

The 16th Meeting of the Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Committee Opened in the Tajik Capital of Dushanbe With the Participation of Iran's Minister of Energy Ali Akbar Mehrabian and Tajikistan Minister of Energy and Water Resources Juma Daler

IRAN NEWS

The Director General of Iran's North Railway Administration-2 Has Announced That Rail Freight Exchanges in the Sectors of Exports, Imports, and Transit With the Republic of Azerbaijan Increased by 33 Percent From March to December 2023

VOL. XXIX, No. 7890 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 27, 2023 DAY 6, 1402

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Regional Cooperation a Catalyst for New World Order

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



TEHRAN - Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade Abbas Aliabadi has underscored the significance of mutual cooperation among regional countries, considering it a catalyst for shaping a new global order. Aliabadi made the remarks in St. Petersburg on Monday after Iran signed a free trade agreement with members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) -- Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Speaking about Iran's joining the EAEU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the BRICS group of emerging economies, the minister said this involvement lifts constraints on multilateral cooperation among regional countries. He criticized some world powers for trying to preserve the unipolar system, saying that cooperation among regional countries could contribute to the formation of a new order in international relations. Pointing to the growth in Iran's trade with the Eurasian Union over the past four years under the temporary preferential tariff agreement, Aliabadi said that the signing of the free trade agreement would lead to unprecedented expansion in trade between Iran and the member countries. Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) signed a major agreement to start free trade some six years after Tehran joined the bloc in a bid to diversify its trade partners amid sanctions imposed by the West.

MKO Received Oil From Iraq's Saddam in Return for Killing Iranians



TEHRAN (IRNA)- Documents obtained by Iran's intelligence bodies show that the members of the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) terrorist group received oil from Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein in return for killing the Iranian people, says the prosecutor's representative. The third session of the court investigating the crimes of the MKO members was held publicly on Tuesday under the chairmanship of Judge Dehqani in the 11th branch of the criminal court of Tehran Province. During the hearing, the prosecutor's representative laid out the details of the documents against the MKO members and their relations with Saddam. "Intelligence and judicial investigations show that the MKO members, as mercenaries of Iraq, carried out terrorist acts against the people. Also, the intelligence officials have obtained information showing that they took oil from Iraq in exchange for the terrorist acts," he said. Judge Dehqani then asked the prosecutor's representative whether the said documents have been included in the lawsuit raised against the MKO members, to which the representative responded in the affirmative. "The documents related to this meeting that was held in 2001 in the Iraqi Intelligence Service between the head of the Iraqi intelligence and Masoud Rajavi in the presence of Mehdi Abrisshamchi have been documented and included in the lawsuit," he said.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK



IRGC Advisor's Assassination Exposes Israel's Frustration Against Resistance

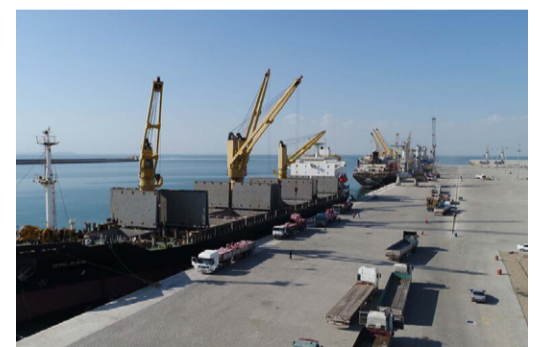
TEHRAN - The chief commander of the Iranian Army has condemned Israel's assassination of a senior military advisor of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria as yet another sign of the occupying regime's "frustration" against the resistance. In a message issued late on Monday, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi extended his congratulations and condolences to the family of Seyyed Razi Mousavi, as well as resistance fighters and the IRGC, on the Iranian commander's martyrdom in an Israeli airstrike in a Damascus neighborhood. "Following the defeats of the usurping regime in the face of the people in Gaza and the resistance front, the impotence and frustration of the child-killing Zionist regime were exposed once again by another crime and the martyrdom of a sincere fighter," he wrote. The Army chief also described Mousavi as one of the senior IRGC military advisers in Syria and a comrade of top anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani. General Soleimani was assassinated in a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020. He was highly revered due to his key role in fighting the US-created and Israeli-supported Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria. President Ebrahim Raisi also said the Israeli regime will definitely pay the price for its criminal act of killing a senior military advisor of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria. In a message on Monday, Raisi said the vicious act of assassinating the IRGC military advisor in a missile attack in Syria was yet another sign of the usurping Zionist regime's desperation. The president extended his condolences to Mousavi's bereaved family, his fellow comrades in the IRGC and the Iranian nation over his assassination. He added that the brave military advisor who was one of the companions of Iran's top anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani was killed while "safeguarding lofty Islamic values." The IRGC announced in a statement that the two officers were martyred against the backdrop of the relentless savagery of the "fake and child-killing" Israeli regime in Gaza. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani strongly condemned the Israeli regime's terrorist measure to assassinate the IRGC advisor in Damascus. He said the vicious and cowardly act was another indication of the terrorist nature of the Israeli regime. "Since its sinister existence, the Zionist regime has committed various kinds of crimes by repeatedly and continuously violating international regulations and norms, and today it has also committed a cowardly and aggressive terrorist act," the spokesperson added. Kanaani emphasized that Iran reserves the right to adopt necessary strategies and give a response to the move in due time and place. Iranian Defense Ministry spokesman Reza Taleai-Nik called for the global condemnation and punishment of the Zionists' crime, adding that they will get a "decisive and smart response." "The perpetrators of this crime must await the penalty of their recent operation. Waiting for that [penalty] will torment the regime and its elements to death," he said. Abolfazl Amouei, spokesman for the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said that the committee will hold an extraordinary meeting next week on the IRGC commander's martyrdom. "Definitely, this action of the Zionist regime will not go unanswered. As military and government officials said, Israel will pay a heavy price for its heinous and barbaric act," he noted. Speaking to the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network (IRINN), Iranian Ambassador to Damascus Hossein Akbari denounced Mousavi's murder as "a cowardly terrorist act by the Zionist regime" in violation of international conventions. The IRGC advisor was at the Iranian embassy at 2 p.m. local time (1100 GMT) and he was martyred at his house after returning from work at 4:10 p.m. (1310 GMT) by three missiles. The "heartless and passive" Israeli crime is actually "a reaction to the situation," he added. "Perhaps, it can be said that the Zionist regime is taking crazy measures today to make up for some of its failures regarding both domestic problems and conditions in Gaza, where it has practically achieved none of its objectives after 80 days [of war]." The envoy also emphasized that the victim country reserves the right to respond in kind and that the Zionist regime will naturally receive a response to its crime in due time and circumstances. Mousavi was martyred while serving Iran's military advisory mission in Syria. Iranians are in Syria in purely an advise-and-assist capacity. The mission was the first to rush to Syria's assistance in 2014, when the Arab country found itself in the grip of the Daesh terror outfit. Led by General Soleimani, the mission played an instrumental role in Damascus' successful counterterrorism push that ultimately defeated Daesh in late 2017.

COMSTech, Pasteur Institute of Iran Forge Partnership for Health, Scientific Development



ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - A three-day international course on "Outbreak Investigation and Control of Infectious Diseases" has been started at the Secretariat of the OIC Standing Committee on Science and Technology (COMSTech). The course, facilitated by 5 renowned experts in virology and infectious diseases from the Pasteur Institute of Iran and two from ICCBS has attracted over 100 participants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Iran, Yemen, Nigeria, Uganda, Indonesia, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Jordan, and Bangladesh, participating both virtually and physically. The course is jointly organized by COMSTech, Pasteur Institute of Iran, and Dr. Panjwani Center for Molecular Medicine and Drug Research, ICCBS, University of Karachi. The inaugural ceremony graced by the Chief Guest, H.E. Dr. Reza Amiri Moghaddam, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Pakistan who expressed gratitude to the COMSTech team for organizing these unique and valuable capacity-building events. Dr. Moghaddam pledged full support for such collaborations, emphasizing the enduring cooperation between COMSTech and Iran. During his speech, the Iranian Ambassador highlighted Iran's remarkable scientific achievements, despite challenges and sanctions. He said that Iran has emerged as a global leader, publishing over 78,000 scientific articles in 2022 and ranking 15th worldwide. He underscored Iran's commitment to scientific development, with notable progress in various fields and a focus on inclusivity, evident in over 50% of Iranian students being women.

Major Projects Worth \$80m Launched in Chabahar Port



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash officially launched five major infrastructure projects with a total investment of 40 trillion rials (about \$80 million) in the southeastern Chabahar Port. The second phase of a 100,000-ton grain silo, a 25-megawatt power plant, a water desalination plant with a capacity of 5,000 cubic meters and a storage warehouse with a capacity of 734,000 tons are among the projects whose implementation was started with the presence of the Minister of Transport and Urban Development. Also, a multi-purpose cargo support terminal with an annual capacity of 296,000 tons and a container support service terminal with an annual capacity of 50,000 TEU were other development and executive projects started in Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti Port. According to Bazrpash, providing a suitable platform for the use of port infrastructure and equipment in Shahid Beheshti port, promoting the participation of the private sector in the development of port activities, and attracting private sector investment for the development of the country's maritime-oriented economy and the development of Makran coasts are among the major goals of logistics projects being implemented in Chabahar Port. As Iran's only oceanic port on the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar Port holds great significance for the country both politically and economically. The country has taken serious measures to develop this port to improve the country's maritime trade. The port consists of Shahid Kalantari and Shahid Beheshti terminals, each of which has five berth facilities. The port is located in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan Province and is about 120 kilometers southwest of Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, where the China-funded Gwadar port is situated.

Iraq Slams U.S. After Deadly Strikes Targeting Pro-Iran Forces

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - U.S. air strikes targeting a pro-Iranian group in Iraq on Tuesday claimed at least one life, drawing an angry response from Baghdad as regional tensions spike amid the Israel-Hamas war. The United States has repeatedly targeted sites used by forces in Iraq and Syria in response to dozens of attacks on American and allied forces in the region since the October 7 outbreak of the war. Iraq said the latest U.S. strikes killed one member of the security forces and wounded 18 other people, including civilians. In a statement, it warned that such attacks "infringe upon Iraq's sovereignty and are deemed unacceptable under any circumstances or justification." "Iraqi military sites were targeted by the American side justifying the act as a response," the Iraqi government said, adding it "resulted in the martyrdom of one service member and the injury of 18 others, including civilians." "This constitutes a clear hostile act." "It runs counter to the pursuit of enduring mutual interests in establishing security and stability, and it opposes the declared intention of the American

side to enhance relations with Iraq." Questioned by AFP, an official in Iraq's interior ministry said a strike had targeted a Hashed al-Shaabi site in Hilla, the capital of Babylon province. One person was killed and 20 others wounded, the official said, giving a higher injured toll than the government. Four others were wounded in a second strike in Wasset province. The casualty toll was confirmed by security sources in both Babylon and Wasset provinces. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said earlier American forces had carried out strikes on three sites used by pro-Iran groups in Iraq in response to a series of attacks on US personnel. "US military forces conducted necessary and proportionate strikes on three facilities used by Kataeb Hezbollah and affiliated groups in Iraq," Austin said in a statement. The Kataeb Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades, forms part of the Hashed al-Shaabi, a coalition of former paramilitary forces that are now integrated into Iraq's regular armed forces. The group was designated a "terrorist organization" by the US State Department in 2009.



IRAN NEWS



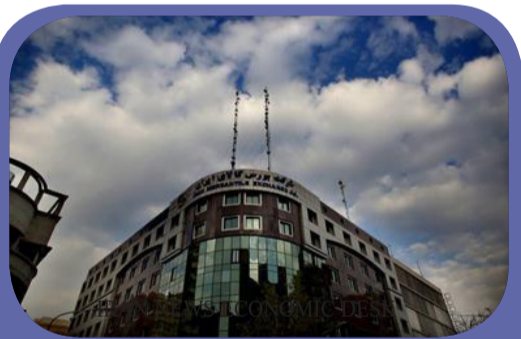
Iran, Egypt FMs Discuss Bilateral Ties, Gaza War

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Egyptian counterpart have discussed bilateral ties as well as the latest developments regarding the Gaza war. Amir-Abdollahian and Sameh Hassan Shoukry held their talks on the phone on Monday night. The two ministers stressed the need for sending further humanitarian aid to war-hit Gaza. Amir-Abdollahian said that the Israeli regime should immediately stop its crimes against Palestinians in the besieged territory. The Iranian foreign minister has been engaged in diplomatic efforts aimed at supporting the people of Gaza ever since the Israeli regime waged its war on October 7. He has taken several regional tours and held numerous phone talks with officials in the region and beyond as part of those efforts.

CBI Governor Leaves for Moscow to Strengthen Monetary-Banking Ties



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) left Tehran for Moscow on Tuesday at the head of a technical delegation to boost banking-monetary cooperation with Russia and bolster ties within the framework of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) inked between Iran and EAEU members. CBI Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin will hold talks with Governor of the Central Bank of Russia Elvira Sakhizadovna Nabiullina and other officials of the country during his visit to Moscow. Deputies governor of the Central Bank of Iran for International and Economic Affairs and CEOs of Bank Melli Iran and Bank Sepah accompany Farzin in this visit. After more than three and a half years of negotiations, Iran and member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) clinched an FTA in St. Petersburg on Monday on the sidelines of the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Union Council. Upon the implementation of this agreement, the tariff rate of 87 percent of trade goods between Iran and the EAEU member states will be minimized to zero.



Over 11m Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Month

TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) in last Iranian calendar month of Azar witnessed trade of 11,980,791 tons of commodities with a total trading value of nearly \$3b on its physical market. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor, trade of 9,893,000 tons of commodities valued at nearly \$2b. On this floor the IME sold 5,059,317 tons of cement, 2,279,000 tons of iron ore, 1,930,172 tons of steel, 545,000 tons of sponge iron, 58,805 tons of zinc, 39,140 tons of aluminum, 32,356 tons of copper, 2,275 tons of cast iron, 1,000 tons of coke, 800 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 175 tons of lead and 60 tons of precious metals concentrate. It's worth noting that the IME also traded 5 tons of cotton on its agricultural trading floor. Moreover, the exchange saw trade of 1,944,596 tons of commodities worth more than 866 million USD on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor. Items traded on this floor included 648,540 tons of vacuum bottom, 548,923 tons of bitumen, 387,000 tons of polymeric products, 190,000 tons of lube cut, 135,220 tons of chemicals, 23,470 tons of sulfur, 15,967 tons of oil, 11,652 tons of petroleum products, 1,925 tons of feedstocks, 1,000 tons of slop wax and 200 tons of waterproofing materials. Last was the IME's side market on which the exchange traded 88,089 tons of goods.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



Iran Ready to Export Oil Products to Nicaragua

TEHRAN - Oil Minister Javad Owji on Monday expressed Iran's readiness for exporting oil products and technical and engineering services to Nicaragua. The minister made the remarks in a meeting with visiting Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Denis Moncada, saying Iranian companies are prepared to help Nicaragua implement its refinery projects and provide it with equipment. Iran's 13th administration is keen to develop relations with Nicaragua in all fields, underlined Owji, adding he had good talks with the Central American country's energy minister on supply of fuel and oil products and also exports of techno-engineering services during his recent visit to Managua. Iran and Nicaragua have common views on the fight against global arrogance, said the oil minister, pointing out that the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Nicaraguan Revolution took place almost simultaneously and are known as the "Twin Revolutions". Tehran-Managua ties have increased since the

13th administration took office, mentioned Owji, calling for forming technical and specialized boards to put bilateral agreements into action. Nicaragua's foreign minister deemed the Iranian oil officials' visit to his country necessary to put the agreements into practice. Moncada said he would report to the Nicaraguan president on Iran's considerable expertise and willingness to cooperate with his country in refinery projects. He described refinery projects as vital to Nicaragua and added, "We are eagerly waiting for holding the joint commission's meeting and using the technical know-how of Iranian experts in our refinery projects." The foreign minister said, "This is the fourth visit I have paid to Iran over the past two and a half years," concluding Iran's oil minister was briefed on Nicaragua's oil industry and needs in the refinery sector during his visit, expressing hope the two sides will have good cooperation in this area.

Iran, Syria Share Stance on Need to End Israeli Genocide in Gaza



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says Iran and Syria have a common stance on the necessity of putting an immediate end to Israel's war crimes and genocide in Gaza. In a Monday meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, who is in Iran to attend Tehran International Conference on Palestine, Amir-Abdollahian hailed Damascus' firm stance on the ongoing developments in Gaza and Palestine. He said Iran and Syria are supporting each other in dealing with regional issues. Israel waged the war on Gaza on October 7 after the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas carried out Operation

Al-Aqsa Storm against the occupying entity in response to the Israeli regime's decades-long campaign of death and destruction in Palestine. Amir-Abdollahian also hailed the promotion of security and stability in Syria and voiced Iran's support for the expansion of the Arab country's sovereignty all over the territory. The Syrian foreign minister, for his part, commended Iran's hosting of the international conference on Palestine and said his country fully endorses Iranian President Ebrahim Raeisi's view with regard to the Palestinian issue. The Palestinian people's victory is in fact the triumph of the Arab and Muslim nations, he said.

FTA With EAEU to Open New Horizon for Shanghai, ECO, BRICS



MOSCOW (IRNA) - Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari has said that the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the Islamic Republic and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) will open a new horizon for expanding ties with Shanghai, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and BRICS. Safari stated in an interview with IRNA in Moscow on Monday that the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is significant. This is because it will result in new trade connections with the Shanghai, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and BRICS. This is due to three of the five Eurasian Union member countries being part of Shanghai, two being members of ECO, and one of them also being a member of BRICS. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran emphasized that the agreement signing will lead to increased exports and imports between Iran and the EAEU members. He noted the significant potential for Iranian exports in joint automobile production, transit, reactors, construction materials, medical equipment, and medicine. Iran and the EAEU signed an important agreement to initiate free trade, six years after Iran joined the bloc to expand its trade partners in response to Western sanctions. Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Abbas Ali-Abadi and Chairman of the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) Mikhail Myasnikov signed the agreement.

Rasht-Caspian Railway to Be Inaugurated by Yearend



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran's third mega railway project, the Rasht-Caspian Railway, will be inaugurated by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (to end on March 20, 2024). The Rasht-Caspian rail corridor is important for the transit of cargo from the north to the southern parts of the country. The construction operation of this giant railway project started in 2006 but its physical progress was negligible from 2006 to 2019. The Rasht-Caspian Railway is a part of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Upon the completion of the project, the Persian Gulf will be connected to the Caspian Sea by rail. Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development for Construction and Development of Railways, Ports and Airports Affairs Abbas Khatibi said the 37km railway project will be inaugurated before the current Iranian calendar year ends. He put the current physical progress of this project at 86 percent, Mehr news agency reported. The Rasht-Caspian railway line is a continuation of the Qazvin-Rasht railway. It will provide the possibility of transiting and transporting cargo from Russia and other neighboring countries of the Caspian Sea, Khatibi said. The launch of the Rasht-Caspian Railway will significantly boost the trade volume of the country, the Middle East, Central Asia and Eurasia, he added.

More Than 100 Killed in Central Nigeria

MANGU (Dispatches) - More than a hundred people have been killed in central Nigeria in a series of attacks on villages, local government officials said Monday. The toll marked a sharp rise from the initial figure reported by the army Sunday evening of just 16 dead in a region plagued for several years by religious and ethnic tensions. "As many as 113 persons have been confirmed killed as Saturday hostilities persisted to early hours of Monday," Monday Kassah, head of the local government in Bokkos, Plateau State, told AFP. Military gangs, locally called "bandits", launched "well-coordinated" attacks in "not fewer than 20 different communities", Kassah said. "We found more than 300 wounded people" who were transferred to hospitals in Bokkos, Jos and Barkin Ladi, he said.



Turkey's Parliament Set to Debate Sweden NATO Bid



ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - The Turkish parliament was yesterday set to resume debate on approving Sweden's bid to join NATO, a thorny issue that was further complicated after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan linked it to Ankara's request for F-16 fighter jets from its ally the United States. Sweden and Finland dropped decades of military non-alignment and sought to join the US-led defence organisation after Russia invaded Ukraine last year. Their bids won fast-track approval from all NATO members except Turkey and Hungary. The two ultimately relented and Finland was accepted as NATO's 31st member in April. Turkey and Hungary remain the only North Atlantic Treaty Organization members left to ratify Sweden's bid 19 months after it applied for membership. In November, the Turkish parliament's foreign affairs committee failed to reach agreement on a text for a full floor vote and will meet again on Tuesday afternoon. Erdogan in July lifted his objections to Sweden's NATO membership after Stockholm cracked down on Kurdish groups that Ankara calls terrorists. "We see that there is a change in policy in Sweden. We see some decisions taken in courts, albeit few," Fuat Oktay, a lawmaker from Erdogan's ruling AKP party and head of the parliament's foreign affairs committee said in a televised interview on Monday. "We had some requests for further steps to be taken," he added. Once it is approved by the committee, there will be a vote on the full parliament floor, where Erdogan's ruling alliance holds the majority of seats. NATO allies have piled pressure on Turkey, with France saying the credibility of the alliance was "at stake". But the process is fraught with problems. In December, Erdogan suggested that parliament will only act on Sweden if the US Congress approves Turkey's requested purchase of dozens of F-16 fighter jets and spare parts, and if other NATO allies including Canada lift arms embargoes imposed on Ankara. "Positive developments from the United States regarding the F-16 issue and Canada keeping its promises will accelerate our parliament's positive view (on Sweden's membership bid)," Erdogan said. "All of these are linked," he added. "Sweden's NATO membership and F-16 sales to Turkey will be handled in coordination to some extent... because unfortunately, neither country trusts the other," Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara office director of the US German Marshall Fund think tank, told AFP. Turkey's ageing air force has suffered from Ankara's expulsion from the US-led F-35 joint strike fighter program in 2019. This was in retaliation for Erdogan's decision to acquire an advanced Russian missile defence system that NATO views as an operational security threat. US President Joe Biden's administration has repeatedly promised to move forward with the \$20-billion F-16 sale but lawmakers have blocked it over concerns about Turkey's alleged violations of human rights and its past tensions with Greece.

WHO Decries Deadly Strike on Gaza Refugee Camp



GENEVA (Dispatches) - World Health Organization staff visited Monday a Gaza hospital receiving casualties from deadly strikes on a refugee camp, hearing distressing stories of entire families killed and seeing dying children. "WHO's team heard harrowing accounts shared by health workers and victims of the suffering caused by the explosions," the UN health agency chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on X, formerly Twitter. "One child had lost their whole family in the strike on the camp. A nurse at the hospital suffered the same loss," he said. The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza says that at least 70 people were killed in Israeli strikes late Sunday on three houses in the Al-Maghazi refugee camp. AFP was unable to independently verify the toll. The Israeli military said it was "reviewing the incident" and "committed to international law including taking feasible steps to minimise harm to civilians". Rows of victims' bodies, shrouded in white bags, lined the ground at Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir al-Balah, central Gaza, ahead of a mass funeral. The Al-Aqsa hospital staff had reported receiving around 100 casualties from the blasts, Tedros said. "The hospital is taking in far more patients than its bed capacity and staff can handle," he said. "Many will not survive the wait," he warned, insisting "this latest strike on a Gazan community shows just why we need a Ceasefire NOW". The war broke out when Hamas fighters launched an unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7 and killed about 1,140 people, mainly civilians, and seized 250 hostages, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli figures. Sean Casey, a WHO Emergency Medical Teams coordinator who was on Monday's mission to Al-Aqsa hospital, described doctors providing pain relief to a critically injured nine-year-old boy named Ahmed. He "was being treated basically with sedation to ease his suffering as he dies", Casey said in a video shot inside Al-Aqsa, seeming to fight back tears. "He was crossing the street in front of the shelter where his family is staying and the building beside him

blew up," he said. "He was hit by shrapnel, by rubble, his brain matter was exposed. There's nothing anybody can do for him. Like so many cases here, there isn't capacity to manage complex neurological cases, complex trauma cases," he said. WHO has warned that only nine of Gaza's original 36 hospitals remain even partially functional. Meanwhile Israel on Monday said it was "intensifying the fighting" against Hamas in Gaza, where relentless strikes across the Palestinian territory exacerbated the dire conditions for civilians in the war's 12th week. The conflict has heightened tensions across the Middle East where Iran - which supports Hamas - on Monday accused Israel of martyring a senior Revolutionary Guards general in Syria and vowed revenge. Pope Francis decried the "desperate humanitarian situation" in Gaza. During his traditional Christmas message he called for an immediate ceasefire and the freeing of hostages. As war raged, festivities in Bethlehem, which Christians consider to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ, were effectively scrapped in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The city's usually vibrant streets had only a handful of worshippers and tourists. The war erupted when Palestinian militants broke through Gaza's militarised border and attacked southern Israel on October 7, killing about 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli figures. Militants also seized about 250 hostages, Israel says. Israel vowed to crush Hamas and launched a retaliatory military campaign in Gaza, including extensive aerial bombardment and sieges. The campaign has killed at least 20,674 people, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. "We as an international community should not accept that thousands upon thousands of people, children are being blown up, being killed while they're crossing the street, while they're sleeping in their beds," Casey said. "This is an unacceptable situation," he said, demanding a ceasefire. "This has to stop."

Japan Moon Lander Enters Lunar Orbit



TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan's SLIM space probe entered the Moon's orbit on Monday in a major step towards the country's first successful lunar landing, expected next month. The Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) is nicknamed the "Moon Sniper" because it is designed to land within 100 metres (328 feet) of a specific target on the lunar surface. If successful, the touchdown would make Japan only the fifth country to have successfully landed a probe on the Moon, after the United States, Russia, China and India. On Monday, SLIM "successfully entered the moon's orbit at 04:51 pm Japan time" (0751 GMT), the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a statement released Monday evening. "Its trajectory shift was achieved as originally planned, and there is nothing out of the ordinary about the probe's conditions," the agency said. The lander's descent towards the moon is expected to start around 12:00 am Japan time on January 20, with its landing on the surface scheduled for 20 minutes later, JAXA said. The H-IIA rocket lifted off in September from the southern island of Tanegashima carrying the lander, after three postponements linked to bad weather. JAXA said this month that the mission would be an "unprecedentedly high precision landing" on the Moon. The lander is equipped with a spherical probe that was developed with a toy company. Slightly bigger than a tennis ball, it can change its shape to move on the lunar surface. Compared to previous probes that landed "a few or 10-plus kilometres" away from targets, SLIM's purported margin of error of under 100 metres suggests a level of accuracy once thought impossible, thanks to the culmination of a 20-year effort by researchers, according to JAXA. With the advance of technology, demand is growing to pinpoint targets like craters and rocks on the lunar surface, Shinichiro Sakai, JAXA's SLIM project manager, told reporters this month.



Serbian Opposition Marches in Support of Arrested Protesters

BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Thousands gathered in front of a Belgrade police station on Monday evening in support of those arrested the previous day during protests against what they say was electoral fraud in Serbia's recent parliamentary and local elections. It marked the eighth consecutive day of protests, which unlike Sunday's demonstrations were peaceful despite having started with roadblocks in the capital and later a gathering in front of the state electoral commission building. "See you tomorrow at 6 pm," Srđan Milivojevic, a deputy from the opposition "Serbia against violence" coalition said late Monday, signalling protesters would reconvene. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic had denounced violence in the capital the previous evening, when opposition demonstrators had tried to storm Belgrade city hall and clashed with police. Vucic said there was evidence the violence had been planned in advance. Moscow on Monday also accused the West of interfering, suggesting that foreign actors were trying to stir up the unrest. Earlier Monday, Vucic met the Russian ambassador in Belgrade Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko and briefed him on the Sunday's incidents. Vucic is walking a difficult line balancing between East and West, vowing to keep Serbia on a course for European Union membership while also remaining friendly with Russia and courting Beijing and Washington. A few hundred demonstrators meanwhile had blocked the street in central Belgrade where the public administration and local self-government ministry is located. Other roadblocks - some taking the form of street soccer and volleyball - quickly followed. The protesters, mainly students organised under the "Borba" (Fight) movement, were supporting the opposition claims of fraud that started on December 18, a day after

the elections. They are calling for a revision of the voter roll, claiming that it was the source of the alleged electoral fraud. But a statement from the ministry insisted the registry was "one of the most up-to-date records". "I am born 2002, and I thought that there would be no need, as my parents did, to fight for democracy through the street," 21-year-old politics student Emilija Milenkovic told AFP at one protest Monday. "But I have to," Milenkovic added, wearing the badge of "Otpor", the students' movement that organised protests against former president Slobodan Milosevic. A day after the elections, Vucic's party said it had won more than half of parliament's 250 seats. The main opposition coalition "Serbia against violence" denounced what it said was electoral fraud, alleging that voters from neighbouring Bosnia had been allowed to cast ballots illegally in the capital. International observers - including representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - reported "irregularities", including "vote buying" and "ballot box stuffing". Several Western countries also expressed concern. Germany, for one, labelled the reported allegations "unacceptable" for a country hoping to join the European Union, while a statement from Brussels said Serbia's "electoral process requires tangible improvement and further reform". On Saturday, Serbian prosecutors asked the police to probe allegations of fraud. Vucic was not himself on the ballot for these elections, and the only support for him after his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) declared victory came from Moscow. "The attempts of the collective West to destabilise the situation in the country are obvious," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told state-run news agency RIA Novosti.



China Warns Rocket Remnants to Hit South China Sea

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China warned that remnants of a rocket would hit an area in the South China Sea on Tuesday, following the sixth deployment of its most powerful launch vehicle eleven days ago. Rocket debris, which generally burns up in the atmosphere on re-entry, is expected to fall off the coast of China's island province of Hainan between 11:00 a.m. (0300 GMT) and noon (0400 GMT), said the China Maritime Safety Administration. China launched a Long March 5 rocket on Dec. 15 from Hainan's Wenchang launch site, a sixth launch of the rocket type since its first flight in 2016. A variant of the rocket, the Long March 5B, was previously used to launch China's probe to Mars and also modules of its space station. A 2021 launch of the Long March 5B caused particular anxiety due to speculation over where remnants would land. In 2020, debris from a Long March 5B fell on Ivory Coast, damaging several buildings. The Long March 5 mission earlier this month successfully launched what Chinese state media described as "a high-orbit optical remote sensing satellite". The powerful rocket is normally used to launch very large payloads. The "satellite" will be used in land surveys, crop yield assessments, environmental management, meteorological warning and forecasting, and disaster prevention and relief, said the official Xinhua news agency. Xinhua also reported at the time of the launch that the fairing of the payload atop the rocket was 18.5 metres (60.7 feet), far longer than the usual 12.267 m, suggesting an unusually large "satellite". No images of the satellite have been released to the public. The unusual payload has sparked guesses that it is a high-altitude satellite would hold above the Earth at a fixed location, allowing it to peer down continuously at a certain region from its perch.

Russia Says Controls Maryinka in East Ukraine, Kyiv Denies the Claim

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia said that its forces have gained full control of Maryinka in Ukraine's east, but Kyiv's military denied Moscow's claim, saying Ukrainian troops were still within the borders of the blighted town. "Our assault units (...) have today completely liberated the settlement of Maryinka," Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a televised meeting. Putin said control of the town, which lies some five kms (three miles) southwest of the city of Donetsk, will allow the Russian forces to move enemy combat units away from Donetsk. "Our troops (now) have the opportunity to reach a wider operational area," he said in a video of the exchange between him and Shoigu posted online by a Kremlin journalist. But Oleksandr Shtupun, a spokesman for the Ukrainian military, told the Ukrainian national broadcaster on Monday, that fierce fighting for the town continued. "Our troops are in the administrative borders of Maryinka, the battles for the city continue," Shtupun said. "The city is completely destroyed, but it is incorrect to talk about the complete capture of Maryinka." Reuters could not independently verify the reports or who controls Maryinka, a small town in the Donetsk region that had a pre-war population of

about 10,000 people and has since been turned into rubble. The reports on the assault on Maryinka came as Moscow pushes on with its most recent offensive along the whole eastern front aiming to take control of more Ukrainian territory. Ukraine troops have long built strong fortification in Maryinka, allowing them to repel numerous Russian attacks there. If Russia's claims about taking over the town prove true, it would be Moscow's most significant battlefield gains since May. Moscow captured in May the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut, the theatre of some of the bloodiest fighting in the 22-month long war. Ukraine's counteroffensive that followed in June has aimed to retake land in the country's south and east, including Bakhmut. Kyiv's forces, however, have struggled to make significant progress in their counteroffensive in the face of entrenched Russian resistance. Russian troops have also intensified land and air-based attacks on the nearby town of Avdiivka since mid-October as the focal point of their slow-moving push through eastern Ukraine's Donbas region. Avdiivka was briefly captured in 2014 by Russian-backed separatists who seized large chunks of eastern Ukraine. Fortifications were later built around the town - seen as a gateway to Donetsk.



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Website: <http://www.irannewsdaily.com>
E-Mail Address: info@irannewsdaily.com
ISSN 1024-6053 P.O. Box: 15875-8551
Address: No 13, Pajouhesh St., Golestan II St, Golestan

St.Marzadaran Blvd., Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran Distributed by:
Cities of Iran Cultural and Artistic Institute
Managing Director: *Fereydoon Taherpour Asl*



Celtics Feast on Lakers Home Court in Classic NBA Christmas Clash

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Boston Celtics used a hot start and a strong finish to put away the Los Angeles Lakers 126-115 in a Christmas clash of storied NBA franchises. Kristaps Porzingis scored 28 points and pulled down 11 rebounds and Jayson Tatum added 25 points for the Celtics, who withstood a 40-point effort from Lakers star Anthony Davis. The game between the teams that share the record for most NBA titles with 17 apiece was one of five on the Christmas Day slate that started with the New York Knicks' 129-122 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks at Madison Square Garden. The reigning champion Denver Nuggets beat Golden State 120-114 in a clash of the last two title winners that left Warriors coach Steve Kerr fuming at the officiating. Lakers star LeBron James, coming off a 40-point performance in a win over the Thunder in Oklahoma City on Saturday, scored just 16 points on five-of-14 shooting. James added nine rebounds and eight assists, but a slightly "lethargic" start -- which Lakers coach Darvin Ham said could have been due to holiday distractions or an unusually early afternoon start -- proved too much to overcome. The Celtics roared out of the gate to a 12-0 lead and led by as many as 18 before the Lakers began to chip away. Davis scored 20 first-half points, driving for a basket that cut the deficit to 58-57 in the waning seconds of the first half. Both teams got a scare late in the second period, when James and Jaylen Brown collided and both went down, James holding his left knee and Brown his back. James would go briefly to the bench before returning while Brown went to the locker room and was diagnosed with a lower back contusion. He eventually returned to finish with 19 points. Tatum said the thing he liked best about the victory was how Boston responded after the Lakers closed the gap then took a two-point lead early in

the third on Jarred Vanderbilt's dunk. Boston answered with seven straight points and the Lakers wouldn't get in front again as the Celtics improved to a league-best 23-6. "And it's a big win, right? It's Christmas day and it's tough to win on the road," Tatum said. "So just the way we responded and executed late in the game." In Denver, Jamal Murray scored 28 points and two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic overcame a poor shooting day by going 18-for-18 at the free-throw as the Nuggets took their winning streak to five games. Despite connecting on just four of 12 shots from the field Jokic finished with 26 points, adding 14 rebounds and eight assists to help the Nuggets come out on top in a seesaw battle. The Warriors came into the contest riding a five-game winning streak. But superstar Stephen Curry endured a frustrating afternoon, scoring just four points in the first half on the way to a total of 18 on seven-of-21 shooting. He was three-for-13 from three-point range and handed out four assists. Canada's Andrew Wiggins helped keep the Warriors in it, scoring a team-high 22 points off the bench. But after Jokic took 14 second-half free-throws Kerr blasted the NBA for "legislating defense out of the game." In New York, Jalen Brunson scored 38 points for the Knicks as they finally got the better of Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Bucks, halting Milwaukee's seven-game win streak with a 129-122 victory at the Garden. The Knicks had lost their previous nine games against Milwaukee, including a 130-111 decision on Saturday. Julius Randle scored 24 points and grabbed nine rebounds, RJ Barrett bounced back from a disappointing showing on Saturday to score 21 points, and Immanuel Quickley added 20 off the bench for the Knicks. Damian Lillard and Antetokounmpo meanwhile each scored 32 points apiece for Milwaukee.

Do Not Get Used to Suffering in Gaza



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah said today that families grieving for their loved ones in Gaza should not be forgotten, as he issued an emotional Christmas message marking only his second comment on the war in the enclave. Salah posted a black-and-white picture of a Christmas tree on his social media pages, saying he was approaching Christmas with a heavy heart amid the fighting in Gaza, which has been under intense bombardment by Israel since Hamas militants launched a cross-border rampage on October 7. Israel says Hamas militants killed 1,200 people and took around 240 people hostage in their attack. Israel's ensuing bombardment of Gaza has killed more than 20,400 people and wounded at least 50,000, according to authorities in the Hamas-ruled strip. "With the brutal war going on in the Middle East, especially the death and destruction in Gaza, this year we get to Christmas with very heavy hearts and we share the pain of those families who are grieving the loss of their loved ones," Salah said. "Please do not forget them and do not get used to their suffering. Merry Christmas," Salah wrote to his more than 63 million followers on Instagram and almost 19 million on X. Salah had faced some criticism in his native Egypt after staying silent on the issue for more than a week after the war started, with many fans comparing his stance to other Arab sports figures who have been more vocal about it. Egyptian Red Crescent officials said in October that Salah had made a "significant donation" to help the people of Gaza.

Alcaraz Has a Lot of Areas That He Can Improve on

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tim Henman has poured cold water on the notion that Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz are likely to forge an epic rivalry. The duo played out some thrilling matches in 2023 but Henman believes Djokovic is in a league of his own, while Alcaraz's level is a closer match to Jannik Sinner and Holger Rune. That theory could be tested in a few weeks at the Australian Open, which is live on Eurosport. At 20, Alcaraz has already had a career that would be the envy of most tennis players, bagging two Grand Slams and ascending to the top of the world rankings. After beating Novak Djokovic over five epic sets in one of the greatest Wimbledon finals of all time, many expected Alcaraz and the Serbian to forge a new rivalry but Henman thinks the Spaniard's level is closer to that of Holger Rune and Jannik Sinner, who beat Djokovic twice en route to Italy's first Davis Cup success since 1976. "I mean, Alcaraz had an amazing year, winning his first Wimbledon title," Henman told Eurosport. "He missed the early part of the year and he still finished No. 2 in the world. He was still in the race to finish No. 1 at the end of the year. He's still so young. He's still learning. You reflect on what happened at Roland Garros in the semi-finals, where after two sets, he suddenly got a terrible cramp. And I'm sure that was from the sort of nervous tension that went with playing that match against Djokovic. So, he's still got a lot of areas that he can improve on." He's got amazing all-round game, the versatility, but he's still so young. He's another one that just embraces challenges and he loves the competition. "He has an element of a rivalry against Djokovic because they're completely different eras, but also, I think [he's] almost closer to Sinner and Rune. Those are three guys that I think are going to play each other an enormous amount in the biggest and best tournaments. And that's so important for our sport. We love those rivalries. It looks like when Sinner and Alcaraz have played, they've had incredible matches. They are different personalities. They've got similar games. I think Alcaraz has got a little bit more versatility but in terms of ball striking and power from the back of the court, Sinner is phenomenal. "I felt that Alcaraz was definitely a good step ahead of Sinner but the way Sinner played at the end of last year, I think Sinner has absolutely closed the gap."



Liverpool Need Slice of Luck Amid Injury Crisis



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool will wrap Joe Gomez in cotton wool and pray the defender does not become yet another addition to the snowballing injury crisis at the Premier League club, manager Jurgen Klopp said. Liverpool's Kostas Tsimikas sustained a broken collarbone in their 1-1 draw with Arsenal on Saturday, leaving the Merseyside outfit with few options at left back, with first-choice defender Andy Robertson also sidelined due to a shoulder injury. Gomez, who is right-footed, is likely to fill in at left back until Robertson returns. "It is for us obviously really tough, it's really tough. You have injuries sometimes and we accept all of them, but a broken collarbone is really bad because it just takes (so) long," Klopp told reporters ahead of Tuesday's clash against Burnley at Turf Moor. "Same what Robbo (Robertson) had, a different injury but that takes long as well, how we all know." We all know we need luck in these moments to get through and now we will have Joey (Gomez) there and just have to make sure we put him in cotton wool and we have to make sure he is always ready for the games." Liverpool, second in the standings, next face 19th-placed Burnley, who beat Fulham 2-0 in their last league match to move off the bottom of the table. Klopp said he believes Burnley are better than their results show. "I have watched quite a few Burnley games and I am pretty impressed by what they are doing -- and on Saturday they got then the reward," he said. "We all know if you win once and you have a chance to play in three days again then you will want to win again and that's exactly what we expect -- and a pretty good atmosphere as well. We better be, and will be, ready."

Pele Would Have Been Sad at State of Brazil Team

SAO PAULO (Dispatches) - Pele "would have been sad" at the state of the current Brazilian national team, his son Edinho has told AFP in an interview days before the first anniversary of his death on Friday. Brazil have struggled in qualifying for the 2026 World Cup and presently occupy sixth place in the South American table, the last spot that affords direct qualification. The Selecao have struggled without their biggest current star, Neymar, who is a long-term injury absentee after tearing knee ligaments. "This crisis didn't appear overnight, there are big and complex problems," said Edinho, 53, who is one of Pele's seven children. "We are experiencing a decline... we still have great players but in previous times we had more high-level players than we do today." Edinho, who was raised by his mother as Pele and her separated shortly after they moved to New York when he signed for New York Cosmos in 1975 but grew closer to him in later life, added: "There is no doubt, if (Pele) had been there this year, he would have been very sad." Santos, the Brazilian club where Pele spent most of his career, are also going through a tough period after they were relegated to the second division for the first time in its 111-year history. The club is wracked by financial problems and boardroom rifts. "Unfortunately this is no surprise. Anyone who has followed the daily life of the club could have anticipated such a scenario, and it has ended up happening," said Edinho, who was Santos' goalkeeper for several seasons. The ceremonies to mark Friday's first anniversary of Pele's death from cancer at the age of 82 are expected to be low-key. The six surviving children of the man widely considered the greatest footballer in history will hold a virtual meeting to mark the moment as several live in the United States, while a ceremony is scheduled to be held at the mausoleum in Santos that was opened to the public in May.

Edinho, whose life has been far from smooth serving time for money laundering and drug trafficking, said the loss of the charismatic man who scored 77 goals in 92 appearances for Brazil had left a huge

hole in the family's life. "He was exceptional, we miss him a lot," Edinho said. "He carried our country's name through football, which we are very proud of."

