

Vice-President Mohammad Mokhber Has Said That the Islamic Republic of Iran Is in an Unprecedented Situation in International Relations, Adding That All the Agreements and Understandings Including Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and Eurasia Have Brought About Good Results

# IRAN NEWS

The Lebanese Resistance Movement Hezbollah Says the Zionist Regime's Assassination of the Deputy Head of the Political Bureau of the Palestinian Hamas Resistance Movement Saleh al-Arouri Will Not Go Unanswered

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## 2 DOMESTIC



### Implementing FTA to Rev Up Iran's Production Growth, Spur Economy

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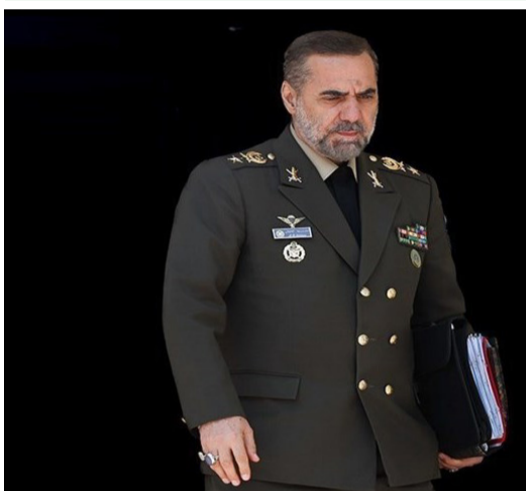
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### Russia Pounds Ukraine's Two Biggest Cities

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### Assassination of Hamas Official to Haunt U.S. in Region



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Iranian defense minister warned the US to brace itself for the consequences of the Israeli assassination of Deputy Chief of the Political Bureau of Hamas Saleh al-Arouri. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet session on Wednesday, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said the assassination of the senior Hamas official will bedevil the U.S. "The U.S. has upset regional balance, and the consequences of this (Israeli) assassination (of Arouri) will beset them," he warned. Such moves against the resistance forces will only strengthen regional solidarity against the American policies, the Iranian minister noted, warning Washington that its strategic mistakes will agitate the region and cause the U.S. plans to backfire. Senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri was killed in an Israeli drone strike on Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiyeh on Tuesday. He was a senior official in Hamas's politburo and was known to be deeply involved in its military affairs. He had previously headed the group's presence in the occupied West Bank. Samir Findi Abu Amer and Azzam Al-Aqraa Abu Ammar, leaders of Hamas' armed wing - the Qassam Brigades - were also killed, Hamas said in a message. It named four other members of the group who were also killed.

### Iran Has Asked Iraq to Extradite 38 Separatist Terrorists



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's top human rights official says the Islamic Republic has called upon Iraqi authorities to extradite 38 main members of separatist and terrorist groups holed up in the Arab country's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region. Kazem Gharibabadi, secretary of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, made the remarks on the sidelines of the fourth trial session of the members of the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) terrorist group, which was held in absentia in the capital Tehran on Tuesday. Iran has urged the central government in Iraq and authorities in Kurdistan to meet their commitments toward Iran and take necessary measures to secure the border. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has launched several rounds of airstrikes against the positions of the terrorists who are holed up in Iraqi Kurdistan. On November 21, 2022, positions of anti-Iran separatist and terrorist groups in northern Iraq came under combined attacks using missiles and kamikaze drones. The strikes targeted the positions of the notorious Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and the Komala Party in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran's Arabic-language Al-Alam television news network reported at the time.



TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has said the border of the Muslim world is in Gaza today, and that the Palestinians there are standing against arrogance and against the United States. Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks in a meeting with a group of religious eulogists and elegists on Wednesday, as Iran is gearing up for parliamentary elections slated for March 1, 2024. "Today, the burden of jihad of clarification is on the shoulders of you Ahl al-Bayt elegists and eulogists," Ayatollah Khamenei said during a meeting with a large number of elegists and eulogists at the Imam Khomeini Hussainiyah. "Among the prominent and distinguished characteristics of Fatemeh al-Zahra (AS) is her jihad of clarification," the Leader said. He described the late Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution, as the greatest performer of jihad of clarification in the contemporary era, saying that Imam Khomeini managed to overthrow the corrupt Pahlavi dynasty and establish a religious democratic government through jihad of clarification. He then noted "The border of the Muslim world today is in Gaza, the pulse of the Islamic world beats in Gaza today, and the Palestinians there are standing against the world of disbelief, tyranny, arrogance and against the Unlisted states." The Israeli regime been waging a devastating war on the Gaza Strip since October, killing at least 22,185 people, most of them children and women. More than 57,000 others have also been wounded. Regarding domestic issues, the Leader said, "Anyone who opposes the elections is opposing the Islamic Republic and Islam." "[Participation in] the elections is a duty. It is the duty for those following the path of jihad of clarification to create a sense of duty [among people] towards elections," he said, invoking a term used to describe a campaign aimed at educating people on the conspiracies of the enemy. Ayatollah Khamenei also denounced "hostile" attempts to undermine the nation's role in the country's management, which proves the realization of religious democracy in Iran. He further censured attempts aimed at demoralizing the people and making them distrustful by claiming that the elections in Iran are meaningless. Additionally in his remarks, the Leader said that soft power is more effective than hard power as the latter has immediate effect but it wanes. Over the past more than 40 years, he noted, the Islamic Republic has relied on soft power more than the hard one. "Of course, you know that I believe and follow up on ... advanced weapons that match the needs and capabilities of the enemies. In my opinion, however, intellectual, linguistic and strong logical weapons should pervade among us along with hard power and weaponry might." Ayatollah Khamenei also said world powers such as the US have atomic bombs and all kinds of advanced arms, but they make investments in arts, cinema, and advertising as soft power. "Hard power means that the US comes and stays in Afghanistan for 20 years and spends billions. In the end, it is forced to flee from Afghanistan due to the people's hatred [towards it]," he added. "Hard power means that the US comes and takes over the entire Iraq with equipment. It also overthrew the Iraqi government and sits in its place. After about 20 years, the most hated government in Iraq is the American government." The Leader said Palestinians have no weapons to defend themselves, but they have today attracted public attention through their innocence, patience, and resilience.

### Iranians Pay Tribute to Martyr Gen. Soleimani

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Thousands of Iranian people have flocked to the southeastern province of Kerman to pay homage to top anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated along with a number of his companions in a 2020 US drone strike in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. General Soleimani's hometown and burial site hosted a deluge of the legendary commander's lovers and followers from all walks of life and various social strata on Wednesday on his fourth martyrdom anniversary. Kerman's authorities said 1,300 distinguished experts and lecturers are to narrate the sacrifices of General Soleimani on the sidelines of his martyrdom anniversary, announcing the convention of 13 discussion forums as well as printing 1,000 volumes of books revolving around his character and school of thought. The provincial officials also predicted a 30-percent increase in the number of pilgrims and visitors to General Soleimani's burial site compared to last year. General Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and their companions were assassinated in a US drone strike authorized by then-US President Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020. Both commanders were highly revered across the Middle East because of their key role in fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.



### Iran to Pursue General Soleimani's Assassination Case to Bring Perpetrators, Abettors to Justice



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The head of the Iranian mission to the United Nations says the country reserves the right to pursue the case of the 2020 assassination by the US government of General Qassem Soleimani, the then commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps. Amir Sa'ed Iravani said in a letter addressed to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday that Iran will pursue legal means to hold accountable the countries, organizations and individuals that played a role in General Soleimani's assassination in a US drone strike outside the main airport in the Iraqi capital Baghdad in January 2020. "The Islamic Republic of Iran reserves its legitimate right under international law to pursue legal proceedings aimed at holding accountable and bringing to justice the perpetrators, organizers, and sponsors of this reprehensible act of terrorism," Iravani said in the letter. The diplomat also reiterated that the United States had breached its international obligations by carrying out the "cowardly assassination" of General Soleimani, saying the act constituted a flagrant violation of the international law. He said that the Israeli regime had played a role in the assassination based on statements issued by former Israeli intelligence officials, adding the US had also used the Ramstein Airbase in Germany for carrying out the assassination. "Aside from the United States, all those who by any means had aided, abetted, or otherwise assisted and supported [the assassination], whether directly or indirectly, bear responsibility for their involvement in the perpetration of this terrorist crime," read Iravani's letter which was published by the official news agency IRNA. Iran also sent a letter to the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on Tuesday, saying the country will continue its efforts to bring to justice the perpetrators and abettors of General Soleimani's assassination.

### Israel Accountable for All Wrongful Acts Against Iran



TEHRAN - Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations says Israel must be held accountable for complicity in assassination and sabotage acts in the Islamic Republic amid confessions by the occupying regime's officials to the "internationally wrongful acts." Amir Sa'ed Iravani made the remarks in letters sent on Tuesday to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and France's UN Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere, whose country holds the Security Council's rotating presidency for January. He said the Israeli authorities have "openly admitted" to their complicity in assassinations and acts of sabotage targeting Iranian officials, scientists, and civilians, adding that the occupying regime is also implicated in destructive operations against Iran's peaceful nuclear infrastructure. "The Israeli regime bears full responsibility for all internationally wrongful acts committed against Iran and should be held accountable," he stated. Iravani also reiterated Tehran's legitimate and inherent rights, as stipulated by international law and the UN Charter, to respond decisively to any threats and unlawful actions originating from the usurping entity. He further highlighted Iran's unyielding determination to exercise its rights in order to safeguard the country's security, national interests, and people against any threats or attacks. In a statement on December 30, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that the regime is "acting against Iran all the time, everywhere," saying, the objective is to do "absolutely everything to prevent Iran" from what he called attaining nuclear weapons.

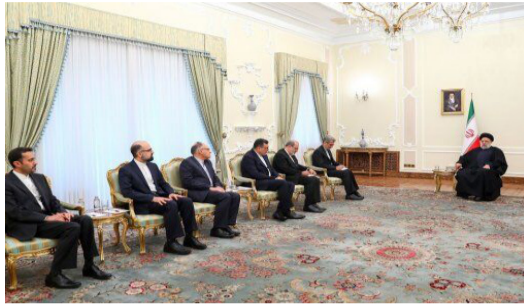
# IRAN NEWS



## Assaluyeh Dock No. 17, First Homegrown Cryogenic Loading Arm Operational

TEHRAN (Shana) - Dock No. 17 of Assaluyeh Port in Iran's southern province of Bushehr and the first domestically-built cryogenic loading arm were put into operation in the presence of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) managing director. Speaking during a ceremony, NPC CEO Morteza Shahmirzaei said, "I proudly announce that the first cryogenic loading arm, which was before manufactured by a few Western countries, has been made, installed, and put into operation by Iranian engineers and experts." Iran's petrochemical industry is about to stand at the summit and become self-sufficient in acquiring technical know-how and making necessary equipment and products, added the deputy oil minister, continuing it is a matter of pride that the first ammonia cargo was loaded at Dock No. 17.

## President Calls on Envoys to Use All Potentials to Deepen Int'l, Regional Ties



TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Ebrahim Raisi has called on new Iranian ambassadors in foreign countries to use the utmost potential of the country to develop interactions with foreign countries. During a meeting with new 6 ambassadors of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Tuesday, President Raisi described Iran's authoritative position in the region as a suitable platform for expanding relations and cooperation with other regional and international countries and organizations. Referring to the existing appropriate capacities to develop cooperation with many foreign countries, Raisi urged the Iranian envoys to explain the stances of the Islamic Republic of Iran and use all potential to strengthen ties. In this meeting, the ambassadors of the Islamic Republic of Iran in South Africa, Oman, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah, Thailand, Belgium, and Brunei also discussed the country's capacities or the international organization where they are missioned. They also explained their plans and the goals of their mission.



## Tehran, New Delhi Discuss Import, Export of Protein Products

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Officials from Iran and India discussed bilateral ties and also import and export of protein products. Head of Iran's Veterinary Medicine Organization Mojtaba Norouzi and Head of Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) of India Abhishek exchanged views in New Delhi regarding the import and export of animal and aquaculture products. The two sides emphasized broadening mutual ties in the field of importing and exporting protein products. The Iranian deputy minister of agriculture paid a visit to the LULU slaughterhouse and granted the "A" Grade of the Veterinary Medicine Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the management of the slaughterhouse. In a separate meeting with the ambassador of Iran to New Delhi, Norouzi discussed a host of issues related to the import and export of agricultural inputs between the two countries.

## Iranian Hajj Flights Waiting for Saudi Arabia's Clearance

TEHRAN (IRNA) - An official at national Iranian airlines IranAir has announced that all flights to carry Umrah pilgrims from Iran to Saudi Arabia are called off due to not receiving permission from the host country. "We're still waiting for receiving it," Hessam Qorbanali, the director general of public relations office of IranAir (HOMA), said on Wednesday. Although coordination in the issue had already been ensured between the two countries, it has not been implemented yet because of legal and technical complications with the related procedure, the official added. He went on to say that such a permission is needed for arrival of all Iranian airlines including IranAir and Meraj in Saudi Arabia. In the last day of December, 2023, Iran announced it will begin to send Umrah pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the first time after nine years, months after a rapprochement deal with Riyadh in March the same year. According to the Iranian officials, near 62,000 pilgrims are to be sent to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah this year. Umrah or lesser pilgrimage is a visit to shrines in Saudi Arabia. The pilgrimage is not compulsory like Hajj.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



TEHRAN - The chairman of the Iran Chamber of Cooperatives said the implementation of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) recently signed between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) will boost production growth and economic prosperity in the country. Iranian companies should take maximum advantage of the potential of the agreement for importing raw materials and the goods required in the country, Bahman Abdollahi stated. Once the capacity of the FTA is used optimally by Iranian firms, it will boost production and also help economic indicators in the country grow, he emphasized. He pointed to the positive and important impacts of the agreement and said the country should first define a proper, purposeful and long-term trade planning and use the high capacities of the agreement in line with boosting its economic activities. He placed special emphasis on the significance of promoting trade infrastructures and noted that focusing on the required infrastructures is vital for the economic growth in the country. Abdollahi called on private and cooperative companies to take effective measures in this

regard and pointed out that the restrictions pertinent to the banking and monetary system are among the most serious trade barriers facing Iran and other countries. Elsewhere in his remarks, the official referred to the trade exchanges between Iran and member states of the union and said Iran and the EAEU countries exchanged more than \$2 billion worth of products in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21 to November 22, 2023), showing a 14 percent hike compared to the same period last year. Iran exported more than \$1 billion worth of products to the Eurasian market from March 21 to November 22, 2023, registering a 20 percent hike compared to the previous year's corresponding period, he added. The free trade agreement between the EAEU and Iran was signed during the EAEU summit in St. Petersburg on December 25. In 2018, Iran and the EAEU inked a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), which came into effect on October 27, 2019. The two sides later began negotiations to upgrade the PTA to an FTA after the success of the former.

## Cowardly Assassination of Arouri Attests to Israel's Frustration

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Ali Akbar Velayati, an adviser to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei on international affairs, condemned the Israeli assassination of Deputy Chief of the Political Bureau of Hamas Saleh al-Arouri in Lebanon as a testimony to the Zionist regime's weakness. In a message on Tuesday, Velayati, who is also the secretary general of the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening, condemned the assassination of the senior Hamas figure. Arouri was assassinated on Tuesday evening in a targeted Israeli drone strike on the Southern Suburb of Beirut. Velayati said the "unfair and blind-hearted" Israeli assassination of the courageous Hamas commander, who had devoted his life to protecting the sacred causes of Palestine, liberating holy al-Quds and struggling against the arrogance and the Zionist regime, has caused grief. He said the late Hamas commander and his comrades had opened a front in an area of thousands of kilometers against the world of arrogance, noting that Arouri's name

always rattles the enemies of Palestine and Muslims. "Such brutal measures and crimes reveal the flimsy Zionist regime's weakness and frustration. As they (Israelis) have been facing epic resistance shown by the Palestinian combat groups and courageous people at all fronts, specifically since the start of the Al-Aqsa Storm operation, and all of their plots have ended in failure in the battlefield, have now resorted to such cowardly assassinations," Velayati said. He underlined that the Palestinian combatants and commanders of the resistance current will not only come to a halt with such Israeli attacks, but also will grow stronger constantly. "The US and its allies, as the main perpetrators of these crimes in the region, must bear in mind that history won't forget the ruthless massacre of the defenseless people, including the Palestinian children, elderly and young people, and brave combatants, and that Palestine's resistance groups and valor and freedom-seeking people will give an appropriate response to those criminals," he stated.



## Israel's Terror Machine Real Threat to Regional Security, Peace



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has denounced as a "cowardly terrorist operation" the Israeli assassination of the deputy head of the political bureau of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas, stressing that the regime's terror machine is a "real threat" to regional peace and security. Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in a social media post, a day after Saleh al-Arouri and his companions were killed in an Israeli drone attack in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. "The evil terror machine of this regime in other countries is a real threat to peace and security and a serious alarm for the security of the countries in the region," he said in the post. The Iranian diplomat further noted that Israel's terrorist operations prove that the occupying regime has failed to reach its objectives in the war in Gaza despite US support. The deputy head of Hamas political bureau has been assassinated in an Israeli drone attack in the southern suburb of Beirut. He also offered his condolences to the head of Hamas politburo Ismail Haniyeh and the heroic nation of Palestine on the martyrdom of Arouri.

## Export of Aquatics Surges 14% in 8-Month Period



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iran exported 132,000 tons of aquatic animals in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (from March 21 to November 22, 2023), registering a 14 percent hike compared to the same period last year. The country exported 116,000 tons of aquatic products overseas from March 21 to November 22, 2022. The report put the value of aquatic animals exported from the country in this period at \$235 million, showing a six percent hike compared to last year's corresponding period. In return, Iran imported \$40 million worth of aquatic animals in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year, YJC reported. According to the statistics, 70 percent of Iran's fisheries products were exported to Iraq (39,000 tons), China (22,000 tons), the United Arab Emirates (21,000 tons) and Russia (10,000 tons) respectively.

### France closes embassy in Niger until further notice

Paris on Tuesday said its embassy in Niamey, Niger's capital, was now closed, confirming previously reported plans, after relations between the two countries deteriorated following a military coup in the African country in July 2023. "For five months, our embassy has been severely hampered" by obstacles that have obstructed its diplomatic mission, a spokeswoman for the French foreign ministry said in a statement. "A blockade around the embassy, travel restrictions for staff and the refusal to allow any diplomatic personnel to travel to Niger was a clear violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations," the statement continued. The embassy's closure – an extremely rare measure – was decided at the same time as the withdrawal of the last French soldiers deployed in Niger on December 22. Paris and Niamey have had an acrimonious relationship since the military coup in July, which toppled President Mohamed Bazoum and has been seen as another major blow to French influence in the region after military takeovers in Mali in 2020 and Burkina Faso in 2022.



### Taiwan Spots Chinese Balloons Over Island Near Major Air Base



TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Three Chinese balloons flew across Taiwan island and near an air base, the Taiwanese defence ministry said, the first time it has reported them crossing the island since reporting a spate of such balloons in the Taiwan Strait starting last month. The potential for China to use balloons for spying became a global issue in February 2023 when the United States shot down what it said was a Chinese surveillance balloon. China said the balloon was a civilian craft that accidentally drifted astray. Taiwan is on high alert for Chinese activities, both military and political, ahead of Jan. 13 presidential and parliamentary elections. China claims the island as its own territory. Taiwan's defence ministry has since last month reported several instances of Chinese balloons flying over the sensitive Taiwan Strait, then crossing airspace to the island's north before vanishing. On Wednesday, giving its daily update for Chinese military activities over the past 24 hours, the ministry said it had detected four balloons flying over the strait, three of which flew across the centre of the island. It said the three flew 105 nautical miles (194 km), 160 nautical miles and 159 nautical miles respectively to the southwest of Ching Chuan Kang, the location of an important Taiwan air force base. The balloons then disappeared at various points, added the ministry, which has previously said it believed they were mostly for weather monitoring. Asked whether the latest balloons were for weather or other purposes, the ministry declined to comment specifically. It "closely monitors and appropriately responds" to balloons and gathers information about their path for "judgement and analysis," the ministry said. Over the past four years China has stepped up military activity around Taiwan and Chinese fighter jets and warships now regularly operate in the strait.

### Euro Zone Economy Likely Entered Recession Last Year



LONDON (Dispatches) - Euro zone factories ended 2023 on the back foot, with activity contracting in December for an 18th straight month, according to a survey which gave scant signs of any imminent strong bounceback in an economy likely in recession. HCOB's final euro zone manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), compiled by S&P Global, did nudge up to 44.4 in December from November's 44.2 but remained firmly below the 50 mark separating growth in activity from contraction. A preliminary estimate was for no change from November. An index measuring output, which feeds into a composite PMI due on Thursday and seen as a good gauge of economic health, dipped to 44.4 from November's final reading of 44.6 but was ahead of the 44.1 flash estimate. The pessimistic trend strongly pointed to a contraction in euro zone GDP last quarter, Hamburg Commercial Bank's chief economist Cyrus de la Rubia said. The bloc's economy contracted 0.1% in the third quarter, official data has shown, so a second quarter of contraction would meet the definition of recession. "Amid a relentless slump in the manufacturing sector of the euro zone, the HCOB PMI has shown little improvement compared to November. It paints a bleak picture for the euro zone and would mean that the euro zone entered a recession in the third quarter," de la Rubia said. The 20-country euro zone will endure a short and shallow winter recession, an early December Reuters poll found. An ongoing decline in new orders did ease moderately last month but remained below 50, as it was for all of 2023. The sub-index rose to 42.0 from 41.5. "The sluggishness of new orders echoes the gloom, retreating almost as swiftly as the previous month," added de la Rubia.



## Russia Pounds Ukraine's Two Biggest Cities

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia pounded Ukraine's two biggest cities in a new wave of heavy air strikes that killed at least five civilians and prompted calls for the West to quickly provide more military assistance. Ukraine's Interior Ministry said 135 people had been injured in the latest missile and drone attacks, including 61 in and around Kharkiv, Ukraine's second city in the northeast and 17 in and around the capital, Kyiv. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said rescue operations continued into the late evening as the assaults also caused widespread damage and hit power supplies. Russia has intensified attacks over the New Year period, with President Vladimir Putin warning on Monday that a Ukrainian air strike on the Russian city of Belgorod, which Moscow said killed 25 civilians, would "not go unpunished". Smoke belched out of the charred side of a high-rise residential building in Kyiv where mayor Vitali Klitschko said an elderly woman had been killed and 49 people hurt. Emergency services later recovered another corpse from the building. A 91-year-old woman was killed in a missile strike on Kharkiv that also wounded dozens and a married couple was killed in an attack in the area around Kyiv, local officials said. "Russia will answer for every life (that it has) taken away," Zelenskyy said on the Telegram messenger. Russia later said one man had been killed and 11 people injured in a series of attacks on Belgorod. Zelenskyy, in his nightly video address, later said Russia had deployed almost 300 missiles and more than 200 drones in attacks over the last three days. The latest assaults, he said, were intended to cause maximum destruction. "...The trajectories have been specially calculated by the enemy to cause as much damage as possible," he said. "No other country has yet repelled similar attacks by combined drones and missiles, including ballistic missiles." "Russia stepped up missile and

drone strikes on Dec. 29, when it launched its largest air attack of the war, killing at least 39 people. Kyiv had warned for weeks that Russia appeared to be stockpiling missiles for big attacks. Russia holds swathes of territory in eastern and southern Ukraine, and there is no end in sight to the war as next month's second anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion approaches. Russia depicts a Ukrainian counteroffensive launched in mid-2023 as a failure. Front lines have changed little in recent months. Ukraine relies on military and financial support from allies, but political wrangling in the U.S. and the European Union has delayed over \$110 billion in aid. Zelenskyy wrote on Telegram that he had discussed upgrading Ukraine's air defence systems with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Several Western leaders and foreign diplomats in Kyiv said it was critical for Ukraine to receive more support. "Ukrainian air defence works well but Ukraine must get more help. New Year's celebrations are over and the West must get serious and act now," Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics wrote on social media platform X. Ukraine downed all 10 incoming "Kinzhal" missiles fired in the latest attack as well as 59 of the 70 cruise missiles and all three Kalibr cruise missiles, army chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi said. But he added: "There is no reason to believe that the enemy will stop here. Therefore, we need more systems and munitions for them." Klitschko said gas pipelines had been damaged in Kyiv's Pecherskyi district, and electricity and water had been cut off in several districts. Heating and water supplies were damaged in Kharkiv, mayor Ihor Terekhov said. The outages revived memories of last winter when air strikes on the energy grid caused frequent power cuts.



### Killing of Hamas Deputy Leader Raises Risk of Gaza War Spreading

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Israel killed Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri in a drone strike in Lebanon's capital Beirut on Tuesday, Lebanese and Palestinian security sources said, raising the potential risk of the war in Gaza spreading well beyond the Palestinian enclave. Arouri, 57, was the first senior Hamas offensive leader to be assassinated since Israel launched a shattering air and ground offensive against the group almost three months ago after its shock assault and rampage into Israeli towns. Lebanon's heavily armed Hezbollah group, a Hamas ally, has been exchanging near-daily fire with Israel across Lebanon's southern border since the war in Gaza began in October. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has warned Israel against carrying out any assassinations on Lebanese soil, vowing a "severe reaction." Hezbollah said on Tuesday it had targeted a group of Israeli soldiers in the vicinity of Marj with missiles, following Arouri's killing. Israel has long accused Arouri of lethal attacks on its citizens, but a Hamas official said he was also "at the heart of negotiations" conducted by Qatar and Egypt over the outcome of the Gaza war and the release of Hamas-held Israeli hostages. Israel neither confirmed nor denied carrying out the killing, but its military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said Israeli forces were in a high state of readiness and prepared for any scenario. "The most important thing to say tonight is that we are focused and remain focused on fighting Hamas," he said when asked by a reporter about the reports of Arouri's killing. Israel had accused Arouri, a co-founder of the Hamas' military wing, the Izz-el-Deen al-Qassam Brigades, of ordering and supervising Hamas attacks in the Israeli-occupied West Bank

for years. "I am waiting for martyrdom (death) and I think I have lived too long," Arouri said in August 2023, alluding to Israeli threats to eliminate Hamas leaders whether in Gaza or abroad. Hundreds of Palestinians took to the streets of Ramallah and other towns in the West Bank to condemn Arouri's killing, chanting, "Revenge, revenge, Qassam!" Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have vowed to continue their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea until Israel halts the conflict in Gaza, and warned that it would attack U.S. warships if the militia group itself was targeted. Houthi militants fired two anti-ship ballistic missiles into the southern Red Sea, though no damage was reported, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) said late on Tuesday. Britain's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations Authority reported up to three explosions near a merchant vessel in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, east of Eritrea's Assab, with no reports of damage. The U.S. has announced an international maritime task force to protect shipping through the Red Sea, which leads to the Suez Canal, a shipping route which carries roughly one third of global container cargo. The Gaza war was triggered by a shock cross-border Hamas assault on Israeli towns on Oct. 7 in which Israel says 1,200 people were killed and some 240 hostages spirited back to Gaza. The Gaza health ministry said 207 people had been killed in the past 24 hours, bringing the total recorded Palestinian death toll to 22,185 in nearly three months of war in Gaza. Israel says it tries to avoid harm to civilians and blames Hamas for embedding fighters among them, an accusation Hamas denies.



### Record Half-Million Migrants Crossed Latin America's Dangerous Darien Gap in 2023

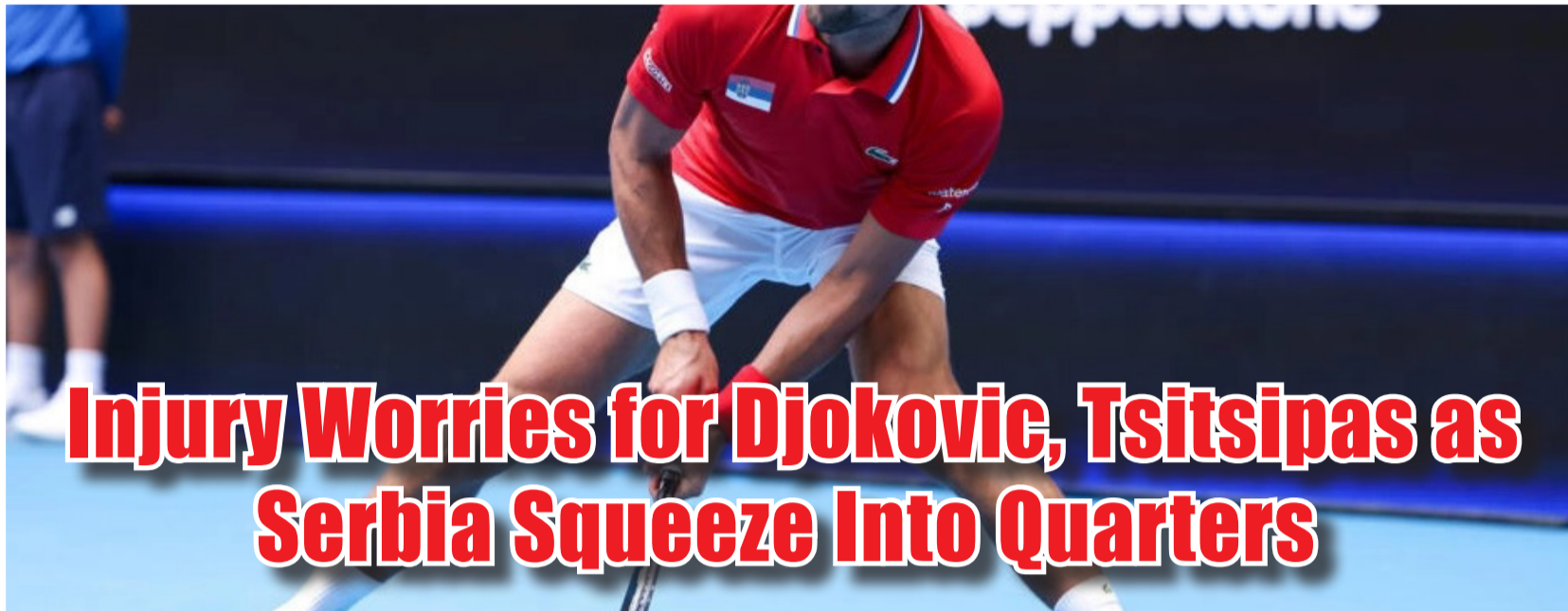
PANAMA CITY (Dispatches) - A record 520,000 migrants crossed the treacherous jungle between Colombia and Panama known as the Darien Gap in 2023, more than double the number reported the year before, according to government figures seen by Reuters on Tuesday. The migrants who made the journey that marks the start of the dangerous trek north from South America to the United States last year were mostly from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti and China, according to the numbers from Panama's migration agency. Around a quarter of the migrants were minors, said Samira Gozaine, who heads the agency. "This is a national security problem," she told reporters at a government event. "Unfortunately, we do not have a quick solution to solve it." Since Panamanian President Laurentino Cortizo took office in 2019, the number of migrants transiting the Darien has skyrocketed, leading authorities to call for international aid. The situation has been driven, in part, by a sharp increase in Venezuelans fleeing the protracted economic and social collapse of the once-prosperous oil nation. In recent years, more than seven million Venezuelans have fled their country, according to UN figures. Those who cross the Darien risk violence, sexual abuse, human trafficking and disease. In September, Reuters reported that African migrants heading to the United States are flying to Nicaragua to bypass the dangers of the Darien Gap. The number of migrants from China making the risky trek has jumped, partly as COVID lockdowns there slowed the economy and as it became more difficult for Chinese nationals to obtain U.S. visas.

## Japan Earthquake Death Toll Passes 60

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japanese rescuers scrambled to search for survivors Wednesday as authorities warned of landslides from heavy rain after a powerful earthquake that killed at least 62 people. The 7.5-magnitude quake on January 1 that rattled Ishikawa prefecture on the main island of Honshu triggered tsunami waves more than a metre high, sparked a major fire and tore apart roads. The Noto Peninsula on the Sea of Japan coast was most severely hit, with buildings ravaged by fire and houses flattened in several towns, including Wajima and Suzu, as shown by before-and-after satellite images. The regional government announced Wednesday that 62 people had been confirmed dead and more than 300 injured, 20 of them seriously. The toll was expected to climb as rescuers battle aftershocks and poor weather to comb through rubble. More than 31,800 people were in shelters, and at least 200 buildings had collapsed, with the number expected to rise, the government said. "More than 40 hours have passed since the disaster. We have received a lot of information about people in need of rescue and there are people waiting for help," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Wednesday after an emergency task force meeting. The number of military personnel sent to the area on rescue missions has been doubled, with more rescue dogs also deployed, he added. The operation was given extra urgency as the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) issued a heavy rain warning in the region, advising people to be on alert for landslides until

Wednesday evening. There were "almost no houses standing" in one town in the Suzu area, said municipal mayor Masuhiro Izumiya. "About 90 percent of the houses (in that town) are completely or almost completely destroyed... the situation is really catastrophic," he said, according to broadcaster TBS. Around 32,800 households were still without power in Ishikawa prefecture, the local utility said. Many cities were without running water. Plenty of food and emergency supplies have arrived in the region, but blocked or damaged roads have slowed their delivery to communities, regional authorities said. Yuko Okuda, 30, was taking shelter at an evacuation centre at the municipal office of the town of Anamizu, down the coast from Suzu. "I'm here because our lifelines have been cut off. Electricity, water and gas – everything. And as aftershocks keep happening, our house could collapse at any time," she told AFP. "The cold and the lack of food are my biggest concerns now," she said, explaining that her son is allergic to eggs and so could not eat the food provided. Shinkansen bullet trains and highways have resumed operations after several thousand people were stranded – some for almost 24 hours. The US Geological Survey said the quake had a magnitude of 7.5, while the JMA measured it at 7.6, triggering a major tsunami warning. The powerful quake was one of more than 400 to shake the region through Wednesday morning, the JMA said.





## Injury Worries for Djokovic, Tsitsipas as Serbia Squeeze Into Quarters

PERTH (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic insisted y a sore right wrist which required on-court treatment was "not a major concern" as he led Serbia into the quarter-finals of the United Cup. The world number one dropped a set in grinding past the Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka 6-1, 6-7 (3/7), 6-1 and required several visits from the trainer. He did not take part in the deciding mixed doubles, instead watching from the team bench as Olga Danilovic and Hamad Medjedovic defeated Czech pair Miriam Kolodziejova and Petr Nouza 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 10-8. It put Serbia into a last-eight clash with Australia. The result means that defending champions the United States are out, with one more day of quarter-final play in Perth to go before the event shifts to a weekend finish in Sydney. "It happened in the warm-up today before the match," said Djokovic of the wrist issue, which comes barely a week ahead of his defence of the Australian Open. "I basically got constant treatment before the match, during the match, after the match, you know, trying to address the issue that I'm facing today in the best possible way. I know professional sport in general, these things happen. I think it's not a major concern, because I still managed to finish the match and managed to play well, even though I maybe wasn't feeling 100 percent. Hopefully I'll have enough time to recover for tomorrow's tie against Australia," added the 24-time Grand Slam champion. Czech Wimbledon winner Marketa Vondrousova started the tie by defeating Danilovic 6-1, 3-6, 6-3, handing Djokovic a comeback assignment as he took on Lehecka to take it to the deciding doubles. "It was amazing, I didn't have luck in singles but thank god we have Novak

with us," Danilovic said after sending Serbia through in the doubles. The 113th-ranked Medjedovic added: "I know how tired Olga was, she gave everything she could, and did it for us." Poland will face China in the other Perth quarter-final. In Sydney, Stefanos Tsitsipas, beaten by Djokovic in the Australian Open final last year, also struggled with an injury, to the lower back. The Greek world number six was expected to meet Chilean number one Nicolas Jarry, but sat it out, leaving teammate Stefanos Sakellariadis to step up. Sakellariadis, just 19 years old and ranked 416, put up an outstanding fight against the 19th-ranked Jarry, but fell short 6-3, 3-6, 7-5. Greek world number eight Maria Sakkari had earlier earned a commanding 6-0, 6-1 victory over Chile's outclassed Daniela Seguel. Tsitsipas returned for the crucial mixed doubles decider with Sakkari, but they lost 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 10-6 to Seguel and Marcelo Tomas Barrios Vera. "It's amazing, amazing," Barrios Vera said. "It's our second match as a team, so we're super happy." Tsitsipas, who reached the Australian Open final last year, losing to Djokovic, was clearly struggling on serve late in the match, grimacing as he held his back. While watching Sakkari's singles, he told the host broadcaster "there are a few chances I might not play and there are a few chances that I might" against Chile. "I'm kinda 50-50 so far. We'll wait and see." A six-time Grand Slam semi-finalist, Tsitsipas has 10 ATP Tour titles to his name, but is still searching for a first major win. In the other Sydney tie, Donna Vekic and Borna Coric overcame Arantxa Rus and Tallon Griekspoor respectively to give Croatia an unassailable 2-0 lead over the Netherlands.

## Man United Send Sergio Reguilon Back to Tottenham



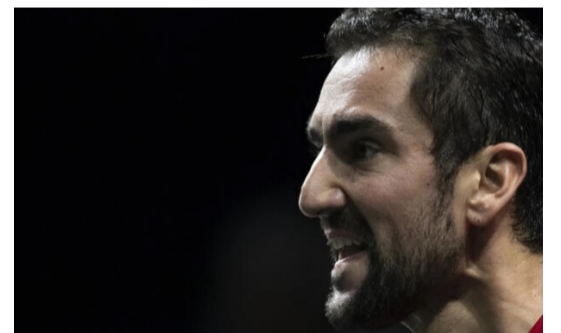
LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United have activated a break clause for Sergio Reguilon to cut short his loan and return to Tottenham Hotspur. The 27-year-old joined United on a season-long loan on deadline day in September as left-back cover, with the arrangement including an option at six months for him to end the deal early. He is now expected to look at another loan move for the second half of the season, which is possible under FIFA rules as he is yet to play for Spurs during the campaign. The Spaniard was signed while Luke Shaw was out injured but United now have options returning to Erik ten Hag at left-back. Shaw is currently sidelined but it is a short-term knock, while Tyrell Malacia is close to a return from a knee injury after being out since the summer. Ten Hag has also used Diogo Dalot at left-back with the Portugal international's importance to United highlighted by his national team manager Roberto Martinez while recently back in England as a pundit. Reguilon made 12 appearances for United during his time at the club, with nine of those ending in defeats. Overall, United felt he did well as cover for Shaw who was coming back into the team during the early stages of the campaign. United's elimination from European competition means they will have fewer games to juggle in the second half of the season and they were also knocked out of the League Cup which meant a two-legged semi-final last year. Reguilon's final start for United was the 3-0 defeat at home to Bournemouth. While Spurs manager Ange Postecoglou has injury problems at the back, at left-back he has seen Destiny Udogie emerge as a key player and Ben Davies can also play in that position.

## Nadal roars back with 'emotional and important' win over Thiem

BRISBANE (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal won his first match back from a year-long injury layoff when he beat former US Open champion Dominic Thiem at the Brisbane International, calling it an "emotional and important day." The 22-time Grand Slam winner looked in superb touch with a clinical 7-5, 6-1 victory over the Austrian in front of a full house at Pat Rafter Arena. He will now play Jason Kubler in the second round after the Australian wildcard progressed when Aslan Karatsev was forced to withdraw injured with the scores locked at one set apiece. The 37-year-old Spaniard had not played singles since a second-round loss at the Australian Open last year, undergoing two rounds of hip surgery. "Today, honestly, is an emotional and important day for me after probably one of the toughest years of my tennis career, without a doubt," he said. "To have the chance to come back after a year and play in front of an amazing crowd, and play I think at a very positive level for the first day is something that makes us feel proud." The former world number one did concede the result could have been very different. "I know I have been practising okay in the last week, practising I think at a positive level," Nadal said. "I'm talking with my hand on my heart and being very honest with all of you. You really at the end hope that you're going to play at this level, but inside yourself you know that it can be a disaster, and that, of course, worried me." The long layoff raised fears that his career could be over, but Nadal said this week he was always determined to make it back for the 2024 season. He conceded before the match there was "a high percentage" that it would be his last season, but left the door open to play on should his body hold up. "I missed being healthy, I missed feeling competitive and to play in front of full crowds like this," he said court-side after beating Thiem in 89 minutes. Nadal spent time at his academy in Kuwait to prepare for the Australian summer and trained there with fast-rising French teen Arthur Fils. He looked like he had never been away as he lost only six points on serve throughout the match and made few unforced errors in an almost perfect display against a quality opponent. But at 6-5 and with the set looking certain to go to a tiebreak, Nadal stepped up the pressure on Thiem's serve, forcing a series of errors and eventually winning the set when a Thiem forehand sailed long. Nadal then seized the advantage, holding his serve to love and then breaking Thiem to take a 2-0 lead in the second set. The Austrian's head then seemed to drop as Nadal lifted even further, wrapping up the match easily. "I think the first set was very equal, both of us serving well and then I was able to have that break for 6-5," he said. "I know Dominic has been going through hard times with injuries too, so happy to see him on court, wish him all the very best for the season."



## Cilic Loses on Comeback From Knee Surgery



HONG KONG (Dispatches) - A rusty former US Open champion Marin Cilic squandered nine match points on his return to tennis after an injury-ravaged year, losing a thriller to Jan-Lennard Struff 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (9/7) at the Hong Kong Open. The Croatian former world number three Cilic looked to be cruising to victory in a tricky first-round test against the gritty big-serving German at Victoria Park after racing to a set and 5-2 up. But world number 25 Struff showed huge determination to drag himself back from the brink, saving five match points in the second set to level the match in a tiebreak. Struff then withstood four more match points in the deciding set before eventually prevailing after a marathon 3hr 6min on Victoria Park's centre court. Cilic was pleased that his troublesome right knee had shown no ill-effects from the meniscus surgery and cartilage damage that kept him out for almost all of 2023. "After coming back from such an injury, I'd have to say it was really positive feedback during the match," said Cilic, who won his lone major at Flushing Meadows in 2014 and has also reached Grand Slam finals at Wimbledon and the Australian Open. "I gave him a chance a little bit to come back, then things got complicated," said the 6ft 6in (1.98m) Cilic, who was wearing a small patch of support tape on his knee. "But it gives me really good confidence. There were obviously a few things a little bit rusty with some knee movements, but I believe that it's going to come back with a few more matches." Struff, who reached two finals last year, said it took time to get into his stride in his first match of 2024. "After not playing for one year, I thought (Cilic) played a very good match," Struff said. "I wasn't happy for the first set and a half how I played, but I tried to make it as hard as I could for him and I was a bit lucky, for sure." Struff will meet Austria's world number 43 Sebastian Ofner in the second round after he cruised past American Mackenzie McDonald, ranked two places higher, 6-1, 6-2. McDonald made headlines when he knocked out an ailing Rafael Nadal from the Australian Open a year ago, but looked out of sorts in his season opener as he was ousted in just 61 minutes. Rising French star Arthur Fils, 19, who was runner-up in the ATP Tour's NextGen Finals last year, reached the second round with a 6-3, 4-6, 6-1 win over Borna Gojo of Croatia. Top seed and world number five Andrey Rublev of Russia will not begin his campaign until Thursday after a bye into the last 16, where he will meet Britain's Liam Broady. World number 108 Broady, who came through qualifying, breezed past Argentina's world number 70 Pedro Cachin 6-4, 6-0 in 1hr 9min.

## Clarkson Gets First Jazz Triple-Double Since '08 in Beating Mavs

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jordan Clarkson registered Utah's first triple-double in nearly 16 years and the Jazz avenged a 50-point loss to the Dallas Mavericks with a 127-90 victory in Salt Lake City. Clarkson totaled 20 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds to become the first Jazz player with a triple-double in the regular season since Carlos Boozer had one on Feb. 13, 2008. The Mavericks trounced the Jazz 147-97 in Dallas on Dec. 6. Utah, which has won eight of its past 11 games, controlled the play for much of the night and used a 25-2 run in the second half to blow the game open. Simone Fontecchio led the Jazz with 24 points, including 14 in the first quarter, when Utah took a double-digit lead. Lauri Markkanen added 17 points, John Collins scored 15. Keyonte George had 14 and Walker Kessler contributed 11 points, 10 rebounds and four blocks. Luka Doncic, who had a first-half triple-double in the December blowout, finished with 19 points, 14 assists and six rebounds. Kyrie Irving returned from a 12-game heel injury absence and had 14 points, nine rebounds and four assists for Dallas. Jaden Hardy got hot from outside, hitting five 3-pointers and scoring 17 points. The Mavericks trimmed the Jazz's lead to 62-55 at halftime and momentarily pulled within three in the third quarter. Dwight Powell's dunk later had Dallas within 81-75, but things took a dramatic shift after a Jazz timeout. Markkanen and Clarkson, neither of whom played at Dallas a month ago, sparked a surge with 3-pointers, and Utah took a 14-point lead into the fourth quarter thanks to a 12-4 run. The Jazz continued to pour it on in the fourth quarter, scoring the first four points to go up 97-79. Irving banked in a 3-pointer and then made a layup to give the Mavericks some hope, but the Jazz seized the momentum for good with a 13-0 run to go up 110-84. After Dallas scored, the Jazz scored 12 unanswered points to blow the contest wide open. Former Jazz guard Dante Exum, who has played well for Dallas this season, left early with a right heel contusion.

