

In a Meeting With His Nicaraguan Counterpart, Iranian Foreign Minister Evaluated the Growing Trend of Bilateral Relations, Especially After the Visit of Iran's President to Nicaragua and the Agreements Reached Between the Two Presidents and Expressed Hope That These Agreements Will Be Implemented as Soon as Possible

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Minister of Industry, Mining and Trade Abbas Aliabadi Travelled to Russia on Monday to Sign a Free Trade Agreement With the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as the Development Trade Plays an Important Role in the Sustainability and Expansion of Economic, Cultural, and Social Cooperation

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Gov't Unveils Plan to Construct 95 Renewable Power Plants



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran on Monday unveiled a plan for the construction of 95 11,000-megawatt renewable power plants in a ceremony attended by President Ebrahim Raisi. The plan is aimed at removing the imbalance of electricity and power outages. The amount of electricity generated by the power plants will be 11 times more than that of the electricity generated at the Bushehr Power Plant. The contract for the construction of the power plants will be signed by the private sector, qudsonline.ir reported. Deputy Head of Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Organization of Iran (SATBA) for Investment Affairs Arash Omid pointed to a contract concluded with the private sector for constructing a 4,000-MW renewable power plant and said that the largest contract for simultaneous construction of renewable power plants in West Asia will be inked in Iran. The proven electricity generation capacity of the renewable power plants in the country stands at 30,000 megawatts currently, he added. Experts believe that the development of renewable power plants in the country can help remove the electricity imbalance to a great extent and also assist the stability of the power grid.

Europe Must Play Decisive Role to End Genocide in Gaza



TEHRAN (PressTV) - European countries must play a "decisive role" in efforts aimed at putting an end to Israel's crimes and genocidal war in the Gaza Strip, says Iran's ambassador to Baghdad, Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadeq made the remark in a meeting with the new ambassador of the European Union to Iraq, Thomas Seiler, in Baghdad on Sunday. He slammed the West's double standard policies on support for human rights and emphasized the necessity of protecting the lives of the defenseless Palestinian people and providing humanitarian aid to them. The ambassador outlined the latest developments in relations between Iran and the EU, saying European countries need to change their approaches to Tehran and the West Asia region in line with global issues. The EU ambassador, for his part, said Iran plays a leading role in Iraq as one of its most important neighboring countries. He added that the continuation of talks among officials of Iran and the European Union at different levels would lead to positive outcomes. Seiler expressed hope that sustainable peace would be established in Palestine. The Iranian and EU diplomats also exchanged views about the latest regional and international developments.



Iran Calls for IAEA Impartiality in Resolving Safeguard Issues

TEHRAN - Iran has provided the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with reasoned answers and documents on claims related to its adherence to the Safeguards Agreement in the hope that the IAEA would be impartial and pay attention to the March agreement to resolve the remaining issues, says the ambassador to the international organizations in Vienna. Mohsen Naziri Asl said the Islamic Republic of Iran "always emphasizes that it will continue its cooperation with the agency within the framework of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement." The safeguard claims over Iran's nuclear activities are rooted in the fake documents of the Zionist regime to raise the alarm over the country's peaceful nuclear program. Amid the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in 2018, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed to have discovered nuclear particles in undeclared sites across Iran. While rejecting the claims, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always emphasized that countries' obligations under the Safeguards Agreement are not unlimited. During a visit by IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi to Tehran in March, Iran voluntarily agreed to more monitoring activities by IAEA inspectors within the framework of the parliament's law to fight sanctions. Following the agreement, meetings were held at the expert level, and with interactions between Iran and the IAEA, the two sides have made considerable progress in enhancing their cooperation. As a result, several technical issues between Iran and the IAEA have been resolved, talks and interactions between them have increased, and discussions regarding the resolution of other technical issues are ongoing. Naziri Asl said the March agreement was reached to resolve all the remaining issues between the two sides. The agreement states that modalities must first be agreed upon and the parties should take actions based on them," he added. "Despite the fact that no agreement has yet to be reached over a Modality Plan, the Islamic Republic has taken some voluntary measures based on its good will, which unfortunately did not receive a positive and proportionate response from the US and the three European countries," Naziri said. On the other hand, we gradually witnessed that the IAEA's demands from Iran regarding extra-safeguards issues were increasing, he added, stressing that the only way to continue voluntary cooperation is to create a specified outlook of that cooperation as well as giving assurances to Iran. The official referred to a statement that Iran and the IAEA announced on March 4, 2023, which stressed the importance of enhanced cooperation between the two sides. Naziri said that Iran's cooperation is only part of the statement, and that the statement should be taken into consideration in its entirety. The Iranian official also spoke about recent comments by IAEA Chief Rafael Grossi about the possibility of a "JCPOA 2.0" as well as the limited access to Iran's nuclear sites by the agency's inspectors. Naziri said that Grossi's remarks were not in line with the realities of Iran's peaceful nuclear program, and he was cautioned "through appropriate means." "Despite propaganda, the Islamic Republic has an "exemplary cooperation" with the IAEA. Just in November, an average 12 inspectors have been doing their work in Iran, which is a record among countries that implement comprehensive safeguards agreements, the Iranian envoy said. He added that this level of cooperation shows that there is no problem regarding the IAEA's inspection within the Safeguards Agreement with Iran. Elsewhere in his interview, Naziri spoke about a recent meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors that discussed nuclear threats posed by the Israeli regime. He said that the environment of the meeting was against the regime and a total of 51 anti-Israel statements were proposed, which was unprecedented. However, following negotiations between Islamic countries, three statements were proposed regarding three issues including Israel's crimes in Gaza, the regime's threat to use nukes and the necessity to deal with the regime's undeclared nuclear weapons program. The Iranian envoy said that his country expects the IAEA chief to give a proper reaction to international concerns over the nuclear threats by the Israeli regime.

U.S. Unilateralism Crumbling; Resistance Pillar of Region's Security

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Americans admit that a world order based on unilateralism is on the decline and that they no longer will be able to impose their will on the world anymore, says Iran's deputy foreign minister for political affairs, Ali Bagheri Kani said under the current circumstances that several actors are playing a role in the international arena, the U.S. is unable to impose an order based on its own interests on the world. "We believe that an order that lays claim to multilateralism can be a logical and correct alternative to the U.S.-imposed order," he old ISNA on Monday. He hastened to add that such an order would be able to meet the interests of independent nations and bring peace and stability to the world. Bagheri Kani also criticized the United Nations Security Council, which he said claims to safeguard global peace and security, for failing to take effective and firm action to end the Israeli regime's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip. This failure is rooted in the fact that the Americans view the world from their narrow perspective and meeting their interests does not serve the interests and rights of other players in the international arena, he said. The senior Iranian diplomat further emphasized that the continuation of Israel's crimes and the US support for the regime is a manifestation of the Americans' failure to impose their order on the international community. The U.S. would never be able to achieve its objectives in case of the continuation of the ongoing situation in the

region, he asserted. "The people of the world and Palestine have clearly shown that they are not willing to give up their rights at all and accept the order imposed by the Americans even at the cost of losing their lives and their families," Bagheri Kani added. He emphasized that the people are strictly standing against the "selfish and self-righteous" approach of the United States. Bagheri Kani also argued that the "mature" resistance forces in the region can act as independent players at the national and regional levels. It has been proved to everyone that the resistance movement is now an "undeniable pillar of stability and security" in the region and their stabilizing role is clear to all, he added. Israel waged the brutal war on Gaza on October 7 after the Palestinian Hamas resistance movement carried out Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against the occupying entity in retaliation for its intensified atrocities against the Palestinian people. Since the start of the offensive, the Tel Aviv regime has killed at least 20,424 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and injured 54,036 others. As the regime's most dedicated ally, the US has supplied it with more than 10,000 tons of military equipment since the onset of the aggression. Washington has also cast its veto against all the United Nations Security Council resolutions that called for the implementation of an immediate ceasefire across Gaza.



Iran Dismisses Claims of Involvement in Targeting Israeli Interests in Region



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry has vehemently rejected claims about the country's involvement in targeting the Israeli interests in the region. "Accusing Iran of targeting the interests of the Zionist regime (Israel) in the region pursues political goals and we do not care about these accusations," Nasser Kanaani said in an interview with Sputnik on Sunday. On Saturday, the Pentagon openly accused Iran of targeting ships amid the continuation of Israel's brutal attacks against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. The U.S. Defense Department issued a statement claiming that the Japanese-owned chemical tanker Chem Pluto that was struck off the coast of India was targeted "by a one-way attack drone fired from Iran." The targeted vessel was reportedly operated by a company owned by an Israeli businessman with links to several Indian oil companies. It was transporting crude oil from Saudi Arabia to India. Kanaani said the U.S. move to veto international resolutions proposing the establishment of a ceasefire in Gaza incited Israel to commit crimes in the Strip. He added that the Palestinian resistance groups carried out a quite normal move against the Israeli regime's interests. The Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has announced that it is ready to reach a ceasefire agreement but the continuation of Israel's bombings makes it impossible, the Iranian spokesman said.

FM Stresses Need for Afghanistan's Practical Action to Solve Mutual Issues



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a meeting with Afghan foreign minister emphasized the need to solve the existing issues between the two countries, including the border, water and other issues, and expressed hope that the officials of the Afghan ruling body would cooperate in solving the existing problems in these fields. Amir-Abdollahian appreciated the valuable initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a situation where the United Nations Security Council and other organizations and countries have become passive. He thanked Amir Khan Muttaqi and the accompanying delegation for their active participation in this Palestinian conference. After elaborating on the latest developments in Gaza and the genocide in Gaza and stressing the need for cooperation of all Muslim and freedom-loving countries in helping the Palestinian people, he addressed the bilateral relations between Iran and Afghanistan and called these relations important from different dimensions and the interaction of the two countries. Amir-Abdollahian emphasized the need to solve the existing issues between the two countries, including the border, water, etc., and expressed hope that the officials of the Afghan governing body will cooperate in a practical manner to solve the existing problems in this field. In this meeting, the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan welcomed Iran's principled positions towards the oppressed Palestinian nation and emphasized the necessity and continuation of supporting the resistance and jihad of the Palestinian people against the Zionist occupation until the final victory. Pointing to the importance of promoting bilateral relations, Amir Khan Motaghi raised various issues in bilateral relations and emphasized the necessity of continuing interactions between the two countries in all fields, including water, border, trade and cooperation in judicial and consular affairs.

IRAN NEWS



Smart Fuel System Back to Normal Across Iran

TEHRAN (Shana) - The National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (NIOPDC) managing director said 4,213 gas stations out of 4,305 across the country have been reconnected to the smart fuel system after a disruption halted the fuel supply on Monday morning. Jafar Salari-Nassab said that a crisis committee was formed immediately after the malfunction occurred and the problem was fixed manually at the first stage by Monday night. As the second step, more than 800 teams were dispatched to four corners of the country to reconnect the filling stations to the smart fuel system, explained the official, adding almost 90 percent of the stations were reconnected by Tuesday night and now over 96 percent of them are supplying fuel with smart cards at subsidized prices.

President Hopes Gaza Massacre Would End in New Year



TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Ebrahim Raisi has hoped for an end to the brutal Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip in the New Year. In a message addressed to Pope Francis on the eve of Christmas on Sunday, Raisi expressed hope that the "international community and all the truthful people of the world" would commit to efforts in the New Year that could result in an end to the mass killing of people in Gaza. He said the invasion of Gaza by the Zionist regime of Israel had become the most urgent challenge facing the world in the days leading to the New Year, adding that thousands of people have been killed in Gaza due to lack of action by international organizations and also because of the support provided to Israel by the United States and certain European countries. More than 20,000 people have been killed in Gaza since Israel launched hostilities in early October and after the Gaza-based Hamas resistance movement carried out an operation in the Israeli-occupied territories. Israel's incessant aggression on Gaza and the support provided to the regime by the US and allies have faced mounting international criticism. In his message to the Pope, the Iranian president congratulated him on the occasion of the anniversary of Jesus Christ's birth while wishing health for the pontiff and prosperity for all Christians in the year 2024. "Thinking and deliberation in the noble qualities of Jesus Christ (AS) and examining and using the lifestyle and methods of his Excellency and all divine prophets can open humanity's current path to excellence," Raisi said in the message.



Meeting Technology Needs at Home a Must

TEHRAN (Shana) - The National Petrochemical Company (NPC) managing director on Sunday said the petrochemical industry's technology needs must be satisfied by Iranian companies. Delivering speech during a meeting with students and elites of Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST), Morteza Shahmirzaei added, "We have to get rid of dependence on foreign countries." Diversity in an industry's basket of products is one of the indices for assessing its capabilities, said the CEO of NPC, adding domestic petrochemical sector is now producing 550 grades of products and categorized as one of the strongest industries of the country. According to him, the country's annual petrochemical production capacity tops 92 million tons and 70 complexes are now producing petrochemicals. Iran's petrochemical industry - products, equipment, and technical know-how - was completely dependent on imports in the pre-revolution era, Shahmirzaei pointed out and continued, "Today, over 85 percent of the petrochemical sector's needs are met by Iranian companies and manufacturers." Unlike to the past, designing, executing, pre-commissioning, commissioning, exploiting, and overhauling are all done now by Iranian experts, he underlined. He pledged that all catalysts used in the oil industry will be produced domestically by the Petrochemical Research and Technology Company in collaboration with research and knowledge-based companies by the end of the 13th administration's term.

Tehran, Tokyo Share Experiences in Retrofitting Hospitals

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Officials from Iran and Japan discussed sharing experiences in the field of reviving valuable structures and retrofitting hospitals. In a joint meeting held between the National Habitat Committee (NHC), the international expert of the United Nations and the director generals of the Architecture and Urban Development Office, the two sides discussed sharing experiences and technical know-how for reviving the valuable structures and strengthening hospitals. Japan's fruitful experience on the construction rules and regulations on areas near fault lines was shared at the meeting, Secretary of the National Habitat Committee (NHC) Arman Khorsand stated. In this meeting, officials of the two sides exchanged their views on the upcoming cooperation and joint projects as a joint venture. It was agreed that the National Urban Policy (NUP) would be reviewed, approved and implemented

soon at the Supreme Council of Architecture and Urban Development. After the document is approved, the ground will be provided for more cooperation between the two countries in the field of recreating worn-out structures and retrofitting valuable historical structures, the adviser to Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development noted. With the implementation of the document, Iran will be able to use the international funds for the reviving and rehabilitation of the valuable urban structures, he added. The meeting was attended by an International expert of the United Nations Masakatsu Miyajima, senior directors of the UN-Habitat in Tehran and the Architecture and Urban Development Office. In cooperation with the Iranian Engineering Council, a specialized workshop will be held in Mazandaran province next week with the participation of an international expert from the United Nations Masakatsu Miyajima and also 200 top engineers.

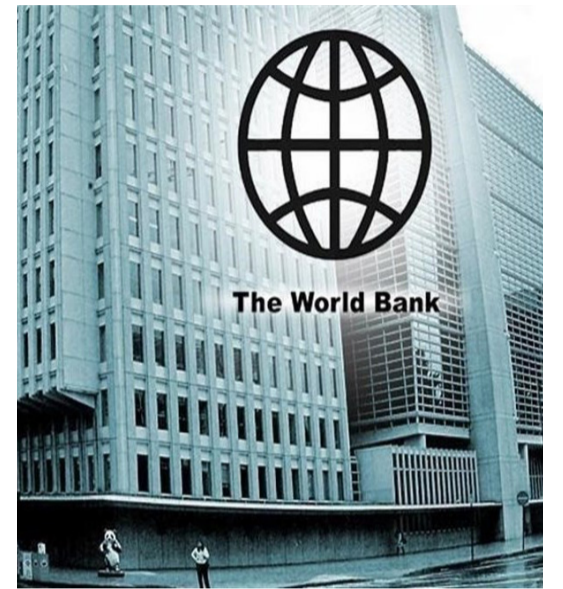
Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Committee Meeting to Be Held on Dec. 27-28



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe will host the 16th meeting of Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Committee on December 27 and 28, an official with Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) announced. Akbar Godari, the director-general of TPO's Central Asia, Caucasus and Russia Office, said that the documents of agreements to be reached in the meeting will be signed by Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian and Tajikistan Energy and Water Resources Minister Daler Juma who are the chairmen of the two countries' Joint Economic Committee. In a meeting between Iranian Vice President and Head of the Planning and Budget Organization (PBO) Davoud Manzour and Tajikistan's Minister of Finance Fayziddin Qahhorzoda on December 8, the two sides discussed ways of boosting economic and trade ties between the two countries. The meeting was held on the sidelines of the eighth meeting of the Board of Governors of the Asian and Pacific Center for the Development of Disaster Information Management (APDIM) which was held in the Tajik capital Dushanbe in the same day. In this meeting, Manzour referred to the upward trend of economic relations between the two countries and underlined the important role of powerful Iranian companies active in various sectors including mining, metal, agriculture, information technology, and knowledge-based industries in the development of cooperation between the two countries. He noted that President Ebrahim Raisi believes that Tajikistan's progress and security is Iran's progress and security, emphasizing the necessity of mutual use of the capacities of the two friendly and brotherly countries for the development of relations in all areas. Qahhorzoda for his part expressed his satisfaction with the development of relations between the two countries and called for an increase in the role of Iranian companies in the

implementation of infrastructure projects in Tajikistan, including the construction of dams and hydroelectric power plants. Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian has said the trade between Iran and Tajikistan has increased by 10 times over the past two years. According to Mehrabian, the value of trade between the two countries which was \$23 million in the Iranian calendar year 1399 (2020-2021) reached \$280 million in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20, 2023). The trade between the two countries also reached \$150 million in the first six months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-September 22) and it is expected to exceed \$300 million by the end of the year (late March 2024). "During the previous visit of President Raisi to Tajikistan, the two countries had set a \$500 million target for the trade between the two sides and now considering the current trend of relations, a much higher goal can be set," Mehrabian said. Iran and Tajikistan on November 8 signed a joint statement and 18 cooperation documents and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) to deepen bilateral strategic relations. The joint statement was signed between President Raisi and his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe. The documents and MOUs were inked by the Iranian and Tajik ministers in the presence of the two presidents. As reported, the documents and MOUs pertained to a roadmap for the long-term bilateral trade and economic cooperation till 2030, mutual visa-free access, anti-drug trafficking operations, transportation, crisis management and the establishment of joint free economic zones, as well as inter-city cooperation in various fields. During a meeting earlier in the day, Raisi said Iran and Tajikistan could increase their annual trade transactions to \$500 million in the first step.

Iranians' Per Capita Income Grows 3% in 2022



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The World Bank (WB) said that the national per capita income of Iranians registered a three percent growth in 2022, adding that Iran ranked 61st among 123 countries in the world in this respect. In its latest statistics on the national per capita income of people in 123 countries, the World Bank said Iranians' per capita income considerably improved last year. The international body put the per capita income of the Iranian people in the reported period at \$5,499. Iran's national per capita income in 2022 was lower than 60 countries and higher than 62 countries worldwide, the report added. According to the report, Bermuda had the highest national per capita income rate in 2022, followed by Switzerland and Luxemburg at the second and third places. Armenia, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, India, Ukraine and Pakistan had lower per capita income rates than Iran in 2022.

Iran, Turkey Eye \$30b Annual Trade



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Senior Iranian and Turkish foreign ministry officials have stressed the need for the two neighboring countries to expand bilateral exchanges to an annual \$30 billion. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari and Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmet Yildiz, in a meeting in Tehran on Sunday, discussed an array of economic and trade issues between Iran and Turkey, including banking and customs arrangements, better transit initiatives that could facilitate trade between and via the two countries, joint investment projects and increased cooperation on natural gas and electricity projects. Safari pointed to problems facing trucks at Bazargan border crossing between Iran and Turkey, underlining the need for more coordination between customs officers and managers on the two sides of the border. The Turkish official, for his part, said that Iran and Turkey should hold a new session of the intergovernmental economic committee between the two countries to explore ways of expanding bilateral economic and trade ties. Turkey is presently Iran's third biggest trade partner, accounting for 24% of Iran's trade exchanges.

13 Dead, 46 Injured in Explosion at Indonesia Nickel Plant

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - At least 13 people were killed and 46 injured in eastern Indonesia in an explosion at a Chinese-funded nickel-processing plant, the owner of the industrial park that hosts the facility said. The island of Sulawesi is a hub for the mineral-rich country's production of nickel, a base metal used for electric vehicle batteries and stainless steel, and Beijing's growing investment has stoked unrest over working conditions at its facilities. The accident occurred around 5:30 am (2130 GMT Saturday) at a plant owned by PT Indonesia Tsingshan Stainless Steel (ITSS) in the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi province, a spokesperson for the complex said in a statement. "The confirmed number of fatalities is 13 people, consisting of nine Indonesian workers and four workers from China," the spokesperson said in a statement, revising the number of the fallen foreign workers down one to four. Forty-six other victims were injured, mostly due to exposure to hot steam, he said.



Russia, Ukraine Report Six Civilians Killed in Attacks on Kherson, Horlivka



LVIV (Dispatches) - Russian attacks on southern Ukraine's Kherson region killed five civilians on Sunday, Ukrainian officials said, while Russian-installed officials in the eastern town of Horlivka said one person was killed in result of Kyiv's shelling. Russian forces abandoned the city of Kherson, the administrative center of the Kherson region on the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine, and the western bank of the River over a year ago but have since subjected many areas there to constant shelling from their positions on the eastern bank. The deaths in Kherson occurred in an incessant Russian shelling of the city and the region over the preceding 24 hours, Ukrainian officials said. Regional police said three people died in shelling of an apartment building and a private home in Kherson city. A woman died in a drone attack in a small town south of Kherson and a second woman was killed when a town further north came under heavy fire. Oleksandr Tolokonnikov, head of the press office of Kherson's regional military administration, told the Ukrainian public broadcaster that gas and water supplies were partially cut off due to the attacks, which also hit a medical facility. "The windows were broken, the building was damaged," Tolokonnikov said. Some 600 km (400 miles) northeast of Kherson in the town of Horlivka, in areas of Ukraine's Donetsk region under Russian control, Ukraine's shelling destroyed a shopping center and several other buildings, a Russian-installed official said. The attacks killed one woman and wounded six civilians, the Russian-installed mayor of Horlivka, Ivan Prikhodko, said on the Telegram messaging app. Reuters could not independently verify the Russian and Ukrainian reports. While Moscow and Kyiv deny targeting civilians in the war that Russia launched on Ukraine in February 2022, both sides have carried out numerous strikes on each other's infrastructure that is critical to their militaries.

Moldova's Pro-European President Sandu to Seek Second Term



CHISINAU (Dispatches) - Moldova's pro-European President Maia Sandu said she intended to run for a second presidential term in late 2024 and called on parliament to begin preparations for a referendum on the country's drive to join the European Union. The country's most prominent opposition figure, Socialist pro-Russian former President Igor Dodon, denounced both her intention to seek re-election and the call for a referendum. "We still have important steps to take and I pledge to continue, if you will give me your trust for a new term," Sandu said in a statement published on the presidential website. She asked the parliament, controlled by her allies in the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), to start work on a referendum on the European orientation of Moldova, an ex-Soviet state lying between Ukraine and EU member Romania. "Our future is in the European family and we need to say clearly - the whole country - which path we choose for Moldova. I call on parliament to initiate a referendum next autumn, in which the voice of the citizens will be decisive," Sandu said. Sandu has denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine and accused Moscow of plotting a coup to oust her. The Kremlin says she is fomenting Russophobia. A former World Bank economist, Sandu has made EU membership the cornerstone of her programme since defeating Dodon in a landslide election in December 2020. An EU summit earlier this month gave the go-ahead to start membership talks with both Moldova and Ukraine. Dodon, writing on his Facebook page, said pro-European policies were no guarantee of victory for Sandu. "People are not as naive as they were in 2020," Dodon wrote. "Today they associate Sandu not with progress and the law but with poverty, arrogance and anti-democratic violence."

Israeli Airstrikes Kill Dozens in "Christmas Bloodshed"



GAZA (Dispatches) - Pope Francis lamented the war in the Holy Land where Palestinian health officials said airstrikes killed at least 78 people on Christmas Eve in one of the Gaza Strip's deadliest nights in Israel's 11-week-old battle with Hamas. Israeli strikes that began hours before midnight persisted into Christmas Day on Monday. Local residents and Palestinian media said Israel stepped up air and ground shelling against al-Bureij in central Gaza. At least 70 people were killed in an Israeli airstrike targeting Maghazi in central Gaza, health ministry spokesperson Ashraf Al-Qidra said, adding that many were women and children. The Israeli army said it was reviewing the report of a Maghazi incident and was committed to minimizing harm to civilians. Hamas denies the Israeli charge that it operates in densely populated areas or uses civilians as human shields. The Palestinian Red Crescent published footage of the wounded being transported to hospitals. It said Israeli warplanes were bombing main roads between central Gaza, hindering the passage of ambulances and emergency vehicles. Medics said a separate Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis in southern Gaza killed eight Palestinians. Clergy cancelled celebrations in Bethlehem, the Israeli-occupied West Bank city where tradition has it that Jesus was born in a stable 2,000 years ago. "Tonight, our hearts are in Bethlehem, where the Prince of Peace is once more rejected by the futile logic of war, by the clash of arms that even today prevents him from finding room in the world," Pope Francis said, presiding at Christmas Eve Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Palestinian Christians earlier held a Christmas vigil in Bethlehem with candle-lit hymns and prayers for peace in Gaza instead of the usual celebrations. There was no large tree, the usual centerpiece of Bethlehem's Christmas celebrations. Nativity figurines in churches were placed amid rubble and barbed wire in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Since a week-long truce collapsed at the start of the month, fighting has only intensified on the ground, with war spreading from the north of the Gaza Strip to the full length of the densely populated enclave. The Israeli military said 10 of its soldiers had been killed in the past

day, following five killed the previous day, its worst two-day losses since early November. "This is a difficult morning, after a very difficult day of fighting in Gaza," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his cabinet on Sunday. "The war is exacting a very heavy cost from us; however we have no choice (but) to continue to fight." In a later video message he said troops would fight on deeper into Gaza until "total victory" over Hamas. Israel has been under pressure from its closest ally the United States to shift its operations into a lower density phase and reduce civilian deaths. On Saturday, Israel's military chief of staff said his forces had largely achieved operational control in the north of Gaza and would expand operations further in the south. But residents say fighting has only intensified in northern districts. Diplomatic efforts, mediated by Egypt and Qatar, on a new truce to free remaining hostages held by militants in Gaza have yielded little public progress, although Washington described the talks last week as "very serious." Islamic Jihad, a smaller militant group allied to Hamas, said a delegation led by its exiled leader Ziad al-Nakhla was in Cairo on Sunday. His arrival followed talks attended by Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh in recent days. The militant groups have so far said they will not discuss any release of hostages unless Israel ends its war in Gaza, while the Israelis say they are willing to discuss only a temporary pause in fighting. The delegation would reaffirm the group's position that any exchange of hostages will have to secure the release of all Palestinians jailed in Israel, "after a ceasefire is achieved," the official said. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both sworn to Israel's destruction, are still believed to be holding more than 100 hostages from among 240 they captured during their Oct. 7 rampage through Israeli towns, when they killed 1,200 people. Since then, Israel has besieged the Gaza Strip and laid much of it to waste, with more than 20,400 people confirmed killed, according to authorities in Hamas-ruled Gaza, and thousands more are believed dead under the rubble. The vast majority of the 2.3 million Gazans have been driven from their homes and the United Nations says conditions are catastrophic.



RABAT (Dispatches) - Protesters marched Sunday through Morocco's capital in support of Palestinians, calling for an end to the Israel-Hamas war which has killed thousands in the Gaza Strip. The crowd in Rabat of about 10,000 people denounced what protest leaders called a "war of extermination" as well as the normalization of relations between Morocco and Israel. The protesters were called to the streets by a disparate group of organizations backing the Palestinian cause, including left-wingers and members the Islamist Justice and Charity movement. They marched along Mohammed V Avenue in the heart of the city, beneath banners declaring "stop the war of extermination in Gaza, stop normalization". In 2020, Morocco joined a number of Arab countries in establishing diplomatic and trade relations with Israel under the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords. As part of the deal, Rabat received U.S. recognition for its claim to sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. On Mohammed V avenue, numerous protesters wielded banners condemning the "destruction of hospitals" in Gaza and Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. Posters called for "free Palestine" and to "save Gaza". The crowd chanted slogans lauding the "resistance of the Palestinian people" and directed particular fury at the United States for its support of Israel's war against Hamas. "When you bomb massively without distinction

between military targets and civilians, including babies -- that is a genocide. We must call a spade a spade," said Jihane, a 27-year-old protester. The war in Gaza was sparked by the unprecedented October 7 attack by Hamas militants against southern Israel. The militants killed around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally using Israeli figures. Hamas also took about 250 hostages, 129 of whom remain in Gaza according to Israel. Israel responded with a massive retaliatory air and ground offensive on the Gaza Strip, aimed at destroying Hamas. That campaign has killed more than 20,400 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory. In Rabat, Hachimi Dammi, a 62-year-old protester, said he had come to express his opposition to the bombing in Gaza and normalization with Israel. Public expressions of opposition to the Abraham Accords had been rare before the war in Gaza. Yet it is now a regular feature of the multiple large protests that have swept Morocco since October 7, with demonstrators on Sunday chanting that normalization had been "treason". The North African kingdom has officially denounced what it said was "the flagrant violations of the provisions of international law" by Israel in its war against Hamas, but has not given any indication that normalization with Israel would be undone.



Philippine Actions in South China Sea Extremely Dangerous

EIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese state media accused the Philippines on Monday of repeatedly infringing on China's territory in the South China Sea, spreading false information and colluding with extraterritorial forces to cause trouble. The Philippines has relied on U.S. support to continually provoke China, with such "extremely dangerous" behaviour seriously harming regional peace and stability, China's Communist Party mouthpiece, the People's Daily, wrote in a commentary on Monday. The Philippines foreign ministry and a national task force handling the South China Sea did not immediately respond on Christmas Day to requests for comment on the report. Tensions between Beijing and Manila have heightened in recent months as both sides trade accusations over a spate of run-ins in the South China Sea, including charges that China rammed a ship this month carrying the Philippine armed forces chief of staff. China claims most of the South China Sea, parts of which are also claimed by the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam and Indonesia. An international tribunal in 2016 invalidated China's claim in a ruling on a case brought by the Philippines, which Beijing rejects. In an unusually direct warning, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said last week any miscalculation in the dispute with the Philippines would bring a resolute response from China, and called for dialogue to address "serious difficulties". The souring of bilateral ties coincides with Manila's moves to bolster military relations with Japan and the United States, its former colonial power and defence ally of seven decades.

Serbia Opposition MP Vows to Keep Up Hunger Strike

BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Looking frail but determined, Serbian opposition leader Marinika Tepic fixes her makeshift bed -- a leather sofa inside a parliament building, where she has been on hunger strike since last week. The 49-year-old is protesting what she says was "electoral fraud" during parliamentary and local elections held in Serbia on December 17, and is demanding the results be annulled. She is not alone. Tepic is one of seven members of the main opposition camp, united under the banner "Serbia Against Violence", to have gone on hunger strike over the results. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's party said it secured a commanding victory during the ballot. But a team of international observers -- including representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) -- denounced several "irregularities", including "vote buying" and "ballot box stuffing". Since Saturday, Tepic has been receiving intravenous liquids daily, but refuses to eat food. "They (the doctors) are trying to maintain this condition as long as possible, because I have no intention to give up until fake elections are annulled, until they admit to electoral fraud, and until the will of the people is defended," Tepic told AFP in an interview. "This simply needs to be done in order to alert both domestic and international audiences," she added. Several Western countries have expressed concern over the reported irregularities. Germany labelled the reported allegations "unacceptable" for a country hoping to join the European Union. The United States called on Belgrade to address the "concerns" of the election monitors, while the EU said Serbia's "electoral process requires tangible improvement and further reform". On Saturday, Serbian prosecutors asked the police to probe allegations of fraud. Serbian police said on Sunday that a total

of 344 complaints had been lodged on election day -- less than during the last vote -- and that prosecutors had found elements of "criminal acts" in 18 cases. International observers have underlined allegations of "voters living abroad being organised and bussed by the ruling party to cast the ballots for local elections in Belgrade". Tepic has accused Vucic of overseeing the scheme. "I think that (Serbia) is the only country in the world with a phenomenon of electoral migrants," Tepic said. Vucic denied the accusations -- in particular addressing the issue of voters who came from neighbouring Bosnia to vote. "We will defend the electoral will of the people and there is no doubt about that," he said. The president also urged the opposition MPs to find other ways to protest. "I would like to ask all those who are on hunger strike not to continue it ... They can organise protests every day. I'm used to protests," Vucic said during a televised address to the nation on Sunday. Evoking a former head of his party, Tomislav Nikolic, who went on a hunger strike in 2011 demanding parliamentary elections, Vucic said his former party colleague had "achieved nothing but endangering his health". Tepic however said she was determined to continue. "It's been a while since I listened to what Aleksandar Vucic says, or at least took it seriously. Because when he opens his mouth, he breaks the law, deceives, lies, buys time and manipulates. And that is how we live for the past 10 years," she said. Tepic says she is very much aware of the consequences of her actions. "I try not to think about that (death). I don't see this as a sacrifice. I see this as a fight, and a way that keeps me alive," he said. "When they ask me if I'm under stress -- no. I'd feel more stressed if I did not do this."





Rudolph Brings Christmas Gift to Steelers, Bills Maintain Push

MIAMI (Dispatches) - The Pittsburgh Steelers kept their playoff hopes alive and severely damaged the Cincinnati Bengals' chances of making the NFL post-season with a 34-11 win over their AFC North rivals. The Buffalo Bills also remain in contention in the AFC East after eking out a 24-22 win at the Los Angeles Chargers thanks to a late Tyler Bass field goal. Quarterback Mason Rudolph, making his first start of the season for Pittsburgh, threw for 290 yards and two touchdowns as he repaid head coach Mike Tomlin for his decision to promote him over Mitch Trubisky. The Steelers snapped a three-game losing streak with a form-busting victory against a Bengals team that had won their last three. With two games of the regular season remaining, both teams are now on 8-7 as they attempt to clinch a wildcard spot. The Baltimore Ravens have already secured a place in the playoffs as AFC North winners. Steelers receiver George Pickens, who had come in for some intense scrutiny after some poor blocking in last week's loss against Indianapolis, scored both touchdowns as he put up 195 yards on four receptions. Pickens got the Steelers off to a hot start when on the second play of their first possession he grabbed a pass short left from Rudolph, jinked to evade the Bengals defense and then powered away for an 86-yard score. Bengals quarterback Jake Browning, who has coped well deputising for injured starter Joe Burrow, had a tough time, throwing two interceptions in the first half, but the Steelers offense was firing on all cylinders. Calvin Austin extended the lead at the start of the second quarter with a seven-yard run and Najee Harris made it 21-0 with a three-yard rush. A 50-yard field goal from Chris Boswell sent Pittsburgh in with a 24-0 lead at the half. The Bengals needed to come out strong after the interval and they did just that with Browning finding Tee Higgins who accelerated away after the catch for an 80-yard touchdown. A successful two point conversion, with

Browning's shovel pass collected by Joe Mixon reduced the deficit to 16. But the Steelers responded immediately and it was Pickens who delivered again -- Rudolph found him wide left and the speedy receiver powered home for a 66 yard score to make 31-8. The Bengals could only manage a field goal at the close of the third and the Steelers managed out the game well with a Boswell 30-yard field goal rounding off an impressive display. The Steelers travel to Seattle on New Year's Eve before ending their season against the Ravens. The Bengals face Super Bowl champions Kansas City next and then close out the regular season at home to the AFC North's other wildcard contender, the 9-5 Cleveland Browns. The Bills (9-6) have resurrected their season thanks to three straight wins but they were made to work hard for victory at SoFi Stadium by a much improved Chargers. The Chargers fired their coach Brandon Staley after last week's 63-21 defeat to Las Vegas but the first game in charge for interim head coach Giff Smith produced instant improvement. Quarterback Easton Stick snuck in a one yard rush at the start of the second quarter to put the Chargers 10-0 up but they trailed by four at the half after Bills quarterback Josh Allen found Gabe Davis with a 57 yard touchdown pass and then rushed in a two yard score himself. A Cameron Dicker field goal put the Chargers back in front only for Allen to again rush in from short yardage and make it 21-13. But the Chargers edged ahead in the fourth thanks to three field goals from Dicker before a 13 play, 64 yard drive ended with Bass's field goal with 28 seconds left. Ed Oliver sacked Stick for a loss of nine on the first play and the Bills held on for a vital victory. The Bills face the New England Patriots next week before a visit to AFC East leaders Miami on the final day -- a game which, if Miami slip up against Dallas on Sunday and then at the Ravens, could yet be a divisional decider.

Thiem, Raducanu Headline Australian Open Qualifying Field



LONDON (Dispatches) - Former U.S. Open champions Dominic Thiem and Emma Raducanu will headline the qualifying field for the Australian Open as they look to reignite their careers in 2024 following struggles with injuries. Thiem broke the Grand Slam stranglehold of Roger Federer, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic by winning the 2020 U.S. Open but a wrist injury the following year sidelined him for months, while a series of other fitness issues saw his ranking slide to number 352. The 30-year-old Austrian, now ranked 98th, won his first match at a Grand Slam since 2021 in New York in August before crashing out in the second round. Thiem, who made the Melbourne Park final in 2020, can still gain direct entry into the main draw of the tournament if one player pulls out. Raducanu missed out on an Australian Open wildcard and will now have to take a similar path as her run 2021 Flushing Meadows run when she became the first player in the Open Era to win a major after beginning in the qualifying rounds. The 21-year-old Briton, who is now ranked number 299, will gear up for the first Grand Slam of the year by playing at the Auckland Classic having fought her way back to fitness following operations on both wrists and an ankle in May. Raducanu is five spots outside the main draw cut-off. The qualifying tournament will begin on Jan. 8 while the main draw is from Jan. 14-28.

Arsenal Hold Liverpool to Seal Top Spot at Christmas

LIVERPOOL (Dispatches) - Arsenal ensured they will spend Christmas Day on top of the Premier League as they held title rivals Liverpool to a pulsating 1-1 draw at Anfield. Mikel Arteta's side took an early lead through Gabriel Magalhaes, but Mohamed Salah hauled Liverpool level before the interval. A draw was arguably the right result after both sides flexed their muscles to show why they have emerged as the leading contenders to win the title. Chasing a first title since 2004, Arsenal sit one point clear of second placed Liverpool heading into the festive period. The team that has topped the Premier League at Christmas has gone on to win the title in six of the past 10 seasons, but the draw on Merseyside was also a boost to the chasing pack. Third placed Aston Villa are level on points with Liverpool, fourth placed Tottenham are three points further back, while champions Manchester City are six points adrift of the leaders with a game in hand. Liverpool are unbeaten in their past 11 games against Arsenal at Anfield. However, coming a week after their goalless stalemate against Manchester United, this was another frustrating result for Jurgen Klopp's team. "Oh my god, how strong are they? The good news is we are good as well," Klopp said. "We pass instead of shoot, four or five times we do that, it's a lesson. But generally the game is great." Arsenal weren't completely satisfied either. Last season they led 2-0 at Liverpool but ended up drawing 2-2, a result that started their collapse in the title race. Their failure to hold on this time should not have such a damaging impact, but it was still a missed opportunity. "Proud of the performance but the final pass went astray a few times. That's where the frustration lies," Arsenal forward Bukayo Saka said. Klopp had urged Liverpool fans to give Arsenal the "proper Anfield experience" after saying he was unhappy with the atmosphere during Wednesday's 5-1 rout of West Ham in the League Cup. But Arteta was well aware of the maelstrom lying in wait, likening the visceral Anfield experience to being thrown around in a "washing machine". Responding to Klopp, the Liverpool faithful bellowed their "You'll never walk alone" anthem as loudly as ever before kick-off, but Arsenal took just 30 seconds to show they were unfazed. A flowing move cut open the Liverpool defence and ended with Gabriel Jesus's shot deflecting just over. It was a warning and Arsenal took the lead after only four minutes. Martin Odegaard delivered a perfect free-kick into the Liverpool area and Gabriel rose to thump his header past Alisson Becker from eight yards. The Brazilian defender celebrated by cupping his hands in his ears in front of the Kop. Anfield was stunned but not silenced. Falling behind was nothing new to Liverpool, who had trailed in eight other Premier League games this season and only lost one of them. Salah took it upon himself to ensure

Liverpool weren't left to rue that debatable decision as the Egyptian conjured a superb 29th minute equalizer. Trent Alexander-Arnold's raking pass picked out Salah down the right flank and he glided away from Oleksandr Zinchenko into the area before smashing a fierce strike past David Raya at his near post.



Leaders Inter Keep Juve at bay



MILAN (Dispatches) - Inter Milan maintained their four-point lead at the top of Serie A with Saturday's 2-0 win over Lecce, as Napoli crashed to a 2-0 defeat at Roma which the troubled champions finished with nine men. Yann Bissek's first goal in Italy just before half-time at the San Siro and a late finish from Nicolo Barella were enough for Inter to bounce back from cup defeat to Bologna midweek and keep closest challengers Juventus at bay. "We came into the game off the back of a result which made us unhappy because we played well in the cup," said Inzaghi. "It was important to win and that wasn't guaranteed after Wednesday's game, so I'm really happy." The 23-year-old Bissek has had a bumpy start to life at Inter but his header from Hakan Calhanoglu's pinpoint free-kick capped a fine performance at centre-back and sent Inter on the way to a fourth straight league win. Inter are hunting a 20th league title and look in good shape to do that after beating 12th-placed Lecce without injured star striker Lautaro Martinez. Marko Arnautovic's underwhelming display up front highlighted how much Inter's attack relies on 17-goal Martinez, and their unusual impotency allowed Lecce to stay in the game until Barella doubled the hosts' lead in the 78th minute. Arnautovic was surrounded by teammates following that strike as it was his deft flick that sent Barella clean through to net his second of the season and end the match as a contest. "They know I am in a difficult spell," said Arnautovic, who also missed a couple of decent opportunities. "I am close to getting back to my best. They can see it, they talk to me every day, but it's not been easy." Dusan Vlahovic kept Juve just about in touch by heading home the decisive goal in a 2-1 win at Frosinone. Serbia striker Vlahovic, who has had a tricky season, is on six league goals after netting the winner with nine minutes remaining after Jaime Baez had equalised for the hosts following Kenan Yildiz's opener early in his first Juve start. "A striker is obviously not happy when they don't score, or not consistently, but I work hard every day to give something to the team," Vlahovic told DAZN. Napoli fell a whopping 17 points behind Inter after the latest defeat of a disastrous season as Roma reignited their bid for a top four spot. Substitute Lorenzo Pellegrini lashed in the opener in 76th minute of a ill-tempered, scrappy encounter at the Stadio Olimpico -- which featured 13 bookings and two red cards -- before Romelu Lukaku capped the win deep in stoppage time. Jose Mourinho's Roma moved into sixth spot above Napoli, whose star striker Victor Osimhen was one of the two players sent off on the day he signed a long-awaited contract extension until 2026. "We needed to make it a happy Christmas for the fans," said Mourinho to DAZN. "We played very well eleven against eleven, had two great chances early on and were always in control." Roma travel to Juve next weekend and will be boosted by a deserved win which took them to within three points of high-flying Bologna, who will be fourth at Christmas after beating Atalanta 1-0.

Pistons Slump to Record-Equalling 26th NBA Defeat

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The Detroit Pistons matched an NBA single-season mark for futility, slumping to a 26th straight defeat in a 126-115 loss to the Nets in Brooklyn. As reigning champions Denver and Eastern Conference contenders Boston and Milwaukee posted comfortable victories, the Pistons matched the league's longest single-season losing streak -- set by the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and the 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers. Detroit, an iconic franchise that won NBA titles in 1989, 1990 and 2004 -- hasn't won since October 28. Mikal Bridges scored 29 points with six rebounds and seven assists to lead the Nets -- who had seven players score in double figures. Jaden Ivey scored 23 points and Cade Cunningham added 22 for the Pistons, who coughed up 14 turnovers leading to 22 Nets points. Brooklyn out-scored Detroit 62-42 in the paint and held an 18-9 edge in second-chance points and never trailed after the first quarter. Detroit will try to turn the tables when they play the Nets in Brooklyn again on Tuesday, when a defeat would land them with the single-season record -- and put them one away from matching the longest losing streak ever, the 28-game slide of the 76ers that spanned the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons. Pistons owner Tom Gores acknowledged the frustration of fans on Friday in a Zoom call with reporters. Nevertheless, Gores branded frustrated fans' calls to "sell the team" that rang out in Detroit on Thursday "ridiculous." As the Pistons remained mired in misery, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points to lead Milwaukee to a 130-111 victory over the Knicks in New York, stretching the Bucks' winning streak to seven games. The Greek star added seven rebounds and seven assists while Bobby Portis came off the bench to deliver 23 points and a team-high 11 rebounds for the Bucks, who improved to 22-7. Jalen Brunson scored a game-high 36 points and Julius Randle added 26 for the Knicks, who will try to snap a nine-game losing

streak against the Bucks in their Christmas holiday rematch on Monday, also at Madison Square Garden. Khris Middleton added 20 points for the Bucks, who out-rebounded the Knicks 53-40. The Bucks remained second in the Eastern Conference behind the Boston Celtics, who improved to an NBA-best 22-6 with a 145-108 victory over the Clippers in Los Angeles. Jayson Tatum returned from a one-game injury absence to score 30 points and Jaylen Brown added 24 for Boston, who ended the Clippers' six-game home winning streak. In Charlotte, the Nuggets used a dominant third quarter to take control and held on for a 102-95 victory over the Hornets. Michael Porter Jr. scored 22 points, Nikola Jokic had 18 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists before fouling out late and Denver out-scored the Hornets 30-9 in the third period on the way to a fourth straight win. Jamal Murray added 20 points and 12 rebounds for the Nuggets, who trailed by six at halftime but opened the third quarter on a 25-1 run, the Hornets unable to make a basket until the final minute of the period. Miles Bridges scored 22 points to lead the Hornets, PJ Washington added 20 off the bench but the Hornets dropped their seventh straight. The Houston Rockets, fueled by a career-high 37 points and 11 rebounds from Alperen Sengun, edged the Pelicans 106-104 in New Orleans. Zion Williamson scored 28 points and Brandon Ingram added 19 for the Pelicans, who led by as many as six in the fourth quarter but were hurt by a pair of late turnovers. The Memphis Grizzlies improved to 3-0 since Ja Morant's return from a 25-game suspension, beating the Hawks 125-119 in Atlanta. Desmond Bane scored 37 points and Morant added 30 with 11 assists for the Grizzlies, who withstood a 30-point, 13-assist double-double from Atlanta's Trae Young. It was Young's seventh straight game with at least 30 points and 10 assists, tying Oscar Robertson for the longest such streak.

