

According to Data From the "Global Gas Pipeline Expansion" Report, Natural Gas Pipelines Spanning 70,000 kms Are under Construction Worldwide at a Cost of Around \$194b as Most of the Ongoing Natural Gas Pipeline Construction Is Based in Asia

# IRAN NEWS

Iran's Blood Storage Has Increased From Four Days to Eight Days, Mostafa Jamali, CEO of the Blood Transfusion Organization, Has Said, Adding That by Offering Molecular Screening Tests, Viral Agents Such as HIV Can Be Detected in Less Than Three or Four Days

**2 DOMESTIC**

## Iran's Monthly PMI Dips to Below the Threshold

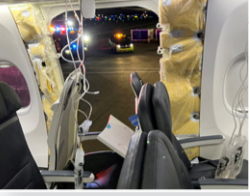
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**3 INTERNATIONAL**

## Mid-Air Blowout Puts Boeing Back in the Hot Seat

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## Iran Records West Asia's 2nd-Highest Economic Growth in 2023



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - - The United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs in its latest report on the global economy dubbed "World Economic Situation and Prospects 2024" has said the Iranian economy grew by three percent in 2023, registering the second-biggest economic growth in West Asia after Bahrain. The UN report has put the growth of Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023 at 3.0 percent, higher than 99 countries all around the world. The entity expects the Iranian economy to grow by 2.4 percent in 2024. The United Nations statistics show that the average economic growth of 12 countries in West Asia in 2023 was less than 1.0 percent. In other words, Iran's economy has grown three times the regional average in 2023. Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon registered negative economic growth in 2023. The economic growth of these countries has been reported as - 0.7 percent, - 3.5 percent, - 0.5 percent, and - 0.2 percent, respectively. The economic growth of Oman is reported to be 1.2 percent, Qatar 2.3 percent, UAE 2.7 percent, Jordan 2.1 percent, and Syria 1.3 percent. Saudi Arabia's economy has also faced stagnation and reported zero growth this year. The UN report also put Iran's inflation rate at 42.1 percent in 2023 and predicted that the figure will fall to 28.6 percent in 2024 with a significant decrease compared to the previous year.

## Operation Al-Aqsa Storm "Turning Point" in Palestine's Anti-Israel Fight



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Palestinian resistance movements' Operation Al-Aqsa Storm is a turning point in the Palestinian people's fight against the occupying regime, says Iran's highest-ranking military commander. Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Baqeri said on Monday that a number of Palestinian fighters successfully designed and carried out such great military action under complete siege in Gaza and without access to any facility. He added that the Palestinian fighters utilized their own capacities in the operation and amazed the enemy with high capabilities and intelligence at an international level. They have also managed to undermine Israel's security and shatter the Zionists' hope for the future, he emphasized. The top Iranian general said that in the aftermath of the October 7 operation, the Palestinian fighters witnessed Israel's brutal crimes against the oppressed yet strong Palestinian people in Gaza and are still resisting the regime. The Palestinian people in Gaza are not concerned about anything but are advancing their objectives, but the Zionists are suffering serious mental problems, he added. Baqeri praised the Gazans' resistance against Israel despite great losses and blockade, saying they insist on achieving their rights to freedom and sovereignty.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

# Terrorism a Threat to All Nations and Governments



TEHRAN - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani has said that terrorism is a threat to all nations, and those who use terror as a tool to reach their goals should be accountable. "Terrorism is an inclusive threat to all nations and governments. Those who use terrorism for their vicious goals should know that they are also responsible for the terrorist acts conducted by terror groups and that they should be accountable too," the spokesman said on Monday at his weekly press briefing in Tehran. Referring to the last week's terrorist attack in Iran's southeastern city of Kerman, where dozens of Iranian and Afghan nationals were killed in twin suicide blasts, Kanaani said that Iran has unfortunately been and remains a victim of terrorism. The Islamic Republic has always stressed the danger of terrorism, he said, adding that the country has used bilateral and multilateral diplomatic negotiations as well as international mechanisms in order to uproot terrorism. Kanaani said that the French government condemned the recent terrorist attack in Kerman. The two sides also discussed the critical situation in Gaza and the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stressed ending the Zionist regime's aggression, he added. Stressing Iran's clear position regarding Gaza, he said that a contradictory action is seen behind the slogans of some Western countries and they should stop providing arms and support to the Israeli regime. He also expressed hope that the United Nations Security Council will fulfill its duties. Iran has made its full diplomatic effort since the beginning of the crisis three months ago and has used all its power and potential at different levels. We are also using bilateral and multilateral negotiations and other international mechanisms to achieve this goal, Kanaani noted. When some actors unilaterally called for an unfair solution in favor of the occupying regime, Iran officially submitted an initiative based on democracy to the United Nations, he added. We believe that this initiative can be a solution to end this decades-long crisis in the occupied territories, he stressed. Referring to the Zionist regime's war against Gaza, Kanaani said an immediate end to the war is what all world countries fully endorse, pointing out that the resolution passed by the United Nations General Assembly in this regard as well as widespread protests around the globe attest to this fact. But unfortunately, he went on, the US does not allow the war to end and exerts its influence and uses its veto right at the UN Security Council to prevent the council from carrying out its duties. "Occupation is the root cause of the Palestine issue and this problem must be resolved. This cannot be achieved based on unilateral plans that only benefit the Zionist regime, and any dialogue in this regard should be held within the framework of Palestinian-Palestinian dialogue." The Foreign Ministry spokesman also maintained that regional issues must be resolved by regional governments and nations, adding that the US, which is to blame for most of the problems, must stop its interventionist policies in the region. Kanaani also spoke about the situation in Iraq where resistance groups have been conducting attacks on U.S. bases to show their protest at Washington's support for Israel's war on Gaza. "The root cause of the insecurity in the region is the illegal presence of American forces, their interference in (the affairs of) regional countries, and of course, their support for the Zionist regime," he said, adding that Iran has its own special approach towards developments in the region. As far as attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq are concerned, it should be noted that American troops should leave that country based on an approval by the Iraqi parliament, and Iraqi forces will also fulfill their duties in this regard, the Iranian diplomat said. He added that Iran has already informed Iraq that the presence of American forces, within an international coalition or under any other reason, will not help promote security and stability in Iraq and the region. Their presence is a cause of instability instead, Kanaani noted. The United States uses its presence in regional countries against the very same countries, he further said, expressing assurance that Iraqi security and military forces are capable enough to boost security and promote stability across their country without getting help from outside forces. The spokesman also touched upon the security situation in the Red Sea in the wake of Yemeni attacks on Israeli-linked ships in response to the regime's war on Gaza.

## Crushing, Decisive Response Awaits Israel in Case of Attacking Iran



TEHRAN - A senior Iranian military commander says Tehran will not hesitate to give a "crushing and decisive" response to Israel if it attacks the country. Iranian commanders will have a free hand to respond to any possible Israeli attack, Major General Gholam-Ali Rashid, commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters, said in an interview with khamenei.ir published on Sunday. Elsewhere in the interview, Rashid said former top Iranian anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani succeeded in making an important achievement in support for the resistance forces in Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen and Syria. General Soleimani raised hope among the Iraqi and Syrian governments that they were capable of defeating the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group which was a very important step in the fight against terrorism, he added. General Rashid said former US President Donald Trump accepted responsibility for General Soleimani's assassination to make himself a "national hero." However, the Iranian commander said, it has been proved that all those who harmed the Islamic Republic have failed to evade punishment and the perpetrators of the crime of General Soleimani's assassination would be punished soon. General Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and their companions were assassinated in a US drone strike authorized by then-president Donald Trump near Baghdad. Both commanders were highly revered across the Middle East because of their key role in fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Rashid said it was imperative to counter acts of aggression by the US and Israel against nations given the background of the American army occupying Afghanistan and then Iraq at the beginning of the 80s.

## Iraqi Resistance Group Claims Haifa Missile Strike


BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - The Islamic Resistance in Iraq says it hit a "vital target" in the port city of Haifa in the northwestern part of the occupied Palestinian territories on Sunday. The Iraqi Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba resistance movement has claimed responsibility for the missile attack against Haifa, declaring that Israel should await more crippling attacks in retaliation for its bloody war on Gaza. Spokesman for the movement, Hussein al-Moussawi, told Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television news network on Monday that the retaliatory strike conveyed a clear message to Israeli authorities that the Axis of Resistance will never abandon its strategic goals in the West Asia region. "Resistance fighters are fairly capable of striking areas [deep inside the occupied lands] beyond Haifa," Moussawi noted. The senior Nujaba official emphasized that the Sunday Haifa strike was not an accident, but rather, falls within a well-developed and audacious plan to confront the actions of the United States and the Israeli regime. "The Axis of Resistance is determined to disrupt US scenarios in the region and thwart the occupying Israeli regime's schemes in Gaza," Moussawi asserted. Moussawi also underlined that the resistance front is capable of withstanding the

ongoing battle for a long time because of its resources and military potentials. Moreover, a barrage of rockets targeted a US-run military facility at the al-Omar oil field in Syria's eastern province of Dayr al-Zawr. Al-Mayadeen television news channel, citing an unnamed local source, reported that nearly 30 rockets targeted the installation on Monday. The source said that the attack was in response to the US strike on a truck passing through al-Qa'im border crossing, which connects the town of Abu Kamal in Syria's Dayr al-Zawr province to the city of Husaybah in the al-Qa'im district of Iraq's western province of Anbar.



The source stressed that the rocket strike against the US-occupied military base came from nearby areas. The United States, Israel's biggest ally, has provided the regime with a raft of arms and ammunition since the initiation of the Gaza war. Washington has also vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire. Israel waged the war on Gaza on October 7 after Palestinian resistance groups carried out the surprise Operation Al-Aqsa Storm into the occupied territories in response to the occupying regime's intensified crimes against the Palestinian people.

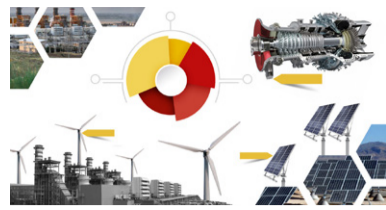
## Iranian Universities Advance in URAP Ranking 2023-2024



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - According to the results of the 2023-2024 edition of the University Ranking by Academic Performance (URAP), 71 Iranian institutions are included in the ranking compared to 64 institutions in the 2022-2023 edition. URAP World Ranking is based on six academic performance indicators including number of articles, citations, total document, scientific productivity, research impact, and international collaboration. In the academic performance ranking of 71 universities in Iran, Tehran University is ranked first nationally with a global rank of 231. IRNA reported. Tehran University of Medical Science (277), and Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Science (436) were ranked second and third, respectively. In the 2023 edition of Europe/URAP, the University of Tehran is ranked first nationally with a global rank of 231. Golestan University of Medical Science (1307), University of Hormozgan, Amol University of Special Modern Technologies, Vali-e-Asr University of Rafsanjan, Ilam University, University of Science and Technology of Mazandaran are institutions that have recently been ranked among the best in the world in the 2023-2024 edition. Harvard University, University of Toronto, and University College London were ranked first to third respectively. The main objective of URAP is to develop a ranking system for world universities based on academic performance indicators that reflect the quality and the quantity of their scholarly publications. In line with this objective URAP has been annually releasing the World Ranking of Higher Education Institutions since 2010, and Field Rankings since 2011. The most recent ranking has gathered data about 3,000 Higher Education Institutes (HEI) in an effort to rank these organizations by their academic performance. The overall score of each HEI is based upon its performance over several indicators.



# IRAN NEWS



## MAPNA Breaks New Record in Electricity Generation

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The electricity generation capacity of the power plants constructed by Iran's MAPNA Group has reached 50,220 megawatts (MW) which is more than the generation capacity of 160 countries including Switzerland, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, Argentina, and Norway. According to the data published by the group, MAPNA's power plants currently account for over 50 percent of Iran's total power generation capacity. Since its establishment in 1993, MAPNA Group has managed to build 36,355 MW of gas units, 1,950 MW of thermal steam units, 11,374 MW of combined steam units, 165 MW of wind and solar power plants, and 376 MW of medium, small, and mobile scale plants across Iran. The company is still building numerous power plants both inside and outside the country. The value of MAPNA's completed projects in the field of electricity is estimated at €24 billion, and the value of MAPNA's ongoing projects in the country is about €8.0 billion.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

## Iran's Monthly PMI Dips to Below the Threshold



TEHRAN - Iran's new PMI data for the fiscal month of Azar (November 23 - December 21), released by the country's Chamber of Commerce, declined for a third consecutive month to fall below the threshold (below 50). The new PMI reading (49.88) is the lowest in the past 11 months except for the calendar month of Farvardin when the economic indexes tend to decrease due to two-week New Year holidays. The survey suggests that the country's economic activities have significantly weakened in this calendar month. The findings indicate that the businesses are still facing a severe shortage of liquidity, which combined with lack of currency allocation and the difficulty in supplying raw materials, has caused the closure of production lines in some companies. The Statistics and Economic Analysis Center of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture, the sponsor and coordinator of the survey, announces the whole economy PMI data in a report every month. The headline PMI is a number from 0 to 100, such that over 50 shows an expansion of the economy when compared with the

previous month. A PMI reading under 50 indicates contraction and a reading of 50 implies no change. PMI is an index of the prevailing direction of economic trends, aiming to provide information about business conditions to company directors, analysts and purchasing managers. The "business activities" (48.83) sub-index has declined from 51.43 reported last month to register its lowest in the past eleven months except for the calendar month of Farvardin. The "new orders" sub-index (47.06) has also decreased for a second consecutive month. However, its decline occurred with a lower slope in comparison to that of the preceding month. The "exports of goods and services" sub-index fell for a sixth consecutive month to settle at 43.91 in this month. The figure is the lowest in 29 months except for each year's calendar month of Farvardin. The "sales of goods and services" (48.50) was another sub-index to decline in this month. It dipped for a second consecutive month to register its lowest in five months. The "raw material inventory" sub-index (48.64) has also posted a fall in comparison to 52.19 reported last month.

## Knowledge-Based Companies Need Big, Stable Market

TEHRAN (Shana) - Vice-President for Science, Technology and Knowledge-Based Economy Rouhollah Dehqani Firouzabadi on Sunday said knowledge-based companies need a large and stable market. Speaking during a signing ceremony of a cooperation agreement reached between the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) and the Presidential Department of Science, Technology and Knowledge-Based Economy, he added no support is more real and purposeful than the development of a large, permanent and steady market, underlining that aimless support may keep a company going but will not stabilize it. The official said his department has divided knowledge-based companies into three categories of start-up, innovative, and technological. The opportunity created today for cooperation with knowledge-based companies is unprecedented in the past 44 years, pointed out the vice president, adding 10 percent of the work has remained. He promised that knowledge-based companies, which are doing research for and having technological

cooperation with the gas industry, would make great achievements in the near future. Meanwhile the National Iranian Gas Company managing director said NIGC plans to invest up to \$2 billion in the knowledge-based sector within the next few years. Talking to reporters on the sidelines of a signing ceremony of a cooperation agreement reached between NIGC and the Presidential Department of Science, Technology and Knowledge-Based Economy, Majid Chegeni added, "Based on the agreement, 12 groups of strategic products worth over \$500 million will be made and we hope that most of them will be produced by the end of the 13th administration's term (August 2025)." He said the Oil Ministry is one of the pioneers of the knowledge-based sector and NIGC has taken appropriate measures in this field over the past years. "We have made essential gas equipment and items domestically and the pace of indigenization will be accelerated following the signing of this cooperation agreement," the CEO of NIGC concluded.

## Israel Has Reached None of Its Goals in Gaza War



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has said that the Israeli regime has reached none of its stated goals in the Gaza war, including the annihilation of the Palestinian resistance movement, Hamas. Amir-Abdollahian was speaking on Sunday as he briefed President Ebrahim Raisi and other cabinet ministers on the latest developments in Gaza where the Israeli regime has been pressing ahead with its brutal attacks for over three months now. "Over the course of more than 90 days, none of the goals of the Zionist regime has been achieved, including the annihilation of Hamas or even disarming it as well as releasing the captives held by the Palestinians in Gaza," the foreign minister said. "For that reason, the Zionists have resorted to the environment outside Gaza and attempted to establish a so-called fake victory for themselves by assassinating Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut," Amir-Abdollahian stated in reference to an Israeli drone strike that killed deputy Hamas political leader al-Arouri in the Lebanese capital on January 2. The Iranian foreign minister also spoke about rifts within the Israeli cabinet as well as disagreements in the US over its support for the regime in the Gaza war.



## Iran's Membership to Significantly Boost Capacities at BRICS

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Deputy Foreign Minister for Coordination on Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari has said that Iran's membership in the BRICS bloc of emerging economies can significantly boost capacities of the organization in the fields of transit, energy, oil, gas and modern technologies. Mehdi Safari said in a recently interview with the Russian news agency RIA Novosti that BRICS is becoming a market half of the world's size. He said the bloc now include the biggest producers and consumers of oil and gas in the world, adding that it will play an important role in the global energy market. He also referred to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which Iran became one of its permanent members in 2023, as a regional market that can create a win-win condition for all member countries. Both BRICS and SCO have proposed Iran to take over leadership role at some of their committees there, the Iranian diplomat added. Iran and five other countries became full members of BRICS as of January 1, 2024.

## Iran Settled Railway Dues With Russia, Turkmenistan



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (known as RAI) has said the company has settled all its dues to Russia and Turkmenistan. "International railway debts that remained unpaid for over 10 years have been paid to Russia and Turkmenistan," Miad Salehi said at the meeting of the administrative council of the country's northwest railways on Sunday. According to Salehi, some domestic companies have not paid their debts to RAI for more than seven years and in order for RAI to be able to prosper, such debt should be paid. Referring to the slogan of "a strong railway, a strong Iran", Salehi said: "One of the requirements for the realization of this slogan is the collection of dues and the payment of railway debts."



## Agrifood Exports Up 22% y/y in 9 Months



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran exported agricultural and food products worth more than \$4.3 billion to 130 countries during the first nine months of the current Iranian year (March 21, 2023 to December 21, 2023), an Iranian official has said. Spokesman for the Trade Promotion Commission of Iran's House of Industry, Mine and Trade Rouhollah Latifi said on Monday that more than 6 million metric tons (mt) of agricultural, horticultural, livestock, fishery, and food products worth \$4,312,948,000 were exported during the nine-month period, adding that the shipments had increased by 7.2% in volume terms and by 22% in value terms year on year. Latifi added that some 4.36 million mt of products worth \$2.562 billion were agricultural, horticultural, and summer crops which showed a 25.4% growth in value terms and a 1.6% decrease in volume terms compared to the March-December last year. Moreover, some 627,000 mt of dairy, fishery, and livestock products worth \$914 million were exported in the nine months to late December, a 27% hike in weight and a 13.3% growth in value compared to the same period last year, he said, adding that some 1.019 million mt of prepared and industrial food worth \$836 million were also exported during the same period, indicating a 26% increase in weight and a 21% growth in value year on year.

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



TEHRAN (MNA) - The head of Iran's Agricultural Research, Education and Extension Organization said that Iran was introduced as the second most innovative agricultural country in South and Central Asia regions. Iran has the fastest growth rate in terms of innovation 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.



## EU Council President to Step Down Early

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - European Council president Charles Michel announced that he will step down early, setting off a race against time for EU leaders to find a successor for the key position. The 48-year-old former Belgian prime minister has been organizing EU summits and government meetings since 2019 and should leave office in November. But he said he would leave early as he will stand in the European parliament elections to be held in June. Michel will be the head of the liberal Reformist Movement in the elections. "Four years after starting my term as a European leader, it's my responsibility to give an account of my work these past years and to propose a project for Europe's future," Michel said. He added that he was ready to take a "personal risk" in standing down in such controversial circumstances. An EU summit is scheduled for just after the June 6-9 elections, and "at this moment it will have to decide when my successor will take up the job," Michel said. If European Union leaders cannot find a successor by then, Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, who has had frequent battles with Brussels, could take the job temporarily.



## Israeli Strike Kills Two Palestinian Journalists in Gaza



CAIRO (Dispatches) - An Israeli air strike on a car near Rafah in southern Gaza killed two Palestinian journalists who were reporting, according to health officials in Gaza and the journalists' union there. Hamza Al-Dahdoh and Mustafa Thuraya were both freelancers. Al-Dahdoh had done freelance work for Al Jazeera and was the son of the Qatar-based TV station's chief correspondent in Gaza, Wael Al-Dahdoh. A third freelancer, Hazem Rajab, was wounded. Al Jazeera Media Network condemned the killing of the two and said it had been a deliberate attack. "We urge the International Criminal Court, the governments and human rights organisations, and the United Nations to hold Israel accountable for its heinous crimes and demand an end to the targeting and killing of journalists," the network said in a statement. A statement from the Israeli military said that "an IDF aircraft identified and struck a terrorist who operated an aircraft that posed a threat to IDF troops." "We are aware of the reports that during the strike, two other suspects who were in the same vehicle as the terrorist were also hit," the statement said. In a statement on Dec. 16, in response to the death of another Al Jazeera journalist in Gaza, the Israeli army, said "the IDF has never, and will never, deliberately target journalists". The Israel-Hamas war that started on Oct. 7 has been deadly for journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an international watchdog, said that as of Saturday, 77 journalists and media workers had been killed - 70 Palestinians, four Israelis and three Lebanese. The Hamas-run Gaza government's media office said the two new deaths raised its own tally of journalists killed by the Israeli offensive to 109. A video posted on an Al Jazeera-linked YouTube channel showed Wael Al-Dahdoh crying next to his son's body and holding his hand. Later, after his son's burial, he said in televised remarks that journalists in Gaza would keep doing their job.

## North Korea Vows Military Strike If Any Provocation, Fires Artillery Rounds



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea will launch a military strike immediately in response to any provocation, Kim Yo Jong, the sister and key ally of leader Kim Jong Un, said, as it fired artillery shells near its border with the South for the third day in a row. The remarks come after South Korea's military said the North had fired more than 60 artillery rounds on Saturday near their disputed maritime border, following a similar volley of more than 200 the previous day. North Korea again fired about 90 rounds on Sunday, the South said. The North's army said they did not pose any threat to the South as the firing drill was conducted parallel to the border. "I make myself clear once again that the safety catch of trigger of the Korean People's Army (KPA) had already been slipped," Kim Yo Jong, one of the most powerful members of Kim Jong Un's regime, said in a statement carried by state news agency KCNA. "As already declared, the KPA will launch an immediate military strike if the enemy makes even a slight provocation," Kim said, using the official name of the North Korean army. Although South Korea held its own fire drills in the sea on Friday in response to the artillery shells, South Korea's Yonhap news agency said there was no plan to do so after Saturday's events. The drills on both sides of the border on Friday sparked warnings for residents of South Korean border islands to seek cover in bomb shelters, although there were no reports of shells crossing the maritime border. In the statement, Kim denied the artillery shell firings on Saturday and said the North had detonated explosives as a deception tactic. South Korea's military rejected Kim's statement as low-level psychological warfare, urging North Korea to cease military activity that raises tension near the border.

# Mid-Air Blowout Puts Boeing Back in the Hot Seat



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - A mid-air blowout has put jetmaker Boeing in the exact place investors and management hoped it would avoid - back in the regulatory crosshairs just as it was awaiting approval of new models of its best-selling MAX jet. Investigators say it is too early to determine what caused a so-called door plug to fall from the side of an aircraft operated by one of Boeing's most loyal customers, Alaska Airlines, on Friday with 171 passengers on board. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Sunday that 171 Boeing MAX 9 airplanes B.A.N would remain grounded until the agency is convinced they can safely operate. The mishap comes as Boeing and supplier Spirit AeroSystems, which made the panel, are grappling with ongoing production setbacks that have hampered recovery from an earlier lengthy 737 MAX safety grounding and wider disruption from the pandemic. Boeing has been under pressure to expand the MAX portfolio and narrow a gap with rival Airbus, which has extended gains in market share since two Boeing MAX crashes in 2018 and 2019 that killed nearly 350 people and led to the MAX's worldwide grounding for 20 months. The MAX's troubled history resulted in sweeping reforms of U.S. airplane regulation in 2020, and the Alaska incident could prompt regulators to take a tougher line on other outstanding issues. Airlines increasingly want to carry more passengers in single-aisle aircraft to take advantage of increases in performance and range while benefiting from their lower cost. After disappointing sales of the MAX 9, Boeing's largest narrowbody, the company was betting on its newest proposal, the

larger-capacity MAX 10, to cut into runaway sales of Airbus's A321neo at the busiest end of the market. Analysts say a full rollout of the MAX line-up is crucial to help Boeing steady or improve its roughly 40% market share and generate enough cash to comfortably ride out the coming decade. Boeing, saddled with \$39 billion in debt, has been reluctant to invest in an all-new plane until engine technology matures in the next decade. Delays to certification of the MAX 10 in particular could put Boeing's 2020s-bridging strategy under renewed pressure, analysts said. Boeing's struggles also come under the watchful eye of China, a key market broadly closed to the jetmaker in recent years as MAX safety concerns overlapped with trade tensions. Chinese officials sought updates on the Alaska incident on Saturday, sources said. Both Boeing and Spirit declined comment. Since the 737 MAX was grounded in March 2019, Boeing shares have dropped by more than 40% while Airbus shares are up 25%. The first clue to the fallout will be how regulators treat certification of the smallest and least-sold version, the MAX 7, which is next up for approval, said Jeff Guzzetti, a former U.S. air crash investigator. The FAA is evaluating whether to grant an exemption that would allow the MAX 7 to attain certification before Boeing completes required design changes. The MAX 9 accident could "swing the pendulum" toward a rejection, he said. "The FAA needs to be seen as strong and on top of things and strict when it comes to safety," Guzzetti said. "The days of any kind of coziness are over."

## Oppenheimer Wins Best Drama Film at Golden Globes 2024

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - "Oppenheimer" - Christopher Nolan's retelling of the story of the inventor of the atomic bomb - bagged the Golden Globe for best drama film as Hollywood's awards season kicked off Sunday. It beat out "Anatomy of a Fall," "Killers of the Flower Moon," "Maestro," "Past Lives" and "The Zone of Interest" for its fifth award of the night, a showing that will generate significant momentum ahead of the Oscars in March. "Oppenheimer" - which tells the story of the inventor of the atomic bomb, and has eight nods - took best director for Nolan, as well as acting wins for Cillian Murphy (lead male actor in a drama) and Robert Downey Jr (supporting male actor). Downey Jr, who plays a powerful politician and bitter adversary opposite Murphy's brilliant scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, praised the movie as a "masterpiece." "A sweeping story about the ethical dilemma of nuclear weapons grosses one billion dollars - does that track? No. Unless and because [the film's studio] Universal went all in on Christopher Nolan to direct," he said. Nolan won best director, fending off Greta Gerwig, who directed "Barbie," the leading film heading into the night with nine nominations. "Barbie," which turned nostalgia for the beloved doll into a sharp satire about misogyny and female empowerment, is tipped to win best comedy film, and won the award for best song, for a tune written by Billie

Eilish. As the year's highest grossing movie, it claimed a newly created trophy for box office achievement. But it surprisingly lost out on best screenplay to French courtroom drama "Anatomy of a Fall." That film's director and co-writer Justine Triet said she had assumed that "nobody is going to see this movie" about "a couple fighting, suicide, a dog vomiting... I mean, come on!" "This movie is about the truth, the impossibility of catching it," she added, as it also won best non-English language film. Among the other winners were Emma Stone as best comedy actress for her no-holds-barred turn in surreal, sexy bildungsroman "Poor Things," and Da'Vine Joy Randolph for her supporting role in prep school comedy "The Holdovers." Hayao Miyazaki's "The Boy and the Heron" won best animated film. After an annus horribilis in which the industry was crippled by strikes, A-listers turned out in force to celebrate Sunday. Stars who were unable to promote their movies during the months-long Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) walkout used the occasion to make up for lost time on the Oscars campaign trail. Along with movie stars like Leonardo DiCaprio ("Killers of the Flower Moon"), attendees include big names from the world of music such as Bruce Springsteen and Dua Lipa - both nominated for best song - and Taylor Swift representing her recent concert movie.



## More Chinese Balloons Spotted Over Strait

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwan's defense ministry said it detected three more Chinese balloons flying over the Taiwan Strait, one of which crossed the island, the latest in a spate of such balloons the ministry says it has spotted over the past month. The ministry on Saturday, in a strongly worded statement, accused China of threatening aviation safety and waging psychological warfare on the island's people with the balloons, days before key Taiwanese elections. China's defense ministry, which last month declined to comment on the balloons, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The potential for China to use balloons for spying became a global issue last February when the United States shot down what it said was a Chinese surveillance balloon. China said the balloon was a civilian craft that accidentally drifted astray. Taiwan is on high alert for Chinese military and political activity ahead of this Saturday's presidential and parliamentary elections. It says China is exerting military and economic pressure in an attempt to interfere in the elections. China views the island as its own territory, a claim Taiwan's government rejects. Since last month Taiwan's defence ministry has reported several instances of Chinese balloons flying over the Taiwan Strait. It has said over the past week some balloons had flown over Taiwan island near major air bases. In the latest incident, revealed by the ministry on Monday in its daily report on Chinese military activities over the past 24 hours, it said three balloons had flown over the strait's sensitive median line on Sunday. However, only one crossed Taiwan island, right at its southern tip, according to a map the ministry provided. The balloons all headed east before vanishing, it added. On Monday, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) vice presidential candidate Hsiao Bi-khim said China should stop harassing Taiwan. "We do not welcome the use of intimidation and threats to interfere with the lives of Taiwan's people at any time," she said. "Not only this week, we hope peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait can continue for a long time."

## Bangladesh's Hasina Wins Re-Election

DHAKA (Dispatches) - Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won re-election for a fifth term Sunday, officials said, following a boycott led by an opposition party she branded a "terrorist organization". Hasina's ruling Awami League "has won the election", an Election Commission spokesman told AFP in the early hours of Monday morning, after a vote that initial reports suggested had a meagre turnout of some 40 percent. She 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 faced almost no effective rivals in the seats it contested, but it avoided fielding candidates in a few constituencies, in an apparent effort to avoid the legislature being branded a one-party institution. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose ranks have been decimated by mass arrests, called a general strike and, along with dozens of others, refused to participate in a "sham election". While the final result and exact figures will be formally announced at a ceremony today, election commission officials said Hasina's party had won around three-quarters of seats, at least 220 of the total 300. But support of other lawmakers including from allied parties could push Hasina's control over parliament even higher. Hasina, 76, had called for citizens to show 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." First-time voter Amit Bose, 21, said he had cast his ballot for his "favorite candidate", but others said they had not bothered because the outcome was assured. "When one party is participating and another is not, why would I go to vote?" said rickshaw-puller Mohammad Saidur, 31. BNP head Tarique Rahman, speaking from Britain where he lives in exile, told AFP he feared "fake votes" would be used to boost voter turnout. "What unfolded was not an election, but rather a disgrace to the democratic aspirations of Bangladesh," he wrote on social media, alleging he had seen "disturbing pictures and videos" backing his claims. Among the victors was Shakib Al Hasan, the Bangladesh cricket team captain, who won his seat for Hasina's party by a landslide, local officials said. The BNP and other parties staged months of protests last year, demanding Hasina step down ahead of the vote. Officers in the port city of Chittagong broke up an opposition protest Sunday, firing shotguns and tear gas canisters. But election officials said voting was largely peaceful, with nearly 800,000 police officers and soldiers deployed countrywide. Meenakshi Ganguly, from Human Rights Watch, said Sunday that the government had failed to reassure opposition supporters that the polls would be fair, warning that "many fear a further crackdown".





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## Liverpool Late Show Stuns Arsenal in FA Cup

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool survived an Arsenal barrage to claim a place in the FA Cup fourth round in dramatic fashion as a pair of late goals sealed a 2-0 win yesterday. While Kevin De Bruyne's long-awaited return for Manchester City in the holders' 5-0 rout of Huddersfield was a memorable moment yesterday, it was Liverpool's victory in the blockbuster third round clash at the Emirates Stadium that stole the spotlight. Jurgen Klopp's side rode their luck for long spells as Arsenal wasted a series of chances before Polish defender Jakub Kiwior headed Trent Alexander-Arnold's free-kick into his own net with 10 minutes left. Luis Diaz wrapped up the smash and grab raid in stoppage-time. Liverpool's first FA Cup win over Arsenal since the 2001 final was a significant moment as the Premier League leaders inflicted a psychological blow on one of their main title rivals. Arsenal have now won only once in their last six games in all competitions, an unexpected stumble that leaves them out of the FA Cup and League Cup and five points behind Liverpool in the title race. No wonder Klopp celebrated with such gusto at the final whistle, pumping his fists in acknowledgement of a victory that could springboard Liverpool's bid to win four trophies. "In the end we came through. I'm really happy we could win this game. Arsenal could have won it without a doubt. We finished it off and it spoke for the character of the boys," Klopp said. The Reds, who drew 1-1 with Arsenal in the Premier League in December, face Fulham in the League Cup semi-final first leg in midweek and are also through to the Europa League last 16. "The performance was there and the amount of chances too. We just have to win the game, but we lost it and we are not capitalising," Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta said. Klopp was without Mohamed Salah and Wataru Endo, who are competing at the Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup respectively, and the ill Virgil Van Dijk. Martin Odegaard should have rewarded

the Gunners for their vibrant start, but the midfielder blasted his shot off the bar from 12 yards. Ben White's thunderous strike from just inside the area forced a superb tip-over from Liverpool keeper Alisson Becker. By the time Kai Havertz wasted two good opportunities in quick succession, Arteta must have feared Arsenal would pay for their profligacy. Arteta held his head in frustration as Bukayo Saka volleyed over from a dangerous position. Liverpool finally came to life and Luis Diaz's snap-shot was well saved by Aaron Ramsdale, while Diogo Jota hit the woodwork. In the 80th minute, Alexander-Arnold's free-kick was headed into his own net by Kiwior and Diaz sealed the win in final seconds of stoppage-time as he took Jota's pass and fired home from 10 yards. Manchester City midfielder De Bruyne had been sidelined since tearing his hamstring during the Premier League opener against Burnley in August. He finally got back in action as a 57th minute substitute in City's emphatic victory over Championship strugglers Huddersfield at the Etihad Stadium. Pep Guardiola's side were leading by goals from Phil Foden and Julian Alvarez when the 32-year-old was introduced. City netted three more times through Ben Jackson's own goal, another Foden effort and a Jeremy Doku strike on his return from injury as a second half substitute. Fittingly, Doku's goal was set up by a deft lofted pass from De Bruyne. City have stayed afloat without De Bruyne, but his world-class quality in midfield will be a key factor in their bid to retain the Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup. Premier League strugglers Luton were held 0-0 by third tier Bolton at Kenilworth Road. Nottingham Forest were also given a scare by League One opponents as Nuno Espirito Santo's men recovered from two goals down to draw 2-2 with Blackpool. West Ham were held to a 1-1 draw against second tier Bristol City at the London Stadium.

## Brazil Says Goodbye to Late Football Great Zagallo



RIO DE JANEIRO (Dispatches) - Brazilians paid their last respects yesterday to football legend Mario Zagallo, a four-time World Cup-winning player and coach who died at age 92 and was the final member of one of the country's greatest generations in the beloved sport. A steady stream of mourners — dressed in black, and the yellow of the Brazilian national team or the colours of the numerous clubs where Zagallo played and coached — filed past his coffin at the headquarters of the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF), whose facade sported a giant banner in his honour. On display near the lace-draped coffin were football-mad Brazil's record five World Cup trophies. Zagallo, a diminutive left-wing known for his tactical brilliance, had a hand in winning four of them, more than anyone in football history. The "Professor," as he was known, played alongside Pele in Brazil's 1958 and 1962 World Cup-winning teams. He then coached the 1970 world champion side starring Pele — considered by many the greatest team in history — and served as assistant coach when the "Selecao" repeated the feat in 1994. "We've lost a sporting legend," said Bebeto, a member of the 1994 team. "He was my second father," he told journalists — a phrase echoed by fellow World Cup champion Cafu (1994 and 2002). Others paying their respects included former Brazil coach Tite and CBF president Edvaldo Rodrigues, who gave an emotional embrace to Zagallo's son Mario Cesar Claudio Auvarenga, a 64-year-old driver, arrived early to be among the first to file past the casket. "You can travel the world, you'll only find one Zagallo. No one else in history won four World Cups," he told AFP. Zagallo's longtime assistant, Eliana Gaia, 66, called him a "human being without equal." "He was a magnificent person, a hero," she said.

## Packers and Buccaneers Into Playoffs, Jags Crash Out

MIAMI (Dispatches) - The Green Bay Packers, four-times Super Bowl winners, grabbed a place in the NFL playoffs on the final day of the regular season after a 17-9 victory over divisional rivals the Chicago Bears on Sunday. The Packers' win secured them the last available wildcard spot in the NFC while in the AFC, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers ground out victory over the Carolina Panthers to book their place in the postseason. Packers quarterback Jordan Love, in his first full season as a starter after replacing Aaron Rodgers, found Dontayvion Wicks with a 12-yard pass in the third quarter to put the Packers 14-6 up. The Bears could only manage a fourth quarter field goal in response and then Anders Carlson calmed any nerves at Lambeau Field with a 25-yard field goal to secure the win and send Green Bay into the postseason. The Packers take the seventh seed spot and will travel to face the second-seeded Dallas Cowboys in wildcard weekend, a classic match-up of two of the league's historic franchises. Dallas took care of business, winning the NFC East and the second seed with a 38-10 win over the Washington Commanders. Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott threw for 279 yards and four touchdowns as Dallas ended with a 12-5 record for the third straight season under head coach Mike McCarthy. The Los Angeles Rams, who beat the San Francisco 49ers 21-20, take the sixth seed and will face the Lions in Detroit, a game which curiously pits both teams' quarterbacks against their former clubs. The Rams took Matthew Stafford from the Lions in 2021 and sent Jared Goff to Detroit as part of the trade. The 49ers, who had already secured the top seed in the NFC and a bye-week, rested starting quarterback Brock Purdy and the Rams also kept Stafford out of action. Stafford's back-up, Carson Wentz won the game with a 12-yard rush with 4:56 left in the fourth quarter. The Lions, already qualified for the playoffs, claimed the third seed



with a 30-20 win over the Minnesota Vikings. The other NFC wildcard game will see Tampa Bay host the Philadelphia Eagles after three field goals from Chase McLaughlin sealed a 9-0 win for Tampa Bay in Charlotte. The win ensured the 2021 Super Bowl champions advance to the postseason as AFC South divisional winners — their third straight crown. The Eagles lost 27-10 at the New York Giants, the fifth defeat in their last six games for last season's Super Bowl runners-up. As the Bucs celebrated, the Jacksonville Jaguars were eliminated after a 28-20 defeat to Tennessee in Nashville that completed a miserable late season collapse. Jacksonville looked to be cruising towards the postseason in late November after leading their division with an 8-3 record. But the Jaguars' season imploded with five defeats in their final six regular season games as the fast-improving Houston Texans overtook them to clinch the AFC South. The Titans — already eliminated from playoff contention — took control of Sunday's clash in the third quarter when DeAndre Hopkins gathered a Ryan Tannehill pass for a six-yard touchdown completion that made it 28-13. Jacksonville looked to launch a fourth quarter rally after Evan Engram's touchdown from Trevor Lawrence cut the gap to 28-20. But after regaining possession, the Jags' bid for a potentially game-tying touchdown score faltered when Lawrence's attempt to reach into the end zone on fourth down was stopped just short to give possession back to the Titans. Jacksonville had one last attempted drive but Lawrence was unable to make any headway — tossing an attempted throw on fourth down well beyond reach of his intended receiver — as the Titans closed out the win. Jacksonville's defeat means both the Buffalo Bills and Pittsburgh Steelers clinched their playoff places.

## Vlhova Wins Tough Slalom as Shiffrin Suffers Rare Blunder



KRANJSKA GORA (Dispatches) - Petra Vlhova produced two excellent runs on a difficult course to win the slalom at Kranjska Gora in Slovenia while World Cup overall leader Mikaela Shiffrin completed a poor weekend by straddling a gate in the first run. Cheered on by a throng of supporters who had made the trip from her native Slovakia, Vlhova clocked 51.30 seconds in the tightly-gated opening run before following up with 56.32sec in the second. "It was tough," laughed Vlhova who revealed in her post-race interview that the fog had made visibility so poor in the first run that she had had to clean her goggles "halfway down". Vlhova put half a second on Lena Duerr in the second run with the German finishing 0.72sec behind. "Of course I knew it would be tough from the first gate to the finish," she said. "I needed to be ready and I wanted to be ready. I skied well, I skied exactly how I wanted. I pushed as much as I could." When I crossed the finish line and saw the green light it was an explosion, because in front of many Slovak people, it's something different to win. This year it was one of the toughest. Leona Popovic was third after the first run but a mistake halfway down the second knocked the Croat out of contention and allowed the American AJ Hurt to claim her first World Cup podium. The 23-year-old Californian, whose previous best in a World Cup slalom was 29th, was 16th fastest wearing bib 38 on the first run, over two seconds behind Vlhova. But she then pulled out the fastest run second time around to finish 0.87sec behind the Slovakian. "It feels amazing," said Hurt who admitted that the "soft" snow on the suited her. "It doesn't really feel real right now, I don't know what to say. I definitely didn't really expect this." Her teammate Shiffrin, however, endured a poor weekend. Having finished only ninth in Saturday's giant slalom, her worst result in the discipline since November 2022, the five-time World Cup overall winner straddled a gate in the second sector and failed to finish, ruling her out of the second run. It is the first time since the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022 that Shiffrin has gone out in her favourite event - 56 of her 93 World Cup victories have come in the discipline. Vlhova is now just five points behind Shiffrin in the discipline standings but remains 207 behind the American in the overall, although she has jumped past Federica Brignone into second.

## Doncic Power Mavericks Over Timberwolves

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Kyrie Irving scored 35 points and Luka Doncic added 34 to lift the host Dallas Mavericks to a 115-108 victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves. Irving made six 3-pointers to go along with eight rebounds, five assists, three steals and two blocks. Doncic sank five 3-pointers and added eight assists and six rebounds to send Dallas to its third straight win to begin its season-high seven-game homestand. Derrick Jones Jr. recorded 12 points and 10 rebounds and Tim Hardaway Jr. added 12 points for the Mavericks, who shot 37.5 percent from 3-point range. The strong shooting allowed Dallas to defeat the Timberwolves for the first time in three tries this season. Minnesota's Anthony Edwards scored 36 points, marking his 12th straight game with at least 20. Edwards also had 10 rebounds for the Timberwolves, who have lost three of their last four games. Karl-Anthony Towns scored 24 points, Naz Reid collected 15 points and nine rebounds and Rudy Gobert added nine points and 17 rebounds in the loss. Dallas held a 96-87 lead before Edwards and Towns combined to score 19 points as Minnesota claimed a 106-100 advantage with 3:53 remaining in the fourth quarter. Undaunted, the Mavericks answered with a flourish as Dwight Powell converted a three-point play and Irving sank a pair of 3-pointers. Jones added a driving layup with 24.1 seconds to play to push Dallas' lead to 111-106, and the Mavericks held the Wolves at bay from there. Irving drained a 3-pointer on consecutive possessions to give Dallas a 78-73 lead with 5:52 remaining in the third quarter. The shots ignited a 19-9 quarter-ending run for the Mavericks, highlighted by Doncic and Hardaway also converting from beyond the arc. Minnesota overcame Towns picking up his fourth foul just 18 seconds into the third quarter by scoring 12 of the first 18 points of the stanza. Reid and Mike Conley each drained a 3-pointer to highlight the sequence and give the Timberwolves a 68-66 lead.

