

Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Ezzatollah Zarghami Says All Iranian Compatriots Abroad Can Return to the Country, Yet Complaining About Misunderstandings Hinders the Issue

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Esmaili Reported the Increase in the People's Participation in Domestic Concerts Since the Beginning of the Current Iranian Calendar Year

2 DOMESTIC



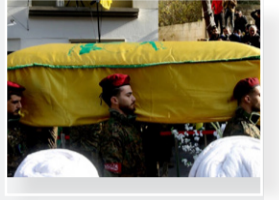
Russia and Iran Don't Need SWIFT

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Hezbollah Targets Israeli Base to Avenge Lebanon Killings

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Tehran, Moscow Smell Trouble in U.S.' Push for Yemen Resolution



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The foreign ministers of Iran and Russia said they are extremely skeptical about the U.S. plan for a UN Security Council voting on a resolution about Yemen, describing it as a pretext for the expansion of American military presence in the Red Sea region. In a telephone conversation on Tuesday evening, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov talked about a range of issues relating to the bilateral relations, the regional developments, the situation in the Red Sea and the crisis in Gaza. Criticizing the US' attempt to pass a resolution against Yemen under the pretext of defending Red Sea security, the Iranian foreign minister emphasized the importance of international maritime security. "The developments in the Red Sea are related to Gaza and the behavior of the US and the Israeli regime towards Palestine; and, proposing such a resolution lays the groundwork for increased American military presence in the region and the Red Sea," Amir-Abdollahian said, the Foreign Ministry reported. The UN Security Council has scheduled a vote on Wednesday on a resolution, initiated by the U.S., that would condemn and demand an immediate halt to what it calls attacks by Yemen's Houthis forces on merchant and commercial vessels in the Red Sea area. Elsewhere in the phone call, the Iranian and Russian diplomats discussed the developments in the Gaza Strip and the ongoing massacre of civilians by the Zionists. Iran's foreign minister stressed the necessity of halting the attacks on Gaza and the killing of the oppressed Palestinian people. For his part, Lavrov offered his condolences on the loss of Iranian people in a recent terrorist attack in Kerman and conveyed the Russian government's sympathy to the Iranian government and nation. He also slammed the recent actions of the United States in the UN Security Council regarding Yemen as a pretext for a broader presence in the region and added, "The Americans aren't very interested in finding the root causes of the crises." "Similar to Iran, we also desire peace in the region, an end to the war in the Gaza Strip, and the establishment of a Palestinian state," Lavrov emphasized.

Israel's Survival Hinges on Terror, Genocide



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf says the Israeli regime was founded on genocide and aggression and its survival depends on perpetrating such heinous crimes. Qalibaf made the remark in an address to the 5th emergency meeting of members of the Parliamentary Union of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (PUIC) in the Iranian capital of Tehran on Wednesday. During the meeting, convened under the title of "Cooperation of Parliaments for Palestine" and attended by senior parliamentary officials from the OIC member states, the participants discussed Israel's ongoing genocidal war on Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip. "What is coming to pass in the Gaza Strip today is a cause of deep concern and shame for humanity. It is a double injustice to a nation that has been deprived of any human rights and has been under aggression and occupation for more than seven decades," Qalibaf said. "No awakened conscience can be dismissive of the heinous and widespread bloody crimes being committed by the Israeli Zionist regime's war machine in Gaza and its horrendous effects on the peace and security of the region and the world." Iran's Parliament speaker further stressed that Israel's 75-year-long occupation of Palestine and the forcible displacement of its original residents in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is not just an issue related to Palestinians and the Israeli regime but an "affront" to humanity and the international community. "The establishment of this regime was through terror, genocide and aggression, and the continuation of its existence depends on the repetition of such acts," Qalibaf said. "There is no practical policy in sight by the Zionist regime to end the conflict in the long run and permanently stop the violence because this fake regime has based its survival on the continuation of the policy of aggression and hostility in the region." The top Iranian legislator also censured the West's double-standard approach towards the Israeli crimes in Gaza, saying, "What we are witnessing in Palestine these days is a clear example of the hypocritical and deviant policy of the United States and its Western allies in supporting bloodshed, absolute defense of the tyrant, and categorical denial of the historical and civilizational realities of Palestine. Highlighting the international community's duty in this regard, Qalibaf called for tapping into various mechanisms, including widespread political and economic sanctions, to force the occupation to stop the war on Gaza. He also demanded the formation of a fact-finding committee to investigate Israel's latest crimes in Gaza and other parts of the occupied Palestinian territories for ensuing trials at the international tribunals. The Parliament speaker also called for an immediate halt to the regime's ceaseless bombardment of Palestinian civilians and the provision of humanitarian access to Gaza at the earliest possible time. Qalibaf also touched on Washington's and its Western allies' unflinching support to the Israeli regime over the past decades, saying, "Israel, has not only committed the most heinous crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, racial discrimination and genocide against the oppressed people of Palestine, but as a corrupt and pampered child under the support of the Western political system and as the center of crisis in the region has remained immune from any accountability, responsibility and punishment." Meanwhile addressing the event, President of the People's National Assembly of Algeria Ibrahim Boughali has called for taking practical measures to solve the Palestinian conflict. Boughali said that the PUIC member states should increase their dialogues as part of efforts to reach sustainable peace in the region. The efforts to solve the Palestinian crisis must be practical so that permanent peace can be reached in Gaza, he added. The Algerian official also urged all freedom seekers and politicians of the world to take necessary measures to hold the Zionist regime of Israel accountable for its crimes in Gaza. The Zionist regime continues its crimes against the defenseless people of Gaza and Palestine, he said, adding that the regime has violated international laws through its aggression on Gaza. All Muslim countries and the international community must take necessary measures against the Zionist regime and its crimes in Gaza.

Afghanistan Unable to Tolerate Fresh Setbacks



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Foreign Ministry says that the international community and organizations should recognize that Afghanistan in its current situation cannot tolerate new setbacks. In a statement issued on Wednesday, the Ministry said that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the first signatories to the United Nations Charter, supports constructive initiatives that can ensure peace, stability, security, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan. Stability and security in Afghanistan and the region require the United Nations to pay special attention to humanitarian issues, problems, and conditions needed to carry out its duties and responsibilities, added the statement. As in the past years, the Islamic Republic has sought to follow a path to help the noble people of Afghanistan resist the hardships of its occupation by understanding the difficult conditions of the country in the post-occupation era, it noted. Iran seeks to reduce the suffering of the people of Afghanistan in the transition period, it further noted. The statement said that the continued hosting of millions of Afghans, supporting trade and commerce, facilitating the movement of Afghan residents and citizens, providing services in healthcare, and helping visually impaired people from natural disasters, represent the constructive approach and humanitarian goals of the Islamic Republic toward its neighbor in recent years. Reviewing the developments in Afghanistan has proved that a failure to overcome the upcoming situation will lead to devastating consequences for international peace and security, it underlined. Iran's Foreign Ministry underscored that the international community and organizations should recognize that "the current Afghanistan cannot tolerate a new setback".

Hamas Condemns Blinken for Justifying Israeli Genocide During Tour of Failure



GAZA (Dispatches) - The Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has denounced U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's claims that members of Hamas hide behind civilians in the Gaza Strip, saying the claims are an attempt to justify Israel's crimes of genocide against Palestinians in the war-torn besieged territory. Hamas made the remarks in a statement on Wednesday, a day after Blinken reiterated Washington's unwavering support for the Israeli regime's aggression against Gazans. Hamas said the Blinken's remarks are "miserable attempts" to wash the hands of the occupying regime of the blood of the people in Gaza, adding that they reflect the extent of US involvement in these crimes and the widespread violations of all international laws committed by the Israeli military in the blockaded territory. The resistance group asserted that, "We reject the fallacies and misleading narrative that US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken still insists on repeating, 96 days after the barbaric Zionist aggression against Palestinian civilians, which continues with the full support of President Biden's administration." Speaking at a news conference on Tuesday, Blinken said the U.S. continued to stand with Israel in its mission to "ensure that October 7 never happens again." He went on to say that "facing an enemy that embeds itself among civilians - who hides in and fires from schools, from hospitals - makes this incredibly challenging." Blinken further noted that the war could "have ended on October 8" if Hamas had given up its weapons and released Israeli captives.

Iran Rebukes U.S. Veto Power Abuse in Support of Israel's Genocide in Gaza

TEHRAN - Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations has rebuked the United States' unconditional support for Israel's genocidal war on Gaza by abusing its veto power against the establishment of a ceasefire in the war-torn besieged territory. Amir Saeid Iravani made the remark at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, which discussed the recent use of the veto by the US against an amendment to Security Council resolution 2720 on Gaza. The Russian-proposed amendment called for an "urgent suspension of hostilities" to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access to Palestinians in the war-ravaged territory as well as a "sustainable" cessation of hostilities. Iravani vehemently censured the unwarranted and irresponsible use of the veto by the United States that hindered the Security Council from fulfilling its vital duty of maintaining international peace and security. The top Iranian diplomat stressed that despite all international calls for the Security Council to fulfill its obligation and halt the bloodshed in Gaza, the body has once again fallen short of its duties, solely due to yet another obstruction by the United States. "Unfortunately, through the veto of the proposed amendment put forth by Russia which aimed at a sustainable cessation of hostilities in Gaza, the United States has once again indicated a lack of commitment to ending the violence in Gaza and safeguarding civilian lives," Iravani said. "Indeed, the veto granted Israel unchecked freedom for additional, unrestricted, and indiscriminate bombings on civilian infrastructure and the population of Gaza without

any time constraints," he added. Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the UN underlined that a "sustainable and durable ceasefire" was the sole way to ending Israel's US-backed genocide in Gaza. "We are of the firm belief that the only practical way to proceed is to prevent and stop the criminal and genocidal aggression against innocent civilians in Gaza, establish a sustainable and durable ceasefire, ensure access to humanitarian assistance on a large scale, and halt the forced displacement of the People in the Gaza Strip," he said. "Without a sustainable ceasefire, the tragedy worsens, leading to the loss of innocent lives, including children, and women." Iravani also stressed that the Israeli occupation should be punished for its international wrongdoings, which he said have put the whole West Asia region on fire. "The United States faces a critical choice: it can either persist in its current trajectory, or it can choose to refrain from providing unconditional support," the top Iranian diplomat asserted. "Without such support, Israel would encounter difficulties in sustaining its actions of mass violence and genocide against the Palestinian population." Since the start of Israel's brutal aggression on Gaza on October 7, the United States has vetoed several resolutions at the United Nations that aimed to establish a ceasefire and stop the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in the besieged territory. So far, the Tel Aviv regime has killed at least 23,210 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and injured 59,167 others.



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

More Countries Join South Africa's ICJ Case Against Israel



TEHRAN (PressTV) - More countries have joined South Africa in a case filed against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over the regime's genocidal war on the besieged Gaza Strip. The Maldives, Namibia, and Pakistan expressed their support for South Africa's lawsuit against the Tel Aviv regime during a United Nations General Assembly session on Tuesday. In a social media post, the Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the UN announced that Islamabad has welcomed South Africa's initiative to bring Israel's transgressions under the UN's Genocide Convention to ICJ. It also noted that Pakistan looks forward to the advisory opinion of ICJ on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied territories. Neville Gertze, permanent representative of Namibia to the UN, also said his country "welcomes and supports" South Africa's legal action, adding that "Namibia both identifies and aligns with the arguments put forward by South Africa." In a statement, the government of Maldives also welcomed the application by South Africa before the ICJ, requesting to declare that Israel is in breach of the 1948 "Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." It went on to say that Maldives considers Israel's "deliberate acts of aggression" against the innocent Palestinian civilians a blatant disregard for and violation of international humanitarian law, including the Convention on Genocide. The government of Maldives further reiterates its call for an immediate ceasefire and to open humanitarian corridors for the delivery of assistance to the people of Palestine. It also called for the Court to expedite its response, in order to facilitate urgent action against all acts and measures that are in breach of the international human rights and international humanitarian law. South Africa filed the lawsuit against Israel at the end of December, after nearly three months of Israeli aggression against Palestinians in Gaza. The lawsuit said Israel's actions are "genocidal in character because they are intended to bring about the destruction of a substantial part of the Palestinian national, racial and ethnic group." The application also said Israeli attacks breach the UN's Genocide Convention, and urged the court to "order Israel to cease killing and causing serious mental and bodily harm to Palestinian people in Gaza."

IRAN NEWS



Iran Ready to Expand All-Out Ties With Afghanistan

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Qomi has voiced the Islamic Republic's readiness to expand all-out relations with the neighboring country. Kazemi Qomi made the remarks during a meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban government Amir Khan Muttaqi, Iran's embassy in Kabul has posted on X. During the meeting, Kazemi Qomi expressed Iran's readiness to reinforce all-out cooperation and to render assistance to the people of Afghanistan. Muttaqi, for his part, hailed Iran's initiative in setting up a regional contact group to host a joint meeting of regional special envoys for Afghanistan in Kabul. Back in December 2023, Kazemi Qomi and Muttaqi had exchanged views on the issues related to the formation of a regional contact group in a bid to resolve problems of Afghanistan.

Iran to Make More Arrests over Kerman Attack



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - While a considerable number of individuals have been captured in connection with a January 3 terrorist attack in the southern city of Kerman, Iranian security forces are going to make more arrests in this regard, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a weekly cabinet session on Wednesday, Vahidi said many people, including the main elements of the terrorist attack, have already been arrested. The other elements will also be identified and captured, he added. The interior minister said the main perpetrator of the terrorist attack was a Tajik national, raising the probability that the second element also has Tajik nationality. "The terrorists had illegally crossed the border from a neighboring country," Vahidi added. Last week's twin blasts at an event held in commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of late commander Lt. General Qassem Soleimani in Kerman resulted in the tragic loss of at least 93 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.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



TEHRAN - Iran and Russia have officially switched from the West's SWIFT financial clearing system to a direct interbank transfer mechanism, the deputy head of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) has said. Mohsen Karimi told Iranian state television that the system allows companies in both countries to trade in their respective national currencies instead of using the dollar or euro, FARS news agency reported. "We have linked the financial correspondence networks of the two countries," he explained. "This means that the banks of our two countries no longer need Switzerland to communicate with each other and commercial banks of both countries can establish brokerage relations with each other. The [Iranian] exporter can now charge the Russian side in rials and receive money from them via Russian banks in Iran," Karimi added, noting that the system also allows for payments in Russian rubles. Belgium-based SWIFT is a high-security banking messaging system that enables financial transfers around the

globe. While a number of countries have their own messaging systems, most global transactions are still conducted via SWIFT. Last year, key Russian banks were disconnected from the network as part of sanctions related to the Ukraine conflict. Western restrictions forced Russia to actively promote its domestic payment system, SPFS, first introduced when the U.S. targeted the country with sanctions in 2014, as an alternative to SWIFT. The system, which facilitates financial messaging between banks domestically and internationally, had 514 participants, including 131 foreign entities from 15 nations, as of the first half of last year. Iran and Russia have both been targeted by Western sanctions. The countries first announced plans to scrap Western currencies from mutual settlements and use alternative financial systems in trade in 2022. During a meeting between the heads of their central banks late last month, Tehran and Moscow signed an agreement that formalized this aspiration.

Uzbekistan-Iran Business Forum Takes Place in Bukhara Region



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Bukhara hosted a business forum for entrepreneurs of Bukhara region and Hamadan province, Uza reports. It was attended by Governor General of Hamadan province Alireza Ghasemi Farzad, as well as Ambassador of Iran to Uzbekistan Mohammad Ali Eskandari. 21 joint projects have been launched in cooperation between entrepreneurs of Bukhara region and Iran. Five of them are foreign enterprises created entirely at the expense of Iranian capital. Iran is one of the countries that has a significant share in foreign trade turnover with Bukhara region, which has doubled over the past seven years. A Memorandum of Cooperation was signed following the business forum. A B2B meeting was also held between entrepreneurs from Hamadan and Bukhara. Representatives of the business community became closely acquainted with the activities of the milk processing enterprise Bukhara Agrocluster DZZ.

Iran's Int'l Flights Up 14%

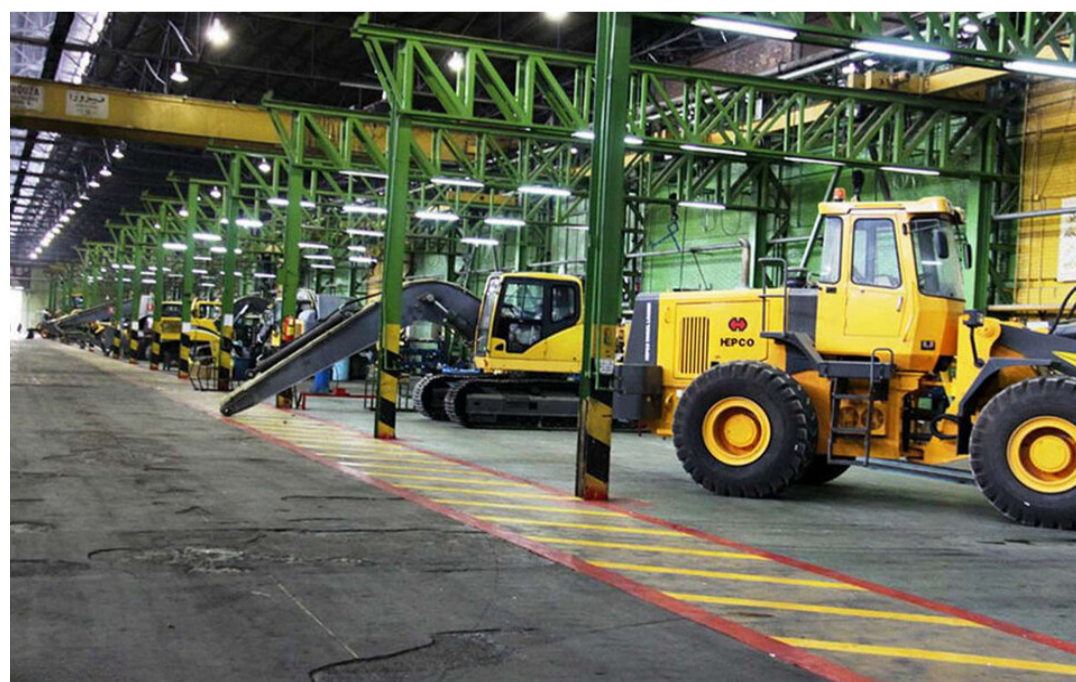


TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The chief executive of the Iran Airports and Air Navigation Company (IAC) said the country's international flights registered a 14-percent growth in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2023). Reza Nakhjavani said that 16,177 international flights including foreign flights and Hajj flights were operated from Iran between March 21 and November 22, 2022. He put the number of foreign and international flights launched from the country between March 21 and November 22, 2023 at 18,474, showing a 14-percent hike compared to last year's corresponding period. Nakhjavani further pointed out that more than two million international passengers (inbound and outbound) have been registered in the first eight months of the current year, indicating a nine-percent growth compared to last year's corresponding period. He put the number of international inbound- and outbound passengers from March 21 to November 22, 2022 at 1,991,468. He went on to say that Mashhad, Shiraz and Tabriz airports have registered the largest number flights to foreign destinations from March 21 to November 22, 2023 respectively.

Road Construction, Mining Machinery Manufacturing to Hit 4,500 by Yearend

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Manufacturing of road construction and mining machinery in Iran is going to reach 4,500 by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 19), an official with the Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry said. According to Abouzar Jamshidvand, the director general of the ministry's Office of Agricultural, Construction, and Mining Machinery, 3,100 such machinery has been manufactured since the beginning of the current year (March 21, 2023), IRIB reported. "The policy of the Industry Ministry is to provide road construction and mining machinery from domestic sources, so according to the general policies of the government, the laws approved by the parliament, and the explicit order of the minister, the aim is to use the capacities of domestic producers to meet the needs of the country in this field," Jamshidvand said. According to the official, the production of road construction and mining machinery increased significantly in the previous year (1401) compared to the preceding year, so that last year

production reached 3,400 while the figure was only 1,700 in the year 1400. "If there is a shortage in production and it is not possible to manufacture domestically, we will import the machines, and good things have happened in this area so far," he said. Back in 2022, Jamshidvand said more than 80 percent of the machinery needed by the mining sector in the country can be produced by domestic manufacturers. The official noted that a working group was formed in the Industry Ministry to assess the demand and capacities in the field of mining machinery, and some contracts were also concluded between domestic manufacturers and some of the country's mining companies. He further noted that there are 26 production units of agricultural, road construction, and mining machinery active in the country, of which 15 units are major ones. "Considering the demand for such machinery in the country, it is necessary to increase the production capacity of such units in the country," Jamshidvand said.



Iran Exports Food, Agricultural Products to 130 Countries

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman of the Trade Development Commission of the House of Industry, Mining and Trade of Iran said that during the first nine months of the current Iranian year (March 21, 2023, to December 21, 2023), 4.3 billion dollars of food and agricultural products have been exported from Iran to 130 countries. The spokesman of the Trade Development Commission of the House of Industry, Mining and Trade, Ruhollah Latifi said: "In the 9 months of this year, more than 6 million tons of fishery, livestock, agricultural, horticultural, and food products worth 4.3 billion dollars were exported to 130 countries, which is a 7.2% growth compared to the same period last year." Latifi also stated: "The export of prepared and industrial food in 9 months of this year has reached 1.2 million tons worth 836 million dollars, which has grown by 26% in weight and 21% in value." Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Russia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are the top five countries that export Iran's food and agricultural products.



Far-Right Rise Could Make Europe Ungovernable

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - The European Union could become ungovernable if the far-right performs as well in the European Parliament election in June as in November's Dutch vote and as opinion polls predict, the head of the liberal Renew group said. Far-right parties, including Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France and Matteo Salvini's League in Italy, are expected to prosper in the June election with pledges to toughen the bloc's approach to immigration and soften climate policies. "With the rise of populists almost everywhere in Europe of the extreme right, we risk having an ungovernable Europe," Stéphane Séjourné, leader of the centrist Renew Europe group, said on Tuesday. Renew, the centre-right European People's Party and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats group formed a coalition five years ago to agree broad policy outlines and divide up top EU jobs. The three have 420 of the 705 seats in parliament. However, anti-immigration populist Geert Wilders' win in the Dutch election has sent a warning to mainstream politicians. In France, President Emmanuel Macron's party, which makes up a quarter of Renew, trails far-right leader Marine Le Pen's by 8-10 percentage points.



Ecuador Roiled by On-Air Take-Over of TV Studio by Gunmen



QUITO (Dispatches) - Ecuador faced a string of violent incidents on Tuesday, including the on-air invasion of a TV station by gunmen, as President Daniel Noboa named 22 gangs as terrorist organizations and military targets. Police arrested 13 gunmen who took over television station TC during a live broadcast, while elsewhere at least seven police officers were kidnapped and there were several explosions around the country. Noboa, who took office in November promising to stem drug trade-related violence, declared a 60-day state of emergency on Monday in response to prison violence - including hostage-takings of guards by inmates - and the apparent escape of Los Choneros gang leader Adolfo Macias over the weekend. In a revised decree on Tuesday, Noboa recognized an "internal armed conflict" and identified nearly two dozen gangs as terrorist groups, including Los Choneros. The government has said the violence is a reaction to Noboa's plan to build a new high security prison and transfer jailed gang leaders. "Today's events show that the actions and decisions taken by the national government are gravely affecting criminal structures, and as an answer they have created a wave of violence to frighten the populace," Admiral Jaime Vela, head of the joint command of the armed forces, said after a security meeting with Noboa and other officials. All the groups mentioned in Noboa's decree are now military targets, Vela added. Prison transfers of major leaders have historically led to violence. Hundreds of inmates have been killed in recent years. The unrest in Ecuador led Peru's government to declare an emergency along its border with Ecuador, while Brazil, Colombia and Chile expressed their support for the Ecuadorian government. The take-over of TC's studio in Guayaquil was broadcast live for about 20 minutes, as people wearing balaclavas and mostly dressed in black wielded guns and accosted staffers huddling on the floor. Gunshots and yelling were heard on the live feed, and some of the invaders gestured at the camera. Someone could be heard yelling "no police". TC, which broadcasts nationally, shares a site with another public broadcaster, Gamavisión, and several radio stations. The attackers entered through Gamavisión's reception, assaulting staff there and leaving dynamite behind, TC news coordinator and reporter Leonardo Flores Moreno told Reuters earlier on Tuesday, when the operation to retake the site was still ongoing.

Hezbollah Targets Israeli Base to Avenge Lebanon Killings



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Lebanon's Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah said it targeted a command base in northern Israel on Tuesday in retaliation for the killings of one of its commanders and a Hamas leader. Hezbollah said the attack was part of its response to the killings of top field commander Wissam Tawil on Monday and Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Aruri on January 2. The Shiite Muslim movement, a Hamas ally, said in a statement that it had targeted the "enemy's northern command centre" in the Israeli city of Safed with "several suicide drones". The Israeli military confirmed that a "hostile aircraft" had crashed at one of its bases in the north, and said that "no injuries or damage were reported". Hezbollah and its arch-foe Israel have been exchanging near-daily fire across the border since the Israel-Hamas war broke out on October 7. Tawil - the highest-ranking Hezbollah member to be killed since October 7 - was buried in his south Lebanon home village of Khirbit Silm on Tuesday. Hundreds of Hezbollah supporters attended the funeral procession in which the group's yellow flag was draped over his coffin. The Hezbollah statement said Tawil was involved in the abduction of Israeli soldiers which triggered its war with Israel in 2006, and that he also took part in noteworthy operations in Syria. He had also "directed numerous operations" against Israeli forces since the Gaza war began, Hezbollah said. The group's number two Naim Qassem, in a speech on Tuesday, described Tawil as a member of Hezbollah's elite al-Radwan Brigade who had fought on several fronts. He warned that Israel's wave of targeted killings "cannot lead to a phase of retreat but rather to a push forward for the resistance". Earlier on Tuesday, an Israeli strike targeted a car in the south Lebanon village of Ghandouria, the country's National News Agency (NNA) said. The strike left "three Hezbollah fighters dead" a security

source told AFP, requesting anonymity for security reasons. Shortly before Tawil's procession began, Israel struck a car parked in Khirbit Silm, according to the NNA and eyewitnesses. Hezbollah later said four of its fighters had been killed. In a statement on Tuesday evening, Israel's army said it had "eliminated" Ali Burji, one of the four slain Hezbollah fighters. It described him as "the commander of the southern Lebanon region of Hezbollah's aerial unit" who was responsible for the attack on the Israeli base earlier in the day. Hezbollah did not name Burji as a commander in his death notice, with a source close to the group telling AFP he was "absolutely not" the commander of its aerial unit or the man behind Tuesday's attack. Hezbollah later denied Israel's claim in a statement, adding that the commander "in charge of Hezbollah's drone unit has not been the target of any assassination attempt like the enemy claimed". On Saturday, Hezbollah said it had fired more than 60 rockets at an Israeli military base in response to Hamas deputy leader Aruri's killing in Beirut which was widely blamed on Israel. Aruri, the most high-profile Hamas figure to be killed during the Gaza war, was killed in Hezbollah's south Beirut stronghold in the first strike on the Lebanese capital since hostilities began. Escalating tensions have prompted a succession of Western diplomats to converge on Beirut to urge restraint and discuss potential solutions - including land border talks. In a meeting on Tuesday with UN chief of peacekeeping operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Prime Minister Najib Mikati said his country was "ready for talks to achieve long-term stability in south Lebanon". The three months of cross-border violence have killed more than 185 people in Lebanon, including 140 Hezbollah fighters and more than 20 civilians including three journalists, according to an AFP tally.

Biden in Dark Over Defense Chief's Cancer for Month



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Joe Biden was kept in the dark over his defense secretary's cancer diagnosis and subsequent hospitalizations for about a month, the White House admitted Tuesday, as details of Lloyd Austin's deeply unusual disappearance raised questions about leadership of the world's top military. The 70-year-old's failure to disclose his hospitalization has prompted an extraordinary row in Washington and could be embarrassing for Biden, who faces multiple foreign crises in his reelection campaign year, including in Israel and Ukraine. As defense secretary, career soldier Austin is personally overseeing military deployments to try and contain fallout from the Israel-Hamas war, which has sparked violence against American forces in Iraq and Syria as well as attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea. After days of refusal to issue details, the Pentagon came out Tuesday with its first full account of Austin's health issues, but the new transparency came too late for a clearly upset White House. According to two of his doctors from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Austin's prostate cancer was detected as a result of routine screening in early December. He underwent minor surgery to treat it on December 22, returning home the following day, the doctors said, referring to a procedure the Pentagon had previously been describing as "elective." However, Austin was readmitted to the same hospital on January 1 due to complications "including nausea with severe abdominal, hip, and leg pain," they said. "Initial evaluation revealed a urinary tract infection," while medical personnel found "abdominal fluid collections impairing the function of his small intestines" after Austin was moved to intensive care on January 2. White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby made clear that Austin had not followed procedures.

N. Korea's Kim Brands Seoul Principal Enemy on Weapons Factory Tour



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea's Kim Jong Un branded South Korea his country's "principal enemy" and warned he would not hesitate to annihilate it as he toured major weapons factories, state media said Wednesday. The report follows recent live-fire exercises by Pyongyang's military near the contested maritime border that prompted counter-drills and evacuation orders for residents on two South Korean border islands. Images in state media showed Kim, in a full-length black leather jacket, standing in front of what analysts said were short-range ballistic missile launchers, purportedly nuclear-capable. "The historic time has come at last when we should define as a state most hostile toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea the entity called the Republic of Korea (South Korea)," Kim was reported as saying by the official Korean Central News Agency. Kim, urging factory workers to modernise and "produce more weapons", said he had "no intention of avoiding a war" and warned he would have no hesitation in "annihilating" South Korea, KCNA added. News of the factory tour came a day after nearly 50 countries joined the United States in condemning North Korea's alleged transfers of weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine, which would violate UN sanctions. The White House last week accused the North of sending both missiles and launchers to Russia in what it called a "significant and concerning escalation" of its support for Moscow's war effort. The live-fire drills that started last Friday marked one of the most serious escalations between the two sides since 2010, when the North shelled Yeonpyeong island, leaving four

dead, including two marines. Kim, accompanied by senior party and military officials, toured multiple munitions factories on Monday and Tuesday, KCNA said, describing the visits as encouragement "in the struggle for attaining the huge production goal for the new year." Kim said that while the North would not "unilaterally" trigger a confrontation, it had "no intention of avoiding a war". Were Seoul to use force against the North, "we will have no hesitation in annihilating the ROK by mobilising all means and forces in our hands," KCNA reported Kim as saying. Those comments signal a shift in North Korean policy and hint that Pyongyang will take a "much tougher stance" toward Seoul in future, Hong Min, of the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP. "It is the first time that the North has called the South its 'principle enemy', signifying the change of North Korea's Seoul approach to an ultra-hawkish mode," he said. The North's recent artillery drills were "emblematic of the changed approach," he added. Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in decades, after Kim enshrined the country's status as a nuclear power into the constitution and test-fired several advanced intercontinental ballistic missiles. 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". Kim also successfully put a spy satellite into orbit late last year, after receiving what Seoul said was Russian help, in exchange for arms transfers for Moscow's war in Ukraine.



Ukraine Producing More Drones Than State Can Purchase

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian manufacturers have ramped up output of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to the extent that Kyiv's current drone procurement budgets are not sufficient to buy everything being produced, Ukraine's technology minister said. Mykhailo Fedorov, a deputy prime minister who also handles the digital brief, has championed the use of drones to fight off the Russian invasion since its early days. "As of today, the market has accelerated much faster than the amount of money to buy all the UAVs," Fedorov told Ukrainian national television. "Therefore we need to increase financing and open up markets further, so that prices fall thanks to competition and localisation of part (production) begins," he said. UAVs have been widely used by both Ukraine and Russia in the 22-month war, providing armies with constant eyes in the sky and allowing them to destroy into targets hundreds of times the drone's value, such as air defence systems and advanced radars. Aerial vehicles are the most commonly used type of drone, although sea and land-borne devices are also being deployed. According to the minister, there are now about 200 companies in Ukraine making drones, and approximately 70 local firms have now signed contracts to supply drones to the state. Meanwhile Ukraine's power grid operator said on Tuesday severe winter weather left more than 1,000 towns and villages without electricity in nine regions and urged residents to conserve power as the energy system has been weakened by Russian strikes. Electricity consumption was at this week's highest levels as temperatures fell to about -15 °C in many parts of the country, grid operator Ukrrenerg said. "The consumption level continues to grow due to the considerable drop in temperature across the country," it said on the Telegram messaging app, adding that electricity consumption in the morning was already 5.8% higher than the day before. "As of this morning due to bad weather - strong winds, ice power was cut off in 1,025 settlements."

China Will Never Compromise on Issue of Taiwan

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese military officials told U.S. counterparts at talks this week that Beijing will "never compromise" on the issue of Taiwan and urged them to stop "provocative actions" in the South China Sea, the defense ministry said Wednesday. China "stressed that it will never compromise or back down on the Taiwan issue", the ministry said in a readout of the talks in Washington, held Monday and Tuesday, urging the United States to "stop arming Taiwan". "China urged the United States to reduce its military deployment and provocative actions in the South China Sea and stop supporting violations and provocations by individual countries," the statement continued. "The United States should fully understand the root causes of maritime and air security issues, strictly rein in its frontline troops, and stop with the exaggeration and hype," it added. "The Chinese side also elaborated its solemn position and major concerns on issues involving China's core interests and international hotspot issues," it said. President Joe Biden and Xi Jinping agreed in November to restart military talks between the countries, put on hold for more than a year. Top US military officer General Charles "CQ" Brown then spoke with China's General Liu Zhenli in December, discussing "the importance of working together to

responsibly manage competition", according to Washington. This week's talks, held at the Pentagon, were led by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Chase and China's Major General Song Yanchao, Washington said. "China expressed its willingness to develop healthy and stable military-to-military relations with the United States on the basis of equality and respect," the Chinese side said in its readout. "The United States should face China's concerns squarely and take more actions that are conducive to the development of relations between the two militaries," it added.

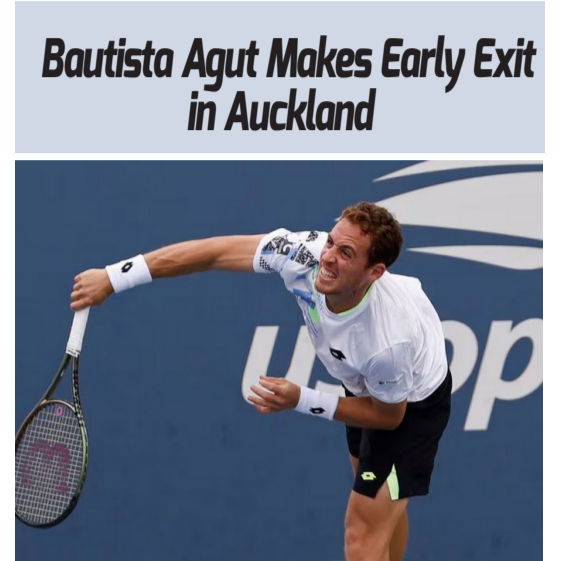




Middlesbrough Stun Chelsea Fops to Take League Cup Semifinal Lead

LONDON (Dispatches) - Chelsea boss Mauricio Pochettino bemoaned a familiar lack of cutting edge after his team lost the first leg of their League Cup semi-final 1-0 to Championship side Middlesbrough at the Riverside. Hayden Hackney scored the only goal on 38 minutes as Pochettino's expensively assembled array of stars again failed to perform away from home. Chelsea have lost five of their last six away games and 21 times on the road since the beginning of last season - the most of any Premier League team. The Blues must turn the tie around when the sides meet again at Stamford Bridge on January 23 to avoid heaping more pressure on Pochettino's position during a disappointing first season in charge for the Argentine. "If we assess the performance overall we were the better side, had clear chances, but we didn't score and weren't clinical," said Pochettino. "It happened a lot this season." Boro boss Michael Carrick could have been forgiven for cursing his luck after losing top scorer Emmanuel Latte Lath to injury after just three minutes. Carrick was also forced to withdraw Alex Bangura inside 20 minutes but the second-tier side were not fazed. "It's very special," said the former Manchester United midfielder. "I know it's a two-legged affair and there is still all to play for, but for what we've had to go through, the injuries, the setbacks we've had, to beat a team of Chelsea's quality is unbelievable." Middlesbrough had not scored against Chelsea for over 17 years. The Blues had won the past nine meetings by an aggregate score of 21-0. However, the home side ended that drought eight minutes before half-time. The pace of Isaiah Jones down the right caused Chelsea's makeshift left-back Levi Colwill problems

all night and his low cross was turned in by Hackney from close range. Chelsea, though, should have at least been level at the break had Cole Palmer maintained his fine scoring form in front of goal. The former Manchester City academy graduate has been one of Chelsea's few big money signings to hit the ground running under Pochettino. However, Palmer twice failed to hit the target with glorious first-half chances. Firstly, he pulled his shot wide from the edge of the area after pouncing on an errant pass from Jonny Howson, and then he fired over the rebound after Tom Glover fumbled Enzo Fernandez's effort. Palmer then fired too close to Glover with another big chance just before the break. The flow of the second half was a different story as Chelsea pegged the home side back in search of an equaliser. But there was a familiarity to the visitors' inability to find a way through. Despite the club spending over £1 billion (\$1.3 billion) on players in the last three transfer windows, Pochettino suggested last month he would need to look to strengthen once more in order to address the lack of a goal threat. Noni Madueke looked the most likely spark to Chelsea's attack, but he was sacrificed as Pochettino threw on Mykhailo Mudryk and Armando Broja. Raheem Sterling should have been more alive to meet one dangerous low cross from Broja, but that was all Chelsea's vast amount of possession in the final 20 minutes amounted to. Middlesbrough conceded late to lose 1-0 to Aston Villa in the FA Cup third round on Saturday. But this time the team that sit 12th in the Championship held out to keep their dreams of a Wembley final against either Liverpool or Fulham very much alive heading into the second leg.



Bautista Agut Makes Early Exit in Auckland

AUCKLAND (Dispatches) - Roberto Carballes Baena upended two-time champion and fellow Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut 6-4, 6-3 in first-round action at the ASB Classic in Auckland, New Zealand. Carballes Baena took advantage of an inconsistent performance from Bautista Agut to win the match in one hour, 43 minutes and set up a second-round clash versus seventh-seeded Sebastian Ofner. The Austrian notched a 6-4, 6-2 win over Denis Shapovalov in the Canadian's first competitive match since he reached the fourth round at Wimbledon in July, sidelined after that because of a knee injury. Also, sixth-seeded Arthur Fils fired nine aces en route to a 6-3, 6-4 win over defending champion and fellow Frenchman Richard Gasquet. Eighth-seeded Max Purcell recorded a 6-4, 6-4 victory over fellow Australian Kiran Pannu. Seventh-seeded Jiri Lehecka breezed to a 6-1, 6-3 win over Australian Adam Walton in a first-round match in Australia. The Czech fired nine aces and had 20 winners to win the match in 71 minutes. Italian Lorenzo Sonego posted a 7-5, 2-6, 7-6 (9) victory over German Yannick Hanfmann to advance to the second round, while Serbian Dusan Lajovic also notched a three-set 3-6, 6-1, 6-4 win. Australians Jordan Thompson, Christopher O'Connell and Alex Bolt joined Italian Matteo Arnaldi, Great Britain's Daniel Evans, Alexander Bublik of Kazakhstan and Serbian Mijmir Kecmanovic in securing straight-set victories. Meanwhile German Laura Siegemund recorded a 6-7 (1), 6-4, 6-4 win over seventh-seeded Russian Liudmila Samsonova to advance to the second round at the Adelaide International in Australia. Siegemund overcame deficits in the second and third sets to win the match in two hours, 53 minutes.

Karl-Anthony Towns, Timberwolves Blow Past Magic

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Karl-Anthony Towns scored 28 points on 11-for-19 shooting and the Minnesota Timberwolves cruised to a 113-92 win over the host Orlando Magic. Rudy Gobert registered a double-double with 21 points and 12 rebounds for Minnesota, which bounced back from a loss against the Dallas Mavericks two nights earlier. Jaden McDaniels finished with 15 points, and Naz Reid posted a double-double with 13 points and 10 rebounds. Moritz Wagner scored 21 points on 6-for-9 shooting off the bench to lead Orlando. Jalen Suggs tallied 20 points, and Paolo Banchero scored 18. The Timberwolves shot 53.8 percent (43 of 80) from the field and 40 percent (12 of 30) from beyond the arc. The Magic shot 36.2 percent (34 of 94) from the field and 31 percent (13 of 42) from 3-point range. Minnesota established a 67-37 lead at the half. The Timberwolves raced to a 26-11 lead in the first nine minutes. Towns opened the scoring with a 3-pointer off an assist from Anthony Edwards, and he closed the early scoring outburst with a layup and another 3-pointer to push the Timberwolves' advantage to 15 points. By the end of the first quarter, Minnesota led 33-16. Reid made a basket with 21.1 seconds remaining to cap off the strong start. Orlando struggled to make effective adjustments in the second quarter. The Magic were outscored 34-21 during that period to fall behind by 30 points at the break. The Timberwolves went on an 11-0 run late in the first half to maintain their dominance. Reid had back-to-back baskets to start the run, and Gobert tipped in a shot to finish the run and make it 62-35 with 1:28 left before intermission. The Magic trailed 90-66 at the end of three quarters. Gobert provided a third-quarter highlight with an alley-oop dunk off a lob pass from Mike Conley. Conley pushed the Timberwolves over the 100-point mark with 7:24 to go in the fourth quarter. He drained a 3-pointer to make it 102-78 as the rout continued.



Djokovic Poised to Scale Grand Slam Peak at Favorite Stomping Ground



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic resumes his quest for Grand Slam supremacy at the Australian Open, where the seemingly invincible Serb will be the firm favourite to claim his 25th major singles title and eclipse a record that has stood for half a century. The 36-year-old enjoyed one of the most dominant seasons of his career in 2023, winning a record-extending 10th crown at the Melbourne major before triumphs at the French and U.S. Opens to go level with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam singles titles. Australian Court won the last of those trophies in 1973 and Djokovic is poised to go past her on his happiest hunting ground, where 12 months ago he braved a political row involving his father and battled through a torn hamstring to prevail. Barring a blip in a thrilling Wimbledon final against Carlos Alcaraz and a couple of late-season defeats by another youngster in Jannik Sinner, the world number one was virtually unbeatable last year with little to suggest he will slow down in 2024. "You're not really meant to play tennis like that at 36," Djokovic's former coach Boris Becker said in a recent Eurosport podcast. "When does the guy get tired, or when does he run out of motivation?" Djokovic has not got off to the best of starts in the new season, suffering his first defeat in Australia in six years at the United Cup mixed team tournament after being hampered by a right wrist issue against Alex de Minaur. "I think I'll be okay," Djokovic said. "It did have quite an impact, particularly on the forehand and serve. I have plenty of time, I think enough time to get myself in the right shape for the Australian Open." With his 43-match winning run in Australia ended, Djokovic will be fired up to get a head start in his quest for the Golden Slam - winning all four majors and the gold medal at the Olympic Games - to match Steffi Graf's rare feat in 1988. "I've always had the highest ambitions and goals. That's not going to be different (in 2024), that's for sure," Djokovic said after outclassing Alcaraz and Sinner in back-to-back matches to secure the year-end top spot at the ATP Finals in November. "The drive that I have is still there. My body has been serving me well, listening to me well. I have a great team of people around me. The motivation, especially for the biggest tournaments in the sport, is still present. "It still inspires me to keep going."

Beckenbauer Commemoration Should Be Held in Stadium

MUNICH (Dispatches) - German football fans should fill Bayern Munich's Allianz Arena to properly commemorate the life of Germany great Franz Beckenbauer who died aged 78 on Sunday, former team mate and ex-Bayern Munich CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said. Beckenbauer, who was Germany's first truly global sports star and led them to the World Cup title as player and coach in 1974 and 1990 respectively, had become part of the country's social fabric in a hugely successful career on and off the pitch spanning over 50 years. Beckenbauer, considered one of the best players of all-time, won 103 caps and captained West Germany to World Cup success in 1974, two years after lifting the European title. He also headed the organizing committee for the 2006 World Cup held in Germany. "The whole world of football and beyond is grieving for our friend Franz," Rummenigge, who played alongside Beckenbauer at Bayern Munich in the 1970s, told Bild newspaper. Rummenigge, a former longtime Bayern CEO, was West Germany's captain under coach Beckenbauer in the 1986 World Cup where they lost to Argentina in the final. "As a thank you and in remembrance FC Bayern should organise a commemoration in the stadium which would not have existed without him," he said. Bayern said on Tuesday the stadium would be illuminated to honour Beckenbauer for the coming days. "In memory of the 'Kaiser', the Allianz Arena will light up with the words 'Thank you Franz' in the evening hours of 16:30 to 22:00 CET over the coming days," the club said. "To finish, the special illumination will also be seen... on Friday night, during FC Bayern's home match against Hoffenheim." The Bundesliga resumes on Friday after the winter break. Beckenbauer was part of the mighty Bayern Munich team who won three consecutive European Cups from 1974-76 among other titles. He became the team coach and club president after his playing career, establishing the German champions as one of the most successful and valuable brands in European soccer. "Franz

Beckenbauer was the leader of the German football for many decades," 1990 World Cup winner Juergen Klinsmann said. "He was with Pele the best player in the world in the 60s, 70s, 80s." "He coached us to win the World Cup, he won the World Cup. He brought the World Cup to Germany 2006," added Klinsmann, who now coaches the South Korean national team. "He was almost like a father and so I think the football world is very, very sad but especially Germany loses its most charismatic leader in sports over the last many decades." Bayern, under the presidency of Beckenbauer, left the ageing Olympic stadium and moved to their

purpose-built Allianz Arena in 2006. A stadium ceremony and special illuminations are not the only proposals to remember the "Kaiser", a nickname he earned for his playing style and vision of the game. Fellow 1974 World Cup winner Bertie Vogts suggested renaming the German Cup the Beckenbauer Cup to ensure his memory lives on. "Maybe the German FA (DFB) should consider renaming for example the German Cup after Franz Beckenbauer," Vogts told the Rheinische Post newspaper. "It is important that his name is not forgotten by the football generations that follow."

