

Kenya's Ministry of Health Issued Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) Certifications for 11 Iranian Companies Active in the Health and Medical Care Sector to Export Their Products to the Country

IRAN NEWS

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Israel Assassinated IRGC Advisor After Failing in Gaza Battleground

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps puts the Israeli regime's recent assassination of a senior IRGC advisor in Syria down to the regime's failure in its ongoing war against the Gaza Strip. "You assassinate Martyr [Brigadier General] Seyyed Razi Mousavi because you could not achieve anything in the Gaza battleground," Brigadier General Ismail Qa'ani said on Friday, addressing the Israeli regime. Mousavi, a senior IRGC commander, was martyred in a missile attack by the regime against the Sayyeda Zeinab neighborhood of the Syrian capital Damascus on Monday. He was martyred while serving as part of Iran's military advisory mission in the Arab country. The atrocity came amid a war that the occupying regime has been waging against Gaza since October 7 following an operation staged by the Palestinian territory's resistance movements, dubbed Operation al-Aqsa Storm. Qa'ani considered al-Aqsa Storm to be a response to "the extensive atrocities that the Zionist regime had committed against the Muslim people of Palestine." At least 21,320 people, mostly women and children, have been killed during the Israeli military campaign across the coastal sliver. Tel Aviv, however, has stopped short of realizing any of its stated goals, including obliteration of the Gaza-based resistance movement of Hamas, enabling release of the people who were taken captive during al-Aqsa Storm, and prompting forced displacement of Gaza's population to neighboring countries. Qa'ani likewise noted that the Israeli regime and the United States -- Tel Aviv's most dedicated ally, which has thrown all-out military and political support behind the war -- had achieved nothing throughout the aggression other than killing innocent women and children. He noted the US had been investing all of its power in supporting the Zionists, but said Washington would eventually be held accountable over its crimes. As opposed to the Zionist regime, which has been receiving maximal Western support, the people of Gaza have solely been defended by the regional resistance front, Qa'ani, meanwhile, reminded. The Iranian commander said the Zionist regime had, so far during the war on Gaza, incurred a sizeable number of casualties, including thousands of fatalities and as many as 500 cases of blindness. "They, however, are not man enough to announce the number of their casualties," Qa'ani said.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

Iranians Are Vigilant, Know Sedition Well



TEHRAN - President SEYED Ebrahim Raisi said the Iranian nation knows well the sedition and seditious, so they showed their vigilance in 'Dey 9 Epic'. Delivering a speech at a ceremony to commemorate the Iranian famous philosopher late "Ayatollah Mesbah", Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi said the 'Dey 9 Epic' (December 30) occasion must be taken as a source of generating vigilance against the Western-cooked seditious in the country. December 30 coincides with the ninth day of the month Dey in the Iranian calendar and is the reminder of the epic turnout of the Iranian nation to foil enemies' plots after the 2009 presidential elections. The 'Dey 9 Epic' was indeed a turning point in that it dismayed the enemies of the Islamic Revolution who had invested in the electoral fraud allegations. It also saved the nation from machinations of ill-wishers who fanned discord among Iranians to secure their vested interests against the Iranian people. The 'Dey 9' Epic was indeed a turning point in that it dismayed the enemies of the Islamic Revolution who had invested in the electoral fraud allegations. It also saved the nation from machinations of ill-wishers who fanned discord among Iranians to secure their vested interests against the Iranian people. President Raisi said that the Iranian people followed the Leader of the Islamic Revolution's notion of vigilance and ended what happened in 2009 in Iran in the form of the US-driven color revolution. In this vein, Raisi highlighted the Israeli war on Gaza and the resistance of the Palestinian people, going on over 80 days, and said that as all intellectuals and politicians in the world acknowledge, the winner of the battlefield is Palestine, and the Israeli regime is the one who endured the irreparable defeat. He described the Palestinian resistance as a group that has neither naval and aerial forces nor an equipped ground force to stand against the Israeli regime, but it has so far won over the evil regime thanks to high faith and honor. Raisi stressed the right position of Iran in support of Palestine and said: "It became clear to the whole world that if today, after 43 years, we are emphasizing on a free Palestine and the freedom of al-Quds, it is the right position; Israel is doomed to be vanished. These are signs of authority for a nation that speaks the truth and predicts truly." It was on October 7 that the Palestinian Resistance carried out 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood' on the Israeli regime's forces in response to the regime's daily crimes against the Palestinian people during 75 years of occupation of Palestine since 1948. Confused with the irreparable intelligence and military blow it suffered from the October 7 operation, Israel is struggling to compensate for the defeat. By the way, people across Iran, took to the streets on Saturday to commemorate the 'Dey 9 Epic', which refers to the mass rallies held in support of the Islamic Republic of Iran Establishment and to condemn riots after the 2009 presidential elections

E3, U.S. Urged to Stop Pressure on Iran's Nuclear Program



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran says France, Germany, Britain and the United States must quit issuing statements and exerting fruitless pressure on Tehran and take the necessary political steps instead. Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani made the statement in reaction to a joint statement issued by the three European parties to the 2015 nuclear agreement - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - and the United States on Thursday. The Western statement has condemned what is claimed to be an increase by Iran in the production rate of highly enriched uranium of up to 60% purity. As always, the Iranian official underscored the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program. He said Tehran still believes diplomacy is the best approach toward the removal of unreal concerns about the peaceful Iranian nuclear activities. "Now the ball is in the court of the US and the three European countries. They should take the necessary political decisions by abandoning the policy of issuing statements and fruitless pressure," Kanaani stated. The U.S. and the European troika - also known as the E3 - have left the negotiating table, the Iranian diplomat reminded. They are, therefore, in no position to make any comment about Iran's nuclear program, he added. "Enrichment at 60% level in Iran's enrichment centers has always been and will continue to be in accordance with the peaceful needs of the country and fully under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)." Instead of pursuing a blame-game policy and taking politically-motivated positions, the US and the E3 had better review their performance regarding the sanctions removal talks in the past two years and observe the outcome of their unconstructive policies, Kanaani said.

Inflation Hits 44%, Surpassing Monthly Averages

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

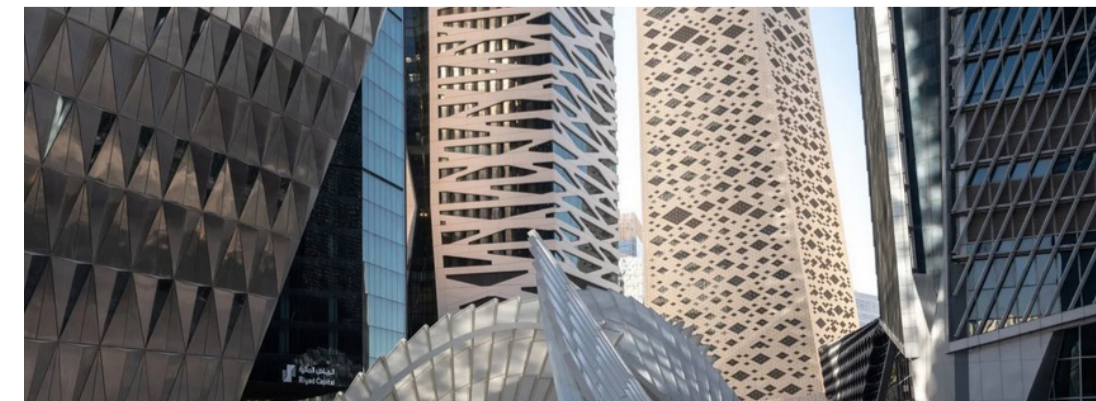


TEHRAN - With Iran's inflation rate soaring, a new report suggests that the price hikes in most provinces are higher than the average figure announced by the authorities. Fararu website in Tehran reported on Friday that the point-to-point inflation rate in December once again surpassed the 40% mark after five months. The index indicates that Iranian households spent approximately 40% more in the past month compared to the corresponding period of the previous year to meet their needs or purchase a range of goods and services. According to the Iran Statistical Center's definition, point-to-point inflation rate represents the percentage change in the average of the price indices in comparison to the year before, providing a more tangible perspective on understanding price hikes. The reported point-to-point rate for the past month was 44.4% while the government had predicted an annual rate of 25 percent for the current Iranian year (started March 21). The highest inflation rate this month was reported in hotel and restaurant services at 56.5 percent, exceeding about 16 percent over the average annual rate of about 40 percent promulgated by the authorities. Inflation for clothing and shoes was at 47.2%, cigarettes at 45.8%, recreation and culture at 44.1%, education at 42% and foods at 41.3%.

BRICS to Grow as Saudi, Iran, UAE, Egypt, Ethiopia Join Ranks

LONDON (Bloomberg) - Membership of the BRICS group of emerging-market nations is set to double, with Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia and Egypt to join its ranks on Jan. 1, South Africa's envoy to the bloc said. Current members Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa in August invited six other nations to become part of their group, pairing some of the planet's largest energy producers with some of the biggest consumers among developing countries. Only Argentina declined the invitation after President Javier Milei, who took office this month, reversed his predecessor's membership bid. The five invitees sent senior-level representatives to a BRICS sherpa meeting in Durban, South Africa, earlier this month and they fully participated in the gathering, "a clear indication that they have accepted the invitation" to join, Anil Sooklal, Pretoria's ambassador to the bloc, said in an interview Friday. The new members will also send officials to a sherpa meeting in Moscow on Jan. 30, he said. "BRIC" was coined in 2001 by economist Jim O'Neill, then at Goldman Sachs Group

Inc., to draw attention to strong economic growth rates in Brazil, Russia, India and China. The term was intended as an optimistic scenario for investors amid market pessimism following the terrorist attacks in the US on Sept. 11 that year. The group held its first leaders' summit in 2009 and invited South Africa to join a year later, adding another continent and the letter "S." About 30 countries want to establish ties with the bloc, Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov was cited by news agency Tass as saying this week. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, will seek to become a member of BRICS within the next two years, Minister of Foreign Affairs Yusuf Tuggar said in November. Except for India, the BRICS have underperformed their emerging-market peers over the last five years, according to Bloomberg Intelligence. US-led sanctions have put Russia off limits for many foreign investors, and some sectors in China - especially technology companies - have also been sanctioned or face potential investment bans.



UNICEF: 2023 Was Deadliest Year for Children in West Bank



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - UNICEF has announced 2023 as the deadliest year on record for youngsters in the occupied West Bank, attributing the rise in fatalities among children to increased Israeli police and military activities linked to the ongoing war on Gaza. UNICEF's statement, released on Thursday, highlighted a significant surge in "conflict-related violence" in the West Bank throughout the year, specifically noting the tragic death toll of 83 children over the past 12 weeks, surpassing double the total count for the entire year of 2022. The agency emphasized the distressing plight of children in the West Bank, stating, "Children living in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, have been experiencing grinding violence for many years, yet the intensity of that violence has dramatically increased since the horrific attacks of October 7." In a stern condemnation, UNICEF denounced the "grave violations against children, in particular killing and maiming", urging all parties to protect children's "most basic right simply to be alive." According to UNICEF's data, at least 124 Palestinian children have lost their lives in the West Bank this year, along with six Israeli youths. Additionally, 576 children have suffered injuries in the region. Recently, the UN Human Rights Office called on Israeli forces to halt "unlawful killings" in the West Bank, highlighting a substantial uptick in airstrikes on densely populated refugee camps. The office also warned of a "rapidly deteriorating human rights situation" in the West Bank, demanding an "immediate end to the use of military weapons and means during law enforcement operations," and an end to the "arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of Palestinians." Conditions in Gaza have also drastically worsened since the latest Israeli war, resulting in over 21,000 fatalities and more than 55,000 injuries, primarily impacting women and children, as reported by local health authorities.

IRAN NEWS



Kabul-Tehran Ties Stride Towards Progress

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The acting foreign minister of Afghanistan's ruling government Mawlawi Amir Muttaqi has described Kabul-Tehran ties as those moving towards development. Hafiz Zia Ahmad Takal, deputy spokesperson of Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry, wrote Saturday on his X page while quoting Muttaqi as saying, Muttaqi has made the remarks during his meeting with an Iranian media delegation in Kabul. The future of Afghanistan and Iran is bright, Muttaqi said in the meeting according to the spokesperson. As the spokesperson noted, Muttaqi has termed Iran as Afghanistan's good neighbor. The two sides have also exchanged views about the situation of Afghanistan and the foreign policy adopted by Taliban, Takal wrote.

Central Asia's Share of Iran Foreign Trade Insignificant



TEHRAN (TCCIMA) - Trade exchanges between Iran and the Central Asian countries account for an only 1% of Iran's foreign trade, a recent report says. Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (TCCIMA) has recently released a report on Iran's trade with five Central Asian countries - namely Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan - which said Iran's volume of trade with these countries is not significant although it has recovered from a pandemic slump. The report puts Iran's trade with the five countries at around \$1.5 billion in 2022 which is up 8% year-on-year. It noted that Iran's imports from Central Asia grew 26% in 2022 with its exports to the five countries rising 3%. The increase in 2022 was largely due to 89 and 106 percent rises in Iran's imports from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan respectively, the report said. It added that Turkmenistan has been the main destination for Iranian exports among the Central Asian countries in 2022 accounting for 38% of the total value of Iran's exports to the five countries.

6% Rise in Loading, Unloading of Goods in Ports

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The loading and unloading of goods in the ports of Iran increased by 6.1 percent in the first nine months of the present Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21), as compared to the same period in the past year, the country's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) announced. As the PMO reported, 172,767,051 tons of commodities were loaded and unloaded in the ports during the nine-month period. During the said period, loading and unloading operations in the container sector reached 1,917,354 TEUs, which was 4.3 percent more than the figure of the same time span in the previous year. Based on the data previously released by the Transport and Urban Development Ministry, the loading and unloading of goods in the ports of Iran rose 17 percent during the previous Iranian calendar year 1400 (ended on March 20), as compared to the preceding year. The ministry's data show that the loading and unloading of goods in the country's ports reached 152.91 million tons in the previous Iranian calendar year, while the figure stood at 130.69 million tons in the preceding year. During the said year, loading and unloading operations in the container sector reached 2.1 million TEUs with a weight of 24.57 million tons, which was 13.5 percent more than the 1.85 million

TEUs in the Iranian calendar year 1399, the report said. The loading and unloading of goods during the previous year also grew by 12.8 percent in the dry bulk sector, while in the liquid bulk sector, the figure increased by 12.6 percent, in the general cargo sector rose by 13.1 percent, and in the oil sector grew by 22.5 percent. While Iran is combating the U.S. unilateral sanctions on its economy, the country's ports as the major gates of exports and imports play a significant role in this battle. This role makes all-out support to ports and more development of them serious and vital. Such necessity has led the government to define projects for more development of the ports and also take some measures to encourage investment making in ports, in addition to facilitating the loading and unloading of goods, especially basic commodities, there. It is worth mentioning that Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization has defined a high number of projects to develop and improve the country's ports, as the country aims to double the capacity of its ports in five years. According to the PMO, the capacity of the country's ports has increased from 180 million tons in the Iranian calendar year 1392 (ended in March 2014) to 250 million tons in 1399 (ended in March 2021).

Iran Keen to Boost Trade with Tajikistan



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Iranian administration is doing its utmost to promote trade and economic relations with Tajikistan, Iran's minister of energy said. The Iranian administration will throw its weight behind five competent Iranian companies which are involved in the construction of Rogun hydroelectric power plant in Tajikistan, Ali Akbar Mehrabian said. He made the remarks during a visit to the Rogun hydroelectric power plant and dam in Tajikistan, a giant project some of whose sections are being developed by the Iranian contractors. Increasing the trade exchanges with the regional countries has been defined as a main goal of the Iranian administration, he added. With a storage capacity of 14 billion cubic meters of water, the dam has six power plant units each of which generates 600 megawatts of electricity, Mehrabian added. Backing the Iranian companies and strengthening the cooperation and activities of these firms in Tajikistan and other neighboring states have been pursued by the Iranian administration, the energy minister added, IRNA reported. Pointing to the 16th Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Cooperation Commission that was held in Dushanbe on December 26-29, Mehrabian said Tajikistan is one of the important countries in the Central Asia. The main topics discussed in the commission included the launch of electrical connection between Iran and Tajikistan, as well as construction of 'Sangtuda 2' hydroelectric power plant and dam, 'Istiqlo' tunnel project, and 'Rogun' power plant.

Minister Hails Iran's Free Trade Agreement With EAEU



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade Abbas Aliabadi has appreciated a recent agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) which he said further strengthens Iran's presence in the 170-million-people market of the bloc. He said that the EAEU members need Iran's different industrial and economic capabilities. "We are presently importing agricultural items, including corn and wheat, from these countries," the minister said, adding that the FTA will give a boost to relations between the two sides.

Referring to the tough sanctions on Iran, he said that the FTA is a good chance for the country's presence in the global markets. Iran and the EAEU signed an FTA in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Monday. Under the terms of the agreement, Iran and the five-member bloc will lift tariffs on 87% of the items being exchanged between them. The rest 13% includes items that each of the six parties consider as sensitive items whose free imports may damage their domestic industry or agriculture.

Iran Imports Over 19 MT of Gold in Nine Months



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran imported 19.24 metric tons (mt) of gold ingots worth \$1.228 billion in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21 - December 21). The gold ingots were the 8th main item imported into Iran in the period under review, according to the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA). An IRICA report said in October that Iran's imports of gold ingots would be exempted from tax payment as of October 23. The report said that the scheme would be executed based on an order by the head of Iran National Tax Administration (INTA) Mohammad-Hadi Sobhanian in accordance with a law on direct taxes. Sobhanian has argued that the exemption is necessary due to repeated calls by the importers of gold ingots and taking the arbitrary sanctions on the country into consideration.

Annual Petrochemical Production Capacity to Top 95m Tons

TEHRAN (Shana) - Iran's annual petrochemical production capacity will surpass 95 million tons (mt) by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 19, 2024), said the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) managing director. Morteza Shahmirzaei, who made the announcement during his Wednesday visit to Mokran Petrochemical Town in Chabahar, southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchestan, added the output capacity was around 2.5 million tons in 1979. Expressing his congratulations on the Iranian Petrochemical Industry Day, the CEO of NPC said, "Sixty-five years have passed since the executive operations of the first petrochemical plant of Iran started on Dec. 29, 1958." He added Iran's petrochemical industry was completely dependent on foreign countries, but it is now run by domestic experts. The model of petrochemical development in Mokran follows the policy of avoiding selling raw materials, said the official, pledging that the zone will witness great developments and 20,000 steady jobs will be created when Mokran Petrochemical Town's operations end. According to him, downstream and upstream plants will be constructed in Mokran Petrochemical Town with the aim of supplying end products to markets.

South Africa Files ICJ Case Accusing Israel's Genocide in Gaza

THE HAGUE (Dispatches) - South Africa launched a case on Friday at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel for what it said were "genocidal" acts in Gaza, with Israel rejecting the case "with disgust." According to a statement, the ICJ application related to alleged violations by Israel of its obligations under the Genocide Convention, and said that "Israel has engaged in, is engaging in and risks further engaging in genocidal acts against the Palestinian people in Gaza." In The Hague application, South Africa also says that Israel has been acting "with the requisite specific intent... to destroy Palestinians in Gaza as part of the broader Palestinian national, racial and ethnic group." Israel rejected the charge, with Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Lior Haat writing on X, formerly Twitter: "Israel rejects with disgust the blood libel spread by South Africa and its application" to the ICJ. The war started by the violent Hamas attacks on Israel is nearing its twelfth week, with vast areas of northern Gaza in ruins and Israeli air strikes and ground combat focusing on central and southern districts.



IRAN NEWS

Xi Urges Chinese Envoys to Create Diplomatic Iron Army



BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese President Xi Jinping urged Chinese ambassadors to forge a "diplomatic iron army" loyal to the Communist Party, reviving the abrasive "Wolf Warrior" rhetoric propagated by some diplomats as a sign of China's increasingly assertive foreign policy. "Dare to be good at struggle and to become defenders of the national interest. It is necessary to... resolutely safeguard the interests of national sovereignty, security and development with a posture of readiness and a firm will to defy strong powers," Xi told Chinese overseas envoys gathered in Beijing, state broadcaster CCTV reported. His remarks harked back to a more brash, confrontational style of rhetoric adopted by Chinese diplomats since 2020, which had been less prominent this year as China sought to attract foreign investment for its weakened economy. Ties with the United States thawed briefly after Xi met U.S. President Joe Biden in November, but China is also currently engaged in diplomatic disputes with the Philippines over a contested reef in the South China Sea, as well as Japan over its discharge of nuclear-contaminated wastewater from its wrecked Fukushima reactor. Xi also urged envoys to adhere to Party discipline, repeating the word "strict" seven times in an annual keynote speech after the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, a secretive high-level Communist Party foreign policy planning meeting that takes place once every five years, concluded on Thursday. "It is necessary to put rules and discipline in front, strictly discipline oneself, take strict responsibility... and create a diplomatic iron army that is loyal to the Party... dares to and is good at struggle, and observes strict discipline," Xi said during the envoys' conference at Beijing's Great Hall of the People. Xi's remarks come amid a renewed disciplinary push among China's diplomatic corps after the previous foreign minister Qin Gang was removed from his post in July, having served only seven months in the role amid rumors of an affair. "Loyalty to the Party, the country and the people is the glorious tradition of the diplomatic front," said Xi. "It is necessary to build a strong line of ideological defense... and be an astute person with firm political beliefs who strictly complies with rules and discipline." Xi also emphasized the need for China to increase its international influence to combat what he believes are the West's attempts to contain and suppress China, repeating the word "struggle" five times. "We must make broad and deep friendships, and the fight to win people's hearts must not only be carried out in temples but deeply among the masses. We must use foreign language and methods to tell the China story well," said Xi, echoing a June 2021 speech in which he urged officials to create a "trustworthy, lovable and respectable" image of China.

Slow Demand Set to Keep Oil Price Near \$80/b in 2024



LONDON (Dispatches) - International oil prices are likely to stay near \$80 a barrel in 2024, a Reuters poll showed, as analysts predicted weak global growth would cap demand, while geopolitical tensions could provide support. The analysts questioned whether the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies (OPEC+) would be able to sustain supply cuts to support the market. The global benchmark Brent crude has averaged around \$82.17 a barrel so far this year and was poised for an over 9% yearly decline as a strong U.S. dollar boosted by a high interest rate environment and subdued demand from top consumer China weighed. A survey of 34 economists and analysts forecast Brent crude would average \$82.56 in 2024, down from November's \$84.43 consensus. Just one contributor expected prices to average above the \$90 mark next year. U.S. crude was seen averaging \$78.84 next year, from \$80.50 last month. "From the demand side we do not expect much impetus in the months to come," said Thomas Wybierek, analyst at NORD Landk. "There is still a question mark behind the supply side. There are a lot of doubts (on whether) the OPEC+ alliance will be capable to reduce supply as decided recently." Last month, OPEC+ oil producers agreed to voluntary output cuts totalling about 2.2 million barrels per day for early next year led by Saudi Arabia rolling over its current voluntary cut to support the market. OPEC+ is cutting some 6 million bpd from its output and its market share has fallen to 27%. "While it is difficult to maintain cooperation with all the members of OPEC+ - at this time and price level - all members are supportive of higher oil prices," said John Paisie, president of Stratas Advisors. Analysts polled also said geopolitical risks would keep oil prices volatile in the coming months. "We think that there will be a greater concern about geopolitics in 2024 than in 2023 - and the associated risk premium will be substantially higher," Paisie added.

Israel Continues Bombing Gaza; Egypt Hosts Talks on Truce



GAZA STRIP (Dispatches) - Israel pounded Gaza, nearly 12 weeks into the war started by the October 7 attacks, as Egypt hosted a Hamas delegation for talks aimed at ending the conflict that has devastated much of the besieged Palestinian territory. With vast areas of northern Gaza in ruins and largely deserted, Israeli air strikes and ground combat have focussed on central and southern districts, driving ever more displaced families into crowded areas around Rafah near the Egyptian border. Intense fighting around central Deir al-Balah and the biggest southern city, Khan Yunis, has driven about 100,000 newly displaced people into already-overcrowded Rafah, said the UN humanitarian office, even as targets there were bombed too. Rafah residents combed through rubble for survivors and bodies after a deadly air strike Thursday. One local man, Tayseer Abu al-Eish, said he was at home when "we heard a loud explosion and debris started falling on us. My daughters were screaming." The relentless bombardment has caused mass civilian casualties and sparked global calls for a ceasefire as alarm has mounted over the dire fate of Palestinians enduring hunger and sleeping in makeshift shelters in the cold winter months. After another strike, in Deir al-Balah, one bereaved mother, Suhair Nasser, wept as she cradled the bodies of her twin children, exclaiming that "the house was bombed and the debris fell on the kids on December 28, their birthday." The military said it had "eliminated dozens of terrorists" across Gaza over the past 24 hours and was "extending operations in Khan Yunis", the hometown of Hamas's Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar. Israel's army says 168 soldiers have been killed inside Gaza. Hamas's military wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, said Friday it had launched a fresh barrage of rockets at southern Israel. The UN says more than

80 percent of Gaza's population has been driven from their homes, with many now living in cramped shelters or tents around Rafah. The UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said 308 people seeking shelter in their facilities have been killed. UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths bemoaned "an impossible situation for the people of Gaza, and for those trying to help them." "You think getting aid into Gaza is easy? Think again," he wrote Friday on X, formerly Twitter. A UN aid convoy came under fire by the Israeli military without causing casualties, UNRWA said. The severe shortages have been only sporadically eased by humanitarian aid convoys entering primarily via Egypt. A truckload of fresh food, including meat, eggs and fruit, reached a Rafah market Friday, bringing some relief. "This is the first time eggs and some types of fruit have entered Gaza from Egypt," said vendor Muntasser al-Shaar. "All types of fruit are missing in the markets. There are some types of vegetables but they're really expensive." While Israel has repeatedly vowed to destroy Hamas, Cairo has proposed a plan involving renewable ceasefires, a staggered release of hostages for Palestinian prisoners and ultimately an end to the war, say sources close to Hamas. Speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, a Hamas official said the delegation would "give the response of the Palestinian factions, including several observations" regarding the proposal Egypt recently submitted to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Hamas would seek "guarantees for a complete Israeli military withdrawal" from Gaza, the official said. Israel is yet to formal comment on the Cairo plan but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told families of hostages on Thursday that "we are in contact" with the Egyptian mediators and promised that "we are working to bring them all back".

Russian Strikes Kill at Least 30 Across Ukraine



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia launched a massive air attack over Ukraine, killing at least 30 people and wounding scores across the country in the fiercest assault since the first days of the war nearly two years ago. Schools, a maternity hospital, shopping arcades and blocks of flats were among the buildings hit in the barrage, said Ukrainian officials. The attacks -- during which a Russian missile passed through Polish airspace -- triggered international condemnation and fresh promises of military support to Ukraine, which has been fighting off invading Russian troops since late February 2022. "Today Russia hit us with almost everything it has in its arsenal," President Volodymyr Zelensky said. Ukraine's military estimated Russia had launched 158 missiles and drones on Ukraine and 114 of them had been destroyed. Air force spokesman Yuriy Ignat told AFP that this was a "record number" of missiles and "the most massive missile attack" of the war, excluding the early days of constant bombardment. Russia tried to overwhelm Ukraine's air defences across most major cities, launching a wave of Shahed attack drones followed by missiles of numerous types fired from planes and from Russian-controlled territory. Interior Minister Igor Klymenko announced on Telegram: "As of now, 30 people have been killed and more than 160 wounded as a result of Russia's massive attack on Ukrainian territory in the morning." Late Friday, Russian authorities said a strike on a residential building in Belgorod, 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, had left one dead and four wounded. A total of 13 missiles were intercepted over the Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine and a "drone-type aircraft" was destroyed over the Bryansk region

further to the northwest, according to Russian authorities. Russia's army said it had "carried out 50 group strikes and one massive strike" on military facilities in Ukraine over the past week, adding that "all targets were hit". The United Nations condemned the attacks and said they must stop "immediately". "Regrettably, today's appalling assaults were only the latest in a series of escalating attacks by the Russian Federation," said UN assistant secretary-general Mohamed Khiafi. Poland reported that a Russian missile passed through its airspace. "Everything indicates that a Russian missile entered Polish airspace... It also left," said General Wieslaw Kukula, chief of the general staff of the Polish armed forces. After speaking to Polish President Andrzej Duda, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance "stands in solidarity" with Poland, adding: "NATO remains vigilant." In the face of sustained Russian assaults, Ukraine is urging Western allies to maintain military support. Ukraine presidential aide Andriy Yermak said Kyiv needed "more support and strength to stop this terror". US President Joe Biden called on Congress to overcome its division to approve new aid for Ukraine, after Washington released its final package of weaponry under existing agreements still to be renewed by Congress. "Unless Congress takes urgent action in the new year, we will not be able to continue sending the weapons and vital air defence systems Ukraine needs to protect its people," Biden said. "Congress must step up and act without any further delay." Britain announced it would send hundreds more air-defence missiles to Kyiv, after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared that "We must continue to stand with Ukraine -- for as long as it takes".



Ukraine, Hungary Prepare for Zelenskiy, Orban Meeting

BUDAPEST (Dispatches) - Ukraine and Hungary are preparing a meeting of President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and Prime Minister Viktor Orban in the near future, the Ukrainian president's chief of staff said, amid recent steps by Hungary that have soured ties. Earlier this month, all European Union states except Hungary agreed to start accession talks with Ukraine. The bloc's leaders bypassed Orban's opposition by getting him to leave the room when the decision was made. But leaders could not overcome Orban's resistance to revamping the EU budget to channel 50 billion euros to Kyiv and are expected to revisit the issue at an emergency summit on Feb 1. Orban wants funding for Kyiv to come from outside the EU budget. Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak made his remarks following a "productive phone call" with Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto. "We are working to organize a meeting between the two leaders in the near future," Yermak said on the X social media platform. He added Ukraine's progress on the path of European integration was also discussed. Zelenskiy earlier said countries need to organize a constructive meeting to discuss problems in their relations. Orban later confirmed he had accepted an invitation to meet.

British Warship in Guyana Waters, Fanning Tensions With Venezuela

CARACAS (Dispatches) - A British warship arrived off the coast of Guyana, further fueling tensions over a territorial dispute with Venezuela, which has launched a major military exercise in response to what it termed an "unacceptable" threat. Venezuela and Guyana have been locked in a land dispute over the oil-rich Essequibo region which makes up about two-thirds of Guyana's territory, but has long been claimed by Caracas. Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro on Thursday ordered over 5,600 troops to join a "defensive" exercise near the Guyana border, in response to Britain sending a warship to the area in a show of support to its former colony. Britain said Friday the Venezuelan military exercises were "unjustified and should cease." London diverted the patrol vessel HMS Trent to Guyana "as part of a series of engagements in the region during her Atlantic patrol task deployment." A Guyana foreign ministry source, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the "uneventful" arrival of the warship in its waters on Friday. Brazil, which borders both countries and whose President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has emerged as a peace broker of sorts, on Friday called for "restraint and a return to dialogue." Expressing "concern," the Brazilian government said in a statement it "believes military demonstrations of support to either party should be avoided." Rocio San Miguel, a Venezuelan military expert and normally a critic of the government, said Britain's military response was

"recklessness that forces Venezuela to respond as it has done." However Gary Best, a former chief of staff of the Guyanan Defence Forces, said having the British ship in their waters was not "a provocation." "It is nothing unusual. However, in the actual context... of the challenge to the sovereignty by Venezuela, it has taken on a new meaning." "I can see how they would see it as a threat." He said the military exercises were "a show of force" from Maduro, ahead of elections in 2024. Venezuela's century-old claim on Essequibo has been revived since massive offshore oil deposits were discovered in the region and Guyana began handing out licenses to oil companies to operate there. Maduro's government held a controversial referendum on December 3 in which 95 percent of voters, according to officials, supported declaring Venezuela the rightful owner of Essequibo. He has since started legal maneuvers to create a Venezuelan province in Essequibo and ordered the state oil company to issue licenses for extracting crude in the region. Guyana, a former British and Dutch colony, insists the Essequibo frontiers were determined by an arbitration panel in 1899. But Venezuela claims the Essequibo River to the region's east forms a natural border recognized as far back as 1777. Brazil urged both parties to respect an agreement reached after Maduro and Guyana President Irfaan Ali met earlier this month in the Caribbean, where they vowed not to resort to force to settle the dispute.



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Celtics Top Raptors, Improve to 16-0 at Home



BOSTON (Dispatches) - Jaylen Brown had 31 points, 10 rebounds and six assists to help the Boston Celtics beat the Toronto Raptors 120-118 and improve their home record to 16-0 this season. With his team trailing by three, Toronto's Pascal Siakam was fouled with 1.4 seconds left. He made the first free throw and missed the second intentionally, but the Raptors were unable to control the rebound. Derrick White had 21 points, five rebounds and seven assists for the Celtics, who won their fifth game in a row. Luke Kornet scored 20 points and Jrue Holiday added 15 points for Boston. Scottie Barnes led the Raptors with 30 points and 10 rebounds. Siakam finished with 27 points, and Jakob Poeltl added 12 points and 10 rebounds. Toronto trailed by 13 after three quarters but scored 18 of the first 21 points in the fourth. Toronto tied the score at 116-116 on Barnes' 3-pointer with 47.1 seconds to play, but the Celtics went up 118-116 on a Kornet dunk with 32.1 seconds left and didn't relinquish the lead after that. The Celtics, who beat Detroit 128-122 in overtime Thursday, played without center Al Horford (rest), center Kristaps Porzingis (calf) and forward Jayson Tatum (ankle). Tatum leads the team in scoring (27.0) and rebounding (8.4). The Raptors led 7-3, but the Celtics surged in front with a 20-4 run that featured three consecutive 3-pointers by Brown. Boston had a 35-20 lead after one quarter. Boston had its largest lead of the game after Sam Hauser made a 3-pointer that gave the Celtics a 40-20 advantage with 10:53 remaining in the second quarter. Boston made 11 of 20 3-pointers in the first half (55 percent) and led 68-53 entering the third quarter. The Raptors trimmed their deficit to nine points after Barnes made two free throws with 3:06 left in the third, but Toronto trailed 99-86

with 12 minutes to play. Meanwhile Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 34 points and Damian Lillard added 31 to lead the Milwaukee Bucks to a 119-111 win over the host Cleveland Cavaliers. Antetokounmpo also grabbed 16 boards while Malik Beasley added 15 points thanks to five 3-pointers. Khris Middleton contributed 13 points and 11 assists as the Bucks won for the ninth time in 10 games. Cleveland was led by Donovan Mitchell, who returned after missing four games with an illness and contributed 34 points and nine assists. Jarrett Allen added 30 points and 12 boards. Craig Porter Jr. came off the bench to score all 14 of his points in the fourth quarter, and Max Strus wound up with 12 points. The biggest factor in the game was the Cavaliers' poor 3-point shooting: 6 of 43 (14 percent). Cleveland led for nearly all of the first half, shooting 63 percent in the first quarter with Allen scoring 16 points in the first 12 minutes. The Bucks drew closer in the second with a 10-0 run after being down by as much as 15, but the Cavaliers went into the break with a 59-52 advantage. Notably, they did so despite shooting 3-for-22 (13.6 percent) from beyond the arc in the half. Milwaukee committed 11 turnovers before the break. Milwaukee took over in the third quarter. The Bucks outscored Cleveland 40-21 in the period and went into the fourth with a 92-80 lead as the Cavaliers continued to miss from deep. In the fourth, momentum went back and forth as Cleveland cut into the deficit. With 6:43 to go, the Cavaliers were within six points, and they sliced it to four with 56.8 seconds to play on a Porter 3-pointer. Strus missed a 3-point attempt that would have pulled Cleveland within one with 22.2 seconds left.

Ski Star Odermatt Revels in Perfect Super-G



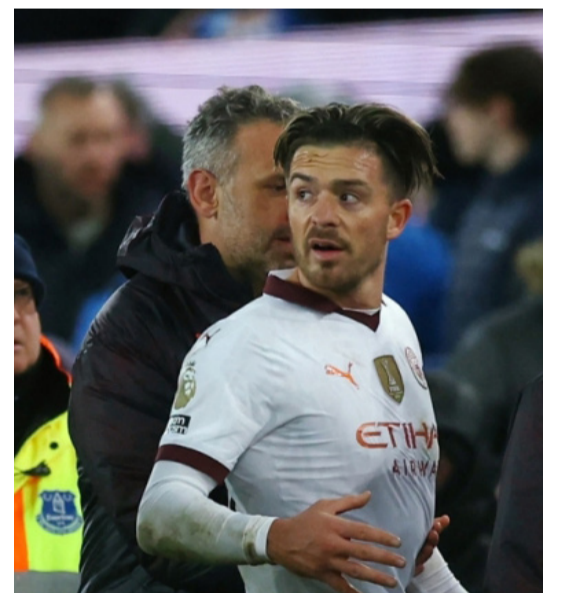
BORMIO (Dispatches) - Switzerland's Marco Odermatt categorised his super-G win at Bormio as 'perfect' which also served to strengthen his bid for a third overall World Cup title. The 26-year-old timed almost a second faster than Austrian runner-up Raphael Haaser, with third-placed Aleksander Aamodt Kilde of Norway, 1.31 sec adrift. It completed a wonderful two days for Odermatt. His closest rival in the overall World Cup race Marco Schwarz of Austria was ruled out for the rest of the season due to a serious knee injury he suffered in a fall in Thursday's downhill. The downhill winner Cyprien Sarrazin - who was second to Odermatt after Schwarz's mishap but trailed by over 300 points - failed to finish on Friday. "I had a plan and I executed it," said Odermatt, who was recording his fourth success of the campaign and 28th World Cup victory. The race was held up after the spectacular fall of Italy's 2011 super-G world champion Christof Innerhofer, who went crashing into the safety netting. The 39-year-old was evacuated by helicopter and taken to hospital in Sondalo, Italy. According to an Italian ski federation spokesperson he has a calf injury. Schwarz for his part will have to watch on from the sidelines after his dreams of the overall title lay in tatters. The Austrian ski federation issued a statement confirming the 28-year-old Schwarz had torn knee ligaments. He underwent scans after being taken by helicopter to hospital in Innsbruck. "After examining the scan, the fears became a sad certainty," read a statement from the federation. "Schwarz suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament, a torn meniscus and slight damage to the cartilage in his right knee."

Britain, Spain Make Winning Starts at United Cup

PERTH (Dispatches) - Cameron Norrie and Katie Boulter handed Britain a 2-0 win over hosts Australia on the opening day of the United Cup mixed team tournament, as the new tennis season began after a short break with the focus on next month's Australian Open. Spain beat Brazil 2-1 in a thrilling start to the revamped US\$10 million (RM46 million) tournament that features 18 countries with ties also set to take place in Sydney with the final scheduled for January 7. World number ones Novak Djokovic and Iga Swiatek are among the big names who will be in action in the coming days as they warm up for the opening Grand Slam of the new year which will run from Jan. 14-28 in Melbourne. Norrie overcame a dip midway through his Group C clash with Alex de Minaur to prevail 6-4 2-6 7-6(2) at the packed RAC Arena and snap his nine-match losing streak against opponents ranked inside the world's top 20. De Minaur's British girlfriend Boulter then settled the tie with a 6-2 6-4 victory over the fit-again Ajla Tomljanovic, who missed the majority of last season due to a knee injury that required surgery. Alejandro Davidovich Fokina and mixed doubles partner Sara Sorribes Tormo earlier beat the pair of Beatriz Haddad Maia and Marcelo Melo 6-4 7-5 in the decider of the Group A tie between Spain and Brazil. United Cup debutant Davidovich Fokina put Spain up 1-0 by defeating Thiago Seyboth Wild 6-4 6-0 in the first match of the 2024 season, dominating his opponent from the baseline and not facing a break point throughout the contest. But Brazil hit back through world number 11 Haddad Maia, who downed Sorribes Tormo 7-6(1) 6-2 in a rematch of their marathon French Open fourth-round clash earlier this year. "To come back and play with Sara, I think we had a great time on court and we enjoyed a lot," world number 26 Davidovich Fokina told reporters. "We didn't care... obviously we care, but the result was like the last thing. We were enjoying out there, just to keep improving also." The Czech Republic will meet China and Poland play Brazil in Perth on Saturday while the Netherlands take on Norway and Italy face Germany in Sydney.



Man City's Grealish Burgled During Match



LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City winger Jack Grealish was burgled while the England star was playing in his club's Premier League match at Everton. Grealish's Cheshire mansion in north-west England was targeted by thieves as he was in action for the Premier League champions during their 3-1 victory on Merseyside. Members of Grealish's family and his fiancée Sasha Atwood were watching the televised match at the house when they heard a disturbance, according to reports on Friday. An alarm was raised and an emergency response was launched with a helicopter, police dogs and a number of officers sent to the property, but no suspects were detected. It was reported the robbers made off with £1 million (RM5.9 million) worth of jewellery and watches. Grealish, 28, was informed of the raid after City's match finished. A spokeswoman for Cheshire Constabulary said: "At around 9.50pm on Wednesday 27 December police were called to reports of a burglary. The caller reported that a number of items had been stolen. Officers, supported by the police dogs and NPAS (National Police Air Service), were deployed and searches were conducted in the local area, but there was no trace of the suspects. No arrests have been made at this time and enquiries are ongoing." City manager Pep Guardiola was relieved nobody was hurt in the incident, but did not confirm if Grealish would be available for Saturday's home game against Sheffield United. "Fortunately nothing wrong happened where the family was inside," Guardiola told reporters on Friday. "It is what it is today in the modern day, with many things happening. It was a bad moment for him and his family but, fortunately, what was not damaged were the people inside."

Ten Hag Says Man Utd's New Investors Want to Work With Him

LONDON (Dispatches) - Erik ten Hag insists Jim Ratcliffe wants to work with him even though he is yet to speak to the British billionaire as he prepares to take control of football operations at troubled Manchester United. Ratcliffe's INEOS group finally agreed a deal to buy a 25 per cent stake in United on Christmas Eve. INEOS will have responsibility for United's footballing operations under the terms of a deal that is expected to take four to six weeks to receive regulatory approval. Dave Brailsford, INEOS' director of sport, was at Old Trafford on Boxing Day for the 3-2 win against Aston Villa, a result which gave the under-fire Ten Hag some much-needed breathing space. United travel to Nottingham Forest on Saturday languishing in seventh place in the Premier League and have already been eliminated from the Champions League and the League Cup. Despite his rocky second season in charge, Ten Hag is confident Ratcliffe is keen to develop a working relationship to get United back on track. "The schedule is so condensed so I didn't have the time so far to speak with them, but it will come and I look forward to it," Ten Hag told reporters on Friday. "They want to work with me. I want to work with them. We will have the conversations, the meetings, so we will see. Asked if he is expecting INEOS to be a regular presence at United's Carrington training base, Ten Hag said: "I'm focused on the game so far. So, I said, no, in this moment I don't want to have distractions but in the coming days, weeks, there will be time for this and then I know more. But I think it's a good thing, it's very positive and, as I said, we are really looking forward to working together. INEOS wants to work with me, in this structure, and I want to work with them." The unpopular Glazer family remain the majority shareholders at Old Trafford. But a United States Securities and Exchange Commission filing related to the deal contains

a provision guaranteeing that INEOS will be consulted on football matters at United. This includes "appointing, dismissing or accepting the resignation of any director of football or first team manager of the company" as well as entering into or continuing any discussion concerning the purchase or sale of any player. "We always want to win and it doesn't matter who is in the lead of the club," Ten Hag said. "We are appointed here to win, so in this area we need a winning culture no matter who is in the lead, no matter who is the owner. But, of course, the owners can inspire you."

