

The Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Pakistan Reza Amiri Moghadam Discussed the Media Cooperation Between the Two Countries With the Caretaker of Pakistan's Federal Ministry of Information

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Al-Aqsa Storm Originated from Palestinians' Own Strength

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TEHRAN - Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Major General Hossein Salami said the Al-Aqsa Storm operation was purely Palestinian, underscoring its separate trajectory from retaliatory measures for General Qassem Soleimani's assassination. "The Al-Aqsa Storm is independent of our quest for retaliation for Hajj Qassem (Soleimani's) martyrdom," the IRGC commander said, emphasizing the detachment between the two events. During the funeral procession for Brigadier General Seyed Razi Mousavi, an IRGC military adviser who was martyred in a terrorist Israeli airstrike in a Damascus neighborhood three days ago, Major General Salami stated, "Seyed Razi's martyrdom came out of the incapability of the Zionist regime," adding, "We will never exercise patience in the face of the martyrdom of our people. Seyed Razi's revenge will be nothing but the elimination of the Zionist regime." Salami also described Mousavi as "one of the most experienced and effective" IRGC members in the resistance front, stating "Today's powerful Muslim structure in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine is undeniably the outcome of Mousavi's struggles." Martyr Mousavi was a comrade of Iran's legendary anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, he said, adding that Mousavi never left the field of jihad (endeavor for the sake of God) over the past 45 years. General Soleimani was assassinated by the U.S. in Iraq in January 2020. He was highly revered due to his key role in fighting the U.S.-created and Israeli-supported Daesh (ISIL or ISIS) Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Highlighting the significance of individuals like Seyed Razi, Major General Salami asserted, "The resistance's potency is due to the unnamed individuals bravely ensuring Muslim safety, tranquility, and dignity." "He (Mousavi) remained steadfast after (the assassination of) Hajj Qassem and accompanied (Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force Brigadier General Esmail) Qa'ani," he said, adding, "The enemy knew him better than us because it had received severe blows from him. The enemy knew what role and influence he had on the endless chain of power." Clarifying the Al-Aqsa Storm operation's nature, Salami stressed its purely Palestinian execution without external involvement, reiterating its separation from the retaliation for General Soleimani's assassination. "The resilience in Palestine is a result of internal capabilities, with Gaza producing weaponry persistently, ensuring the resistance's persistence despite Zionist actions," Salami declared.

E3, US Issue Statement Against Iran Nuclear Program



TEHRAN (MNA) - In a joint statement on Thursday, the three major European countries and the United States have claimed that Iran has increased its rate of production of uranium enriched up to 60%. "The 26 December 2023 report by the IAEA highlights that Iran has increased its rate of production of uranium enriched up to 60% at Natanz and Fordow to levels observed between January and June 2023. These findings represent a backwards step by Iran and will result in Iran tripling its monthly production rate of uranium enriched up to 60%," the statement by the four Western countries said as appeared on the French foreign ministry's website. They further condemn Iran's action, claiming that it adds to the unabated escalation of Iran's nuclear program. They also express concern over alleged proliferation and Iran's delay in declaring this change. The Western states further "urge Iran to immediately reverse these steps and de-escalate its nuclear program." "Iran must fully cooperate with the IAEA to enable it to provide assurances that its nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful, and to re-designate the inspectors suspended in September 2023," the four states added in their statement. They went on to claim they have allegedly remained committed to a diplomatic solution. Iran and the P4+1 (remaining parties to the nuclear deal or the JCPOA) have held several rounds of talks to revive the JCPOA, mainly in the Austrian capital of Vienna. Iran has insisted that it will fully abide by the deal once the illegal sanctions are removed.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

Iranians Bid Farewell to IRGC Commander Assassinated by Israel

TEHRAN - Iranians held a massive funeral ceremony for a senior military advisor of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) who was assassinated by Israel in Syria. Thousands of mourners thronged the iconic Imam Hussein Square in the Iranian capital Tehran on Thursday to pay their homage to Brigadier General Seyed Razi Mousavi. High-ranking military commanders and government officials were also present at the ceremony. Earlier, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei attended the funeral prayer for Martyr Seyed Razi Mousavi in the capital Tehran on Thursday morning. The Supreme Leader expressed condolences to the family of the revered martyr and lauded the tireless efforts made by the former member of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), praying for the martyr resting in peace in heaven. Mousavi was martyred in a terrorist Israeli airstrike in a Damascus neighborhood on Monday. He was a comrade of top Iranian anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, who was also assassinated in a US drone strike in Iraq in January 2020. In the few past days, funeral processions were held for the martyred IRGC advisor at the shrines of Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqayya in Damascus and the shrine of the first Shia Imam, Imam Ali, in the holy Iraqi city of Najaf. He was to be laid to rest at Imamzadeh Saleh shrine in northern Tehran.

Resistance Emerges as Major Power

TEHRAN - The resistance front has secured its place as a great emerging power in the world, the Iranian foreign minister said, noting that the Palestinian resistance groups have obtained such impressive capabilities that they can withstand the Israeli regime's terrible bombardments. Addressing a conference of clerics and seminary teachers, held in the holy city of Qom on Thursday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said more than 80 days have passed since the war on Gaza, but "the Zionist regime has not achieved anything." "According to Hamas commanders, only 14% of the resistance capacity has been damaged so far," the foreign minister said. Amir-Abdollahian said the length of Hamas tunnels today is more than the area of Gaza, and drone manufacturing workshops have not been closed for even an hour since Operation Al-Aqsa Storm on October 7. "Hamas captured valuable security and military forces of the Zionist regime on the first day of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm," he added, Press TV reported. The minister touched on the rising popularity of the resistance, saying Hamas administers both Gaza and the war now. "After the Al-Aqsa Storm, more than 70% of the people of Gaza took up arms and came to the battlefield," he said. "After breaking the wall, all the Palestinian youth and people came to the arena and defended their country." "The Zionist regime", meanwhile, "has changed its goal in Gaza several times, but has failed," the minister said. Amir-Abdollahian then pointed to the all-out US support for the Israeli invasion of Gaza and Washington's repeated messages for Iran that it did not seek an expansion of the war, asking the Islamic Republic to help

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prevent a spillover of the war. "At every stage, they were given a strong response and the establishment responded to them at the official level," he said. "America is lying when it says it is not seeking to expand the war," he said, adding if the Americans were not looking to expand the war, they would not be delivering their equipment and weapons to Israel day and night. "Today, American weapons are arriving in Tel Aviv from all the bases in the region without stop. In addition, some equipment also arrives directly from America in Cyprus and goes to Tel Aviv from Cyprus." Also at the United Nations, a proposal was made to use Iran's relations with the resistance for post-war plans in Gaza, "but we declared that the Palestinian people should be the decision-makers themselves", he added. The foreign minister also touched on the emergence of new powers in the world, citing resistance groups. "The emerging powers do not mean only China's economy. Today, resistance has become a power," the minister said, referring to anti-US groups in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Amir-Abdollahian reserved his highest praise for the Yemenis and Lebanon's Hezbollah, saying they acted very bravely in this war. "Today, Yemen has created a new legal regime in the Red Sea," the minister said, referring to the country's interception and targeting of Israeli ships and vessels bound for Israeli ports in Bab el-Mandeb. "Today, the leaders of the resistance have reached a high level of foresight and understanding and have shown this in the recent war," he added.

FAO, Iran Succeed in Securing Bactrian Camels Future



TEHRAN (MNA) - Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and Iran have successfully jointly carried out a safeguarding biodiversity called "Bactrian Camel Conservation Project." Bactrian Camel Conservation Project completion is not only an achievement, but a testament to our collective commitment to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, Yubak Dhoj GC, FAO Representative a.i. to the Islamic Republic of Iran said in a message on the terminal workshop of the Bactrian Camel Conservation Project on 28 December. In the pursuit of preserving the Bactrian camel, a species listed as "Critically Endangered" by the IUCN, FAO initiated a project two years ago to provide technical support for preservation of Bactrian camel through enhancing both in-situ and ex-situ conservation. Various training courses empowered camel owners, experts, veterinarians and scientists. "Simultaneously, enhancing the livelihoods of local herders, capacity building, and raising awareness among society and policymakers play a crucial role in the sustainability of such projects. Our commitment to protect this valuable species has been realized in close cooperation with the Ministry of Agricultural Jihad," GC stated. Referring to the challenges faced during the implementation phase, he mentioned main achievements of the project including, the establishment of the first germplasm hub for Bactrian camels in Iran at the Jafar Abad station, capacity-building programs for government experts and camel herders through national and international training programs, empowering the newly established cooperative company by procuring feeding equipment as well as facilitating a wool processing workshop.

Baku Hopes to Reopen Its Embassy in Tehran



TEHRAN (MNA) - The foreign minister of Azerbaijan expressed hope on Thursday that his country will reopen its embassy in Tehran in the near future. "Jeyhun Bayramov", the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, expressed hope on Thursday about reopening the embassy of his country in Tehran if the bilateral issues are resolved. The Republic of Azerbaijan shut down its embassy in Tehran in February last year following an armed attack on the diplomatic mission. In September of this year, Tehran's public and revolutionary prosecutor announced the completion of a part of the judicial investigation and the issuance of an indictment against the attacker behind the armed attack on the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Tehran. The Iranian judicial authorities said that the attacker had done that attack for personal reasons. Bayramov noted that the reopening of Baku's embassy in Iran had been discussed with Iran since the attack. He further said that the embassy was shut down for serious security threats. The Azeri foreign minister further said that, "The Azerbaijani side expects the main suspect of this crime to be severely punished. Moreover, the security of our embassy in Iran must be fully guaranteed." Bayramov further noted that Iran's judicial apparatuses have taken "specific actions" in this regard, and Tehran has informed Baku since the start of the trial.

IRAN NEWS



Iran Warns Neighbors Not to Disrupt Ties With Hollow Remarks

BANDAR ABBAS (IRNA) - Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi has warned neighboring countries against making hollow remarks regarding three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf. Addressing reporters on Thursday, Vahidi referred to recent statements made by some Russian and Arab officials regarding the Iranian Persian Gulf islands, underlining that such baseless and empty statements are made to disrupt the ties among countries of the region. The Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned the Russian charge d'affaires on December 23, in the absence of the country's ambassador, and handed over a note of protest over the statement the 6th Arab-Russian Cooperation Forum issued in Morocco on the three Iranian islands of Bumusa, the Greater Tunb, and the Lesser Tunb. That statement voiced support for peaceful solutions to resolve what the participants called a conflict between Iran and the UAE over the islands. The three Persian Gulf islands have historically been a part of Iran, proof of which can be found and corroborated by an abundance of historical, legal, and geographical documents in Iran and worldwide. However, the UAE has repeatedly laid unfounded claim to the islands.

Iran, Armenia Eye \$1b Annual Trade



YEREVAN (IRNA) - Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan has said that Iran and Armenia have agreed to boost the level of bilateral trade to \$1 billion which will then be further increased to \$3 billion. Speaking at a joint press conference after a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in Yerevan on Wednesday, Mirzoyan said that they also discussed bartering gas for electricity. The Iranian foreign minister, for his part, congratulated the new Christian year and the birth anniversary of Jesus Christ, wishing the best for the Christian people across the globe. He said that he and his Armenian counterpart had reviewed bilateral cooperation and have had discussions over the ways to establish peace and stability in the Caucasus region. Amir-Abdollahian voiced Tehran's support for Armenia's territorial integrity, stressing that peace and stability have to be insured in the South Caucasus region without the intervention of alien countries. The foreign minister said that Iran has agreed with the launch of Armenia's consulate in Tabriz in the first few weeks of 2024, expressing hope that the inauguration ceremony will be attended by his Armenian counterpart. Meanwhile earlier Amir-Abdollahian underlined that issues and problems in the region must be resolved by regional countries. Speaking in a meeting with Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan in Yerevan on Wednesday, Amir-Abdollahian highlighted the Islamic Republic of Iran's principled and unchanging policy regarding the necessity of maintaining international borders and territorial integrity of countries. He added that regional issues must be settled by the countries of the region.



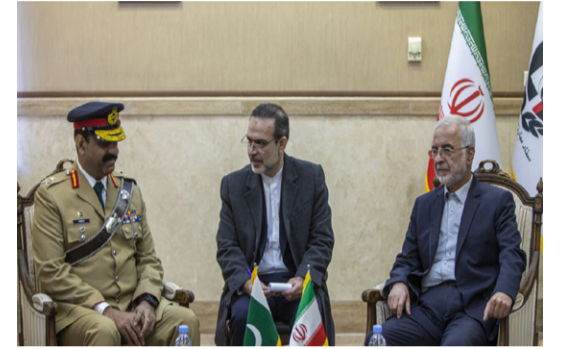
Iran, Iraq Call for Bolstering Economic Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Vice-President Mohammad Mokhber and Iraqi Oil Minister Hayan Abdel-Ghani in a meeting have urged strengthening economic relations. Mokhber met and held talks with Abdul Ghani in the Iranian capital city of Tehran on Wednesday. Referring to the deep-rooted ties and common fields of cooperation in the oil, agriculture, industries, and technologies of HiTech between Tehran and Baghdad, Mokhber said that the progress in economic ties between the two countries has not proportionate with political ties. He called Tehran-Baghdad relations at their best and highest levels, saying the Islamic Republic of Iran considers itself committed and interested in Iraq's security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Thanking the positive and timely stances of the Iraqi government on the issues of Zionist atrocities in Gaza, Mokhber underlined that the crimes committed by the Zionist regime are very tragic, and must be stopped as soon as possible. The Iraqi oil minister, for his part, described the purpose of his trip to Tehran as a major step in strengthening the relations between the two countries plus operationalizing the signed agreements, especially in the fields of oil and gas projects. Terming the Iraqi government's priority as developing all-round relations with Iran, he called for strengthening economic ties besides religious and political ties. Meanwhile on Wednesday, Tehran and Baghdad have signed several memorandums of understanding to expand cooperation in the oil, gas, and petrochemical sectors. The MoUs were signed by Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji

and his Iraqi counterpart Hayan Abdel-Ghani in Tehran on Wednesday. The agreements aim to develop joint oil and gas cooperation ties between the two neighboring countries, particularly Iran's Khorramshahr oil field and Iraq's Sindbad oilfield near Basra. The MoUs also include the improvement of short-term and medium-term educational cooperation for Iraqi oil and gas experts and technicians, including granting scholarships to a number of Iraqi students. Additionally, the ministries of the two countries have agreed to expand the export of technical engineering services and goods and equipment related to the oil and gas industry to Iraq and pursue negotiations related to the participation of capable Iranian companies in the improvement projects of Iraqi refineries. Meanwhile Owji said Iran is self-sufficient in all segments of the oil industry despite brutal sanctions and ready to develop Iraq's upstream and downstream sectors.

Talking to reporters on the sidelines of a meeting with an Iraqi delegation headed by Oil Minister Hayan Abdel-Ghani, the top Iranian oil minister added, "The two sides reached favorable agreements on the exploration and development of joint onshore and offshore fields in line with their previous sessions held in Tehran and Baghdad and tasks assigned by their presidents." Owji said a working group was formed to follow up the renovation and reconstruction of refineries in Iraq by Iranian experts. Given Iran and Iraq's common stance on policies of OPEC and OPEC+, the two delegations held positive talks in this regard, continued the minister.

West to Blame for Rise in Synthetic Narcotics



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of Iran's Anti-Narcotics Headquarters has blamed Western powers for a surge in synthetic narcotic drugs, questioning the logic behind the substantial influx of precursor chemicals into Afghanistan for drug production. Brigadier General Eskandar Momeni made the remarks as he met with the commander of Pakistan's Anti-Narcotics Force, General Muhammad Aniq Ur Rehman in Tehran on Wednesday. He criticized the self-proclaimed advocates of human rights for supplying Afghanistan with such high volumes of drug production precursors. Momeni also hailed the strong relations between Iran and Pakistan and stressed the need to further strengthen operational cooperation, especially in border security, counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism. The Pakistani official, for his part, said that both Iran and Pakistan are facing the threat of opium cultivation in Afghanistan. Aniq Ur Rehman pointed out that superpowers are clearly benefiting from the illicit drug industry, and called on Iran and Pakistan to deepen their cooperation to tackle the shared threat.

Iran, Tajikistan Ink 2 Trade Cooperation Documents



TEHRAN - Officials from Iran and the Republic of Tajikistan signed two cooperation documents in the trade, economic, technical and industrial fields aimed at deepening bilateral relations. In the closing ceremony of the 16th edition of Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic, Trade, Technical and Industrial Commission, held in Dushanbe, the two cooperation documents were inked by Iran's Minister of Energy Ali Akbar Mehrabian and Tajik Minister of Energy and Water Resources Daler Juma as the co-chairs of the commission. In addition to signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU), organizing a training course in the field of water was also signed between the two sides. Launching the electrical connection between Iran and Tajikistan, constructing 'Sangtuda 2' hydroelectric power plant and dam project, 'Istiqlol' tunnel project, and construction of

'Rogun' power plant were among the main topics discussed between the two sides, Moj News Agency reported. During the meeting, Mehrabian expressed Iran's readiness to implement the water and electricity projects in Tajikistan. The 16th Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic, Trade and Scientific Commission and the Iran-Made Expo was launched in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe on December 26. Technical and engineering services, energy (water, electricity, oil and gas), iron and steel, mining and mineral industries (identification, exploration, extraction), construction and civil engineering, industry, industrial machinery and production lines, medical equipment, health tourism, pharmaceutical and cellulose materials and products, agriculture, animal husbandry and related services were among the commodities put on display in the First Specialized Iran-Made Expo.

Iran, Russia Agree to Ditch Dollar, Trade in National Currencies



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The establishment of new financial and banking platforms has opened a "new chapter" in banking relations between Iran and Russia, with the two countries agreeing to ditch the US dollar and instead trade in local currencies. Platforms such as non-SWIFT messaging systems and establishing bilateral brokerage relations using national currencies are now being used by banks and businesses in Iran and Russia, Fars News reported on Wednesday, citing information from the Central Bank of Iran. In a recent meeting, Governor of the Central Bank of Iran Mohammad-Reza Farzin and his Russian counterpart finalized an agreement to use national currencies in bilateral trade. Farzin also proposed harnessing the capacities of BRICS to facilitate transactions during Russia's presidency over the group of emerging economies. The proposal was welcomed by Russia's top banker. According to the report, the technical provisions of the agreement will be put to discussion during future meetings between governors of central banks of Iran and Russia. Iran and Russia, both under draconian Western sanctions, have repeatedly criticized the US and its European allies for weaponizing the dollar as a tool to put pressure on other countries. They, along with other members of BRICS, have launched initiatives to move away from dependence on the US dollar in bilateral trade.



UN Mission Condemns Iranian Adviser's Assassination as Violation of Int'l Law, UN Charter

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iran's mission to the UN office in Geneva on Wednesday denounced the Zionist regime's assassination of Iranian adviser General Seyed Razi Mousavi in Syria as a blatant violation of the UN Charter and international law and human rights. The diplomatic mission said in a post published on X that the "assassination and targeted killing" of Mousavi by the Israeli regime airstrike "was not only an outrageous violation of international law and the UN Charter, but also of universal human rights law." General Mousavi was martyred by the Israeli regime on Monday in the residential neighborhood of Zeinabiyah district in the suburbs of Damascus on Monday, while on an advisory mission in Syria. He was one of the companions of Iran's top anti-terror commander, Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020. Iran maintains an advisory mission in Syria at the request of the Arab country with the aim of helping Damascus get rid of the foreign-backed militants who have been fighting the democratically-elected government there since 2011.

China Urges Regional Alert

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's defense ministry urged the Asia-Pacific to be on high alert as the United States steps up forward military deployment in the region, after reports of a U.S. plan to revive a Pacific airfield that launched atomic bombings of Japan. The Chinese military is paying close attention to moves by the United States, and will firmly safeguard China's maritime rights, security and sovereignty in the region, Wu Qian, a spokesperson at the defense ministry, told a regular news conference. Earlier in December, a U.S. air force general told Japan's Nikkei newspaper that the U.S. military will make "significant progress" towards reclaiming the Tinian North airfield from overgrown jungle vegetation in the coming months, as part of a plan to disperse aircraft across the Indo-Pacific region as China's missile threat grows. The airfield, abandoned after World War II, lies on Tinian island, part of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory, and about 200 kilometres (124 miles) north of Guam.



Maine Elections Official Disqualifies Trump From Presidential Primary Ballot



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Maine disqualified Donald Trump from the state ballot in next year's U.S. presidential primary election, becoming the second state to bar the former president for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, a Democrat, concluded that Trump, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, incited an insurrection when he spread false claims about voter fraud in the 2020 election and then urged his supporters to march on the Capitol to stop lawmakers from certifying the vote. "The U.S. Constitution does not tolerate an assault on the foundations of our government," Bellows wrote in a 34-page ruling. The decision can be appealed to a state Superior Court, and Bellows suspended her ruling until the court rules on the matter. Trump's campaign said it would quickly file an objection to the "atrocious" decision. Lawyers for Trump have disputed that he engaged in insurrection and argued that his remarks to supporters on the day of the 2021 riot were protected by his right to free speech. The decision came after a group of former Maine lawmakers said that Trump should be disqualified based on a provision of the U.S. Constitution that bars people from holding office if they engaged in "insurrection or rebellion" after previously swearing an oath to the United States. The former lawmakers - Kimberley Rosen, Thomas Saviello and Ethan Strimling - said in a statement that Bellows "stood on the side of democracy and our constitution in her decision to bar former President Donald Trump from Maine's ballot." Rosen and Saviello are both former Republican state senators. Strimling is a former Democratic state senator. The ruling applies only to Maine's March primary election, but it could affect Trump's status for the November general election. The ruling likely will add to pressure on the U.S. Supreme Court to resolve questions about Trump's eligibility nationwide under the constitutional provision known as Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. The court's 6-3 conservative majority includes three justices nominated by Trump. Trump has been indicted in both a federal case and in Georgia for his role in trying to overturn the 2020 election, but he has not been charged with insurrection related to the Jan. 6 attack. He leads opinion polls by a large margin in the race for the Republican nomination. Colorado's top court disqualified Trump from the state primary ballot on Dec. 19, making him the first candidate in U.S. history to be deemed ineligible for the presidency for engaging in insurrection.

Deadly Israeli Shelling Reported Near Gaza Hospital



GAZA STRIP (Dispatches) - Israeli shelling near a southern Gaza hospital has killed 41 people over the past two days, the Palestinian Red Crescent said, after Israel stepped up its attacks in the center and south of the besieged territory. The UN humanitarian office said Thursday that an estimated 100,000 more displaced people had arrived in the already-teeming southern border city of Rafah in recent days following the intensification of fighting around Deir al-Balah and Khan Yunis. The extra displacements came as Egyptian officials prepared to receive a high-level Hamas delegation in Cairo on Friday for talks on a new proposal aimed at putting an end to nearly three months of war that has devastated Gaza. The Palestinian Red Crescent on Thursday condemned what it said was Israeli shelling near the Al-Amal hospital in Khan Yunis that "led to the martyrdom of ten people and the injury of at least 21 others", adding the attack followed one in front of the hospital the day before that killed 31. "Among the casualties are individuals present in front of the hospital and displaced persons seeking shelter at the PRCSC (Red Crescent) premises," the group said in a statement. Later in the day, Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry said Israeli shelling had killed 20 people, most of them women and children, at the Shaboura camp in Rafah, on the southern border with Egypt. AFP footage from the city showed bloodied people being rushed through the streets to the nearby Kuwaiti hospital, where medical staff raced to treat a flood of wounded patients, including children. AFP could not immediately confirm whether they were victims of the same strike. The war in Gaza, which started with Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, has left much of the territory's north in ruins, while the battlefield has shifted ever further to the south. Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas in retaliation for the attack, which left about 1,140 people dead, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli figures. Around 250 hostages were also taken during the attack, more than half of whom remain captive - a source of intense anxiety for their families, who protested in Jerusalem on Thursday with the demand to "bring them home". Israel's relentless aerial bombardment and ground invasion in Gaza have killed at least 21,320 people, mostly women and

children, according to the Hamas-run health ministry. The Israeli army says 167 of its soldiers have been killed inside Gaza in its fight against Hamas, which Israel, the United States and the European Union consider a "terrorist" group. The Israeli army recently said it had deployed an additional brigade to Khan Yunis, hometown of Hamas's Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar, where AFP correspondents reported sustained air and artillery strikes. "The missions that our forces are carrying out in Khan Yunis are unprecedented - our forces reach areas that we have never been before, taking over control rooms and eliminating terrorists," Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant told soldiers on Thursday. Israel has repeatedly said that one of the chief goals of the war is the return of the hostages. US President Joe Biden said he was "devastated" by the news that Judith Weinstein Haggai was dead, and pledged that Washington would "not stop working" with its ally Israel to bring the remaining hostages home. More than 80 percent of Gaza's 2.4 million people have been driven from their homes, the UN says, and many now live in cramped shelters or makeshift tents in the far south around Rafah. Residents there combed through rubble for survivors on Thursday after an air strike that one witness said left "several casualties". "We were sitting [at home] peacefully and all of a sudden we heard a loud explosion and debris started falling on us. The apartment was completely destroyed and my daughters were screaming," said Tayseer Abu Al-Eish. A Hamas delegation was due in Cairo on Friday to give its "observations" about an Egyptian plan for a ceasefire recently put to officials from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which is also battling Israeli forces in Gaza. Sources close to Hamas say Cairo's three-stage plan provides for renewable ceasefires, a staggered release of hostages held by Hamas in exchange for Palestinian prisoners in Israel, and ultimately a ceasefire to end the war. It also provides for a Palestinian government of technocrats after talks involving "all Palestinian factions", which would be responsible for governing and rebuilding in post-war Gaza. Diaa Rashwan, who heads Egypt's State Information Services, said the plan was "intended to bring together the views of all parties concerned, with the aim of ending the shedding of Palestinian blood".

U.S. Military's Secretive Spaceplane Launched



CAPE CANAVERAL (Dispatches) - The U.S. military's secretive X-37B robot spaceplane blasted off from Florida on Thursday night on its seventh mission, the first launched atop a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket capable of delivering it to a higher orbit than ever before. The Falcon Heavy, composed of three liquid-fueled rocket cores strapped together, roared off its launch pad from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral in a spectacular liftoff carried live on a SpaceX webcast. The launch followed more than two weeks of false starts and delays attributed to poor weather and unspecified technical issues, leading ground crews to roll the spacecraft back to its hangar before proceeding with Thursday's flight. It came two weeks after China's own robot spaceplane, known as the Shenlong, or "Divine Dragon," was launched on its third mission to orbit since 2020, adding a new twist to the growing U.S.-Sino rivalry in space. The Pentagon has disclosed few details about the X-37B mission, conducted by the U.S. Space Force under the military's National Security Space Launch program. The Boeing-built vehicle, roughly the size of a small bus and resembling a miniature space shuttle, is built to deploy various payloads and conduct technology experiments on years-long orbital flights. At the end of its mission, the craft descends back through the atmosphere to land on a runway much like an airplane. It has flown six previous missions since 2010, the first five of them carried to orbit by Atlas V rockets from United Launch Alliance, a joint venture of Boeing (BA.N) and Lockheed Martin (LMT.N), and most recently, in May 2020, atop a Falcon 9 booster furnished by Elon Musk's SpaceX. Thursday's mission marked the first launched aboard SpaceX's more powerful Falcon Heavy rocket, capable of carrying payloads even heavier than the X-37B farther into space, possibly into geosynchronous orbit, more than 22,000 miles (35,000 km) above the Earth.



Venezuela Launches Military Exercise Over British Warship 'Threat'

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro on Thursday ordered more than 5,600 military personnel to participate in a "defensive" exercise near the border with Guyana, in response to Britain sending a warship to the area. Maduro said he was launching "a joint action of a defensive nature in response to the provocation and threat of the United Kingdom against peace and the sovereignty of our country." Britain said Sunday it would divert the patrol vessel HMS Trent to Guyana, a former British colony, amid the South American country's simmering territorial dispute with neighboring Venezuela over the oil-rich Essequibo region. A Guyana foreign ministry source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP the ship was due to arrive Friday and would be in its territory for "less than a week" for open sea defense exercises. The ship will not dock in Georgetown. The television broadcast accompanying Maduro's announcement showed fighter jets participating in the Venezuelan exercise, as well as ships and ocean patrol vessels. The Venezuelan government earlier asked Guyana, in a statement, "to take immediate action for the withdrawal of the HMS Trent, and to refrain from involving military powers in the territorial controversy." Guyana President Irfan Ali sought to soothe tensions, saying Thursday that "neither Venezuela nor any other State has anything to fear from activities within Guyana's sovereign territory or waters." "We harbor no ambitions or intentions to covet what does not belong to us. We are fully committed to peaceful relations with our

neighbors and all countries in our Region," he said in a statement on Facebook, sending "best wishes to the people of Venezuela, our neighbors." Guyana Vice President Bharat Jagdeo said earlier that the HMS Trent's visit was part of "long-planned" and "routine" measures to build the country's defenses. Maduro claims that Essequibo - which makes up about two-thirds of Guyana's territory - is actually Venezuelan land, a decades-old contention that has flared since massive oil deposits were found in its waters. The rising tensions have raised fears in the region of a potential conflict over the remote area of 160,000 square kilometers (62,000 square miles). The South American neighbors, during a meeting between Maduro and Ali earlier this month, agreed not to resort to force to settle the dispute. "We believe in diplomacy, in dialogue, in peace," said Maduro. "But no one should threaten Venezuela, no one should mess with Venezuela. We are a people of peace, but we are warriors and this threat is unacceptable for any sovereign country," he said. "The threat of the decadent, rotten, ex-empire of the United Kingdom is unacceptable." A UK foreign minister, David Rutley, visited Guyana earlier this month and reiterated sovereign borders "must be respected" and that London would work internationally "to ensure the territorial integrity of Guyana is upheld." Maduro's government held a referendum on December 3 in which 95 percent of voters, according to officials in the hard-line leftist government, supported declaring Venezuela the rightful owner of Essequibo.



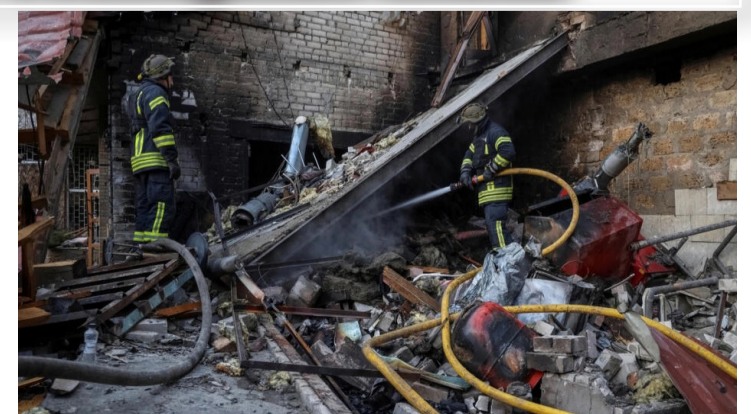
At Least 140 Villagers Killed in Weekend Attacks in Nigeria

MANGU (Dispatches) - Gunmen attacked remote villages over the weekend in north-central Nigeria's Plateau state, killing at least 140 people, officials and survivors said Tuesday, the latest case this year of such mass killings blamed on the farmer-herder crisis in the West African nation. The assailants targeted 17 communities in "senseless and unprovoked" attacks on Saturday and Sunday, burning down most houses in the area. Plateau Gov. Caleb Mutfwang said in a broadcast on the local Channels Television. "As I am talking to you, in Mangu local government area, we buried 15 people. As of this morning, in Bokkos, we are counting not less than 100 corpses. I am yet to take stock of (the deaths in) Barkin Ladi," Mutfwang said. "It has been a very terrifying Christmas for us here in Plateau." Amnesty International's Nigeria office told The Associated Press that it has so far confirmed 140 deaths in the Christian-dominated Bokkos and Barkin-Ladi areas of Plateau, based on data compiled by its workers on the ground and from local officials. There were fears of a higher death toll as some people remained unaccounted for. Some of the locals said that it took more than 12 hours before security agencies responded to their call for help, a claim the AP couldn't independently verify, but which echoes past concerns about slow interventions in Nigeria's deadly security crisis, which has killed hundreds this year, including in Plateau. "I called security but they never came. The ambush started 6 in the evening but security reached our place by 7 in the morning," said Sunday Dawum, a youth leader in Bokkos. At least 27 people were killed in his village, Mbom Mbaru, including his brother, he said. No group took responsibility for the attacks though blame fell on herders from the Fulani tribe, who have been accused of carrying out such mass killings across the northwest and central regions where the decades-long conflict over access to land and water has further worsened the sectarian division between Christians and Muslims in Africa's most populous nation.

Russian Air Strikes Pound Ukrainian Cities in Countrywide Attack

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia launched a wave of missile strikes on Friday across Ukrainian cities, including the capital, authorities said as they raised a nationwide air alert. The overnight attacks came days after Ukraine struck a Russian warship in the occupied Crimean port of Feodosia. Explosions were reported in Kyiv, city mayor Vitali Klitschko said in a post on Telegram. Missiles also struck at least five other Ukrainian cities, including Kharkiv in the northeast, Lviv in the country's west as well as Odesa in the south, the cities' mayors and police said. "Today, at five o'clock in the morning, the fascists' followers hit the peaceful city with S-300 missiles. 10 explosions rang out in Kharkiv. Specialised services quickly arrived at strike spots," Kharkiv region police said. Overnight attacks were also reported in Sumy and Konotop. In southern Odesa, a high-rise building caught fire after being struck by debris from a downed drone, the city's mayor said. "As a result of another enemy attack, one of the high-rise buildings was damaged. The fire was promptly extinguished," mayor Gennady Trukhanov said in a social media post. The attacks came after Kremlin on Tuesday acknowledged a Ukrainian attack had damaged a warship in the occupied Crimean port of Feodosia in what Ukraine and its Western

allies called a major setback for the Russian navy. Ukraine has said its air force destroyed the Novochoerkassk landing ship, with President Volodymyr Zelensky joking on social media that the vessel had now joined "the Russian underwater Black Sea fleet". Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu informed "about the damage to our large landing ship" to President Vladimir Putin in "a very detailed report". Russia's defence ministry said that the ship was damaged by guided aerial missiles. Ukraine's military said its air force destroyed the Russian naval ship in a missile attack on the eastern Crimean port. On Thursday, Zelensky thanked the United States for releasing the last remaining package of weapons available for Ukraine under existing authorisation, as uncertainty surrounds further aid to his war-torn country. Zelensky had warned that any change in policy from the US - Kyiv's main backer - could have a strong impact on the course of the war. "I thank President Joe Biden, Congress, and the American people for the \$250 million military aid package announced yesterday," Zelensky said on social media. "To defend freedom and security not only in Ukraine and Europe but also in the United States, we must continue to respond to ongoing Russian aggression," he said.



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Celtics Rally to Hand Pistons 28th Straight NBA Defeat

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Boston Celtics piled more misery on Detroit, rallying from a 21-point deficit to hand the Pistons a record-equalling 28th straight NBA defeat 128-122 in overtime. The Pistons had already become the first team to lose 27 straight games in a single season with a loss to the Brooklyn Nets on Tuesday. They're now the second team to lose 28 in a row, joining the Philadelphia 76ers who had a 28-game skid spanning the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons. Kristaps Porzingis's dunk -- after Jayson Tatum grabbed the rebound of a miss by Detroit's Isaiah Livers -- effectively sealed it, putting Boston up 123-117 with 45.2 seconds left in overtime. Boston escaped with their perfect home record intact at 15-0, improving their league-leading record to 24-6. For a while, however, it looked like a desperate Detroit might take advantage of a Celtics squad expecting an easy win -- something Boston coach Joe Mazzulla had warned was a danger for his team. "Each loss they're actually playing harder because they want to win," Mazzulla said. "It's going to happen." Detroit, the worst three-point shooting team in the league, drilled 13 treys to Boston's 11. The Pistons had 31 second-chance points and with Cade Cunningham scoring 22 of his 31 points in the first half led by as many as 21 on the way to a 66-47 lead at the break. Cunningham added six rebounds and nine assists and Jaden Ivey scored 22 points with 10 rebounds. But 19 turnovers leading to 27 Celtics points proved too much to overcome. The Celtics seized the momentum with a dominant third quarter, out-scoring the Pistons 35-16 to head into the fourth tied at 82-82. Detroit didn't fold, twice taking a four-point lead. A Tatum layup followed by a Porzingis

three-pointer put Boston up by six with 1:56 left in the fourth, but Bojan Bogdanovic's tip-in for Detroit tied it up at 108-108 and it went to overtime. Porzingis scored 35 points and Tatum scored 31 with 10 assists for the Celtics, who were without injured Jaylen Brown. Derrick White scored 10 of his 23 in overtime. Once again, Pistons coach Monty Williams was full of praise for his players. "They bring a spirit and integrity and toughness to the gym every single day," he said. "As bad as they hurt right now, I hurt for them." Elsewhere, Anthony Edwards scored 44 points to lead Western Conference leaders Minnesota in a 118-110 victory over the Dallas Mavericks, who were without stars Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving. Rudy Gobert added 20 points and 11 rebounds for the Timberwolves, who let an early 18-point lead evaporate but held on for the win. Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton handed out 20 assists without a turnover and scored 21 points in the Pacers' 120-104 victory over the Bulls in Chicago. Haliburton, whose appearance was in doubt because of lower back discomfort, became just the fifth NBA player to have 20 or more assists without a turnover. "I'm just happy I had no turnovers," Haliburton said. "I've been turning that ball over since the in-season tournament, so glad I figured out how to take care of the ball again." Accus maio. Et qui sum quo de perferre hendita tendebist, saes eum atiuum quo necabo. Eribus. Gendeli quatirist verrovit quias aut enitatem. Nequaes et omnitiscium ium quantentibus identi opta ilias dis ea derionse volum rerac. Ignis abore seque que non nis et ut ideles excerem nobis estorep ellacea estium

Ronaldo's Al-Nassr Set for All-Saudi Showdown in Asian Champions League



HONG KONG (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo's Al-Nassr will face fellow Saudi Pro League side Al-Fayha in the last 16 of the Asian Champions League with four-times winners Al-Hilal due to take on Iran's Sepahan when the continental club championship returns in February. Al-Nassr emerged unbeaten from the group phase of the competition earlier this month and will meet the tournament debutants over two legs, the first on Feb. 12 or 13 with the second one week later. Al-Hilal, who won the most recent of their record four titles in 2021, will travel to Iran for the first leg against Sepahan before hosting the side from Isfahan in Riyadh. Karim Benzema will lead Jeddah's Al-Ittihad, the tournament's fourth Saudi Pro League outfit, into the last 16 where they will face Uzbekistan's Navbahor. Nasaf, also from Uzbekistan, were drawn to play former champions Al-Ain from the United Arab Emirates. The eastern side of the draw will see South Korean sides Jeonbuk Motors and Pohang Steelers, who have won five Asian Champions League titles between them, face off in the next phase of the competition. Another former champion from South Korea, Ulsan Hyundai, will take on Japan's V-Varen Kofu, who have become the first second division outfit to progress to the competition's knockout rounds. Chinese Super League side Shandong Taishan will host Japan's Kawasaki Frontale in the first leg of their last 16 meeting on Feb. 13 or 14 while Thailand's Bangkok United take on 2022 J.League champions Yokohama F. Marinos. Teams from the western and eastern regions will continue to be separated through the quarter-finals and semi-finals, which are due to be played in March and April respectively.

Arsenal Fail in Premier League Summit Bid

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal missed out on the chance to return to the Premier League summit on Thursday, losing 2-0 to West Ham as Tottenham went down in a six-goal thriller at Brighton. Mikel Arteta's Gunners were top of the tree at Christmas for a second successive year but trail leaders Liverpool by two points at the halfway point of the season. Last year's runners-up dominated possession at the Emirates but lacked a cutting edge against the disciplined visitors, for whom Tomas Soucek and former Arsenal player Konstantinos Mavropanos scored the goals. Soucek opened the scoring from close range in the 13th minute following a pass from Jarrod Bowen, with the goal confirmed after a lengthy VAR check looking into whether the ball had gone out of play. Arsenal surged forward in relentless waves and West Ham goalkeeper Alphonse Areola made a fine reaction save from a Bukayo Saka header on the half-hour. The England winger hit the post from a tight angle as the clock ticked down towards half-time but Arsenal trailed at the break despite enjoying nearly three-quarters of possession. The Gunners came out determined to find a response but instead they found themselves 2-0 down when Mavropanos's bullet header cannoned in off the crossbar from James Ward-Prowse's corner. Gabriel Jesus failed to beat Areola with a header when well-placed and shortly afterwards missed another glorious opportunity with his head at the back post. Arsenal continued to bombard the visitors' goal but could not find a breakthrough and it could have been worse had Said Benrahma managed to convert a late penalty. Defeat leaves the Gunners in second place on 40 points, one clear of Aston Villa and three ahead of Manchester City, who have a game in hand. Arteta said his team deserved more for their dominance. "We want to be at the top and today we are very, very disappointed," he told the BBC. "We had so much dominance in the game. We are in a really good position. Today is a disappointing night. We have to pick ourselves up for a big game against Fulham." He added: "The players put an enormous effort in. It's a difficult dressing room right now but we have another game in 72 hours. This is football, we have to improve in certain areas." West Ham manager David Moyes celebrated his team's rise to sixth in the table. "We are not one of the top teams," he told Amazon Prime. "We are trying to get up and grow the team. For West Ham to be in Europe (they topped their Europa League group) is a great period." Tottenham, this season's early pacesetters, remain in fifth spot after losing 4-2 despite threatening an astonishing comeback from 4-0 down against Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton. Jack Hinshelwood finished with brutal power to put the home side ahead following a weaving run from Joao Pedro along the edge of the penalty area. Brighton doubled their lead from the penalty spot in the 23rd minute through Pedro, who took full advantage after Dejan Kulusevski was penalised for a pull on Welbeck. Brazil forward Richarlison twice had the ball in the net after the break but both times he was ruled offside. Pervis Estupinan stretched the lead with a thunderbolt from 30 yards in the 63rd minute and Pedro scored a second penalty 12 minutes later. Alejo Veliz grabbed what appeared to be a consolation goal in the 81st minute but it galvanised the visitors. Ben Davies headed home Pedro Porro's deep cross as Spurs threatened to cut through every time they poured forward, with Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg hitting the post during nine frantic minutes of stoppage time. But Brighton withstood the intense pressure to take all three points. "I am really lucky to be this coach of this team with these players," De Zerbi told the BBC. "I am very pleased with the passion

they have, they have everything. "You can't forget we are Brighton. Sometimes they forget we are Brighton. We are not Manchester United, Manchester City, Newcastle or Arsenal, we are still Brighton."



Browns Clinch NFL Playoff Berth With Win Over Jets



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Resurgent Cleveland quarterback Joe Flacco threw for three touchdowns in a 37-20 NFL victory over the New York Jets that saw the Browns punch their ticket to the playoffs. The post-season was looking unlikely for the Browns after star quarterback Deshaun Watson suffered a season-ending shoulder injury in November. Flacco, a former Super Bowl MVP with the Baltimore Ravens who was without a team at the start of the season, is the fourth quarterback to start for the injury-plagued Browns this season. The Browns are now 4-1 with the 38-year-old Flacco starting and 11-5 for the season. Assured of at least a wild card, they still have a chance to win the AFC North division currently led by Baltimore. "He's got something left in the tank," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said of Flacco, who passed for 309 yards, three TDs and an interception. He connected with Jerome Ford on two touchdown passes in the first half as the Browns built a 34-14 lead. Flacco spent three seasons with the Jets before they opted not to re-sign him. Nor did they turn to him when superstar Aaron Rodgers tore his Achilles tendon in the first game of the season. Flacco insisted this week there were no hard feelings, but he schooled his former team with 296 yards in the first half. "He's battling like crazy," Stefanski said of Flacco. "I think he's doing a nice job of playing within himself and playing within the scheme. But he's also making plays. There were a bunch of plays he made tonight that were key." Elijah Moore, another former Jet, caught an eight-yard TD before departing with a concussion in the second quarter. Kareem Hunt had a seven-yard touchdown run for the Browns, who were without star receiver Amari Cooper because of a heel injury. Browns tight end David Njoku had four catches for 114 yards in just the first quarter. He finished with six receptions for 134 yards. A Flacco interception in the second quarter yielded a Jets touchdown as New York's Jermaine Johnson grabbed it and returned it 37 yards. Cleveland's defense also scored, with safety Ronnie Hickman intercepting Jets quarterback Trevor Siemian and racing 30 yards for a TD. Siemian, starting for the second week in a row in place of Zach Wilson, who was sidelined by a concussion, completed 32 of 45 passes for 261 yards and one touchdown.

Djokovic Taking It Season by Season

PERTH (Dispatches) - World number one Novak Djokovic is hoping his latest trip to Australia is not the last, but admits that at 36 he is now taking it "season by season". The Serbian superstar is the king of the Melbourne Park hard courts, winning the Australian Open a record 10 times, with an 11th in his sights next month. He gets his preparations under way in Perth at the ATP-WTA United Cup on Sunday after another incredible season that brought three more Grand Slam titles for a record 24. That included another Australian Open, taming Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 7-6 (7-4), 7-6 (7-5) in the 2023 final. So dominant is Djokovic that he has won four of the last five Australian Opens with the only exception being 2022, when he was kicked out of the country for refusing to get the Covid-19 vaccine. "I hope it's not the last, to be honest," he said of being in Australia again after his arrival in Perth and a late training session on Thursday. "Coming back to Australia, I've always felt like I played my best tennis over the years and had great support. So I'm not sure, I don't really have a plan (for) what's going to happen next year. I'm kind of taking season by season to see how far it takes me." Djokovic's absence from the 2022 Australian Open saw long-time rival Rafael Nadal add to his only other title at Melbourne Park in 2009. Nadal, 37, returns after a year away from the sport at the Brisbane International this week following hip surgery, with the two greats set to cross paths in Australia one more time. Djokovic, who has largely escaped injuries over the years, said he expects the 22-time Grand Slam winner to be as competitive as ever. "He's not a kind of a player that will come back to the tour just to play -- let's say -- on a medium level, play a few matches," Djokovic said at an exhibition match in Saudi Arabia before heading to Perth. "He wants to win titles, he wants to be the best, that's why he is who he is: a legend of our sport."

