

Average Daily Gasoline Consumption in Iran Has Reached About 113m Liters in the 10th Month of the Current Iranian Calendar Year (Started on December 22, 2023), the Managing Director of the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) Said

# IRAN NEWS

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health Tlaleng Mofokeng, Asserted that Gaza Is Confronting "Deliberate Starvation, Not Famine," Referring to the Israeli Regime's Use of Starvation as a Method of Warfare in the Gaza Strip

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### Israel Will Eventually Collapse

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### Leader Urges Efforts to Promote Prayer Among Youths



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei called on various social, cultural and educational organizations in Iran to encourage prayer among the younger generation and make sure that it is in its rightful place. In a message to the 30th National Prayer (Salat) Conference on Saturday, Ayatollah Khamenei stressed the need to pave the way for the new generation to learn, perform and improve the quality of their salat (prayer). The Leader's message is as follows, released by Khamenei.ir: In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. All praise is due to God, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and greetings be upon Muhammad and his pure Progeny, particularly the Remnant of God on earth (may we be sacrificed for him). I thank Almighty God for the continuation of this blessed, auspicious tradition of honoring salat. I would like to sincerely extend my gratitude to Hujjat al-Islam Qara'ati, a diligent, insightful scholar who is the founder of this blessed movement. Salat cannot be considered to be just one of the current needs of an individual and the Muslim community. This great obligation goes far beyond such needs. It should be considered to be the soul for the organs of the human body or like air compared to a person's other material needs. The fact that the acceptance of all worship acts and actions done in serving God are dependent on the acceptance of salat, the fact that the command to pray and to be firm in doing prayers was demanded [by God] from the Prophet, the fact that prayer is considered to be the first requirement in the rule of the righteous, and the fact that its performance and the emphasis on it has been repeated more than any other obligation in the Quran are all proof of the unique status of this divine duty. Encouraging prayer among the younger generation is the key to spreading this divine blessing and ensuring it is in its rightful place. Those who work in areas related to the youth and teenagers - those in the family environment, in schools, in universities, in sports environments, the religious scholars in schools and universities, the Basiji groups in mosques, the Basiji units, the Jihad of Construction organizations, the Jihad groups, and similar groups - should know that they are among those who are addressed by the verse, "Establish salat" (Quran 6:72). They need to pave the way for the new generation to learn salat, to perform the salat, and to improve the quality of their salat. They need to make salat, going to the mosque, being focused when praying, attentiveness to the meaning of salat, and learning about the rules of salat more appealing. And they need to establish salat in its true, genuine form.

### Sources Reject Reports About Decline in Iran's Oil Exports to China



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Different sources have rejected reports according to which Iran has declined oil exports to China, demanding higher prices. Reuters said in a Friday report that Iran has informed China in early December that it will reduce the discounts for its oil sales to the country in December and January. Chairman of Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce Majid-Reza Hariiri, however, said that Iran's oil discounts to China have been falling during the past year. He said that Iran's oil exports are at the highest and the hue and cry will have no effect on the Iranian oil sales. He told IRNA correspondent on Saturday that due to the sanctions imposed on Tehran, oil discounts have to remain secret. Alireza Sotoudeh, an energy expert, also believes that given the rise in China's refining capacity and the increase in Iran's oil production, the reports on halting the country's exports are not true. He stressed that Reuters has fabricated the news in order to create a psychological atmosphere inside Iran and to get more accurate information about Iranian oil sales by reactions of the Iranian authorities to this news.

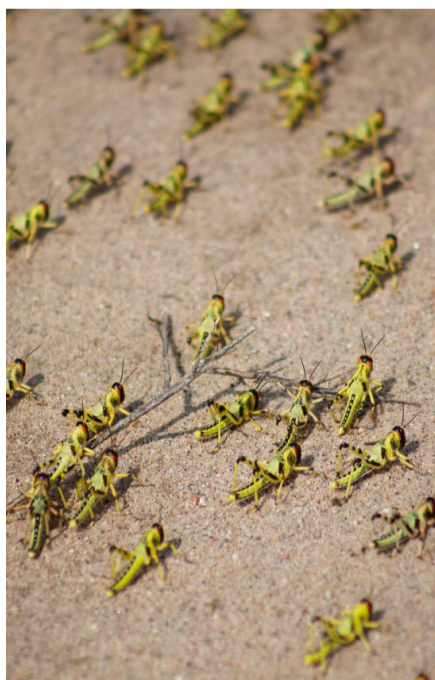


### Iran Boosting Drone Power Proportionate to Potential Threats

TEHRAN - A senior Iranian commander says the Islamic Republic is boosting its drone capabilities to be able to respond to potential threats in kind. "Iran's drone power is increasing proportionately to potential threats and we are witnessing national technological leaps in other industries, including metallurgy, fiberglass, and composites, thanks to this great achievement," Commander of the Iranian Army's Air Defense Force Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi-Fard said. Speaking to a meeting with a number of commanders and staff of the drone unit of the Iranian Army's Air Defense Force, Sabahi-Fard said the country's indigenous drones have taken the edge off the aerial superiority of some foreign countries. The top commander said the development of using drones plays a leading role in increasing the combat and operational power of air defense. He reiterated that the Iranian Army's Air Defense Force is making serious efforts in this regard. Back in December, dozens of home-grown Karrar drones, equipped with air-to-air Majid missiles, joined Iran Army's Air Defense Force. The Karrar drones armed with Majid missiles are capable of intercepting and engaging any flying objects and hostile targets. They successfully performed operations during a large-scale drone drill by the Islamic Republic of Iran Army in October. Elsewhere in his remarks, Sabahi-Fard described the Iranian nation's support for the country at different juncture as the most important component of power which has foiled the enemies' vicious plans to harm national power. Referring to a twin terrorist attack in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman on January 3, where more than 90 people were killed, the top commander said resorting to terrorism shows the extent of humiliation enemies suffer.

### FAO Empowers Iran in Combating Desert Locust Upsurge

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has played a crucial role in supporting the Islamic Republic of Iran in addressing the significant Desert Locust upsurge from 2020 to 2022. Notably, the country has successfully averted an upsurge over the past year with the support of FAO initiatives. Through the Technical Cooperation Emergency Programme, "Urgent action for capacity building to control Desert Locust infestation in the Islamic Republic of Iran," FAO effectively strengthened the monitoring and control capabilities of the Plant Protection Organization of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad. Technical support was received from the FAO Regional Office in Bangkok, and its headquarters in Rome. Operational from 2020 to 2023, the project made substantial contributions to the Plant Protection Organization, enhancing its strategies and capacities to combat Desert Locust outbreaks. Hundreds of Desert Locust and agriculture officers were trained in locust biology, behavior, and modern practices for surveillance, monitoring, control, and management of Desert Locust infestations. These efforts have significantly improved the management of locust outbreaks,



mitigating the adverse

effects on agriculture and local flora. An effective Desert Locust contingency plan was developed at the governmental level, integrating management strategy and enhancing preparedness and response capacities of the Plant Protection Organization at the national level. While the upsurge has been defeated, FAO emphasizes the cyclical nature of locust infestation. FAO will continue collaborative efforts with the Islamic Republic of Iran through the FAO Commission for Controlling the Desert Locust in South-West Asia (SWAC), Desert Locust Control Committee (DLCC), and Desert Locust Information Officer (DLIO) workshops. This ongoing partnership aims to maintain surveillance and response mechanisms, strengthening defenses against future upsurges of this destructive migratory pest insect. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations that leads international efforts to defeat hunger and improve nutrition and food security. FAO's mandate is to achieve food security for all and make sure that people have regular access to enough high-quality food to lead active, healthy lives.

### Trump, Pompeo, Mackenzie Main Suspects in Martyr Soleimani's Case



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Secretary of Iran's High Council for Human Rights Kazem Gharibabadi says former U.S. President Donald Trump, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and former Commander of the U.S. Central Command Kenneth F. McKenzie are the main suspects behind the assassination of Martyr General Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 in Iraq. Addressing a seminar to commemorate martyr Soleimani in Tehran, Gharibabadi said that intentional homicide and financing terrorism are the main charges against suspects in Martyr Soleimani's assassination case. Martyr Soleimani was a great military strategist in the region and his strategies were always successful in fighting terrorists and takfiri groups because he had a correct analysis and understanding of regional developments in the political, military, strategic, and social fields, he added. ISIS was created by the U.S. and its allies in the region, they formed a coalition with some countries in the region to counter ISIS, but it eventually saved ISIS, he noted. Gharibabadi described defending and supporting the Axis of Resistance as outstanding characteristics of Martyr Soleimani. The Americans created and supported ISIS to use its brutality to tarnish Islam and Muslims, he reiterated. The official added that this criminal case against those suspected of assassinating Martyr Soleimani has 96 American defendants, of which 26 have their legal proceedings suspended while 73 others have received indictment.

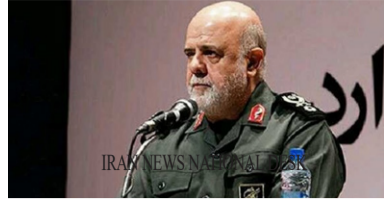
### Iran Captures All Members of Terrorist Team behind Kerman Attack



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - An Iranian prosecutor said all terrorists involved in a January 3 attack that killed over 90 people and injured dozens of others in the southern city of Kerman have been arrested. Prosecutor of Kerman Mahdi Bakhshi revealed the information in a televised interview on Saturday, three days after the terrorist attack. "Thirty-two people have been arrested (in connection with) Kerman (terrorist) crime case and are going through preliminary interrogations," he said. In addition, the judicial official added, as many as "16 bombs have been discovered throughout Kerman province" whose explosive power was more than the suicide vests used in the Wednesday attack, Press TV reported. "Over the recent months, as many as 23 Daesh terrorists ready to carry out suicide attacks have been arrested across Kerman province," the prosecutor noted. The Wednesday's twin blasts at an event held in commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of late commander Lt. General Qasem Soleimani resulted in the tragic loss of at least 91 lives, including 9 children, and left nearly 300 individuals injured, with some in critical condition. The Daesh (ISIS or ISIL) terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack. Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has warned that those behind the terrorist act will receive a severe response.



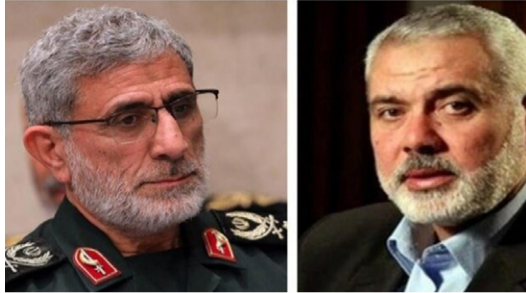
# IRAN NEWS



## Palestine to Obtain Air Defense Weapons One Day

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Lauding the growing capabilities of the Palestinian resistance forces in the struggle against the Zionist regime, an IRGC general said the Palestinian forces will sooner or later ward off the Israeli aerial bombardment with air defense weapons. Addressing a conference in commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of Lt. General Qassem Soleimani, the top adviser to the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Quds Force hailed the growing trend in the military power of the Islamic resistance forces across the region. "Today, the Palestinians are fighting with the use of missiles, but one day they will acquire the capability to prevent even the Zionist bombardments and will obtain air defense weapons," Iraj Masjedi said. The IRGC Quds Force commander's adviser highlighted the Israeli army's weakness in the face of Palestinian combatants, saying Israel's so-called Golani brigade, declared to be a special military force for the war against Palestinians, received so many blows from the resistance forces that it got an order to retreat, just like five other brigades of the Zionist army.

## Arouri to Become Israel's Nightmare



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Quds Force reminded the Zionist regime that their nightmare has begun after the assassination of Deputy Chief of the Political Bureau of Hamas Saleh al-Arouri. In a message to Head of Hamas' Political Bureau Ismail Haniyeh, IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Qaani paid tribute to Arouri, who was killed in an Israeli drone strike on Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiyeh on January 2. "The enemy and the Zionists seek to downplay their heavy defeat in Gaza and the West Bank by assassinating resistance leaders," the Iranian commander said. "The world will see how the brothers of Martyr Arouri will turn into a nightmare for the child-murdering Zionist regime," General Qaani added. The IRGC Quds Force commander went on to say that Arouri was martyred as the noose has been tightened around the Israeli enemy in the West Bank. Arouri 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.



## Israel Will Eventually Collapse

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says the Israeli regime will definitely disappear despite all the unconditional supports it receives from global arrogant powers. "The fake Zionist regime, which draws support from the global arrogant powers, will certainly disappear. Injustice and oppression can never last forever, and this is a divine pledge. What will last is justice," he told people in the northwestern city of Zanjan. Raisi said the enemies' animosity towards the Iranian nation, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic establishment and late top anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani is due to the fact that the Islamic Republic as well as Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei attach special importance to the rights of the oppressed Palestinians. "This is the emphasis of our religion and our policy is to defend the oppressed people of the world," he said. Raisi said the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Imam Khomeini, brought up the issue of supporting the Palestinian cause and stressed the need for the liberation of the holy al-Quds city and elimination of the Israeli regime as a cancerous tumor more than four decades. Iran's

"insistence on the legitimacy of Palestine after four decades has become clear to the whole world," he said. Raisi said while the Iranian people's support for the Palestinians has generated enmity and verbal attacks against them over the past four decades, they have remained steadfast in their backing. "During these four decades, the enemy made enmity with the Iranian nation. It sanctioned and threatened, imposed an economic blockade, and waged enmity of various kinds, but the Iranian nation won in this war of wills," he said. The president said the enemies, in spite of numerous attempts and threats, have miserably failed in their anti-Iran plots, while young Iranian specialists have acquired and employed cutting-edge technologies. "They thought they could get us away from the nuclear industry, but they couldn't. It was the same in the military industry, but many great works have been done and many works are in progress. "They wanted our economy not to grow, but it did. According to statistics, we have more than 5% economic growth. They wanted to stop production, but we revived many inactive and semi-active production units," Raisi said.

## Killing of Innocents Comes From a U.S.-Zionist Dirty Thought



TEHRAN (IRNA) – Majlis Speaker has said that carrying out an operation to kill the innocent and ordinary people comes from a dirty and inhumane thought. Trace of the Takfiri groups in the region, the Zionist regime of Israel in Gaza and the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan is seen in those killings and massacre, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said in the Sunday Majlis session in Tehran. The speaker made the remarks while speaking about the Wednesday terrorist attacks in Kerman, southern Iran, which led to killing of about 90 people who had come to attend the martyrdom anniversary of the General Soleimani on January 4. The tragic incident proved the hostility of cruelty in the heart of the enemies, he added. He went on to say that the criminals kill the civilians, women and children to satisfy their sponsors. According to Qalibaf, the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Commission is charged with reviewing the aspects of the tragedy to present it as a report to the Consultative Assembly. Two terrorist blasts occurred en route to the Kerman martyrs cemetery and the burial site of the former Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Qods Force commander General Qassem Soleimani who was assassinated by the US forces in Iraq on January 3, 2020. The blasts took place out of the route of visit of the people who were there to mark the fourth martyrdom anniversary of General Soleimani and out of the roads leading to checkpoints.



## Followers of Iran's Islamic Revolution Gracious in Region

TEHRAN (IP) - Tehran Mayor said Iran is today the role model of the regional countries and the countries learned resistance lessons from Iran and enjoy dignity for themselves in the region. The Iranian people from different walks of life gathered in Tehran's Imam Hossein (AS) Square, on Saturday, to mark the Dey 9 Epic. Delivering a speech at the ceremony in Tehran on Saturday evening to mark the Dey 9 Epic, Alireza Zakani told people that once the enemies of Islam led by the US, sought to seize the West Asian region but today they are seeking ways to escape the region. He promised that the Palestinian nation would celebrate its victory over Israel, the US would exit the region and the barriers made for Iran at the national, regional, and international levels would be removed. Zakani pointed to the coming parliamentary election in Iran and said that the enemies have planned plots to prevent Iran from holding a healthy election with a high turn-out. He pointed out that a strong parliament requires a strong election which itself requires a high turnout of the people in the polls. December 30 coincides with the ninth day of the month Dey in the Iranian calendar and is the reminder of the epic turnout of the Iranian nation to foil enemies' plots after the 2009 presidential elections. The Dey 9 Epic was indeed a turning point in that it dismayed the enemies of the Islamic Revolution who had invested in the electoral fraud allegations.

## France Raps Kerman Terror Attack, Asks Iran to Help Ease Regional Tensions

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The foreign minister of France condemned a recent deadly terrorist attack in Iran's Kerman, voiced concern about the escalation of regional tensions, and called on Tehran to play a role in preventing the spread of conflicts. In a telephone conversation with her Iranian counterpart on Saturday, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna condemned the January 3 terrorist attack that killed over 90 people in Iran's southern city of Kerman. Expressing concern about the escalating tensions in the region, Colonna called on Iran to help prevent the spillover of the hostilities. For his part, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stressed the need for the efforts by the international community to effectively and practically fight against all forms of terrorism. Pointing to the crisis in Gaza, the Iranian foreign minister said the effective steps toward ending violence in the region should include the cessation of Israeli crimes and genocidal attacks in Gaza, the necessity of practical efforts to end the massacre of civilians, the facilitation of sending humanitarian aid to Gazans, prevention of forced displacement of Palestinians, and the handover of the

future of Palestine in a democratic way to Palestinians themselves. The only way to prevent the spillover of fighting across the region and to establish lasting peace is addressing, responsibly, the root causes of the challenges and also being seriously determined to help solve the problems, he added, the Foreign Ministry's website reported. Deploing the massacre of 22,000 civilians, including women and children, in Gaza, the Iranian foreign minister said the US and the Israeli regime are responsible for the genocide in the enclave. "You can't ignore the root cause of instability in the region without looking at the occupation and let the Israeli regime do whatever it desires and at the same time be worried about the security of the Red Sea and the wider region," he added. Amir-Abdollahian noted that Iran is the most sincere defender of security and stability in the region and the entire world. In the phone call, the two senior diplomats agreed on the importance of continued diplomatic dialogue and contacts between Iran and France. They also underscored the need to remove obstacles to bilateral relations in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

## Mehran Border Exports over \$1bln of Non-Oil Goods to Iraq



TEHRAN (MNA) – The head of the customs office in Iran's Ilam province said \$1.346 billion worth of non-oil products has been exported from the province's Mehran Border Crossing to neighboring Iraq in the current Iranian calendar year. Aqamir Abdi said 2.366 million tons of goods, valued at \$1.346 billion, were exported from Mehran Border Crossing to Iraq. Every day, some 600 trucks transport goods including agricultural products, metal and plastic products, construction materials, etc. to the Arab country via the border crossing, he added. Earlier, Abdi had predicted that the volume of non-oil goods exported to Iraq through this border crossing will surpass three million tons by the end of the year.

## Lebanese Solidarity With Iran Shows Two Countries Unity

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani has described Lebanese solidarity with Iran as the existing unity between the two countries. Thanking Lebanese leaders and officials who expressed condolences and sympathized with the Iranian government and nation over the martyrdom of a large number of Iranians in the Kerman terrorist attack, Amani wrote in Arabic on his account on the X, formerly known as Twitter, on Sunday, saying that "I appreciate your condolences that have had a good impact on our morale and supported us in such sad moments". He reiterated that the massive solidarity of the Lebanese people with the Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrates the depth of unity between the two countries when facing challenges. The Wednesday's twin blasts at an event held in commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of late commander Lt. General Soleimani resulted in the martyrdom of at least 91 lives and left scores more injured, with some in critical condition. ISIL terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack on Thursday.





# IRAN NEWS



## Shahid Soleimani Refinery-Integrated Petrochemical Plant Executive Operations to Start in Few Months

TEHRAN (Shana) - The National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) managing director said the executive operations of Shahid Soleimani Refinery-Integrated Petrochemical Plant will begin within the next few months. Jalil Salari, who made the announcement in the signing ceremony of a contract on coding 450 hectares of the Special Economic Zone in Bandar Abbas, a port city of Iran's southern province of Hormozgan, added the National Iranian Oil Engineering and Construction Company (NIOEC) carries out the project's assessment and studies. The contract was inked by the Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO) and the Shahid Soleimani Refinery-Integrated Petrochemical Company. The deputy oil minister said the main aim behind the plant setup is to complete the value-added chain, continuing 25 percent of its production capacity will be allocated to petrochemicals and a limited volume of gasoline - around 6.5 million liters - will be produced in the plant while petrochemical and gasoline output could be increased if needed.

## Iran's Foreign Trade Value Up 7% in 9-Month Period



## Five Countries Destination of 80% of Iran's Export Products



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The head of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPOI) said eighty percent of Iranian products are exported to five countries, namely China, Iraq, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India. Mehdi Zeyghami pointed to the significance of increasing export of knowledge-based products with higher added value to foreign countries and noted that the recent conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Iran and member states of the Eurasian Economic Union is a good opportunity for promoting the competitiveness of industrial and production units. Speaking at the 3rd Conference of the Iran Scientific Associations Council, Strategies of the Industrial Development, the deputy industry minister pointed out that the removal of tariff rates between the two sides has paved the way for entering complex markets and joining the World Trade Organization (WTO). Elsewhere in his remarks,

Zeyghami pointed to the export of products to the Eurasian markets and added that 80 percent of Iranian products are exported to China, Iraq, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and India, ILNA reported. He emphasized the need for strengthening the export of technical and engineering services due to the high potential of the country and called for the unwavering support of the governments as a prerequisite for spurring export of the technical and engineering services. The TPOI chief further stressed bolstering the export of oil- and non-oil goods to the neighboring and like-minded countries. 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.

## Iran to Launch Joint Investment Funds with Russia, Oman, Saudi Arabia



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A member of the Board of Executive Directors of the National Development Fund of Iran (NDFI) said the country has plans to set up joint investment funds with the Russian Federation, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The NDFI is after cooperating with the wealth funds of the neighboring states and negotiations are underway with Russia to launch a joint investment fund, Hossein Eyvazlou stated. Highlighting the cooperation of the NDFI with the wealth funds of other countries, he noted that the National Development Fund of Iran is missioned to cooperate with other funds throughout the world and priority has been given to the wealth funds of the neighboring countries. Positive signals have been received from Russia, showing that this country is keen on setting up a joint investment fund with Iran, Eyvazlou added. In this regard, the NDFI has prioritized launching joint investment with the neighboring states in the oil, gas, petrochemical and pharmaceutical fields, he said, tahlilbazaar reported. Elsewhere in his remarks, the official pointed out that the Fund has also held negotiations with the Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia and it is hoped that the sides will agree on investment projects as joint venture (JV). The NDFI has also concluded cooperation agreements with African states, he said.

TEHRAN (MNA) - Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance (MEAF) said the country's foreign trade value in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year showed a seven-percent growth compared to same period last year. The ministry noted that more than \$112 billion worth of products were imported to and exported from the country from March 21 to December 22, 2023, showing a seven percent hike compared to last year's corresponding period. Iran exported more than 101 million tons of non-oil products, valued at over \$36 billion, from March 21 to December 22, 2023, registering a 26.48 percent hike in volume and a 0.68 percent decline in value compared to the same period last year. According to the report, Iran imported more than 28.737 million tons of non-oil goods, valued at more than \$48 billion, in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year, showing a 6.04 and a 12.29 percent growth in volume and value respectively compared to last year's corresponding period.

## Iran 2nd Most Innovative Agricultural State in South, Central Asia



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Head of Iran's Agricultural Research, Education and Extension Organization (AREEO) said that, according to the Global Innovation Index 2022, Iran was introduced as the second most innovative agricultural country in South and Central Asia. Iran has the fastest growth rate in innovation performance and also is the second most innovative country in South and Central Asia in the field of agriculture, Mojtaba Khayyam Nekouei stated. The deputy minister of agriculture pointed out that improving the coefficient rate of innovative technologies in the field of agriculture requires the adoption of modern approaches based on the participation of the elite. As a body responsible for the development of knowledge-based agriculture, the organization uses constructive approaches, patterns and methods to accelerate the process of disseminating innovative technologies in the agricultural sector, he

emphasized. Khayyam Nekouei pointed to the "Productive Innovative Farms" as one of the main components of the country's innovative ecosystem in line with the implementation of Article 5 of the bylaw on supporting knowledge-based and job-generating production in the agricultural and natural resources sector and noted that the productive innovative farms have been launched to create productive innovative farmers' network using their capacities to accelerate the process of transferring innovative technologies in the production fields, areeo.ac.ir reported. Given the undeniable role of innovation and innovative technologies in promoting productivity in the agricultural sector, different countries in the world have given priority to supporting the innovative ecosystem to ensure the production, and use the innovative technologies in this sector, he underlined.

## Weekly Trade Volume on IME Up by 13%



TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 3,116,158 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$624m on its physical market, posting growths of 1.7% and 13.1% in value and volume of trades compared to the figures of the previous week. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,439,652 tons of commodities valued at nearly \$350m. On this floor the IME sold 1,250,716 tons of cement, 792,000 tons of iron ore, 255,597 tons of steel, 119,000 tons of sponge iron, 12,095 tons of aluminum, 10,121 tons of copper, 2,510 tons of zinc, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 9 tons of precious metals concentrate. Moreover, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 667,115 tons of commodities worth more than \$270m. Commodities traded on this floor included 265,011 tons of bitumen, 176,900 tons of vacuum bottom, 100,623 tons of polymeric products, 57,000 tons of lube cut, 44,697 tons of chemicals, 13,570 tons of sulfur, 5,560 tons of petroleum products, 3,818 tons of oil, 500 tons of waterproofing materials and 380 tons of feedstocks. The IME also traded within the same week 9,390 tons of goods on its side market.



## Iran, China Universities Calls for Defense Cooperation

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Officials of national defense universities of Iran and China have underlined the need for enhancing defense diplomacy and academic cooperation. A Chinese delegation of the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) headed by Tai Jinsong visited the Supreme National Defense University (SNDU) of Iran and held talks with the deputy president of the university Khosro Bolhassani in the capital Tehran. During the visit, the Chinese delegation became familiar with the activities of the SNDU with regards to education, research, and international student enrollment. In the meeting, Bolhassani called for the expansion of good collaborations between Iran and China and emphasized the need for upgrading bilateral relations in other sectors such as the academic arena. He further noted that the Iranian university initiated providing foreign students with PhD courses, expressing hope that Chinese students would be enrolled as well. The head of the Chinese delegation, for his part, pointed to the important role of the Iranian university in the Islamic country's defense industry, expressing readiness to pave the way for improving academic cooperation between these two universities.



### Italian FM Calls for Formation of EU Army

ROME (Dispatches) - The European Union should form its own combined army that could play a role in peacekeeping and preventing conflict, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said. In an interview with Italian newspaper La Stampa, Tajani said that closer European cooperation on defence was a priority for the Forza Italia party that he leads. "If we want to be peacekeepers in the world, we need a European military. And this is a fundamental precondition to be able to have an effective European foreign policy," he said in an interview published on Sunday. "In a world with powerful players like the United States, China, India, Russia - with crises from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific - Italian, German, French or Slovenian citizens can only be protected by something that already exists, namely the European Union," he added. European defense cooperation has risen up the political agenda since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine almost two years ago.



### Bangladesh Votes in Election Without Opposition



DHAKA (Dispatches) - Bangladesh voted on Sunday in an election guaranteed to give a fifth term in office to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, after a boycott led by an opposition party she branded a "terrorist organization". Hasina has presided over breakneck economic growth in a country once beset by grinding poverty, but her government has been accused of rampant human rights abuses and a ruthless opposition crackdown. Her party faces almost no effective rivals in the seats it is contesting but has avoided fielding candidates in a few constituencies, an apparent effort to avoid the legislature being branded a one-party institution. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, whose ranks have been decimated by mass arrests, has called a general strike and urged the public not to participate in what it calls a "sham" election. But Hasina, 76, called for citizens to cast their ballots and show their faith in the democratic process. "The BNP is a terrorist organization," she told reporters after casting her vote. "I am trying my best to ensure that democracy should continue in this country," she added. Polls will stay open until 5:00 pm local time (11:00 GMT), with results expected after midnight. Early signs suggested that turnout would be low, despite widespread reports of carrot-and-stick inducements aimed at bolstering the poll's legitimacy. As of noon, according to Election Commission Secretary Jahangir Alam, turnout stood at 18.5 percent. At one polling centre in the capital Dhaka, presiding officer Aminul Haque said that as of midday only 187 votes had been cast by the more than 3,300 voters registered there. "I don't have any interest in participating in this farce," charity worker Shahriar Ahmed, 32, told AFP. "I would rather stay home and watch movies." BNP head Tarique Rahman, speaking from Britain where he lives in exile, said he worried about ballot stuffing. "I fear that the election commission may increase voter turnout by using fake votes," he told AFP. Some voters said earlier they had been threatened with the confiscation of government benefit cards needed to access welfare payments if they refused to cast ballots for the ruling Awami League. "They said since the government feeds us, we have to vote for them," Lal Mia, 64, told AFP in the central district of Faridpur. Security was tight during voting, with officers in the port city of Chittagong breaking up an opposition protest. The BNP and other parties staged months of protests last year, demanding Hasina step down ahead of the vote. Around 25,000 opposition cadres including the BNP's entire local leadership were arrested in the ensuing crackdown, the party says. The government puts the figure at 11,000.



### N. Korea Conducts More Military Drills Near S. Korean Border Island

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea was conducting live-fire drills on its western coast, the Yonhap news agency reported Sunday, the third consecutive day of military exercises near the contested maritime border with the South. "N. Korea conducting live-fire drills on western coast: S. Korean military," Yonhap reported. "The North Korean military has been conducting the drills north of the South Korean front-line island of Yeonpyeong since around 4 pm (07:00 GMT)," it reported, citing a military source. There no North Korean artillery shells had fallen south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de-facto maritime border in the Yellow Sea, and no casualties had been reported, it added. Residents on the South Korean border island of Yeonpyeong were warned to stay inside Sunday, local officials told AFP, due to the drills and any possible South Korean countermeasures. "North Korean gunfire is currently being heard," said a text message sent to all residents Sunday afternoon, details of which were confirmed to AFP by local officials. "Troops on Yeonpyeong Island are currently responding, but residents are advised to be careful of outdoor activities," the message said. On both Friday and Saturday, North Korea fired artillery rounds in the same area -- near Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong, two sparsely populated islands situated just south of a de-facto maritime border between the two sides. On Friday, residents of the two islands were ordered to evacuate to shelters and ferries were suspended during one of the most serious military escalations on the peninsula since Pyongyang fired shells at one of the islands in 2010. On both days, North Korea's shells landed in

a buffer zone created under a 2018 tension-reducing deal, which fell apart in November after the North launched a spy satellite. North Korea said Friday that its live-fire drills that day had not even had "an indirect effect" on the border islands. On Sunday, Kim Jong Un's powerful sister denied Seoul's claims that Pyongyang had fired dozens of artillery rounds near their border on Saturday, saying they had instead conducted a "deceptive operation": "Our military did not fire a single shell into the water area," Kim Yo Jong said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency. Kim claimed instead that her country's military had detonated explosives simulating the sound of gunfire 60 times and "watched the reaction" of the South Korean forces. "The result was clear as we expected," she said, adding: "They misjudged the blasting sound as the sound of gunfire and conjectured it as a provocation. And they even made a false and impudent statement that the shells dropped in the sea buffer zone." "The enemy might behave stupidly for the sake of pride misjudging the thundering roar in the northern sky in the future as artillery fire of the KPA (Korean People's Army)," she said. Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in decades after leader Kim Jong Un last year enshrined his country's status as a nuclear power into the constitution and test-fired several advanced ICBMs. At Pyongyang's year-end policy meetings, Kim threatened a nuclear attack on the South and called for a build-up of his country's military arsenal ahead of armed conflict that he warned could "break out any time".

### Japan PM Vows Ceaseless Aid as Snow Hampers Quake Relief



WAJIMA (Dispatches) - Japan's prime minister vowed to provide "ceaseless" support to areas devastated by the New Year's Day earthquake as snow and sleet hampered rescue and relief efforts and local media reported that the disaster had now claimed at least 126 lives. The adverse weather on the Noto peninsula continued to vex survivors at the epicenter of the magnitude 7.6 quake that left more than 30,000 homeless and cut power to tens of thousands of residences and businesses. At least 222 people are still reported missing and more heavy snow or rain is forecast overnight for the region. Footage on national broadcaster NHK showed construction trucks digging through piles of dirt three meters (almost 10 ft) tall to unearth houses buried by landslides. "Rescuing people trapped under the rubble and responding to isolated areas are issues that must be tackled with the highest priority," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on an NHK program on Sunday. "As we move forward with ceaseless reconstruction and recovery efforts, we must not hesitate in responding due to budget constraints in the disaster-affected areas," he added. Kishida had said on Friday that his government would tap 4.74 billion yen (\$32.77 million) of budget reserves for reconstruction efforts. The governor of Ishikawa Prefecture, where the Noto peninsula is located, declared a state of emergency on Saturday, calling the quake "an unprecedented disaster" for the region. NHK reported. In the city of Wajima, on the peninsula's northern coast, a line of cars stretching as far as the eye could see had formed to refuel at a petrol station as fuel supply to the region gradually returned.

### Russian Strikes in East Ukraine Kill 11, Including Children



KYIV (Dispatches) - At least 11 people, including five children, were killed by a Russian missile strike on the eastern Ukraine town of Pokrovsk on Saturday, the regional governor said, as the bombardments intensified. Since late December, there has been an increase in the number of strikes in both Ukraine and Russia, with particularly heavy casualties, as the war triggered by Russia's invasion in February 2022 nears the end of its second year. Despite the intensification, the front line has barely shifted. Eight people were also wounded when Russian forces hit the area with S-300 missiles. "The main blow was dealt to Pokrovsk and Rivne in the community of Myromgrad," the head of the Donetsk region, Vadim Filashkin, said on Telegram. He released photographs showing rescue workers working through the debris of the attack which damaged six houses in Pokrovsk and another in nearby Rivne. According to the emergency services the toll could rise with six people, including two children, believed to be under the rubble of one of the buildings. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky denounced the attacks saying "the Russians just hit ordinary residential buildings, private houses". He assured that no Russian strike "will go without consequence". The town of Pokrovsk, which had a population of 60,000 before the war, had already been hit by a deadly bombardment last August, which left nine people dead and 82 injured. The town is around fifty kilometres (30 miles) from the front line of the fighting. Elsewhere in Ukraine, one adult and two children were injured in shelling in the Kherson region in the south. One person was killed in Toretsk, near Bakhmut, and another was killed and two injured in Nikopol, in the east, according to the respective regional authorities. In the Russian-occupied territories of eastern Ukraine, two people were killed by Ukrainian shelling in Makiivka and Gorlovka, an attack that also left several people injured, according

to the local authorities installed by Moscow. Russia on Saturday also said its forces had shot down four Ukrainian missiles over Moscow-annexed Crimea overnight. The attack came a day after Russia said it repelled a Ukrainian drone attack on Crimea, downing 36 of them over the peninsula. Kyiv said it had hit the Saki airbase in western Crimea. "Saki airfield! All targets have been shot!" Mykola Oleschchuk, Ukraine's air force commander, said on social media. Ukraine has targeted Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, since the start of Moscow's full-scale offensive. Russia also said that it had destroyed six Ukrainian Neptune naval missiles over the Black Sea. The number of strikes on both sides has multiplied in recent days, with Russia in particular bombing Ukrainian towns en masse on two occasions: on December 29, when 55 people were killed, and on Wednesday when six died. For its part, Ukraine has repeatedly targeted the Russian town of Belgorod, 50 kilometres from the border, including an unprecedented attack last Saturday that killed 25 people. Hundreds were also injured in these attacks. Authorities in Belgorod, faced with the risk of Ukrainian bombardments, cancelled the evening Orthodox Christmas celebrations on Saturday. They had already extended the school holidays until January 19, and offered to evacuate the inhabitants of the city of 300,000 residents. The unprecedented measures for a major Russian city are a blow to the ambitions of the Kremlin, which has always tried to give the impression that the conflict is not directly affecting the everyday life and safety of Russians. In another unwelcome sign to Russian leaders, a group of wives of Russians mobilised to fight in Ukraine symbolically laid flowers Saturday at the flame of the unknown soldier right beneath the walls of the Kremlin and demanded the return of their husbands from the front.



### Somalia President Signs Law Nullifying Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal

MOGADISHU (Dispatches) - Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud signed a law nullifying an agreement by the breakaway Somaliland region to grant Ethiopia access to the Red Sea in return for recognition as an independent nation, he said late on Saturday. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's stated ambition to secure access to the Red Sea is a source of tension between the Horn of Africa nation and its neighbours and has raised concerns of a fresh conflict in the region. Somalia, which considers Somaliland part of its territory, rejected the New Year's Day deal that would allow landlocked Ethiopia to lease 20 km (12 miles) around the port of Berbera, on the Gulf of Aden with access to the Red Sea, for 50 years for its navy and commercial purposes. Ethiopia would in return become the first country to recognise Somaliland as an independent nation. "This evening, I signed the law nullifying the illegal MoU between the government of Ethiopia and Somaliland," Mohamud posted on X, formerly Twitter, late on Saturday. "This law is an illustration of our commitment to safeguard our unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity as per international law." The Somali president did not specify what the new law says or when parliament passed it. There was no immediate comment from Somaliland or Ethiopian officials. Abiy said in October that Ethiopia's existence was "tied to the Red Sea", adding that if countries in the Horn of Africa "plan to live together in peace, we have to find a way to mutually share with each other in a balanced manner". His national security adviser has said Ethiopia would offer Somaliland an unspecified stake in state-owned Ethiopian Airlines in return for giving it access to the Red Sea.

## Trump Says He Will Win U.S. Presidency for Third Time

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Donald Trump hit the campaign trail Saturday in the first-in-the-nation presidential nominating state of Iowa, vowing to win "for the third time" as Americans marked the anniversary of the deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol by a mob of his supporters. Many watched in horror three years ago on January 6, 2021, as rioters -- egged on by the ex-president and fueled by his false claims of voter fraud -- stormed the seat of U.S. democracy in a bid to halt the transfer of power. In a rambling, two-hour speech Saturday to supporters in Newton, Iowa, Trump did not delve into the events of that day, but described those jailed over their roles in the assault as "hostages." He has said that if elected, he will pardon many. Trump mocked President Joe Biden, his putative rival in November's election. He said Biden has overseen economic decline and invited chaos at the nation's borders, while failing to stop Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "I would've absolutely stopped Putin," he said. Trump warned of World War III if Biden is re-elected, adding, "This is our last chance to save America." Never having given up on the fiction that he won the 2020 election, Trump declared that in November he will win "for the third time." The runaway leader in the race for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, Trump was impeached for inciting insurrection and faces multiple felony charges over his conduct leading up to and during the violence. In an evening appearance at a middle school in the town of Clinton, Trump gave another meandering speech in which he attacked Biden as too old to govern, incompetent and leading the United States

to ruin with overrun open borders. "We are a failing nation," Trump said in the hour-long address. "We're going to bring it back from hell," he added. Biden, who offered blistering criticism of Trump in a speech Friday, has no public events planned this weekend, the White House said. Trump leads rivals Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis by more than 30 points in Iowa, which stages its Republican nominating contest -- known as a "caucus" -- on January 15, kicking off the 2024 primary season. Trump has described January 6 as "a beautiful day" and has made the "great patriots" and "hostages" imprisoned over the riot a cause celebre. The false claim that Democratic election theft led to January 6 has become orthodox among many Republicans, with hard-liners in Congress promoting the fantasy that the chaos at the Capitol was a "false flag" operation by federal agents. A Washington Post/University of Maryland poll released Thursday found that 44 percent of Trump voters believe the FBI organized and encouraged the riot. But polls also show that Democrats and independents hold strongly negative views of the riot and the rioters, and of Trump's role in encouraging them. "We will never forget the horrific events of January 6, 2021," Democratic House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a statement Saturday, adding that those responsible "must be held accountable, because in this country no one is above the law." Vice President Kamala Harris posted on social media that a victory by those "who seek to dismantle our democracy" would bring violence and chaos.





**WHO, World Bank, Iran facilitate provision of imaging services at public hospitals**

Tehran (ISNA) - The World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with the World Bank and the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME), is spearheading a transformative initiative to enhance health care access in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Under the Iran COVID-19 Emergency Response Project-Additional Financing (ICERP-AF), WHO is overseeing the deployment of cutting-edge medical imaging equipment to 65 public hospitals spanning 31 provinces across the country. As part of this endeavor, 42 magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machines, 15 computed tomography (CT) scanners, and 14 angiography systems are being supplied to public hospitals, serving as a major milestone in the ongoing battle against COVID-19. This initiative is designed to strengthen the nation's health infrastructure and cater to the surging demand for diagnostic and therapeutic services.



**Study Finds Immune System Can Influence Behavior**



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Those who are allergic to seafood may feel quite ill just by smelling it, increasing their proclivity to avoid it. People who acquire food poisoning after eating a particular meal exhibit the same avoidance pattern. Scientists have long known that the immune system has a role in human sensitivity to allergens and diseases in the environment, but it was unknown whether it also played a role in producing these types of behaviors in response to allergic stimuli. According to a Yale-led study published in the journal Nature, the immune system plays a critical role in modifying our behavior. "We find immune recognition controls behavior, specifically defensive behaviors against toxins that are communicated first through antibodies and then to our brains," said Ruslan Medzhitov, Sterling Professor of Immunobiology at Yale School of Medicine, investigator for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and senior author of the study. Without immune system communication, the brain does not warn the body about potential dangers in the environment and does not try to avoid those threats, the study showed. A team in the Medzhitov lab, led by Esther Florsheim, at the time a postdoctoral researcher at Yale and now an assistant professor at Arizona State University, and Nathaniel Bachtel, a graduate student at the School of Medicine, studied mice that had been sensitized to have allergic reactions to ova, a protein found in chicken eggs. As expected, these mice tended to avoid water laced with ova, while control mice tended to prefer ova-laced water sources. The aversion to ova-laced water sources in sensitized mice lasted for months, they found. The team then examined whether they could alter the behavior of sensitized mice by manipulating immune system variables. They found, for instance, that mice allergic to ova lost their aversion to the protein in their water if immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies, produced by the immune system, were blocked. IgE antibodies trigger the release of mast cells, a type of white blood cell that, along with other immune system proteins, plays a crucial role in communicating with areas of the brain that control aversion behavior. Without IgE as an initiator, the transmission of information was interrupted, so mice no longer avoided the allergen. Medzhitov said that the findings illustrate how the immune system evolved to help animals avoid dangerous ecological niches. Understanding how the immune system memorises potential dangers, he added, could one day help suppress excessive reactions to many allergens and other pathogens.

**In Europe, Tourist Tax Is Seen as One Solution to Overtourism**



LONDON (Dispatches) - From Amsterdam to the Algarve to Barcelona, tourist accommodation will be more expensive in some places this year due to hikes in the tourist taxes adopted by many European destinations. One key reason for this is the need to limit the negative effects of overcrowded tourist areas. The start of the new year always brings its share of changes, including price hikes. And travellers are not spared, not even those planning a city-break in Europe. In fact, the increase in Amsterdam's tourist tax has caused quite a stir. Said to be the most onerous in the European Union, it has risen from 7 per cent to 12.5 per cent of the cost of a night's stay in a hotel. This price increase will apply from the beginning of this year. The tax on cruise passengers visiting the Venice of the North is also rising, from €8 to €11 per person per day. Announced last fall, this policy was presented as a means of combating the harmful effects of overtourism. But Amsterdam isn't the only destination to take such a step. According to a 2020 report by the NAO Group and GDS-Movement, seen and summarised by Schengenvisa.info, "more countries are imposing tourism taxes lately, especially in the US and Europe," thus generating "more funding to reach their green goals" through sustainability initiatives. So you shouldn't be surprised to find yourself paying more for a night's stay in a hotel

in the coming months, especially in Spain. In Valencia, all types of accommodation will be subject to a tourist tax, which will vary from €0.50 to €2 per night. It remains to be seen when this measure will come into effect. In Barcelona, it's already been voted: the tourist tax is set to rise to €3.25 from April 1 — and that's no April Fool's. Up from €2.75 in 2023, the tax has been rising steadily since June 1, 2021, in line with the timetable laid down by Barcelona City Council. Meanwhile, in the Algarve, the Portuguese town of Olhao has not waited until 2024 to fill the municipal coffers with a tourist tax whose value fluctuates according to the season, just as in Croatia. Visitors pay €2 per night between April and October, but only €1 between November and March, although the total amount is capped at five nights and there's no charge for children under 16. Olhao's measures echo the policies already implemented in two other Algarve municipalities, Faro and Vila Real de Santo Antonio. An increase in tourist tax can also be expected in Iceland, according to statements made by Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir to Bloomberg last September. Here again, the motive is overtourism and the need to preserve the environment. However, as yet, there's no word on the amount or the date of entry into force of this policy, which forms part of a broader aim to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040.

**Living Near Nature Can Improve Mental, Physical Health in Older Adults**

LONDON (Dispatches) - Living near urban green and blue spaces may be tied to better physical and mental health in older adults, according to a new study. Researchers from Washington State University led the study (opens in a new tab), published in the journal Health & Place Thursday, based on survey data from more than 42,000 people in urban areas of Washington state from 2011 to 2019. Researchers said being able to access even just 10 per cent more forest space in a person's zip code was connected to reduced mental health problems that need treatment and affect a person's personal and professional life. The study also showed having access to 10 per cent more green space, tree cover, bodies of water or long trails lowered the chance that older people would report their general health as poor or fair. "Our findings suggest that loss of our urban green and blue spaces due to rapid urbanization may not just have an environmental impact but could have a public health impact as well," said Adithya Vegaraju, study author and medical student in the Washington State University (WSU) Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine, in a news release. Other studies on the topic have analyzed how living close to nature impacted general health. However, Vegaraju said this is the first to focus on older adults in the U.S., adding older people are especially susceptible to depression and other mental health issues, which are proven to increase risk of dementia and the decline of

cognitive functions. "Older adults with depression, anxiety or mental health issues are known to be more resistant to medical interventions or talk therapy, which are the go-to treatments for these conditions," he said. "If exposure to green or blue spaces could help prevent, delay or even treat poor mental health in older adults, we need to look at that more closely as a way to improve mental health outcomes in this population." Vegaraju suggested based on the study that health-care providers could prescribe time outdoors as a potential way to alleviate mental health issues in older adults — a growing trend known as "nature prescriptions." More research in this field needs to be done in order to understand the exact relationship between proximity to nature and mental health, according to Solmaz Amiri, senior study author, research assistant professor in the WSU Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine and researcher in the Institute for Research and Education to Advance Community Health. "It is thought that exposure to green and blue spaces could help slow cognitive decline," Amiri said in the release. "What we would like to know is if green and blue space exposure can influence dementia directly or whether it can do so by reducing mental health issues that may lead to cognitive decline." Amiri added she hopes these findings will help low-income people who may not have equal access to green and blue spaces in their community if they live in urban areas.



**Obese Teens at Higher Risk of Kidney Disease as Adults**



LONDON (Dispatches) - Teenagers who've packed on extra pounds have a significantly increased risk of developing kidney disease as a young adult, a new study finds. Obesity increased risk of later kidney disease as much as ninefold in boys and fourfold in girls, according to results published recently in the journal JAMA Pediatrics. Even a few extra pounds increased a teen's risk of kidney disease, researchers found. "The association was evident even in persons with high-normal BMI in adolescence, was more pronounced in men and appeared before the age of 30 years," wrote the research team led by Dr. Avishai Tsur, of the Hebrew University Department of Military Medicine in Israel. Prior research has linked high BMI to kidney disease in older folks, but there hasn't been much investigation into the potential risks of childhood obesity for kidney health, the researchers said. The study tracked more than 593,000 Israeli adolescents ages 16 to 20 who were born after 1974, all of whom underwent medical assessments for mandatory military service. After an average follow-up of 13 years, researchers found that nearly 2,000 of the participants had developed early chronic kidney disease. The teens' risk of kidney disease increased with their excess weight, results show. Boys with severe obesity had a nine times higher risk of kidney disease, while those with mild obesity had a nearly seven times higher risk and those who were overweight had a fourfold increased risk. The same was true of girls - a four times higher risk for severe obesity, nearly three times higher risk for mild obesity, and more than doubled risk for overweight. Even those with a high-normal BMI were at increased risk -- 80% higher for boys and 40% higher for girls. High-normal participants averaged a BMI of about 22. A healthy BMI runs from 18.5 to 24.9. "These findings are a harbinger of the potentially preventable, increasing likelihood of developing chronic kidney disease and subsequent cardiovascular disease," the researchers wrote. The association held even after controlling for other kidney risk factors, researchers said. "Our analysis suggests that even in the absence of incident diabetes or hypertension, the risk is increased by 1.5- to 2.7-fold for persons with overweight and obesity in adolescence," they wrote. It's not yet clear why excess weight damages the kidneys, researchers said. High blood pressure, elevated cholesterol levels and hormone disruptions linked to obesity all might play a factor.



**Weather Change Triggers Surge in COVID, Flu Cases**

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - As winter sets in and cold wave intensifies, health experts are highlighting a sudden surge in viral infections, influenza, and COVID-19 cases. Dr. Nikhil Modi, a senior pulmonologist at Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, pointed out that the declining temperature leads to increased moisture in the air, low wind speed, and a rise in pollution, contributing to various infections. "Due to the falling temperature, there is fog, which, along with pollution, forms smog. This atmospheric condition can result in different types of infections, and many people are experiencing difficulty in breathing," Dr. Modi said. "The rise in cases is not limited to COVID-19, other infections, including swine flu, influenza, and H1N1, have also seen an increase. Hospitals are witnessing a surge in patients with symptoms such as cough, cold, fever, breathing problems, decreased oxygen levels, and pneumonia complaints," he added. Dr. Nikhil Modi emphasized preventive measures to avoid infections in winter. He recommended staying indoors whenever possible, covering the body adequately in cold weather, especially the head and legs. Consuming nutritious, hot food, maintaining cleanliness, and wearing masks when going outside are crucial precautions. "Stay indoors in such weather and not go out of the house unless it is necessary. The best way to avoid diseases in winter is to keep your body properly covered in the cold. Especially cover your head and legs," he said. "Eat nutritious food, eat hot food, take care of cleanliness and wear a mask whenever you go out of the house. Because the mask will not only protect you from many viral infections but will

also protect you from pollution," Dr. Modi added. Amid the surge in COVID-19 cases, the doctor urged people not to ignore symptoms such as cough, cold, fever, body ache, loose motion, throat mucus, and headaches. He emphasized the importance of testing for other viral infections, not just COVID. "If a patient is continuously experiencing problems like cough, cold, fever, body ache, loose motion, mucus in the throat, headache, then do not ignore it and do not just get the corona test done. But also get tested for other viral infections. Because many times people get tested for COVID-19 only when they have a cough, cold, fever etc. and do not get tested for other diseases and later their problems increase," the doctor said. "Many times people ignore fever for several days, which is not right. If a fever above 100 persists for two or three days continuously, consult a doctor immediately and get it checked. It is not right to take only paracetamol," he added. India recorded 774 fresh cases of COVID-19 in the last 24 hours according to the Union Health Ministry. As per official data, two deaths have been reported in the country in the last 24 hours - one each in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. With this, the total count of coronavirus cases in India since its outbreak in January 2020 has reached 4,50,17,431 with an increase of 774 cases in the last 24 hours. The death toll due to COVID-19 cases in India has risen to, 5,33,387 reflecting an increase of two deaths in the last 24 hours. The total number of COVID-19 cases that have recovered in India is 4,44,79,804, an increase of 919 since yesterday morning.



# IRAN NEWS



## China's Central Bank Commits to Economic Growth and Market Opening

BEIJING (Dispatches) - The People's Bank of China (PBOC) has laid out a series of measures aimed at bolstering the country's economic growth and further opening its financial markets to foreign investors. In a recent announcement, the PBOC outlined its commitment to maintain steady economic expansion through the promotion of sustainable social financing growth coupled with prudent monetary policies. The central bank has underscored the importance of an improved credit structure that supports technological innovation and contributes to the reduction of carbon emissions, aligning with China's broader environmental goals. Furthermore, the PBOC has confirmed its plans to increase the financial market opening-up. This strategic move includes enhancing the participation of foreign investors in China's bond market, which is expected to foster a more globally integrated financial environment. In addition to market liberalization efforts, the PBOC is concentrating on the internationalization of the yuan. This initiative aims to elevate the Chinese currency's role in the global financial system and is part of a broader strategy to improve financial services for both domestic and overseas market participants.

## Saudi FDI Inflows Rise 29% Amid Ongoing Economic Reforms



RIYADH (Dispatches) - As a result of ongoing economic reforms, Saudi Arabia recorded a 29.13 percent surge in foreign direct investment inflows in the third quarter of 2023, compared to the previous three months. FDI inflows, which refer to the total amount of capital and investment into Saudi Arabia from foreign investors or entities, totaled SR7.99 billion (\$2.13 billion), a rise from SR6.2 billion recorded in the previous quarter, data from the Saudi Central Bank, also known as SAMA, showed. By contrast, the Kingdom's total investment in foreign countries dipped by 8 percent during the same period and amounted to SR17.21 billion. This rise in FDI coincides with Saudi Arabia's implementation of substantial legal, economic, and social reforms to attract greater external funding. These efforts encompass various initiatives, such as the introduction of the National Investment Strategy, the launch of the regional headquarters program, and newly introduced tax incentives, including zero levies, for foreign companies. Regarded as a crucial enabler of Vision 2030, this new strategy aims to propel the growth and diversification of the Kingdom's economy. As outlined in Vision 2030, this involves elevating the contribution of FDI to the gross domestic product to 5.7 percent and positioning Saudi Arabia among the top 10 economies in the Global Competitiveness Index by 2030. Furthermore, in February 2021, the Saudi government expressed its intention to restrict contracts with foreign companies without regional headquarters in the Kingdom. A year later, guidelines were issued to encourage companies to establish such bases in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Finance later set January 2024 as the deadline following which the government agencies would face limitations in conducting business with companies operating without their regional headquarters in the Kingdom. Investment Minister Khalid Al-Falih, in a November interview with Bloomberg, stated that the number of licenses issued to companies for the establishment of their regional headquarters surpassed the Kingdom's target of 160 by the year end. Over 200 international firms from various sectors, including energy, technology, health care, and hospitality, have now set up bases in Riyadh, he added. Noted firms that relocated to the Kingdom include Northern Trust, Bechtel, and Pepsico from the US, and IHG Hotels and Resorts, PwC, and Deloitte from the UK. From Jan. 1 onward, the Investment Ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and the General Authority for Foreign Trade, will create a list of companies without headquarters in the Kingdom. This list, to be updated regularly, will be accessible on the unified electronic portal for government procurement. As a result, such companies will only be considered for government projects under exceptional circumstances. The ministry also announced a zero income tax policy in December 2023 for foreign entities relocating their regional headquarters, effective from the license issuance date. This incentive incorporates no levy on corporate profits for 30 years.

## U.S. Economy Cranks out Jobs at Brisk Clip in December



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. employers hired more workers than expected in December while raising wages at a solid clip, casting some doubt on financial market expectations that the Federal Reserve would start cutting interest rates in March. There were, however, some cracks in the closely watched employment report from the Labor Department. The economy added 71,000 fewer jobs in October and November than previously reported. While the unemployment rate held at 3.7% last month, that was because 676,000 people left the labor force, almost erasing all the gains in participation since February. Household employment fell sharply and the workweek was on average slightly shorter than in November. Nonetheless, the report indicated that the economy avoided a recession last year and would likely continue to grow through 2024 as labor market resilience supports consumer spending. "A gradual labor market cooldown remains in place," said Scott Anderson, chief U.S. economist at BMO Capital Markets in San Francisco. "However, the lingering labor market resilience and strength in wage growth could keep the Fed on the sidelines for longer than the markets currently expect." Nonfarm payrolls increased by 216,000 jobs last month, the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast payrolls rising by 170,000 jobs. The economy added 2.7 million jobs in 2023, a sharp step-down from the 4.8 million positions created in 2022. That reflected cooling demand in the economy following 525 basis points worth of rate hikes from the U.S. central bank since March 2022. Roughly 100,000 jobs per month are needed to keep up with growth in the working age population. Government hiring as state and local authorities try to bring education staffing back to pre-pandemic levels led the rise in employment last month, with 52,000 jobs added. Government payrolls growth averaged 56,000 jobs per month in 2023, more than double the average monthly gain of 23,000 in 2022. Employment in the healthcare sector increased 38,000, spread across ambulatory healthcare services and hospitals. Unseasonably mild weather boosted hiring at construction sites, with payrolls in the industry rising 17,000. Leisure and

hospitality employment gained 40,000. Employment in the industry is below levels seen before the COVID-19 pandemic by 163,000. Retail employment rose 17,400. Professional and business services payrolls rose 13,000, but temporary help services shed another 33,300 positions. Employment in the sector, seen as a harbinger for future hiring, has declined for 11 straight months. Manufacturing jobs increased 6,000. But employment in the transportation and warehousing industry fell 22,600. The labor market generally remains tight, with 1.40 job openings per every unemployed person in November. That is feeding through to wages, which remain elevated. Average hourly earnings rose 0.4% in December, matching the prior month's gain. That raised the year-on-year increase in wages to 4.1% from 4.0% in November. Wage growth is well above its pre-pandemic average and the 3-3.5% range that most policymakers view as consistent with the Fed's 2% inflation target. Financial markets initially reduced the probabilities of a March rate cut to around 53% but later boosted them to about 65% as traders digested the mixed employment report. Attention now shifts to December's consumer inflation report, scheduled to be published next Thursday. Stocks on Wall Street were mixed. The dollar slipped against a basket of currencies. U.S. Treasury prices fell. The Fed held its policy rate steady in the current 5.25%-5.50% range last month and policymakers signaled in new economic projections that the historic monetary policy tightening engineered over the last two years is at an end and lower borrowing costs are coming in 2024. There was an increase in the share of industries reporting job growth last month, helping to assuage concerns that hiring was too concentrated in a few sectors. With December's employment report, the government incorporated annual revisions to the seasonally adjusted household survey data, from which the unemployment rate is derived, for the past five years. The revisions had little impact on the jobless rate or the labor force participation rate. The unemployment rate has risen from a five-decade low of 3.4% in April amid an influx of people into the labor force, some of it tied to a rise in immigration.

## Canada's Jobs Growth Stalls in December as Wages Accelerate



OTTAWA (Reuters) - Canada's economy added far fewer jobs than expected in December and the jobless rate remained at 5.8%, but permanent employees' wages increased at the fastest pace in three years, data showed. The economy added just a net 100 jobs last month, Statistics Canada said. Analysts polled by Reuters had forecast a net gain of 13,500 jobs and the unemployment rate to tick up to 5.9% from 5.8% in November. The average hourly wage growth for permanent employees - a figure closely watched by the central bank - accelerated to an annual rate of 5.7% in December - the highest since January 2021 - from 5.0% in November, Statscan said. "The main story here is we are seeing some cool down in the job market," said Doug Porter, chief economist at BMO Capital Markets. "The one disturbing aspect for the (central) bank is that average hourly wages took a big step up in the month." The Bank of Canada (BoC) has said wage growth that sticks above 4% would hinder its efforts to sufficiently cool inflation. The Canadian dollar was trading 0.1% lower at 1.3360 per U.S. dollar, or 74.85 U.S. cents, after earlier touching a 17-day low at 1.3398. The Canadian jobs figures were released at the same time as U.S. data, which showed the economy there added more workers than expected in December. Wage growth in Canada has remained strong even though job growth has eased in recent months as the economy slows under the impact of the BoC's 10 rate hikes between March 2022 and July 2023. Canada's economic growth was flat in October. "The stagnation in employment, which follows sluggish GDP growth last year, suggests that the impacts of high interest rates are becoming more widespread across the economy," said Royce Mendes, head of macro strategy at Desjardins Group.

## Turkish Banks Trim Deposit Rates as Margins Pressured



ISTANBUL (Reuters) - Some Turkish banks have begun to cut their lira deposit rates to ease pressure on margins, banking sources said, after rising interest rates during the central bank's rate tightening cycle curbed loan demand. Deposit rates climbed in the second half of 2023 as Ankara implemented a policy U-turn towards greater orthodoxy, hiking rates sharply. It has also started to wind down the so-called KKM scheme, which aimed to protect lira deposits from what has been sustained depreciation since a late-2021 currency crisis. Banking sources said deposit rates, which exceeded 52% on average at the end of 2023, dropped to as low as 44% at the start of this year as banks sought to manage their spreads amid concerns about the funding costs they were facing. Until elections last May, when President Tayyip Erdogan won a new term, the central bank implemented an unorthodox, Erdogan-backed policy of low rates despite high inflation. Since the election, it has pushed up its policy rate by 3,400 basis points to 42.5%. Loan rates and deposit rates climbed in parallel with the policy rate and a senior banker said banks are now seriously trying to control the cost side to manage spreads well. The banking sector's net interest income decreased some

4% year-on-year in the January-November period to 632.6 billion lira (\$21.3 billion) as unconventional policies widened the deposit-loan interest rate gap. The contraction in net interest income neared 20% in the summer months. Two banking sources said deposit rates at some top state and private banks decreased by up to 5 points, declining to provide names as they were not authorized to speak on the issue. "Banks are trying to control costs. Inflation-indexed bonds no longer have as positive an effect as before," one source said. Banks had been offering higher deposit rates to make lira deposits more attractive in line with the authorities' exit strategy from the KKM scheme, while loan demand has declined due to high interest rates. The ratio of lira loans to domestic lira deposits has as a result decreased from 110% in January last year to 95% in November. This has led to growing cost pressures on banks. Financial sector consultant and economist Arda Tunca said demand for commercial loans was quite weak. "Banks' safes are full of deposits, but it is difficult for them to convert them into loans," Tunca said. "This means banks hold deposits more than they need. Why not lowering funding costs then?"

## Int'l Defense Experts to Speak at Second World Defense Show



RIYADH (Dispatches) - The second World Defense Show is preparing to begin in February, revealing some of the industry titans and senior government figures who will address the show's visitors and exhibitors over four days. Under the patronage of King Salman, WDS 2024 will be held between Feb. 4 to Feb. 8 in Riyadh. It will host the exclusive Future Defense Leadership Forum on preview day, followed by four days of interactive industry discussion and demonstration in the main conference room and across dedicated content theaters, in three of the exhibition halls. "We are delighted to confirm an exciting program of industry-leading international and regional speakers, who will address visitors and exhibitors in people, technology and capability-focused discussions," said Andrew Pearcey, CEO, World Defense Show. "World Defense Show is not just an exhibition of ground-breaking technology, the event offers a chance for the leaders in the field of defense to convene for the shared purpose of addressing the challenges facing the industry and the world. WDS's role as an enabler of global collaboration will extend beyond the event itself, providing a platform for countries to engage in international cooperation," he said. The Future Defense Leadership Forum at the World Defense Show 2024 will begin with an address by Ahmad Abdulaziz Al-Othay, governor of the General Authority for Military Industries. This event, attended by high-level government and private-sector delegates from the global defense industry, is set to delve into national policy, technology and innovation, offering insights into both Saudi and global perspectives on defense and security challenges over the next decade. The forum will feature a series of keynote addresses, including "Enhancing KSA's Investment Ecosystem" by Khalid Al-Falih, minister of investment, and a discussion on "Defense Force Readiness" by General Fayyadh Al-Ruwaili, chief of the general staff of the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces. Ahmed Al-Khateeb, chairman of SAMI, will address "Security and Stability in the New Saudi Era," underscoring the importance of innovation and adaptation in defense technology. The forum will also host key panel discussions. "The People Challenge: Attracting, Upskilling and Retaining the Right Talent for the Defense sector" will bring together Prof. Haluk Gorgun, president of the Defense Industry Agency in Turkey; Walid Abukhaled, CEO of SAMI; Sulaiman Alabtain, CEO and chairman of SOFON Industries; and Eric Beranger, CEO of MBDA.



## Turkish-Made Heavyweight Torpedo AKYA Completes Test-Fire

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Türkiye successfully test-fired the domestically-produced heavyweight torpedo AKYA with warhead. AKYA, developed by Turkish defense giant Roketsan, was launched from the TCG Preveze submarine in the Eastern Mediterranean on Wednesday, and it hit the target with full accuracy, the National Defense Ministry said in a statement. The fully indigenous, new-generation torpedo hit the target from a distance of 12,000 yards and sank it. Naval Forces Commander Adm. Ercument Tatlioglu, Defense Industries Presidency chief Haluk Gorgun and Roketsan CEO Murat Ikinici watched the test-firing of AKYA from the command center of TCG GÖKOVA, a Turkish frigate. "Today is a very important day for the Turkish Naval Forces. We performed a very successful launch of our local and national torpedo AKYA, and we included it in the inventory of the Turkish Naval Forces," said Tatlioglu in his remarks after the test-firing. "We will soon put into service our Hisar naval national and local guided missile, which we will use against air targets from our ships. Likewise, our national and local mine Malaman will be added to our inventory in a short time," said the commander, as he recalled that Atmaca, an anti-ship guided cruise missile developed by Roketsan, has recently been added to the navy's inventory. "Our ships use our domestically developed fire control systems, guidance bullets and torpedoes," he added.

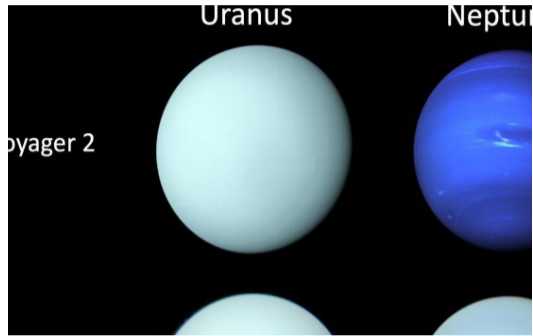


## Changes in Muscles May Explain Fatigue in Patients With Long COVID

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Muscle cells' "power stations" function less effectively in people with long COVID, potentially explaining the persistent fatigue that's a hallmark of the condition. That's the finding of a Dutch study published Thursday in the journal *Nature Communications*. "We're seeing clear changes in the muscles in these patients," said study lead author Michèle van Vugt, a professor of internal medicine at Amsterdam University Medical Center (UMC). According to background information from the researchers, about one in every eight COVID-19 patients will go on to experience long COVID. Symptoms can last for months and include fatigue, problems with memory and thinking, and other issues.



## Researchers Reveal True Colors of Neptune, Uranus



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The true colors of Uranus and Neptune are different than what has been commonly portrayed, according to new research from the Royal Astronomical Society released Friday. The research shows that both Uranus and Neptune are closer to greenish blue as opposed to the deep blue hue usually associated with Neptune and the greener shade of Uranus based on images taken from NASA's Voyager 2 mission. "Although the familiar Voyager 2 images of Uranus were published in a form closer to 'true' color, those of Neptune were, in fact, stretched and enhanced and therefore made artificially too blue," said lead researcher Patrick Irwin of the University of Oxford. The discrepancy in the colors, long known to astronomers, came about because Voyager 2, the only spacecraft that flew past the two planets, captured images of them in separate colors. The individually colored images were later put back together in composites that were also enhanced to highlight the planets' details but Irwin said "the distinction became lost over time" when it came to the original colors. "They did something that I think everyone on Instagram will have done at some time in their life, they tweaked the colors," Prof. Catherine Heymans, Astronomer Royal for Scotland and a professor of astrophysics at the University of Edinburgh told the BBC. To uncover the true colors, the researchers used data from space-based and ground-based telescopes, including the Hubble Space Telescope's Space Telescope Imaging Spectrograph and the European Southern Observatory Very Large Telescope's Multi Unit Spectroscopic Explorer to observe the planets' colors in more detail. "Applying our model to the original data, we have been able to reconstitute the most accurate representation yet of the color of both Neptune and Uranus," Irwin said.



## Fairy-Tale Ice Sculptures Lure Tourists Into China's Harbin

HARBIN (Dispatches) - China's annual Ice and Snow Festival, with its fairy-tale ice sculptures, opened on Friday, January 5 attracting throngs of tourists who shuffled carefully over the slippery ice and snow and dragged their children in sledges around the park. This year the ice park spans 810,000 sq meters with 250,000 cubic meters of sculptured ice, harvested from the nearby frozen Songhua River, and lit up at night with colorful lights. The sculptures, some a few-stories-high, featured Chinese-style buildings and bridges, fairy-tale castles, towers and one fashioned after Beijing's Temple of Heaven. Several ice slides were built for children and adults around the park. The festival's marketing vice director Sun Zemin told Reuters the average amount of people visiting the park daily has increased significantly to around 30,000 this year, and hotel rooms in the city booked out past Spring Festival in February. "In 2018, the average number of people attending the park per day was around 18,500... So the overall number of people has close to doubled compared to previous years," he said. Harbin is the capital city of China's most northern province Heilongjiang, which shares a border with Russia 3,000 kms (1,864 miles) long. Over the New Year holidays, the festival park received over five times more visitors than a year ago at 163,200 people and generated 46.18 million yuan (\$6.45 million) in income, nearly six times higher

than a year ago, the provincial Heilongjiang TV station said. That helped draw some 3.05 million tourists to the city during the same period, and Heilongjiang's culture and tourism department dubbed the tourist boom an "ice and snow miracle" in Harbin this winter. This year's winter has proven an important season for Harbin, as interest in the icy destination soared after social media posts showed many citizens from the warmer south flocking to the snowy city, seen as key in jumpstarting the "ice and snow" economy there. The southern patrons, bundled up tightly to brave the sub-zero chill and many donning cute furry eared-hats, won themselves an endearing nickname from the locals, "Southern Little Potatoes." Harbin has become an internet hit after "Southern Little Potatoes" turned into a trending topic on domestic social media, state media Xinhua said, citing Harbin's tourism bureau director Wang Hongxin. "This is the first winter holiday since the pandemic restrictions were lifted, and everyone can't hold back," Long Ping, a 19-year-old college student said, adding that people wanted to go out and relax after a stressful few years of the COVID pandemic. China lifted its strict COVID lockdown restrictions in December 2022 but many businesses especially those in the tourism sector took to a stuttering revival as people fell sick and travel was weak last winter.

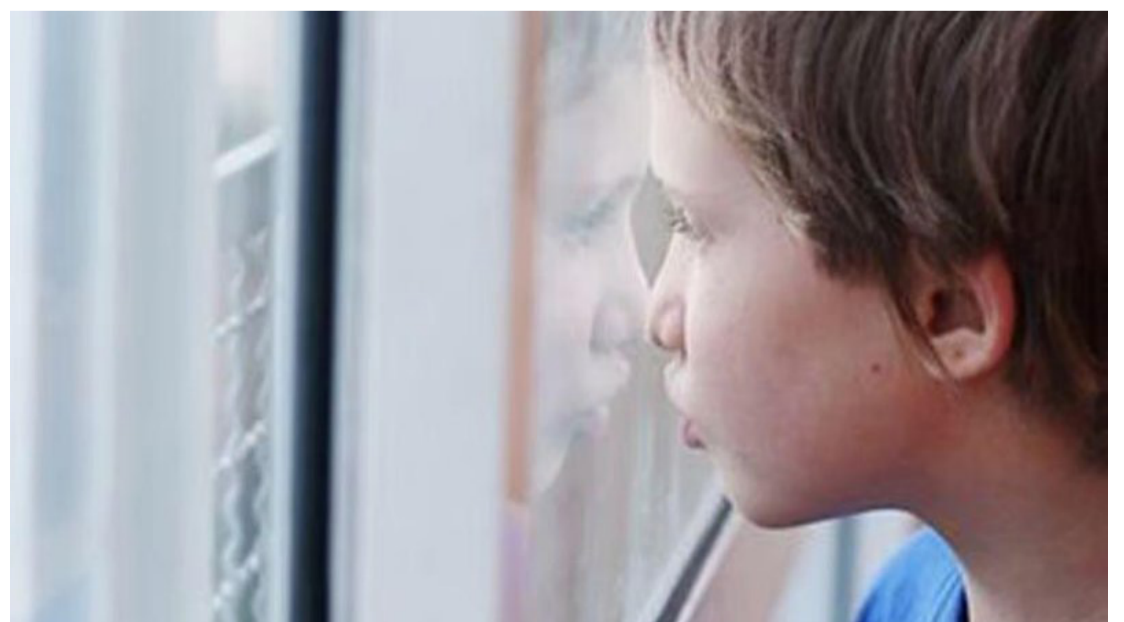
## High-Nutritional Crops Needed in Africa as Population Increases

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Twaft Jennings from the University of Leeds, states diversification towards fruits, vegetables and crops such as cassava, millet and sorghum would improve nutrition security in the country. According to the most recent World Bank report, economic growth in the region has slowed in the past few years as rising conflict and violence and climate shocks are poised to exacerbate the issue. About 462 million people in the region were still living in extreme poverty in 2023. Research carried out by the integrated Future Estimator for Emissions and Diets (iFEED) in Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia reveals that by 2050, climate change extremes will increase in frequency and severity by 2050, including "droughts, intense rainfall, and days in the growing season above 35 degrees." That could lead to reduced crop yields, including an average maize yield decrease of 25% by 2050. Over the past few years, the region has seen a small influx of climate-smart agricultural programs planting seeds, maize, sorghum, groundnuts, cowpeas, vegetables. In an interview with EurekaAlert, Professor Jennie Macdiarmid, from the Rowett Institute at the University of Aberdeen and one of the authors of the paper said the study highlighted the need to place nutrition at the heart of agricultural policy. "If policy solutions focus only on increasing production of calories and adapting to be climate smart, it is likely there will be negative consequences for health through nutritionally poor diets," she said.



## Spaces Around Brain's Blood Vessels May Show Risk of Autism

LONDON (Dispatches) - The fluid-filled spaces around the brain's blood vessels need proper waste "clearance" every few hours. When that fails to happen, a baby's risk for autism appears to rise, new research shows. It's too early to say that trouble within these "perivascular" spaces causes autism, but it seems to be an early marker for the condition, a team from the University of North Carolina (UNC) reports. "Our findings were striking, given that neuro-radiologists typically view enlarged perivascular spaces as a sign of neuro-degeneration in adults, but this study reported it in toddlers," noted study co-author Dea Garic, a research assistant professor in UNC's department of psychiatry. "This is an important aspect of brain development in the first years of life that should be monitored," Garic added in a university news release. According to Autism Speaks, about 1 in every 36 U.S. children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Autism's exact origins remain unclear, and a better understanding of the condition could lead to better prevention and treatment. In the new study, the UNC team focused on perivascular spaces within the brain. Because toxins called amyloid plaques (linked to Alzheimer's disease) can build up within these fluid-filled areas, they've long been a target of research in older adults. Garic and study co-author Mark Shen wondered if they might also play a role in brain health very early in the life span. As the researchers explained, every six hours cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) pulses through perivascular spaces in the brain, flushing out inflammatory and other waste products that could otherwise hamper brain activity. That waste includes amyloid beta. This brain-cleansing process is especially active during sleep. And, given that autism and sleep issues often arise together, the UNC team wondered if perivascular spaces might explain why. From studies in animals and older adults, they already knew that poor sleep can trigger an unhealthy enlargement of perivascular spaces. Would the same hold true in small kids? To find out, the investigators looked at 870 brain MRIs taken of sleeping children at six, 12 and 24 months of age. These babies were all the younger siblings of kids with autism - meaning they were already at higher risk of developing the condition. Their brain MRIs showed a correlation between enlarged perivascular spaces and a later autism diagnosis, the researchers reported. Kids with enlarged perivascular spaces in their brains before the age of 24 months were 2.2 times more likely to be diagnosed later with autism, compared to kids whose MRIs showed normal-sized perivascular spaces.



## Study Explores Whether a Statin Inhaler Could Relieve Asthma, COPD

LONDON (Dispatches) - Drugs already used by millions to lower cholesterol might someday have a new role: Relieving asthma and COPD. That's the hope of a new line of research underway at the University of California, Davis. A study funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health is seeking to determine whether a "statin inhaler" might reduce the airway inflammation that makes breathing difficult for folks with illnesses like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Taking a statin pill has no significant effect on the airways, but "delivering statins directly to the lung via inhalation might achieve better local tissue drug levels, and therefore, better clinical results," theorized lead investigator Amir Zeki, a professor of internal medicine who specializes in pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at UC Davis. This research is still in its early stages. However, if it pans out it might offer another treatment option to the more than 26.5 million Americans with asthma and the more than 16 million battling COPD. Zeki's team is focusing on what's known as airway smooth muscle (ASM) - tissue which lies within each airway's wall and helps control airflow. The inflammation that drives asthma can trigger a tightening of smooth muscle, restricting airways. This "hyperactivity" of smooth muscle also plays a role in COPD, the researchers explained. Treatments such as asthma bronchodilators already target receptors on specific smooth muscle cells, triggering a healthy relaxation of the muscle. But these meds aren't always effective. "Despite their widespread use, current inhaler therapies that treat asthma and COPD remain inadequate in controlling symptoms for many patients, especially those with moderate to severe disease," Zeki said in a UC Davis news release. "For this reason, we need novel inhaled medications to treat obstructive airway diseases such as asthma via mechanisms of action different from current standard-of-care therapies."







## Germany Make United Cup Final

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Australia's Alex De Minaur backed up his upset of Novak Djokovic by defeating Alexander Zverev Saturday, but it was not enough to prevent Germany booking a United Cup final against Poland. De Minaur battled past the world number seven 5-7, 6-3, 6-4 to send the tie to a deciding mixed doubles after Angelique Kerber dug deep to beat Ajla Tomljanovic 4-6, 6-2, 7-6 (9/7). But Zverev made amends, partnering Laura Siegemund to claw past Storm Hunter and Matt Ebden 7-6 (7/2), 6-7 (2/7), 15-13 in a see-sawing match which finished at 2:18am and saw them save four match points. Earlier, world number one Iga Swiatek led top seeds Poland to a 3-0 sweep of France to make their first final after crashing in the semis last year to eventual champions the United States. De Minaur has now earned three consecutive wins against top 10 players, having also beaten Taylor Fritz in an ideal build-up to the Australian Open. His straight sets victory over Djokovic in the quarter-finals was his first over a world number one. "This is my favourite court in the whole world and every time I step out here I get goosebumps," De Minaur said of the Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney. "It's what I've worked so hard for. It's another milestone, but the job's not done," he added of surging into the top 10. Zverev looked comfortable in the opening set, but a forehand winner down the line from De Minaur to break for 5-3 in the second swung the momentum. From that point on, with the crowd roaring him on, he was in charge. Three-time Grand Slam champions Kerber came from a set down and saved

two match points to defeat Tomljanovic and post the first win of her comeback from maternity leave to give Germany a 1-0 lead. "I think we both played at a really high level," she said. "For me, it's the first singles win after coming back and it's really a great feeling." Swiatek and teammate Hubert Hurkacz swept top seeds Poland into the final with a hard-fought victory over France. Hurkacz, at a career-high nine, defeated Adrian Mannarino 6-3, 7-5 before Swiatek toppled Caroline Garcia 4-6, 6-1, 6-1. "I'm happy that I came back and I didn't make so many mistakes as in the first set," Swiatek said. "Sometimes it's a bit hard to point (to) one thing that changed (after the first set). I just feel like I needed to calm down a little bit and not rush it," she added. Garcia was France's saviour in their 2-1 win over Norway in the quarter-finals, coming through a titanic struggle against unheralded Malene Helgo, then backing up to win in mixed doubles. She again displayed her fighting spirit in breaking Swiatek for a 4-3 lead and taking the first set in 43 minutes. But that was as good as it got for the world number 20, who folded as Swiatek moved through the gears to dominate the rest of the match. A steady Hurkacz played well in the critical moments and held serve with few problems to close out his match in 1hr and 41 mins. "I think definitely today was a real battle," said Hurkacz, who won the Shanghai Masters last year and also tasted victory at Marseille. "Adrian was playing really, really tricky shots and it's difficult to play against."

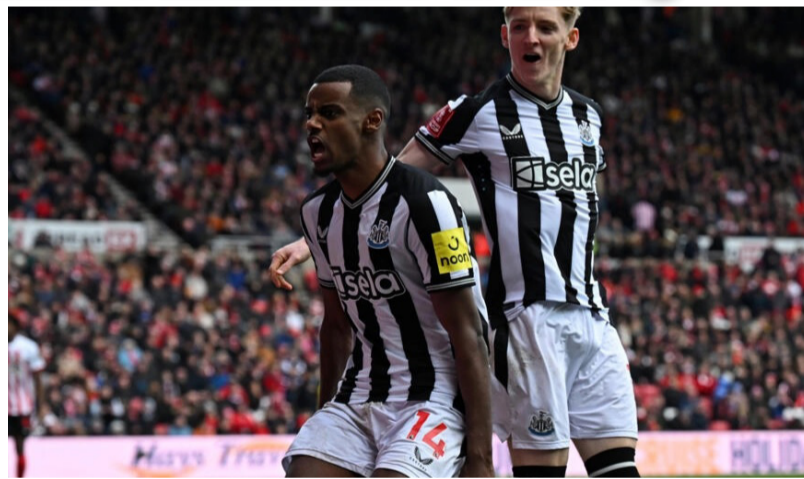
## Maradona Cleared of Tax Evasion Years After His Death



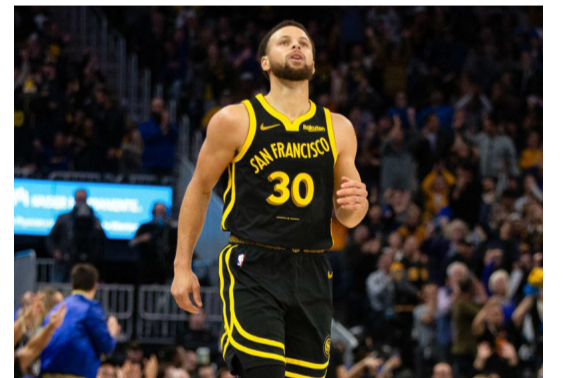
ROME (Dispatches) - Italy's highest court cleared the late Argentine soccer legend Diego Maradona of tax evasion charges, ending a 30-year-long legal battle between the ex-Napoli striker and revenue authorities. Known as "El Pibe de Oro", or the Golden Foot, Maradona was accused of allegedly using proxy companies in Liechtenstein to dodge legal fees when receiving payments between 1985 and 1990 from the Napoli club for his personal image rights. "It is over and I can clearly state without fear of being contradicted that Maradona has never been a tax evader," his lawyer, Angelo Pisani, told Reuters. Rome's Court of Cassation overturned a 2018 verdict in mid-December, a court document published on Wednesday and seen by Reuters showed. Maradona died in November 2020 from a heart attack. Fans of Napoli and of the Argentine national team worshipped him as the "god of football". Investigations into the footballer's tax payments started in the early 1990s and resulted in charges of 37 million euros (\$40.38 million) and the confiscation of some of the player's belongings during his visits to Italy. Pisani added that the final verdict "does justice to fans, to the values of sport, but mostly to the memory of Maradona". "It places a grave stone on a persecution that he suffered for 30 years," he said. "The heirs now have a legal right to claim damages," Pisani said. "I hope that they use it, in memory of their father."

## Newcastle Beat Bitter Rivals Sunderland in FA Cup

LONDON (Dispatches) - Newcastle ended their 13-year wait to beat bitter rivals Sunderland as Alexander Isak's double inspired a 3-0 win in the FA Cup third round on Saturday. In the first Tyne and Wear derby since 2016, Eddie Howe's side put their regional neighbours to the sword thanks to Dan Ballard's first-half own goal and Isak's brace after the break at Sunderland's Stadium of Light. Newcastle had lost six of their previous seven clashes with Sunderland, but their composed display neutered the fired-up Black Cats and delivered a first derby success since a 1-0 victory in 2011. After four successive defeats in all competitions, Howe hoped the derby would be a "season-changing" moment to save the wounds from their Champions League exit and poor Premier League form. Whether vanquishing second-tier opponents will prove transformative remains to be seen, but for now local pride was all that mattered to the 6,000 Newcastle fans who waved their black and white scarves in delight at the final whistle. "We handled the occasion well, were brave with the ball and were very composed. We didn't let the crowd take over," Howe said. "Today will have done us the world of good. It keeps us in an important competition and that brings hope." While the northeast rivalry might lack the glamour of the Manchester and north London derbies, there is no questioning the rivalry between clubs separated by just 14 miles. Encapsulating the enmity was a bizarre incident this week when Sunderland were forced to apologise to furious fans after a stadium bar was redecorated with Newcastle colours in the corporate hospitality section of the visitors' support. Newcastle's fans were taken to the stadium on buses in a huge police convoy, then given their tickets to the match, in a bid to avoid the violent scenes that have marred previous encounters. Howe had enlisted the help of the few Geordies in Newcastle's squad to tell the rest of his globally assembled squad just how important the derby is. The message clearly hit home as Newcastle dominated a frenetic encounter. Amid the sound and fury in the stands, Newcastle kept their nerve and snatched the lead in the 35th minute as Ballard diverted Joelinton's cross into his own net. Sunderland gifted Newcastle their second goal less than 60 seconds after the interval when Almiron robbed the dawdling Pierre Ekwah inside his own area and teed up Isak to fire home from 10 yards. Ballard's 90th minute foul on Anthony Gordon conceded a penalty that Isak converted to cap the exclamation point on Newcastle's victory. Non-league Maidstone United, the lowest ranked team left in the competition, clinched a surprise 1-0 win against Stevenage to reach the fourth round for the first time. There is a 69-place gap between George Elkobi's Kent-based club and third-tier Stevenage. But in their first third round appearance since 1988, the National League South minnows made history as Sam Come netted a penalty in first half stoppage-time before fans flooded the pitch in celebration at the final whistle.



## Curry Helps Warriors Avert Upset Bid From Pistons



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry brushed aside a poor long-range shooting night to bury two key 3-pointers in the final 1:05 and the Golden State Warriors held off a determined effort by the visiting Detroit Pistons for a 113-109 victory in San Francisco. Attempting to rebound from blowing an 18-point, fourth-quarter lead in a 130-127 home loss to the Denver Nuggets the night before, the Warriors led 95-84 following a Dario Saric 3-pointer with 7:13 remaining before the Pistons rallied. With Cade Cunningham producing 11 of his game-high 30 points, the Pistons used a 19-7 burst to go up 103-102 on a Bojan Bogdanovic 3-pointer with 1:41 to go. But then Curry took over. After giving Golden State the lead for good on a pair of free throws with 1:32 remaining, the NBA all-time 3-point king, having missed eight of his first 10 attempts from beyond the arc, nailed 28-footers 19 seconds apart, the latter giving the hosts a 110-103 cushion with just 46.1 seconds left. Curry later capped a team-high 26-point night with one free throw and Brandin Podziemski added a pair, assuring Golden State just a second win in five consecutive home games. Klay Thompson backed Curry with 19 points, going 3-for-9 on 3-pointers. The Warriors shot 16-for-38 on threes, outscoring the Pistons, who went 13-for-44, by a difference-making nine points. Saric chipped in with 17 points, while Jonathan Kuminga, Trayce Jackson-Davis and Podziemski added 11 apiece for the Warriors, who completed a two-game, season-series sweep of the Pistons. Jackson-Davis, who made all five of his shots, also found time for a team-high nine rebounds, while fellow rookie reserve Podziemski had a game-high-tying five assists. Cunningham's 30 points came despite 1-for-7 shooting on 3-pointers. He made 12 of his 15 shots from inside the arc. Jalen Duran compiled a 13-point, game-high 12-rebound double-double for the Pistons, who lost their third straight after last Saturday's win over Toronto that snapped a 28-game skid. Kevin Knox II had 18 points, Alec Burks 13, and Bogdanovic and Jaden Ivey 12 apiece for Detroit, while Killian Hayes chipped in with a game-high-tying five assists and two steals on a scoreless night. Making his first San Francisco appearance since being traded to Detroit last February, James Wiseman contributed four points, three rebounds and two blocks to the Pistons' cause in 15 minutes off the bench.

## Rublev Ends Teen Wildcard's Run to Reach Hong Kong Final

HONG KONG (Dispatches) - World number five Andrey Rublev overcame a fierce examination from Chinese wildcard "Jerry" Shang Juncheng to reach the Hong Kong Open final. Rublev kept his Australian Open preparations on track and ended the fairytale run of the 18-year-old Shang, who was in his first ATP Tour semi-final, with a 4-6, 6-2, 6-3 battling victory in 2hr 9min of pulsating tennis at Victoria Park. In Sunday's final the Russian top seed will face Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori, who beat Austria's world number 43 Sebastian Ofner 4-6, 7-5, 6-3. The dynamic world number 183 Shang has been playing nerveless tennis to beat older and higher-ranked opponents all week. After accounting for world number 16 Frances Tiafoe in a career-best straight-sets win in the quarter-final on Friday, Shang was brimming with confidence. He flew out of the blocks to break the 26-year-old Rublev in the opening game. Rublev became frustrated as he was unable to convert any of his three break points during the opening set, which Shang sealed emphatically with an ace after 43 minutes. The combustible Russian, who drew blood when he smashed his racquet into his left knee in anger, faced two more break points in the opening game of both the second set and third sets. But this time on each occasion he held firm and eventually wore down his plucky opponent as his own serve and winners began to find their range. "He was playing unbelievable," said Rublev of Shang, who has thrilled capacity crowds in the southern Chinese city. "I was thinking in some moments that I have no chance because he was dominating and I was powerless, I didn't know what to do. Somehow I just keep fighting, keep trying, trying to say something positive, trying to say this cannot happen." Rublev let out a massive roar as he finally broke Shang in the second game of the second, bellowing as much in relief as in celebration. The third set could have gone either way until Rublev finally broke Shang to lead for the first time in the match at 5-3, and held his own serve to seal the outcome. World number

69 Ruusuvuori also had to fight back from a set down during a 2hr 12min baseline war to reach his second ATP Tour final. His first came at Pune in 2022. Ruusuvuori refused to lie down after dropping a tight first set in 41 minutes and forced Ofner, 27, to rely on his booming serve to get him out of trouble more than once as the match wore on. But at 5-6 in the second set, his delivery finally cracked and the Finn took it to a decider. In the sixth

game of the third set, Ofner saved four more break points but a fifth proved a bridge too far as Ruusuvuori took a crucial 4-2 advantage and served out comfortably. "It was a very tough match," said Ruusuvuori. "Very good win and now I'm in the final, and that's why we play tennis so I will just go and enjoy that one." "I just tried to stay as strong as possible physically and make it as tough as possible for him."

