

The Makran Coastal Region in Southeast Iran Will Turn Into the Country's Third-Largest Petrochemical Hub With an Investment of €20b by the End of the Seventh National Development Plan (2026), According to the Head of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC)

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian Has Said that His Ministry Is Following Good Plans for Developing the Country's Power Plants, Mentioning a Plan for Construction of New Renewable Power Plants Across the Country

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Iran Warns of Severe Response to Israeli Threats



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The foreign minister of Iran cautioned the Zionist regime that any act of adventurism or aggression will draw a devastating response from Tehran. In a telephone conversation on Sunday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and British Foreign Secretary David Cameron talked about the latest regional developments and bilateral relations. Expressing hope that Britain would adopt a realistic and constructive approach to the regional developments and bilateral relations to enhance the atmosphere of ties, Amir-Abdollahian said, "The root cause of the Palestinian crisis does not date back to October 7 but to 75 years of Israeli occupation, continuous violation of Palestinians' fundamental rights, war crimes in Palestine, and genocide against this oppressed nation. England's role in these issues is, of course, evident." He also condemned the silence of certain Western governments on the crimes committed by the Israeli regime against Palestinians, which have led to the martyrdom of 21,000 civilians in Gaza over the past 80 days. "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers Hamas a liberation movement against occupation and apartheid, similar to movements against apartheid in South Africa." The Iranian foreign minister then criticized the US and certain Western countries for their double standards towards Gaza and Ukraine. "The Israeli regime cannot be allowed to commit massacres of women and children, nor perpetrate genocide in Gaza and inflame the region, yet considering stopping a Zionist ship in the Red Sea as a threat to the security of this vital economic waterway," he added, the Foreign Ministry's website reported. Regarding the threats against Iran, Amir-Abdollahian warned, "The Islamic Republic of Iran will give a strong and regretting response to any Israeli regime's adventurism and acts of aggression."

Israel Allies Losing Hope in Crisis-Ridden Tel Aviv



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says the Israeli regime is in a situation that even its closest allies are planning for a post-Israel period. Speaking at a Sunday meeting with members of the Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Amir-Abdollahian described Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, launched by Palestinian resistance groups against Israel on October 7, as a "turning point" in regional developments. "Today, the Zionist regime (Israel) is in such a state that even the regime's friends have no hope for it and are thinking about a post-Israel era," Zohreh Elahian, a member of the committee, quoted the foreign minister as saying. He also emphasized that the United States, as the main supporter of Israel, is desperate due to mounting public hatred both at home and abroad. The lawmaker noted that Amir-Abdollahian also outlined Iran's diplomatic efforts in support of the Palestinian people, including negotiations with authorities from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Jordan. Rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders, also condemned countries opposing a ceasefire in Gaza, warning that this would result in a humanitarian disaster. Activists have launched a global campaign, named Countdown2Ceasefire, asking people to turn the New Year's countdown in their countries into a countdown for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.



Iran Urges IAEA to Avoid Politicization

TEHRAN - The UN nuclear agency is strongly advised to perform its professional function and stay away from political issues when it comes to cooperation with Iran, the Iranian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson said. Speaking to reporters at a weekly press conference on Monday, Nasser Kanaani said reports that raise concerns over Iran's uranium enrichment activities are not constructive and run counter to the reality of Iran's peaceful nuclear program. "Iran's nuclear activities are peaceful and monitored by the IAEA," he said. The spokesman noted that the International Atomic Energy Agency and its director general are expected to proceed with their professional job, avoid politicized behavior, and allow the course of cooperation with Iran to continue professionally and within the framework of the Safeguards Agreement, the NPT and the statement signed by Tehran and the UN nuclear agency. Reaffirming Iran's commitment to the NPT and the Safeguards Agreement, Kanaani said since the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has been at the top of the list of countries where the IAEA has carried out the highest number of inspections. Asked about Iran's relations with Russia and the latter's stance on the Gaza war, Kanaani said the Tehran-Moscow ties are expanding based on the Raisi administration's good neighborliness policy. "The existence of extensive relations in various fields does not mean that two countries agree on all international issues," he said, arguing that it is natural to have different views on issues as long as relations are based on mutual respect and acceptance of differences of opinion. He also said Tehran has already declared its position regarding the issue of the three Iranian islands. "Therefore, the developing relations between the two countries do not prevent us from expressing our positions in controversial cases," the Foreign Ministry spokesman added. These actions are a violation of international law and the United Nations Charter as well as a breach of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is condemned and can be pursued legally, Kanaani said. Such measures are a threat to international peace and security, he said adding that the Zionist regime is used to spreading its internal crises beyond the borders of the occupied territories by trying to expand insecurity in the region. He urged the United Nations Security Council to fulfill its responsibility against the wicked behavior of the Zionist regime. Elsewhere in his remarks, Kanaani slammed the criminal assassination of martyr Seyed Razi Mousavi. Certainly, the Zionist regime will not achieve strategic results by doing these criminal actions, and the resistance is more powerful than ever, he stated. He also congratulated the New Christian Year, saying that the nations of the world are celebrating the New Year in a situation where the birthplace of Jesus Christ in Palestine is under the unprecedented crimes of the usurping regime. Unfortunately, the Zionist regime continues its crimes, he stressed. The spokesman also pointed out the martyrdom anniversary of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, noting that the Islamic Republic seriously follows up the probe into the crime committed by the US regime regarding the assassination of Martyr Soleimani; so, the issue will never be forgotten and the passage of time will not lessen the significance of the criminal case. At the domestic level, the legal and criminal dimensions of the assassination are being pursued against the United States, and at the international arena, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs follows up it based on a 1973 UN convention, he said, adding that Tehran takes significant measures in this respect. According to the spokesman, along with legal follow-ups for the crime committed by the United States, official notes have also been conveyed to the Swiss Embassy in Tehran, which represents US interests in Iran. Kanaani also mentioned that if there is a fair criminal court, the assassination case should be definitely considered a matter of international crime, and the commander in charge of the assassination must be pursued and brought to justice. However, whatever the case may be, the US administration has illegitimately utilized its influence in international entities, he said.

West Tries to Halt Iran Nuclear Activities With Politics

TEHRAN (IP) – Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) said that enemies ignored the various capacities of nuclear energy in our country and tried to halt Iran's peaceful nuclear activities through politicians. The inauguration ceremony of the 2nd Plasma Therapy Centre to treat diabetic ulcers and cancer was held on Monday. Delivering a speech during the event, Mohammad Eslami stated: Nuclear energy is effective in various fields and the enemies did not want us to reach the field by distracting our image in the world. Eslami said: Today, heavy water has more than 230 derivatives, which have a high scientific value and are considered the basis of pharmaceutical developments in the future, and this part of nuclear activity is considered a tremendous development in the field of pharmaceuticals and health. He further reiterated the effects of plasma in the treatment of diabetic and cancer patients saying: One of the core

services is directed to the community health sector, which should be expanded in the community. Eslami went on to conclude: We are trying to commercialize research in the nuclear field so that society can use the benefits of this knowledge in various economic and health sectors. Meanwhile attending the event, Eslami said: The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran is going to increase the number of specialized clinics for the treatment of diabetic wounds to 50 by next year so that people across the country can use this important technology. He stated: We are trying to expand the scientific and research services of the Atomic Energy Organization in the society so that people can benefit from the benefits of this knowledge. He further said that cold atmospheric plasma (CAP) was shown to decrease bacterial load in chronic wounds. It was also presented as a novel approach to healing wounds in both in vitro and in vivo experiments.



Tehran, Moscow Officially Ditch Dollar in Mutual Trade



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran and Russia have officially abandoned the American Greenback for mutual settlements after the two countries finalized an agreement to trade in the ruble and the rial. The agreement was sealed during a meeting in Russia between the heads of the central banks of the two countries, RT reported. The establishment of new financial and banking platforms has opened a "new chapter" in relations between Iran and Russia, the Central Bank of Iran stated. The arrangement allows banks and entrepreneurs to use alternative financial and banking platforms, such as non-SWIFT money-messaging systems, and also involves the establishment of bilateral brokerage relations in national currencies. Iran and Russia, both subject to the US sanctions, first announced plans to use their respective national currencies instead of the US dollar in the bilateral trade in July 2022. Earlier this week, members of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) signed a full-fledged Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Iran. In July, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi called for the dollar to be abandoned in the international trade, saying that the US currency has been used as an instrument of the Western hegemony. Over the past year, Moscow and Tehran have significantly strengthened the economic cooperation in the face of Western economic sanctions. Bilateral trade turnover has nearly tripled from \$1.6 billion in 2019 to \$4.6 billion in 2022, according to official data.

Iran Officially Becomes BRICS Member in 2024



TEHRAN (MNA) – The BRICS group of emerging economies has welcomed 2024 by officially adding five developing nations. Specifically, the bloc introduced Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia to kick off the New Year. These countries are set to officially join after receiving an initial invitation at the bloc's 2023 annual summit, watcher.guru.com reported. Last year, the BRICS economic alliance has flourished. In what was undoubtedly a year of growth, the bloc fast-tracked a host of initiatives. Those range from its de-dollarization plans to its first-ever expansion bid. The latter of which is finally set to be made official. Indeed, the BRICS alliance has welcomed 2024 by officially adding five expansion nations to its ranks. Specifically, it introduced Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia to be the first countries to constitute expansion since South Africa was added more than a decade ago. The expansion is set to have massive geopolitical ramifications, as they could be hugely important to its multipolar goals.

IRAN NEWS



PSEEZ Begins Equipping New Dock at Pars Port

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Pars Special Energy Economic Zone (PSEEZ) Organization has begun equipping dock No. 10 of Pars petrochemical export port located at the zone in Assaluyeh, Shana reported. The executive operations of the mentioned dock, which is aimed at exporting liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), were started in a ceremony with the presence of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) Head Mohsen Khojasteh-Mehr. The NIOC has allocated \$30 million for the completion of the mentioned dock and the project is being carried out by the PSEEZ. Equipping this dock will enable PSEEZ to export 2.5 million tons of LPG annually, which will bring the country \$1.5 billion of annual revenue. Located in the port city of Assaluyeh, PSEEZ is home to several petrochemical complexes that receive gas and gas condensate feedstock from the giant South Pars gas field, which Iran shares with Qatar in the Persian Gulf. were underway in the region.

Iran to Launch Offshore Rial by Late March



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Mohammad-Reza Farzin has said that the country is scheduled to finalize a plan for using "offshore rial" in exchanges with a number of neighboring countries by the end of the current calendar year to March 20. He made the remarks at a Sunday meeting of the dialogue council of the government and the private sector in the northeastern province of Khorasan Razavi. Farzin said that this mechanism has been devised for the settlement of exchanges of goods and services which will facilitate trade with countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. The CBI chief stated that offshore currencies are among tools that are used by some countries so as to give a boost to the use of their national currencies in trade and help manage their forex reserves.



Iran Exports Products Worth \$6.9b to Iraq

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran exported commodities valued at \$6.9 billion to Iraq during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21, 2023), the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced. According to Mohammad Rezvanifar, Iraq was the second top export destination of Iranian products in the mentioned nine-month period. As previously announced by an official with Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), the value of Iran's export to Iraq increased by 15 percent in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20, 2023). Farzad Piltan, the director-general of TPO's Office of West Asian Countries, said that based on the data released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration, Iran exported commodities worth over \$10 billion to its neighbor in the previous year. By stating that Iraq is one of the strategic partners of Iran in the field of foreign trade and especially exports, he put the value of Iran's import from Iraq at about \$200 million in the past year. Considering Iran's vast export capacity and Iraq's large market for Iranian goods, both sides want to expand the volume of bilateral economic exchanges. Iran and Iraq have set a target of \$20 billion in annual trade, and businessmen and authorities of both countries are determined to meet that

target. Head of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce Yahya Ale-Es'haq has stated. "In general, Iran and Iraq have agreed to improve relations and change the monetary and banking conditions so that the central banks of the two countries will ease the current situation and solve the problems," he has noted. The current administration of Iran under President Raisi has shown great interest in broadening and enhancing trade and economic ties with neighboring states, Ale Es'haq has emphasized. In late September, 2023, Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) hosted an Iran-Iraq business conference in which officials from the two sides discussed ways of expanding mutual business relations. Speaking at the conference, TPO Head Mehdi Zeyghami stressed the need to balance the trade between the two countries, saying: "The level of trade and economic relations between Iran and Iraq has increased significantly in recent years, and the figure can be increased up to 40 billion dollars if the two sides' trade is balanced." The government of Iran is ready to cooperate with Iraq for the industrial development of the country in the 2035 horizon, he noted, saying: "Iran is ready to transfer technology to Iraq and develop industrial projects in the country."

FM Dismisses Concerns on Radioactive Contamination of Border River



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian refuted reports that the Metsamor nuclear power plant in neighboring Armenia may have polluted the Aras border river with radioactive materials. The foreign minister attended a meeting of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission in Tehran on Sunday. Asked by a lawmaker, who represents two border counties in the northwestern province of Ardabil, Amir-Abdollahian dismissed concerns about the radioactive contamination of the Aras River. The foreign minister said a technical report and verification activities of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran have dismissed any pollution of the Aras River caused by the operation of the Metsamor nuclear power plant in Armenia. In August 2022, the Republic of Azerbaijan's Trend News reported that the Metsamor nuclear power plant dumps 12,000-16,000 cubic meters of radioactive waste into the Aras River every day. According to media reports, the Metsamor plant whose first unit came into operation in 1976 by the Soviet Union, has been expired years ago, but it is still operating and posing environmental threats to Turkey, Azerbaijan republic, Russia, Georgia, Iran and Kazakhstan.



Egg Exports Reach \$110m in 9 Months

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran has exported over 107,000 metric tons (mt) of eggs worth \$110 million since late March last year, the managing director of the Mihan Poultry Union has announced. Mohammad Moradi made the announcement in an interview with IRNA on Monday. He said that over 107,000 mt of eggs have been exported since the beginning of the current Iranian year on March 21, 2023. The products were exported to Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan as well as the Persian Gulf littoral states including Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Moradi added. He also explained that Iran has the potential capacity to produce more than 1.6 million mt of eggs each year. The country managed to produce 1.2 million mt of eggs during the last Iranian year, he noted, adding that this year's production is estimated to increase to almost 1.3 million mt. According to the official, Iran currently stands at the ninth place in terms of egg production in the world. To maintain that rank, we need to have sustainable production, he noted. According to statistics, the per capita consumption of egg in Iran is over 14 kg. That's while the average rate of consumption in the world is 11-12 kg, and stands at 18 kg in developed countries.

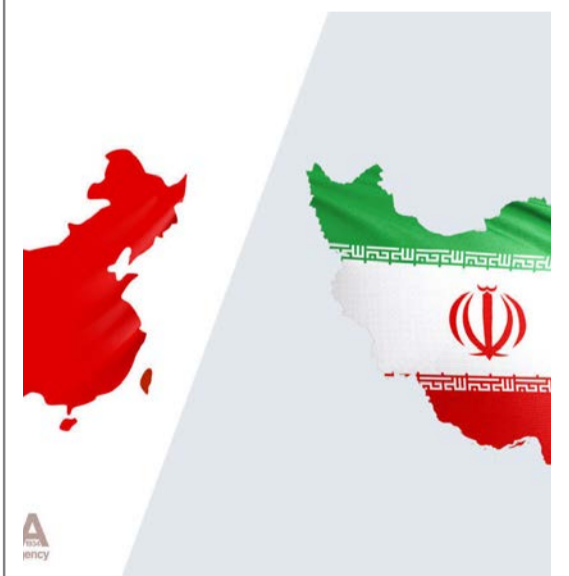
Zionist Criminals to Pay for Assassinating Top Iranian Commander

TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Ebrahim Raisi has condemned Israel's assassination of a senior Iranian military advisor of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria, stressing that the occupying regime will pay the price for the crime. President Raisi made the remarks during an unannounced visit to the family of martyr Brigadier General Seyed Razi Mousavi on Sunday, as he extended his condolences to his family. The Iranian president called the murder a "cowardly act" and went on to say that the sacrifices and dedication of the martyrs form the cornerstone of the country's security and power. "The services and sacrifices of this great commander in supporting and strengthening the Islamic resistance front will forever remain honored," he added. Raisi further attributed the heinous crime committed by the Israeli regime to its incompetence and frustration in the face of the resistance front in the region. "Certainly, this

crime will not go unanswered, and the Zionist criminals will pay for this crime," he said. Mousavi was martyred in a terrorist Israeli airstrike on December 27, while on an advisory mission in Syria. 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. Iran maintains an advisory mission in Syria at the request of Damascus with the aim of helping the war-torn Arab country get rid of the foreign-backed militants who have been fighting the democratically-elected Syrian government since 2011. Earlier in December, Israel killed two IRGC military advisors -- Mohammad Ali Ataee Shoorcheh and Panah Taqizadeh -- in an attack in Syria. The IRGC announced in a statement that the two officers were martyred against the backdrop of the relentless savagery of the "fake and child-killing" Israeli regime in Gaza.



Iran, China to Continue Coordination on Int'l, Regional Diplomacy



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador to China Mohsen Bakhtiar has said that Tehran and Beijing will continue their close and successful coordination on international and regional diplomacy. Bakhtiar made the remarks on his page on social networks on Sunday to congratulate the New Year 2024 which is coincident with the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Bakhtiar cited the resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia through China's mediation, Tehran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS bloc of emerging economies as examples of successful diplomatic cooperation between Iran and China in 2023. Iran and China signed a 25-year document on comprehensive cooperation in March 2021; which Iranian officials have referred to as an important development in the Middle East region to further deepen bilateral relations in different economic areas.

Denmark's Queen Margrethe II Announces Surprise Abdication

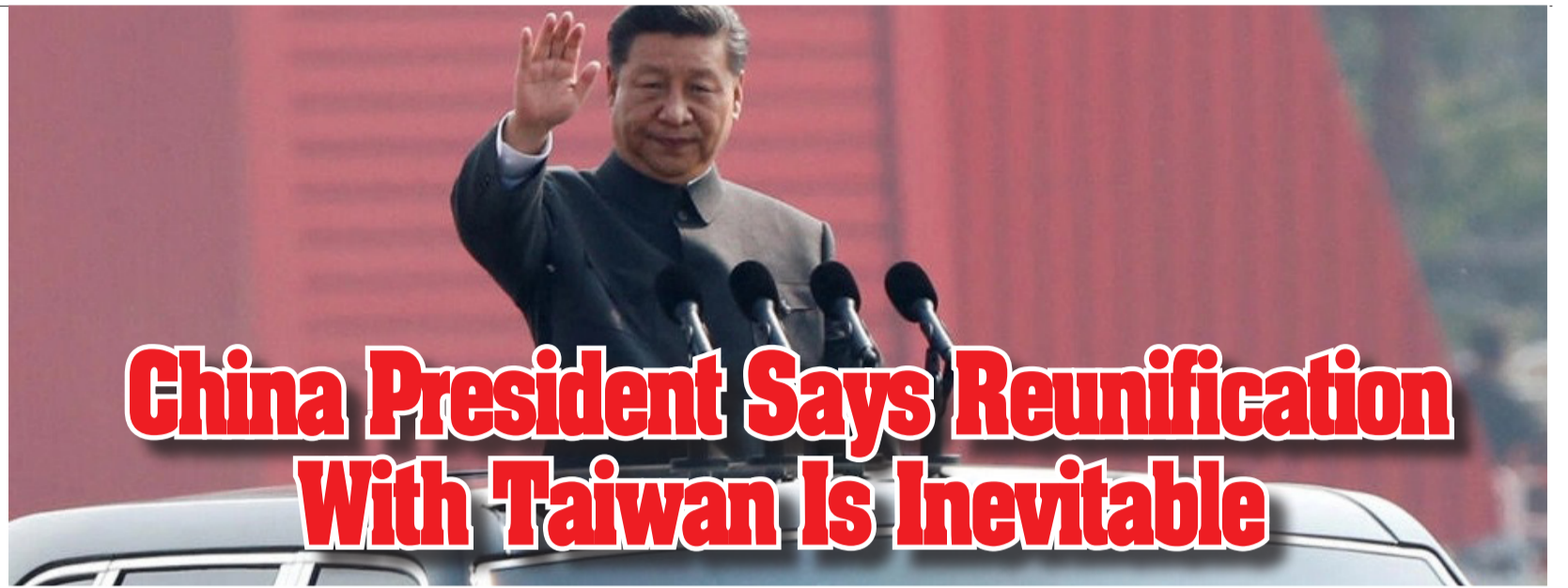
COPENHAGEN (Dispatches) - Denmark's popular Queen Margrethe II, Europe's longest-serving monarch, said Sunday that she would abdicate on January 14 and pass the baton to her son Crown Prince Frederik. Margrethe, 83, has reigned for 52 years and has been Europe's only reigning queen after the death of Britain's Elizabeth II. She has been hailed for subtly modernising Danish royalty in her half-century on the throne. She made the surprise announcement during her traditional New Year's Eve speech broadcast on Danish television, citing her age and health issues. "In two weeks time I have been Queen of Denmark for 52 years," she said. That length of time would take its time on anyone, she added. "One cannot undertake as much as one managed in the past..." On 14th January, 2024 -- 52 years after I succeeded my beloved father -- I will step down as Queen of Denmark. I will hand over the throne to my son Crown Prince Frederik."



North Korea's Kim Says Armed Conflict Becoming Reality Because of U.S.



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un told the country's military commanders the most powerful means must be mobilized to destroy the United States and South Korea if they choose military confrontation, state media reported on Monday. Kim said the danger of an armed confrontation on the Korean peninsula is fast becoming a reality because of hostile maneuvers by the enemies including the United States, requiring the country to "sharpen the treasured sword" to protect itself. "If the enemy opt for military confrontation ... our army should deal a deadly blow to thoroughly annihilate them by mobilizing all the toughest means and potentialities without moment's hesitation," KCNA news agency quoted Kim as saying. Kim made the comments as he hosted senior military leaders on Sunday at the ruling Workers' Party (WPK) headquarters to congratulate them on the accomplishments made in 2023, the state news agency said. North Korea in 2023 tested its largest ballistic missiles and launched its first military reconnaissance satellite, which Kim has called major advances in modernizing the country's military. The call to upgrade the country's military readiness follows the pledge made at the conclusion of a five-day WPK meeting that ended on Saturday to boost its nuclear arsenal, build military drones and launch three new spy satellites in 2024. The escalation of rhetoric from Kim comes as the United States increased drills with South Korea in the past year, deploying more strategic military assets, including a nuclear missile submarine, aircraft carriers and large bombers. It also comes ahead of a year that will see pivotal elections in both South Korea and the United States, which Pyongyang likely sees as an opportunity to increase its leverage by stepping up a campaign of military pressure. On Monday, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol pledged to accelerate work to complete a missile defence system and a system using U.S. extended deterrence to "fundamentally deter any North Korean nuclear and missile threat." Extended deterrence refers to the strategy of using U.S. military assets including nuclear weapons to deter and, in the event of an attack against an ally, respond. In separate reports, KCNA said Kim hosted a reception for senior members of the ruling party and attended a late night "grand art performance" celebrating the new year at the May Day stadium in Pyongyang, where senior party members, soldiers and members of the diplomatic corps were present. The show featured ice skaters, acrobats and choirs, and fireworks lit up the sky at midnight, as the venue filled "with great happiness and boundless excitement of seeing in the New Year with the benevolent father of the great socialist family."



China President Says Reunification With Taiwan Is Inevitable

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's "reunification" with Taiwan is inevitable, President Xi Jinping said in his New Year's address on Sunday, striking a stronger tone than he did last year with less than two weeks to go before the Chinese-claimed island elects a new leader. The Jan. 13 presidential and parliamentary elections are happening at a time of fraught relations between Beijing and Taipei. China has been ramping up military pressure to assert its sovereignty claims over democratically governed Taiwan. China considers Taiwan to be its "sacred territory" and has never renounced the use of force to bring it under Chinese control, though Xi made no mention of military threats in his speech carried on state television. "The reunification of the motherland is a historical inevitability," Xi said, though the official English translation of his remarks published by the Xinhua news agency used a more simple phrase: "China will surely be reunified." "Compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," he added. The official English translation wrote "all Chinese" rather than "compatriots". Last year, Xi said only that people on either side of the strait are "members of one and the same family" and that he hoped people on both sides will work together to "jointly foster lasting prosperity of the Chinese nation". China has taken particular exception to current Vice President Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Party (DPP) and leading in opinion polls by varying margins, saying he is a dangerous separatist.

Responding late on Saturday to Lai's comments at a live televised presidential debate earlier in the day, China's Taiwan Affairs Office said Lai had "exposed his true face as a stubborn 'worker for Taiwan independence' and destroyer of peace across the Taiwan Strait". "His words were full of confrontational thinking," spokesperson Chen Binhua said in a statement. Since 2016 - when President Tsai Ing-wen took office - the DPP-led government has promoted separatism and is the "criminal mastermind" in obstructing exchanges across the strait and damaging the interests of Taiwan's people, Chen said. "As the leading figure of the DPP authorities and current DPP chairman, Lai Ching-te cannot escape his responsibility for this," he added. Tsai and Lai have repeatedly offered talks with China, but have been rebuffed. The DPP says only Taiwan's people can decide their future, as does Lai's main opponent in the election, Hou Yu-ih from Taiwan's largest opposition party the Kuomintang (KMT). The KMT traditionally favours close ties with China but strongly denies being pro-Beijing. Hou has also denounced Lai as an independence supporter. The defeated Republic of China government fled to Taiwan in 1949 after losing a civil war with Mao Zedong's communists who founded the People's Republic of China. The Republic of China remains Taiwan's formal name. Lai said on Saturday that the Republic of China and People's Republic of China "are not subordinate to each other", wording he and Tsai have used previously which has also riled Beijing.



Israel Continues Crime in Gaza, Hamas Fires Rockets

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israeli jets intensified attacks on central Gaza, residents and medics said, as battles raged through the rubble of towns and refugee camps in a war Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said would take "many more months" to end. Netanyahu's comments signal no let-up in a campaign that has killed many thousands and levelled much of Gaza, while his vow to restore Israeli control over the enclave's border with Egypt raises new questions over an eventual two-state solution. The Israeli military will release some reservists who were called up to fight Hamas in Gaza, a move it said on Sunday would help the economy as the country prepares for a prolonged war. Air strikes pounded al-Maghazi and al-Bureij in the centre of Gaza, killing 10 people in one house and driving more to flee to Rafah on the border with Egypt from front lines where Israeli tanks are battling Hamas fighters. Rockets fired from Gaza raced toward central Israel overnight, triggering sirens throughout the central and southern parts of the country. Israeli media carried footage of numerous interceptions. There were no reports of any direct hits. Hamas' armed wing said the barrage was in response to "massacres against civilians" in Gaza. A Red Crescent video published on Sunday showed rescuers working in the dark to carry an injured child from smoking rubble in central Gaza. Six people died in a strike on the village of al-Mughraqa outside Gaza City, health officials said. A separate strike on a house in Khan Younis killed one person and wounded others, they added. As 2023 drew to a close, Palestinians in

Gaza prayed for a ceasefire but had little hope the new year would be better. "Tonight the sky in world countries will be lit by firecrackers, and joyful laughs will fill the air. In Gaza our skies are now filled with Israeli missiles and tank shells that land on innocent, homeless civilians," said Zainab Khalil, 57, a resident from northern Gaza now in Rafah. Israel's air and artillery bombardment has killed more than 21,800 people according to health authorities in Hamas-run Gaza, with many more feared dead in the rubble, and pushed nearly all of its 2.3 million people from their homes. Palestinian health ministry casualty figures do not differentiate between fighters and civilians but the ministry has said that 70% of Gaza's dead are women and people under 18. Israel disputes Palestinian casualty figures and says it has killed 8,000 fighters. Israel blockaded most food, fuel and medicine after the Oct. 7 attack. It said on Sunday that it was ready to let ships from some Western countries deliver aid directly to Gaza's shores after security checks in Cyprus. Gemma Connell, an official with the U.N. humanitarian agency OCHA, said that many of the tens of thousands of people fleeing to Rafah had no possessions and nowhere to sleep. "I just am so fearful that the amount of deaths that we've been seeing is going to increase exponentially both because of this renewed offensive but also because of these conditions which are literally unbelievable," she said. The United States, Israel's main ally, has urged it to scale down the war and European states have signalled alarm at the extent of Palestinian civilian suffering.



Macron Calls for Unity as France Prepares to Host Olympics

PARIS (Dispatches) - French President Emmanuel Macron called for unity in the country in his New Year's Eve address Sunday as it prepares for the 2024 Olympic Games, after a difficult year for his government. Speaking from the gardens of the Elysee Palace, with the flags of the Olympic nations behind him, he promised a civic and economic "rearmament" for the country. And evoking the memory of former European Union leader Jacques Delors, who died on Wednesday, he said voters would have a decisive choice to make in June's European elections. They would have to choose between "continuing Europe or blocking it", he said. "We will have to make the choice of a stronger, more sovereign Europe in the light of the legacy of Jacques Delors." Macron was speaking at the end of a troubled year in which his government forced through deeply unpopular pensions reforms and faced summer riots over the police killing of youths. More recently, the government passed a controversial immigration bill with the backing of the far right, creating divisions within its own ranks. And Macron himself came under fire earlier this month for comments he made supporting film icon Gerard Depardieu, who is charged with rape and facing a litany of sexual assault claims. He has also faced criticism for his handling of the crisis in the Middle East that followed Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli response. France would not forget the hostages held by Hamas, he said Sunday, or the 41 French citizens killed during their attack. But his call last week for a lasting ceasefire in Gaza during a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has so far fallen on deaf ears.

Russia Pounds Kharkiv With Missiles



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia pounded the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv with missiles and drones in the hours leading into New Year's Eve, Ukrainian officials said, hours after Moscow accused Kyiv of carrying out a deadly air assault just across the border on nearby Belgorod. Russia pounded the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv with missiles and drones in the hours leading into New Year's Eve, Ukrainian officials said, hours after Moscow accused Kyiv of carrying out a deadly air assault just across the border on nearby Belgorod. In the first waves of Russia's attacks, at least six missiles hit Kharkiv, Ukraine's National Police said on Sunday, injuring at least 22 people and hitting 12 apartment buildings, 13 residential houses and a kindergarten. Earlier, Ukrainian officials said that among those injured in Kharkiv were two boys aged 14 and 16 and a security adviser for a team of German journalists. Closer to midnight, as part of a wider bombardment of Ukraine that also targeted Kyiv, several waves of Russian drones hit residential buildings in Kharkiv's centre, spouting fires, the mayor of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, said. "On the eve of the New Year, the Russians want to intimidate our city, but we are not scared - we are unbreakable and invincible!" the mayor, Ihor Terekhov, said. The attacks came within hours after what Moscow said was an "indiscriminate" Ukrainian air attack on the city of Belgorod, near Kharkiv and just north of Ukraine's border, that killed at least 22 people. Russian newspaper Kommersant cited a source close to the Russian Investigative Committee as saying that Ukraine launched its attack on Belgorod from a multiple rocket launcher in the Kharkiv region. Terekhov posted several photos showing windows blown out of residential buildings and fire fighters putting out a fire at what seemed like a store. Both sides have increased attacks in the last week of 2023, with Russia killing at least 31 civilians in its biggest air assault of the war on Ukraine on Friday. U.S. President Joe Biden, asked if he'll speak to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy after Russia's latest attacks in Ukraine, said: "I speak to him regularly."

Former Pakistan PM Imran Khan Barred From Running in Legislative Elections

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan and most of his supporters have been rejected as candidates for the February 8 election, party officials said Sunday after nominations for the ballot closed. Khan has been in prison since August, facing trial over a slew of cases he insists have been orchestrated to prevent him from contesting the election as the figurehead of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. The former cricket star was found guilty of graft earlier this year, but a court suspended his three-year sentence and the conviction is being appealed. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) disqualified him from office over the conviction, but PTI turned in nomination papers for Khan last week regardless. "Nomination papers of almost all national and provincial leaders of PTI, including Imran Khan, have been rejected," said PTI spokesman Raouf Hasan. "90 to 95 percent of our candidates' papers have been rejected." Hasan told AFP candidates were being blocked as part of an "agenda" to prevent PTI from contesting the election. "All tactics are being tried for this purpose but, under any circumstances, we will not leave the political ground and

will not boycott the elections," he said. An election commission official told AFP various PTI candidates had been rebuffed including Khan, based on his conviction. The commission is due to announce the final list of contesting candidates on January 23. PTI's claim it is already being frozen out of the electoral process is likely to lead to a slew of appeals to the ECP and various courts. "We will stay in the elections and will file appeals against all these decisions in each of the constituencies and will use all our constitutional, legal and political options," Hasan said. Khan, 71, was ousted last year after falling out with Pakistan's powerful military leaders who backed him into power in 2018. In opposition, he waged an unprecedented campaign of defiance against the military establishment which has directly ruled the nation for much of its history. He accused them of engineering his removal from office in a no-confidence vote via a US-backed conspiracy and of plotting an assassination attempt that saw him wounded. After Khan's brief detention in May sparked unrest, PTI has been the subject of a widespread crackdown, with leading figures either jailed or forced to leave the party.





Arsenal Falter Once More at Fulham, Spurs Close on Top Four

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal's Premier League title challenge suffered another blow in a 2-1 defeat at Fulham on Sunday, as Tottenham beat Bournemouth 3-1 to close in on their north London rivals. The Gunners' high hopes of a first league title in 20 years have been rocked by two damaging defeats in four days. Mikel Arteta was looking for a response after losing 2-0 at home to West Ham on Thursday but was left angered by what he described as his side's "worst performance of the season". Arsenal remain in fourth, two points behind leaders Liverpool and level on 40 points with Manchester City, but having played a game more than both their title rivals. "If we play like today we will be nowhere near. Today was a really difficult day to swallow," said Arteta on his side's title aspirations. "It's a really sad day today because we didn't deserve to win the game." Arsenal had started brightly at Craven Cottage as Bukayo Saka pounced to tap home his first goal in six games after Bernd Leno parried Gabriel Martinelli's initial effort. But the visitors failed to build on their early advantage and Fulham hit back to snap a three-game losing run in the Premier League without even scoring a goal. Raul Jimenez was badly missed during his three-game ban for a red card at Newcastle and the Mexican kickstarted the Fulham fightback with his fourth goal in as many games. Former Arsenal winger William sent Tom Cairney free down the left and his dangerous low cross was swept home by Jimenez at the back post. Fulham were the better side in the second half and they got their reward just before the hour mark. Arsenal failed to clear a corner and the ball broke kindly for Bobby De Cordova-Reid to smash home from close range. Only a fine save from

David Raya to deny Cairney and the crossbar from Andreas Pereira's free-kick prevented Arsenal from suffering further punishment in the pouring rain in west London. But enough damage may have been done to their title chances over the past week. Arteta's men could even be outside the top four by the time they are next in league action in three weeks' time as Tottenham closed to within a point of the Champions League places. Ange Postecoglou's men shrugged off a mounting injury crisis to inflict Bournemouth's first defeat in eight games. Fifth-placed Spurs are just three points off the top with the table tantalisingly poised heading into 2024. "We're three points off the top so if that is the difference between having a great season and where we are, I'll take it," said Postecoglou. "When you're trying to build something you will undoubtedly come up against some challenges. I am seeing progress." Pape Sarr's precise finish into the bottom corner opened the scoring after just nine minutes. But the Senegalese midfielder left the field in tears midway through the first half with an injury that puts his participation in the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations in doubt. Bournemouth will feel they should have been level before the break as the in-form Dominic Solanke hit the bar amid a flurry of chances. Instead, the visitors were picked off in the second half. Son Heung-min is also set to depart for a few weeks to lead South Korea at the Asian Cup. The Spurs captain signed off in style with a thumping finish from a narrow angle before Richarlison made it 3-0. Alex Scott pulled a goal back six minutes from time, but it was too little, too late for the Cherries, who remain in 12th.

Murray Reveals 2024 Could Be His Last on Tour



BRISBANE (Dispatches) - Two-time Wimbledon champion Andy Murray said 2024 could be his final year before retirement after illness and injury hampered his preparation for the new season. Murray's year will begin at the Brisbane International as he builds up for the Australian Open later in January. The 36-year-old is ranked 42nd in the world after a frustrating end to 2023, when he won just one match in his last four tournaments. Murray has previously battled back from what seemed impending retirement after undergoing hip surgery in 2018. But he conceded that he will bring down the curtain on his career if the next 12 months follow the same pattern as 2023. "If I was in a situation like I was at the end of last year, then I probably wouldn't go again," Murray told the BBC. "But then if physically I'm doing well and my results are good and I'm playing well, then that's enjoyable and I could see myself still playing." "We'll see how the year goes, see how the body holds up. If things are going well, I'd love to keep going. But if they're not, and I'm not enjoying it, it could be the last year, yes." Murray, who won Wimbledon in 2013 and 2016 and also took the US Open title in 2012, is part of a golden generation coming towards the end of trophy-laden careers. Roger Federer retired in 2022 and Rafael Nadal had an injury-blighted 2023, although the Spaniard has suggested he might try to play on beyond 2024. At 36 Novak Djokovic is still hoping to add to his record 24 Grand Slam titles before hanging up his racket. Murray revealed the psychological struggle with falling down the rankings after so many years at the top was taking its toll. "When you have played right at the highest level, it's not that easy when you are going through periods where you are losing in first rounds, and maybe losing matches that you probably should have won," he added. "At the same time, a couple of years ago if someone had offered me that I'd been playing at top-40 level in the world when I had been struggling with my hip, I would have been happy with that. "But it is hard, mentally, so I need to do a better job of putting things in perspective this year and be a little bit easier on myself."

Ravens Crush Miami to Take AFC Top Seed

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Baltimore Ravens secured the AFC top seed for the NFL playoffs in emphatic fashion on Sunday, crushing the Miami Dolphins 56-19 with Lamar Jackson throwing five touchdowns. The San Francisco 49ers, meanwhile, will have the NFC top seed -- and the home field advantage throughout the playoffs that comes with the ranking -- after they won 27-10 at Washington. Jackson is the frontrunner to win the league's Most Valuable Player award and he hugely boosted his chances with an outstanding display against a Miami team that had hopes of topping the conference. The Ravens quarterback threw for 321 yards on 18 of 21 passing, averaging 15.3 yards per pass as he picked apart the Dolphins defense. After the Dolphins, who are also in the playoffs, had opened the scoring with Cedric Wilson collecting an eight-yard pass from Tua Tagovailoa, Jackson found Justice Hill with a 20-yard touchdown pass wide right. The Ravens took a 14-10 lead through a Gus Edwards one-yard rushing touchdown and went in with a 28-13 advantage after Jackson threw two touchdowns late in the second quarter. Jackson delivered a 75-yard touchdown pass to Zay Flowers and then, after Tagovailoa was picked off by Roquan Smith, Jackson connected with Isaiah Likely for a 35-yard score. Jackson found Likely again for a seven-yard score in the third and although De'Von Achane's touchdown early in the fourth gave the Miami hope, the Ravens pulled away from there. Patrick Ricard caught a four-yard pass from Jackson before Melvin Gordon ran in from three yards and reserve Tyler Huntley found Charlie Kolar with a 19-yard touchdown pass. Miami can take the AFC East division title by beating Buffalo next week. The Ravens had picked off 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy four times in winning last week but he bounced back as San Francisco took a top seed at Washington. Purdy threw for 230 yards and two touchdowns on 22-of-28 passing with no interceptions. He has set a club record for single season passing yards, overtaking Jeff Garcia's mark of 4,279. The Niners extended a 13-10 halftime lead on Elijah Mitchell's two-yard touchdown run and Purdy found Brandon Aiyuk with a 17-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter. The 49ers were assured of the NFC top seed when the Philadelphia Eagles fell in a surprise 35-31 loss at home to Arizona (4-12). James Conner's two-yard touchdown run with 32 seconds remaining claimed the upset for Arizona and the result opens the door to Dallas pipping Philadelphia to the NFC East title. The Cowboys can win the division with a victory at Washington next week. Defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City moved into the playoffs, winning the AFC West for the eighth successive season thanks to a gritty 25-17 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals. The only points in the second half of the game came from the boot of Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker, who scored six field goals in the game, four of them after the break. The Bengals were eliminated from playoff contention and that ensured the Denver Broncos missed the playoffs for an eighth straight year despite a 16-9 win over the Los Angeles Chargers. The Pittsburgh Steelers kept their playoff hopes alive with a 30-23 win over the Seattle Seahawks with

running-back Najee Harris scoring two touchdowns and putting up a season-best 122 yards. The result leaves the Seahawks needing to beat Arizona on the final day and hope other games fall their way next week. Seattle's loss clinched a playoff berth for the Los Angeles Rams (9-7) after their 26-25 win at the New York Giants. The fight for the NFC South title will go down to the wire after the New Orleans Saints beat Tampa Bay 23-13. Atlanta's hopes were dented with a 37-17 loss to the Chicago Bears while the Buffalo Bills enter their AFC East decider with Miami off a 27-21 win over New England. Chicago clinched the top pick in the 2024 NFL when Carolina lost 26-0 at Jacksonville.



Ugandan Athlete Benjamin Kiplagat "Stabbed to Death" in Kenya



NAIROBI (Dispatches) - Ugandan athlete Benjamin Kiplagat has been found dead in Kenya, police said Sunday, with local media reporting he had been stabbed to death. The Kenyan-born Kiplagat, 34, had represented Uganda internationally in the 3,000m steeplechase, including at several Olympic Games and World Championships. His body was found in a car on Saturday night on the outskirts of the Rift Valley town of Eldoret, which is home to many athletes who train in the high-altitude area. "An investigation has been launched and officers are on the ground pursuing leads," local police commander Stephen Okal told reporters in Eldoret. He said Kiplagat's body had a deep knife wound to his neck, suggesting he was stabbed. Uganda's Daily Monitor and other media outlets in Kenya said he had been stabbed to death. "World Athletics is shocked and saddened to hear of the passing of Benjamin Kiplagat," the global athletics governing body said in a statement on X, formerly Twitter. "We send our deepest condolences to his friends, family, teammates and fellow athletes. Our thoughts are with them all at this difficult time." Peter Ogwang, state minister for sports in Uganda, expressed similar sentiments on X. "I send my deepest condolences to his family, Ugandans, and the entire East Africa for the loss of such a budding athlete who has on several occasions represented us on the international scene," he said. Media reports said Kiplagat had been training in the Eldoret area before going to Uganda to take part in athletics competitions. Kiplagat, whose running career spanned about 18 years, won the silver medal in the 3,000m steeplechase at the 2008 World Junior Championships and bronze at the Africa Championships in 2012. He made the semi-finals of the event in the 2012 Olympics in London and also competed in Rio in 2016.

Djokovic Sparks Serb Celebration in the Midnight Hour

PERTH (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic got the party started for 2024 as he sealed a 2-1 win for Serbia over China near the stroke of midnight on Sunday at the United Cup in Perth. The world number one kicked off the new season by teaming up in mixed doubles with compatriot and longtime friend Olga Danilovic to hold off Zheng Qinwen and ATP number 58 Zhang Zhizhen for a 6-4, 1-6, 10-6 victory. Glancing at his watch after his on-court interview, Djokovic then implored the house DJ to fill in for five minutes before leading the RAC stadium crowd in a rousing countdown to the midnight hour. "Thanks to the fans for staying this late," the winner of 24 Grand Slams said. "We're glad you decided to spend this special night with us." The Serbs were playing their first match at the competition while China now stand 1-1. Djokovic won his earlier singles over Zhang 6-3, 6-2 while Danilovic went down 6-4, 6-2 to her Chinese opponent Zheng, the WTA's 2023 Most Improved Player who has risen to be world number 15. The 22-year-old Danilovic could not praise her celebrated teammate enough. "This was number one on my bucket list -- to play with Novak and to win, I'm so happy. "This was an incredible match, I gave my all and I'm glad to finish 2023 like this, it could not be better." "I've looked up to Novak from the first moment I touched a racket." Jessica Pegula and Taylor Fritz had to fight through a deciding doubles match to conclude a 2-1 defeat of Britain on Sunday for the United States to stay in title contention at the United Cup. The defending champions, who won the trophy last January over Italy, earned a 1-6, 7-6 (7/5), 10-7 mixed doubles win to claim victory in Perth after the sides split the singles. "We have a team energy from last year here, we don't want to take a loss and let it die," said Fritz, who was broken twice in the opening set. World number five Pegula added: "To get a win in this fashion after such a long day (on court) brings back a lot of memories. "It was a big win today, especially after losing such a tough singles match." Britain, who beat Australia to open their tournament account, took a 1-0 lead when Pegula crashed 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to Katie Boulter in the singles. It was Boulter's first win over a top-five player on her seventh attempt after she bounced back from a set and double-break down. Pegula's 10th-ranked teammate Fritz kept the tie alive despite a thigh strain he blamed on over-training, defeating Cameron Norrie 7-6 (5), 6-4. In Sydney, Leylah Fernandez led Canada to a fighting victory over Chile with the former US Open finalist winning her singles rubber and then backing up in a decisive mixed doubles. The 35th-ranked Fernandez got Canada off to a perfect start, cruising past Chile's Daniela Seguel 6-2, 6-3 in 73 minutes. With Canadian number one Felix Auger-

Aliassime sitting out the men's singles, 314th-ranked Steven Diez stepped up but was toppled by world number 19 Nicolas Jarry 7-5, 6-4. It set up a deciding mixed doubles, with Fernandez teaming with Diez to battle past Seguel and Tomas Barrios Vera 7-5,

4-6, 10-8. The 21-year-old broke five times in her singles clash against a player in her first WTA Tour-level singles match in nearly two years, using the serve-and-volley tactic well.

