to help set up a maritime task force to protect merchant shipping in the Red Sea following a series of Yemeni attacks on ships, which were either Israeli-owned or heading toward the occupied Palestinian territories. Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden's national security adviser, said on December 4 that such patrols or escorts could be the appropriate response to the targeting of ships in the region. The U.S. has signaled that several pivotal nations have expressed interest in signing on to the maritime task force. In reaction, Yemen's Ansarullah resistance movement dismissed U.S. plans to form a maritime task force in the Red Sea, saying the group has numerous "stinging" pressure levers that can be activated in the strategic body of water. "We have stinging pressure levers against the countries that will participate in the coalition in the Red Sea [against Yemen]," said Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of Ansarullah's political bureau.

## UK Sanctions Quds Force Chief



LONDON (Dispatches) - Britain has introduced a raft of new sanctions targeting head of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Quds Force Gen. Esmail Qaani and several others. British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said Thursday the travel bans and asset freezes were coordinated with Washington. Others in the list included Mohammad Saeed Izadi, a member of the IRGC; Ali Shirazi, an IRGC member; Majid Zarei, an IRGC member; Mustafa Majid Khani, an IRGC member; Khaled Qadoumi, representative of Hamas in Iran; Nasser Abu Sharif, representative of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Iran and the Palestinian branch of the Quds Force. Iran's behavior "poses an unacceptable threat to the UK and our partners," Cameron claimed, accusing the country of threatening people on UK soil and using its influence to "destabilize the Middle East through support to armed groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad". Washington, which had already sanctioned most of those targeted by London, announced it was joining Britain in sanctioning Zarei, whom it claimed supported Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movements. The UK has targeted more than 350 Iranian individuals and organizations, including other leading IRGC commanders and Tehran's prosecutor general. The US and the European Union have also imposed their own sanctions. For decades, Iran has been the target of the most severe economic and financial sanctions of the United States and its allies, directly endangering the lives of Iran's most vulnerable population, including children, the elderly, and patients. Unilateral coercive measures are employed by certain states as a method of war to starve innocent civilians which violate the UN Charter and international law.

## Southeastern Iran Terrorist Assault Claims 11 Police Lives

TEHRAN - A terrorist attack on a police post in southeastern Iran has martyred 11 police forces and injured six others. Iranian media report quoting some provincial officials that the attack occurred early on Friday in Rask County in Sistan and Baluchestan province. Iran's police spokesman General Saeed Montazer-al-Mahdi slammed the "cowardly" and "blind" terror attack in a short statement on Friday morning. He said that police forces had neutralized several terrorists in the firefight, noting that the situation was fully under control. The spokesman said a special team of police officials has been deployed to the area at the order of police commander General Ahmadreza Radan. Alireza Marhamati, deputy governor of Sistan and Baluchestan Province in security and political affairs, said that terrorists staged the attack at around 2:00 AM against the headquarters of Rask Police. He said that 11 police forces, including officers and conscripts, were killed in the attack. Some of the injured are in critical condition, Marhamati added. The Pakistan-based so-called Jaish-al-Adl terror group claimed responsibility for the attack. Majid Mirahmadi, the deputy interior minister for security and police affairs, said the terrorists attacked the police post from several directions and later ambushed reinforcements deployed to the location. He said two of the terrorists were killed and one of them was injured and arrested in hours-long clashes, while the rest escaped. Six police forces were injured during the exchange of fire, he said. The region is sealed off and the search for the perpetrators is underway, added the official. Iranian police forces have flown helicopters over the region to hunt down the terrorists. The group has conducted several bomb attacks and kidnappings in southeastern Iran targeting both civilians and security forces over the past years.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

## Iran Warns UN Refugee Chief of Dangerous Israeli Plan to Forcibly Relocate Gazans



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has warned the United Nations refugee chief of the Israeli regime's plan to forcibly relocate Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which is subject to an unrelenting Israeli war. The top diplomat made the remarks to Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), on Thursday in Geneva, where he attended the Global Refugee Forum 2023 earlier during his stay. Speaking to Grandi, Amir-Abdollahian expressed concern about the Israeli regime's "dangerous" measures aimed at bringing about an exodus of Palestinians from the northern part of Gaza to the southern parts of the coastal sliver and from there to neighboring countries. The Israeli regime has been waging a genocidal war against Gaza since October 7 following an operation staged by the territory's resistance groups, dubbed Operation al-Aqsa Storm. Also on Thursday, Gaza's Health Ministry said nearly 18,800 people, mostly women and children, had been killed in the Israeli strikes so far. Palestinian and other regional officials have warned that through its unbridled aggression, the Israeli regime pursues a policy of resettling the people of Gaza in Egypt. Amir-Abdollahian urged that the UNHCR and other responsible international organizations refrain from adopting discriminatory approaches towards refugees from various countries and the countries that host them. He, meanwhile, pointed to the Islamic Republic's hosting of millions of foreign refugees, and the extensive services that the country renders to them, despite suffering from oppressive and unilateral United States-imposed sanctions.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iranian Startups, Platforms Ready to Offer Quality Services in Iraq

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – An official at the Iranian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (ICT) said that the competent startups of the country have voiced their readiness to offer quality services to neighboring Iraq. Iran's Deputy Minister of Communications and Information Technology (ICT) Mohammad Khansari, in a videoconference meeting with Chief Executive of Iraqi Telecommunication and Post Company (ITPC) Zainab Abdulsahab Abboud Al-Banna, briefed her on the capabilities, achievements and services of major Iranian startups and platforms in the field of e-commerce. During the meeting on Wednesday, popular and successful Iranian platforms active in different fields including e-commerce, logistics, transport of the postal service and provision of e-commerce software infrastructures, presented a comprehensive report on the highlights of their activities and services to the Iraqi authorities and expressed their readiness to have a strong presence in the markets of the neighboring country. The directors of the Iranian platforms also responded to the questions raised by Iraqi officials in the relevant fields.

## Trade With Neighboring Countries Hits \$38.6b



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran has exchanged as much as 63 million tons of products worth \$38.6 billion with 15 neighboring countries in the eight calendar months to November 22, according to Head of the country's customs administration. Mohammad Rezvanifar said that Iran's eight-month trade with neighboring countries registered 11.42% and 17.21% year-on-year increases in terms of value and tonnage, respectively. The official noted that Iran has exported some \$18.38 billion worth of goods from the neighboring countries, also importing \$20.24 billion from these countries in the period under review. He said that the value of Iran's exports to neighboring countries shows a 20.75 hike in comparison to last year's corresponding period. Rezvanifar also added that Iran's imports from its neighbors is up 6.87% in value terms YOY while increasing 13.95% in terms of tonnage.

# Iran Lifts Visa Rules for 33 Countries Including Persian Gulf States



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – The government said it was lifting visa requirements for 33 countries, including Persian Gulf states like Saudi Arabia. "The ministry of tourism believes that an open-door policy will showcase Iran's determination to engage with different countries of the world," ISNA reported on Thursday. The decision will increase to 45 the number of countries or territories whose citizens can visit Iran without needing to obtain a visa, it said. The move is another step towards thawing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular after years of tension between the two oil-producing countries. Iran and Saudi agreed to restore full diplomatic relations, severed in 2016, under a Chinese-mediated agreement in March. Nationals of Saudi

Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are included in the decision to waive visa requirements, in addition to Bahrain, with whom Tehran has not yet re-established full ties. ISNA gave a full list of the countries, which included Lebanon, Tunisia, India, several Central Asian, African and "Muslim" nations. Only one Western-allied European nation was on the list, Croatia, a small member of the European Union and NATO. "Russians will only profit from this visa exemption if they are visiting the country in groups," ISNA added. Omani nationals had been able to travel to Iran visa-free prior to this announcement. Iranian pilgrims will for the first time in eight years begin regular travel to Saudi Arabia from Dec. 19, Iranian media reported on Wednesday.

## Over 150,000 Trips Under Visa-Free Exchange Between Russia, China, Iran



TEHRAN (IP) - More than 150,000 mutual trips with Iran and China have taken place within the framework of the visa-free group exchange since its launch in August 2023, Nikita Kondratyev, the head of the Department of Multilateral Economic Cooperation and Special Projects at the Russian Economic Development Ministry, told TASS. "We have launched a group visa-free tourist exchange with China and Iran. According to the latest statistics as of yesterday, we have more than 150,000 reciprocal trips and about 50,000 inbound tourists respectively, mostly from China, came to Russia through this channel," Kondratyev said at the St. Petersburg International Travel Hub Tourism Forum. The head of the department noted that the introduction of such a mechanism for group visa-free travel is also being discussed with India. "Now we are working with several countries in the Middle East and Asia to introduce a fully visa-free regime," he added. "As for the creation of some comfortable conditions for the convenience of foreign guests, we are preparing to launch a tourist payment card in 25 countries starting next year. We see that due to the measures taken, the interest of foreign tourists in traveling to our country is growing. This is also evidenced by the data on the two-fold increase in the number of reservations in Russian accommodation facilities," Kondratyev said. The Travel Hub International Tourism Forum takes place in St. Petersburg from December 13 to 15.



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## Pakistan Iran Friendship Jeep Rally

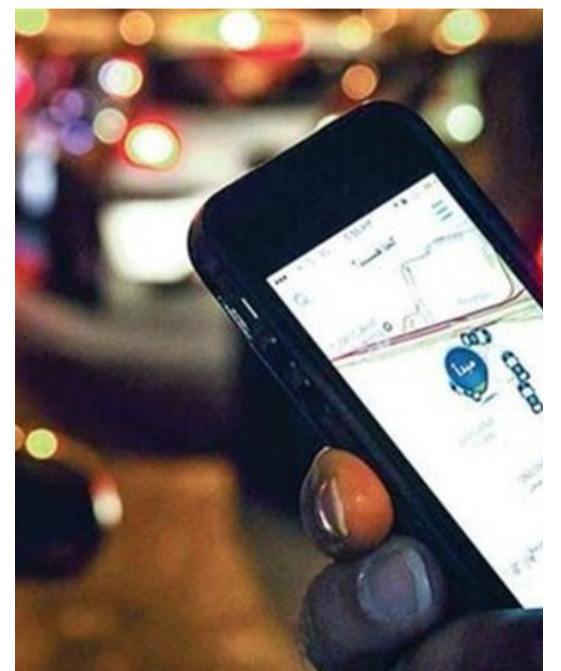
TEHRAN - Pakistan Embassy, Tehran organized an event to welcome members of Cross Route Club. Members of Pakistani community were invited to attend the event. The Jeep rally comprising of 20 members including 02 women and 02 children from all over Pakistan, started its journey from Cultural House of Iran at Lahore on November 29, 2023. They visited UNESCO Heritage Site, Takht-e-Jamshid, Isfahan, Kashan, Qom and reached at Tehran. The team will complete its 7500 km journey in 25 days and return to Lahore on December 23, 2023. The cross route Jeep rally visited Iran earlier in 2021 to promote friendship and Tourism between the two brotherly countries. Ambassador H.E Muhammad Mudassir Tipu welcomed the members of the rally to Iran. He lauded their efforts for promotion of tourism and friendship between the two countries. In the end, he distributed souvenirs among the Jeep Rally delegates.

# Iran, China Emphasize Developing Cooperation in Standards Sector

TEHRAN (MNA) – Officials from Iran and China stressed the need to expand bilateral cooperation in the field of standards. Head of the Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Iran (ISIRI) for International and Halal Affairs Ebrahim Ebrahimi in a meeting with the commercial attaché and representatives of the Chinese Embassy to Tehran emphasized strengthening the trade and economic relations between the two countries, especially in the field of standards. Ebrahimi pointed to a memorandum of understanding (MoU) inked previously between Tehran and Beijing in the field of standards, which expired two years ago, and said that the two sides are interested in concluding a new MoU for facilitating and developing trade ties. Introducing the status of the ISIRI and the technical activities of the organization in the fields of

standardization, evaluation of adaptation, and authentication, Ebrahimi noted that the institute is the official and authorized body for granting the logo of halal in Iran. He said Iran and China enjoy high potential to deepen the level of their cooperation in the field of Halal industry. The commercial attaché of the Chinese Embassy in Iran, for his part, expressed his satisfaction with the meeting with the Iranian official and emphasized that standards play a leading role in investment, production, and management of the quality of goods in all aspects of life. He also said he would transfer the views of the Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Iran to his country in line with taking practical measures to accelerate the signing of a memorandum of understanding in the standards sector.

## Iran Plans 7-Fold Rise in Production of Radioactive Drugs



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) has announced plans to establish a new radiopharmaceutical center to ramp up the production of radioactive drugs in the country by up to five to seven times. Mohammad Eslami made the announcement during a visit to Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. He stated that the rise in the production of radiopharmaceuticals would be a huge step in assisting patients in the country. Eslami pointed out that three new radiopharmaceuticals were unveiled on Tuesday, bringing the total number of different types of such drugs produced in Iran to 50. Currently, around 210 medical and treatment centers across the country benefit from the services and products provided by the AEOI, covering approximately one million patients annually, he added. "In the therapeutic sector, we intend to increase effectiveness, and in the diagnostic aspect of radiopharmaceuticals, enhancing precision can provide physicians with higher clarity of problems and lesions for better tumor diagnosis," the nuclear chief said. Eslami maintained that Iran has made substantial advancements in this field despite being under sanctions, citing Pars Isotope Center – a major supplier of supplier of radioisotopes in the country- as a model example.

## Iran Has World's Biggest Per Capita Energy Consumption



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Head of the National Productivity Organization of Iran has cited the latest data released by the International Energy Agency (IEA) which says Iran had the world's biggest per capita energy consumption in 2022. Mir-Saman Pishvaei said that although Iran sits on the world's second largest oil and gas reserves, it faces imbalances for its high level of consumption. The worrying issue is that the global average energy consumption is downwards, while it is upwards in Iran, the official said. Noting that the Iranian officials have to take serious measures in energy consumption, he said that "we have to move from providing energy to management of energy consumption." Pishvaei also said that Iran consumes as much as 700 million cubic meters a day (mcm/d) of gas during winter which is not acceptable in comparison to other world countries.



### Hungary Holds Up EU Deal on 50b Euro for Ukraine

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - Hungary held up a European Union deal on Friday on 50 billion euros for Ukraine from the EU budget and EU leaders decided to return to the discussion in January, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said. Rutte said 26 EU countries were in agreement to provide Ukraine with the money from the EU budget until 2027, but Hungary was against that decision, which requires unanimity. "We still have some time, Ukraine is not out of money in the next few weeks," Rutte told reporters on leaving the talks. "We agreed with the 26 countries. Victor Orban, Hungary, were not yet able to do that. I am fairly confident we can get a deal early next year, we are thinking of late January," said Rutte, adding there would be another summit to reach the deal.



### Russian Inflation Could Near 8% This Year



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Annual inflation may approach 8% in Russia this year, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday, a day before the central bank is widely expected to hike interest rates again to rein in soaring prices. Most analysts polled by Reuters expect the Bank of Russia to raise its key rate by 100 basis points to 16% on Dec. 15, with inflationary pressure exacerbated by labour shortages and lending growth in addition to soaring government spending and a weak rouble. Putin has routinely praised the resilience of Russia's economy against Western sanctions, but tends to skirt around issues such as the weakness of the currency, stubbornly high inflation and the impact of high interest rates on households' purchasing power, a particularly sensitive topic as the country gears up for a presidential election in March. "The most important indicator is economic growth," Putin said in a year-end press conference. "GDP growth by the end of the year is expected at 3.5% - this is a good indicator, it means we have recovered from last year's fall ... and we have made a relatively serious step forward." Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted 2.1% in 2022 as sanctions over Russia's invasion of Ukraine pounded the economy. Part of that recovery has been built on Russia's success in evading a Western oil price cap, although Putin faces numerous economic challenges as he runs for re-election. "Unfortunately, inflation has increased," Putin said. "By the end of the year it is expected at 7.5%, maybe a little more at 8%, but the central bank and government are taking necessary measures." The central bank targets inflation at 4%. Putin said it was assumed that a return to target indicators would be possible. One woman's question via video link about soaring prices for eggs elicited an apology from Putin, though he blamed the government. "Demand has increased but production has not," Putin said. "Secondly, we did not open up imports at the required volume in good time. I am sorry, so I apologize for this, but this is a failure of the government's work." The government this week said it would exempt 1.2 billion eggs from import duty in the first half of next year to try and rein in prices that have risen more than 40% this year.



### EU Gives Green Light to Ukraine Membership Talks

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - European Union leaders unexpectedly agreed on Thursday to open membership talks with Ukraine, something Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban for weeks had vowed to block. EU diplomats and officials said Orban agreed to leave the room, knowing the other leaders would go ahead and vote on Ukraine. Orban confirmed that he had abstained from the vote at the EU summit on what he called a "bad decision." Such an unusual vote to approve a decision - especially such a major one - is unheard of in Brussels, even for a place where diplomats have long been very creative about how to strike deals. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed the decision. "This is a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe. A victory that motivates, inspires, and strengthens," he said. Ukraine badly needs support from its Western allies in its nearly two-year fight against Russia's invasion. Its counter-offensive has failed to make major gains and the Biden administration has so far been unable to get a \$60 billion aid package for Ukraine through the U.S. Congress. European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said it was "a strategic decision and a day that will remain engraved in the history of our Union." Orban had very different words to describe the decision. "Hungary's stance is clear, Ukraine is not prepared for us to start talks on EU membership," he said, calling the decision to start talks "irrational" and "inappropriate." "But 26 member states were adamant that this decision must be made so Hungary decided that if

26 decide so, they should go on their own path and Hungary does not wish to participate in this bad decision," he said. The talks themselves are likely to take years. Ukraine, which has a population of 44 million and is geographically bigger than any EU member, presents some unique challenges for admission to the 27-member bloc. In intense diplomacy on the matter, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Orban before the summit, alongside von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel. The European Commission on Wednesday restored Hungary's access to up to 10.2 billion euros in refunds for economic projects after finding it had fulfilled conditions on the independence of its judiciary. Talks will continue at the summit on the bloc's multi-annual budget framework. Michel said the European Council had also decided on Thursday to open accession negotiations with Moldova. He went on to say the summit granted EU candidate status to Georgia and would also advance an EU bid by another hopeful - Bosnia - once it reaches "the necessary degree of compliance" with criteria. Earlier in the day as the 27 EU leaders gathered for their last summit of the year, Orban insisted that the EU should not start membership talks with Ukraine. He was a lone hold-out at the summit. Other EU leaders had warned that not agreeing to start negotiations would have been seen as a victory for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

### Serbian Ruling Party Faces Snap Sunday Vote



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has dropped in on ordinary Serbs in a folksy tour around the country to secure another term in power for his populist party in a snap election on Sunday largely prompted by public outrage over mass shootings. After two shooting attacks in May that left 18 people dead including nine elementary school students and teenagers, street protests rattled Vucic and his Serbian Progressive Party's more than decade-long grip on power in the West Balkan republic. For weeks huge crowds backed by the centrist and liberal opposition marched through Belgrade demanding government action to counter a culture of violence they said authorities allowed to flourish in society, and snap elections before year's end. Opposition parties and rights watchdogs also accuse Vucic and the SNS of stifling media freedoms, supporting violence against opponents, corruption, and ties with organized crime. Vucic and his allies deny such allegations. The Dec. 17 parliamentary election - the first since 2012, combined with simultaneous voting in most municipalities including the capital Belgrade and in the northern province of Vojvodina - comes only 18 months after the previous one. During the campaign, Vucic, whose presidential term expires in 2027, drove to the north of Serbia in his own Skoda car rather than in a swish government limousine, to check the quality of various roadworks. In other trips throughout the country, he helped farmers cook pork scratchings, flipped pancakes, opened a TikTok account, gave an interview to a major opposition weekly and visited a monastery - all in an effort to shore up his party's popularity after the backlash over the shootings. "The state is not a joke, and it cannot be run by irresponsible people," Vucic, 53 - originally a far-right nationalist who later shifted towards a pro-European, conservative stance - said in a video published on his Instagram account, referring to political foes. In the months ahead of elections, the outgoing government disbursed one-off payments to students, pensioners and single mothers, and announced a rise in wages and pensions in parts of the public sector. Radomir Lazovic, a leader of the Serbia Against Violence opposition alliance, accused the SNS of pressuring and bribing voters. "There is a huge opportunity for things to change. People have realized that the SNS, even after such a tragic (shooting) event, was not ready to change anything," Lazovic told Reuters. A recent pre-election poll by the Nova Srpska Politicka Misao website put the SNS in the lead with 39.8% of the vote, with Lazovic's coalition next on 25.6% and the Socialist Party of outgoing Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, an SNS coalition partner, with 8.9%. After the two mass shootings and in line with previous pledges, Vucic quit as chairman of the SNS, handing the post to Milos Vucevic, his closest ally and the outgoing defence minister, but he retains decisive control over party policies.



### Venezuela, Guyana Agree Not to Use Force to Settle Dispute

CARACAS (Dispatches) - The presidents of Venezuela and Guyana pledged after direct talks on Thursday not to resort to force to settle a long-simmering -- and recently reheated -- territorial dispute over the oil-rich Essequibo region, a joint statement said. Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro and Guyana's Irfan Ali shook hands after a two-hour meeting on the Caribbean island nation of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The two sides agreed that they "will not threaten or use force against one another in any circumstances," the statement said. Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves of Saint Vincent read the three-page statement, which included concrete measures to ensure tensions on the ground do not escalate suddenly. But neither Venezuela nor Guyana agreed on the proper global jurisdiction to settle the territorial dispute over Essequibo, which makes up about two-thirds of Guyana's territory. Maduro, who has sought to rally support in his nation with the territorial claims, cast the summit as a triumph. "Excellent day of dialogue!" Maduro posted on X, formerly Twitter. "We did it!" The two sides pledged to resolve the dispute "in accordance with international law" but noted that while Guyana believes the International Court of Justice is the proper jurisdiction for the matter, Venezuela has rejected the body's recognition over the issue. Gonsalves said the both Georgetown and Caracas "committed to the pursuit of good neighborliness, peaceful coexistence and the unity of Latin America and the Caribbean." The statement noted that the two leaders agreed to meet again within three months in Brazil, whose leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was tapped as an interlocutor in the dispute. Guyana's president left the summit declaring that his nation will not cede its sovereignty over the region's oil fields. "Guyana has all the right... to facilitate any investment, any partnership... the issuing of any license and the granting of any concession in our sovereign space," Ali said. Though Caracas has long claimed Essequibo, it ratcheted up its rhetoric after Guyana, which has governed the area for

more than 100 years, started issuing licenses for oil companies to operate there. The meeting took place after months of escalating discord that has raised fears in the region of a potential conflict over the remote area of 160,000 square kilometers (62,000 square miles). Maduro's government held a controversial referendum on December 3 in which 95 percent of voters, according to officials in the hard-line leftist government, supported declaring Venezuela the rightful owner of Essequibo. He has since started legal maneuvers to create a Venezuelan province in Essequibo and ordered the state oil company to issue licenses for extracting crude in the region -- moves Ali branded as a "grave threat to international peace and security." Guyana has taken the case to the UN Security Council and approached military "partners," including the United States, which has carried out joint military exercises in Essequibo. "The land boundary between Venezuela and Guyana should be respected unless -- or until -- the parties reach a new agreement -- or a competent legal body decides otherwise," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Brazil's Lula, according to a State Department summary of a call between the two Thursday. Lula has backed a peaceful solution and warned Maduro against "unilateral measures that could escalate the situation." Brazil, which borders both countries, has also reinforced its troops around the area. The decades-old dispute intensified after ExxonMobil discovered oil in Essequibo in 2015, helping give Guyana -- which has a population of 800,000 -- the world's biggest crude reserves per capita. The Venezuelan government's anti-imperialist rhetoric has seen it accuse Ali of being "a slave" of ExxonMobil. On Monday, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil told reporters there could be talk of "cooperation in oil and gas matters." Gil cited the Petrocaribe agreements, under which Venezuela supplies crude oil at preferential prices to Caribbean countries, and gas deals with Trinidad and Tobago.



### New Rockets Set to Launch in 2024

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Several new European and American rockets are set for blast off in 2024, at a time the aerospace industry faces a shortage of launch vehicles fueled by the rise of satellite constellations. Here are the maiden flights space watchers can look forward to next year. The Ariane 6 rocket, which carries Europe's hopes for space autonomy from the United States and Russia, is set to make its inaugural voyage between June 15 and July 31, after four years of delays due to the pandemic and other difficulties. The project was launched in 2014 in response to the rise of SpaceX's Falcon 9. Building on Ariane 5, Ariane 6 should be half as expensive as its predecessor thanks to new production methods. With a planned 28 launches even before its first flight, the rocket, available in two versions, will carry payloads to both geostationary orbit (11.5 metric tons) and low Earth orbit (21.6 metric tons), using reusable upper-stage engines. Once launched, the challenge for Ariane Group will be to successfully ramp up its output. "It is a real industrial challenge to go from building two to nine launchers per year," said executive president Martin Sion. Banned from flying since December 2022 after the failure of its first commercial flight, the Vega C rocket manufactured by Italian space company Avio, is supposed to launch again in the fourth quarter, according to the European Space Agency (ESA). The unavailability of Europe's premier small rocket forced the ESA to rely on the US company SpaceX to launch several European scientific and GPS satellites. The accident was caused by the failure of a rocket motor nozzle, forcing a redesign. United Launch Alliance (ULA), a joint venture between Boeing and Lockheed Martin, has developed the Vulcan Centaur rocket to replace its Atlas V and Delta IV launch vehicles. After getting past the first few flights, ULA will begin recovering and reusing the first stage boosters. This and other innovations make the Vulcan platform "much more affordable" than its predecessors, ULA CEO Tory Bruno told AFP. Vulcan Centaur will be able to carry up to 27.2 metric tons into low Earth orbit, comparable to Falcon 9. The first launch of Vulcan Centaur is scheduled for early January. This ambitious mission will carry a private lunar lander which could become the first American spacecraft to land on the Moon since the end of the Apollo program. A second mission, which will carry Sierra Space's new "Dream Chaser" spacecraft, is planned for the second quarter of 2024. This mini-space shuttle will be responsible in particular for resupplying the International Space Station.

### U.S. Stresses Safety for Gaza Civilians

GAZA (Dispatches) - A U.S. security envoy had talks with Israel about shifting its strategy in Gaza toward surgical operations against Hamas and away from a broad ground campaign, as Palestinians reported heavy attacks along the narrow coastal strip on Friday. Israeli tanks and planes intensified their bombardment of the northern Gaza, as well as Khan Younis and Rafah in the south of the enclave, residents, authorities and media said. Four people, including two children, were killed and several others wounded in an Israeli air strike on a house in Khan Younis early on Friday, Palestinian health officials said. Official Palestinian news agency Wafa said overnight Israeli airstrikes on Khan Younis and Rafah killed or injured tens of people. One of the strikes hit a housing block near the Kuwaiti hospital in Rafah, Wafa added. Live video footage looking into southern Gaza from Israel after dawn on Friday showed thick, black plumes of smoke rising into the air. The cause of the smoke was not immediately known. Israeli special forces said on Friday they had recovered the body of hostage Elia Toledano, 28, who had been held by Hamas since Oct. 7 after being taken from an outdoor music festival. The military said an "identification procedure" had been carried out by medical officials, military rabbis and forensic experts. Israel has been pounding the 25-mile (40-km) length of Gaza with no sign of a pause in hostilities or a ceasefire that would enable delivery of more desperately needed basic supplies for civilians to survive as their homes have been destroyed. Israeli forces have besieged the coastal strip and laid much of it to waste, with nearly 19,000 people confirmed dead, according to Palestinian health officials, and thousands more feared buried under the rubble. White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan discussed moves on Thursday to shift Israel's attacks on Gaza to lower-intensity

operations focused on high-value targets during his visit to Israel, but it would be "irresponsible" to give specific time frames for such a change, a senior administration official told reporters. "There was a discussion in these meetings and also in our prior meetings, and in calls between the President and the Prime Minister, on kind of a shift in emphasis from high-tempo clearance operations, high intensity clearance operations, which are ongoing now, to ultimately lower-intensity focus on high-value targets, intelligence driven raids, and those sorts of more narrow, surgical military objectives," said the official, who asked not to be identified. The official said Sullivan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had very detailed discussions about efforts to get remaining hostages out of Gaza, and there was broad agreement that the future of Gaza should be Palestinian-led. "There was never an anticipation that there would be major ground clearance operations going on indefinitely," the official said. Sullivan put a big emphasis on the need to protect civilians, and Israeli defence officials provided a detailed briefing about "the extraordinary efforts that they are undertaking to try to separate the civilian population from Hamas," the official said. Israel says Hamas uses civilians and civilian buildings as shields, an allegation the group denies. Washington has been pushing Israel for weeks to do more to protect civilians in Gaza's population of 2.3 million. Biden, asked on Thursday whether he wanted Israel to scale back its assault on the Gaza Strip by the end of the year, said: "I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives, not stop going after Hamas, but be more careful." The occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip need to be connected under a "revamped and revitalized" Palestinian Authority government, Sullivan said in an interview on Israeli TV.



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## Rangers Down Betis; Brighton See Off Marseille

PARIS (Dispatches) - Kemar Roofe's winner sent Rangers into the Europa League last 16 with a 3-2 victory at Real Betis on Thursday, while Joao Pedro's late strike helped Brighton sink Marseille. Rangers, runners-up in the competition two seasons ago, were heading out of the tournament and into the Europa Conference League with the game level 12 minutes from time and Sparta Prague on their way to a 3-1 victory at Aris. But after a corner was twice not cleared, Roofe bundled the ball home from three yards out to fire Rangers from third to first in Group C. The Scottish giants had twice led in the first half through Abdallah Sima and Cyriel Dessers, but Juan Miranda and Ayoze Perez both equalised for Betis. Rangers held on in a frantic finale to inflict a first home defeat of the season on Betis, who had to settle for a Conference League play-off spot. "Playing in Europe is special, it's always been special during my time here," Roofe told TNT Sports. Brighton avoided a Europa League knock-out round play-off in February with a tense 1-0 home win over Marseille in Group B. Both teams had already secured top-two finishes, but the Seagulls needed a win to usurp OM at the top of the standings. The Premier League side struggled to break down their visitors for long periods, but Pedro showed neat footwork in the box before drilling the ball into the top corner in the 88th minute to score his sixth goal in as many Europa League matches this season. "I lost my voice, I lost everything. It was an amazing game. We played amazing football," said Brighton manager Roberto De Zerbi. West Ham made it a clean sweep for British teams, finishing top of their group as Mohammed Kudus and Edson Alvarez scored in a 2-0 win over Freiburg, who finished second in Group A. Earlier, a youthful Liverpool side lost 2-1 at Union Saint-Gilloise in their final group game. Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp rang the

changes with his team already secure as Group E winners and with an eye on the weekend's Premier League game against rivals Manchester United, starting six players aged 20 or younger. Saint-Gilloise, who needed a victory to keep alive their hopes of pipping Toulouse to second place, took the lead through Mohamed Amoura before Jarell Quansah hit back for Liverpool. Cameron Puertas restored the hosts' advantage two minutes before half-time with a low strike which beat Caoimhin Kelleher at his near post. Klopp threw on Joe Gomez, Ryan Gravenberch and Darwin Nunez in the second half, but Saint-Gilloise held on for a famous win, although the Belgians dropped into the Europa Conference League play-off round after Toulouse beat LASK Linz 2-1 in the group's other game to finish second. Dani Parejo scored a late winner as Villarreal took top spot in Group F and direct qualification for the last 16 with a 3-2 victory at Rennes. Lorenz Assignon hammered home in the 12th minute of injury time to seemingly send Rennes back to the group summit, but his goal was ruled out by VAR and scuffles broke out after the final whistle. VAR intervened because Enzo Le Fee had collected the ball himself after his own free-kick had struck the woodwork in the build-up. The Ligue 1 club only needed to avoid defeat to finish first, but instead will have to face a team dropping out of the Champions League in the play-off. Azeri club Qarabag finished second in Group H courtesy of a 2-1 success against Haechken. They were a distant eight points adrift of group winners Bayer Leverkusen, though, as the Bundesliga leaders extended their unbeaten start to the season to 23 matches in all competitions by thrashing Molde 5-1. In the Conference League, Premier League high-fliers Aston Villa qualified for the last 16 as Nicolo Zaniolo netted his first goal for the club in a 1-1 draw at Bosnian club Zrinjski.

## Messi, Bonmati Nominated for FIFA Best Player Awards



PARIS (Dispatches) - Lionel Messi and Aitana Bonmati were named as finalists for the FIFA best players of the year awards by world football's governing body on Thursday. Messi was awarded a record-extending eighth Ballon d'Or crown in October in Paris, while Bonmati took the women's prize after starring for Spain in their Women's World Cup triumph. Erling Haaland and Kylian Mbappe are the other nominees for the FIFA men's best player award, with Bonmati's Spain teammate Jenni Hermoso and Colombian teenage sensation Linda Caicedo also named on the women's shortlist. The awards ceremony will take place in London on January 15. The men's finalists were named based on performances from December 19, 2022 until August 20 this year, with the women's decided by achievements between August 1, 2022 and August 20, 2023, the day of the World Cup final. Messi won his second FIFA best player trophy last year after helping Argentina win the World Cup. Haaland, who finished second to Messi in the Ballon d'Or voting, scored 52 goals in his first season at Manchester City last term to help the English club to a treble of Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League titles. France striker Mbappe scored 41 goals in all competitions to help Paris Saint-Germain win Ligue 1. Bonmati and Hermoso both scored three goals in the tournament as Spain lifted the Women's World Cup for the first time, while Bonmati also won the Women's Champions League with Barcelona last season. Hermoso was forcibly kissed by then-Spanish football federation president Luis Rubiales following Spain's 1-0 final win over England, sparking a huge controversy and his eventual resignation. Caicedo, 18, starred in Colombia's run to the World Cup quarter-finals and has since signed for Real Madrid.

## Clubs Spent Record \$888m in Agent Service Fees in 2023

ZURICH (Dispatches) - Football clubs paid a record \$888.1 million in agent service fees in 2023, an increase of 42.5 per cent on the previous year, world governing body FIFA said in its annual "Football Agents in International Transfers" report released on Thursday. The previous record was in 2019 when worldwide spending on commissions to agents involved in the international transfer of players was \$654.7 million. The 2022 amount was \$623.2 million. English clubs were the biggest spenders by far this year with a total outlay of more than \$280 million, while 86.6 per cent of the worldwide expenditure came from European clubs, FIFA added. Saudi Arabian clubs went on a spending spree this year, splashing out almost one billion dollars in the transfer window to lure top players from Europe and they had the second-biggest expenditure on engaging club agents at US\$86 million. "The number of international transfers with an agent acting on behalf of the player reached a record high in 2023 with a total of 3,353 transfers," FIFA said in its report. "This corresponds to 15.4 per cent of all transfers and represents an increase of 8.4 per cent compared to 2022." In a first for women's football, professional clubs spent more than \$1 million in agent service fees, with the total reaching just under US\$1.4 million. Agents have been at loggerheads with FIFA after they lost an appeal in July to block new regulations that would cap their transfer commissions and introduce exams to secure a license. FIFA said it received 19,973 licensing applications this year with 9,207 taking the exam, which 32.6 per cent passed. However, an English FA tribunal set up in June ruled earlier this month that the proposed FIFA regulations are incompatible with British competition law.



## Raiders Romp Past Sorry Chargers



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Las Vegas Raiders ran in nine touchdowns in a 63-21 thrashing of the Los Angeles Chargers on Thursday, coming within a whisker of breaking the NFL's all-time scoring record. The Raiders, who failed to score a single point in a dismal 3-0 loss to the Minnesota Vikings on Sunday, ran riot in a one-sided clash at their Allegiant Stadium. The Raiders rattled off six unanswered touchdowns to lead 42-0 after a disastrous first half for the Chargers. Vegas kept the hammer down after the restart, running in three more touchdowns against a Chargers side struggling to readjust after confirmation of a season-ending injury to quarterback Justin Herbert earlier this week. The Raiders led 63-7 early in the fourth quarter after cornerback Jack Jones intercepted Herbert's back-up Easton Stick to stroll into the end zone for a 16-yard pick six. The only question remaining at that stage was whether the Raiders would go on to break the NFL's all-time regular-season record for points in a single game of 72, set by Washington in a victory over the New York Giants in 1966. The Raiders eased up however over the closing minutes of the game and failed to add to their total as the Chargers scored two consolation touchdowns from Alex Erickson and Quentin Johnston. Raiders quarterback Aidan O'Connell threw for four touchdowns with 248 passing yards from 20-of-34 attempts to spark the rout. O'Connell said the short turnaround after Sunday's toothless shutout against Minnesota had worked in the Raiders' favor. "I think it might have been good for us to have a short week," O'Connell said. "We couldn't really sulk about what happened on Sunday, we just had to come out here and play and trust ourselves and put an entire team performance together. It was awesome." While rookie O'Connell was left basking in the glow of a lopsided victory, the defeat could seal the fate of the Chargers' underpressure head coach Brandon Staley. Staley was asked after the drubbing whether he felt he should still lead the team. "Yes," he replied. "I know what I've done here for three years. Games like this happen to every coach in the league, it's part of sports." But pressed on whether he expected to still be in a job on Friday, he admitted: "I don't know that."

## Bennett Snatches Surprise Win in First Downhill of the Season

VAL GARDENA (Dispatches) - American skier Bryce Bennett was the surprise winner of the first men's World Cup downhill of the season at Val Gardena in Italy on Thursday. The 31-year-old Californian, who was 35th in the downhill rankings last year, edged favourite Aleksander Kilde by just 0.03 seconds to claim only his second World Cup win. His previous success also came in the same event at Val Gardena two years ago as did his first notable finish, a fourth place in 2018. "I like this piste," said Bennett, still in disbelief at his sudden change in fortune. "My goal was to finish among the top 30, or even aim for the top-15, I didn't expect this result at all." But when I woke up this morning, I said to myself that I had to put aside all my doubts and it worked. Marco Odermatt, who won the giant slalom at Val d'Isere on Saturday, completed the podium, finishing 0.05sec behind Bryce. Odermatt, who is still waiting for his first World Cup downhill success, is now level with Marco Schwarz at the top of the overall standings with 160 points, 36 ahead of Manuel Feller. Thursday's downhill was only the third event in the men's calendar to be completed with seven of the nine cancelled because of bad weather. Wearing bib 34, Bryce benefitted from faster conditions, particularly at the bottom of the Saslong, warmed by the sun. He deprived Kilde, silver medallist in the 2023 world championships in the discipline, of a fourth victory in the Dolomites resort. "I didn't ski fast enough to win. I did well in some sections, a little less well in others," admitted Kilde, who has won three of the previous five downhill races in Val Gardena. A second downhill, this time over the entirety of the formidable Saslong, is scheduled for Saturday during a busy programme of four events in four days. On Friday, the men will switch to super-G. Prior to last Saturday's giant slalom, the only other race to go ahead was a slalom in Gurgl, Austria. The season's giant slalom opener in neighbouring Soelden was cancelled, before two downhill races in Zermatt-Cervinia (Switzerland/Italy) were also scratched. The races at the American resort of Beaver Creek - two downhill and a super-G - were wiped out by heavy snowfall and high winds.

