

Osama Hamdan, a Senior Official of the Palestinian Resistance Movement Hamas, Emphasized That Security and Stability in the West Asia Region Are Contingent on the Cessation of the Zionist Occupation of Palestinian Territories

IRAN NEWS

Friday Prayer Leaders Across the Country Are to Meet the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Tuesday on the Occasion of 26th Nationwide Congress of Friday Prayer Leaders Which Began Sunday

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Israel Maneuvering to Involve U.S. in Wider Conflict



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent ambassador to the United Nations says a series of missile strikes carried out by the United States and the United Kingdom on Yemen amounts to a "declaration of war" against the Arab country's people. "The actions by the United States and the UK in attacking Yemen constitute a flagrant violation of national sovereignty, a breach of international law, and a transgression of the United Nations Charter," Amir Sa'ed Irvani said in an exclusive interview with Newsweek published on Saturday. "Compelling evidence suggests that the Tel Aviv regime has effectively maneuvered to involve the US in these conflicts, aligning with its own interests," he said, referring to the circumstances in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria as well as Iraq and Yemen. Irvani added that the joint military aggression exposed the so-called success of the Israeli regime's lobbying in Washington to draw the US into "a direct war" and exacerbate the spillover of hostilities to other parts of the region. Irvani emphasized that Israel has fallen short of achieving most of its stated objectives in the war against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. However, the regime sees a more extensive crisis than the ongoing Gaza conflict to "facilitate a so-called face-saving exit from the current quagmire," the Iranian diplomat said. "The Israeli regime's requests from the United States extend beyond a mere solicitation for weapons, intelligence, financial, and political support; instead, it encompasses a desire for direct participation in the war," Irvani stated. The Iranian ambassador warned that a "severe humanitarian crisis" unfolds when the international mechanisms display a lack of both the will and capability to put an end to Israel's crimes in Gaza while the region is under a stringent siege, with essential supplies such as fuel and food being denied to the people of the Strip. In response to this dire circumstance, Irvani said, Yemen's Ansarullah Movement, driven by a sense of human duty, has assumed the role of defending the oppressed Palestinian nation. He said Ansarullah has declared that all shipping lanes in the Red Sea waterway are secure, except for vessels associated with the Tel Aviv regime or engaged in the transportation of goods to or from Israel. This, he said, portrays Ansarullah as a proponent of humanitarian principles. Pointing to an all-out siege, encompassing land, air, and sea, on Ansarullah for the past eight years, the Iranian diplomat said Yemen has demonstrated resilience by relying on its internal capacities despite facing protracted embargo and blockade. Irvani said the resistance groups in Iraq and Lebanon are integral to their respective governments, with decisions subject to governmental considerations, but Ansarullah stands apart as an independent government possessing national sovereignty.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

World Disillusioned With Israel by Virtue of Palestinian Martyrs




المؤتمر الدولي طوفان الأقصى ويقظة الوجدان الإنساني
كنفرانس بين المللي طوفان الاقصى وبيداري وجدان بشري

International Conference of Al-Aqsa Storm and Awakening of Human Conscience

تهران - الجمهورية الإسلامية الإيرانية ٢ رجب ١٤٤٥
جمهوری اسلامی ایران - تهران ٢٤ دی ١٤٠٢
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran 14 January 2024

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says the world has been disillusioned with Israel thanks to the pure blood of thousands of Palestinians who were killed in the regime's U.S.-backed genocidal war on the Gaza Strip. He made the remarks in an address to the International Conference of Al-Aqsa Storm and Awakening of Human Conscience in Tehran on Sunday. "What has disillusioned the world today is the pure blood of Palestinian martyrs and thousands of martyred children," Raisi said. "The world has awakened... Palestine has become the [number one] issue of the entire world. Palestine is not solely the concern of the Muslim Ummah (community) anymore and has turned into a global issue." He also noted that despite efforts aimed at portraying those defending their homeland as evil, it has become clear to the world that "the center of all mischief is the United States and some Western governments that are supporting the Israeli regime." The Iranian chief executive reiterated that Palestine is the foremost issue of the Muslim world, saying the liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in al-Quds is a priority of the Muslim world. He further emphasized that the issue of Palestine is 75 years of usurpation and occupation and that its solution is resistance and resilience. "Today, the winner of the Al-Aqsa battle is Palestine and the loser in the field is the Zionist regime and its supporters," Raisi said. He also reiterated that defending Palestine and resistance groups is on the agenda of the Islamic Republic. The occupation will not bring legitimacy to Israel, he asserted. The Tel Aviv regime should end its occupation of Palestine and be punished for it. Raisi further warned that Israel's normalization of ties with some Arab countries will neither bring about security for the Zionist regime nor for regional states. The President continued, "Against this approach, the approach of resistance was formed in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and everywhere in the Islamic world, because the only way to face greed and oppression was resistance and standing. When the current of the oppressor does not tolerate logic and negotiation, the only logic is to stand and resist them." Raisi said, "The current of resistance was modelled after what happened in the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of our great Imam Khomeini, and the standing of this nation against the Americans, the Westerners and their fake government in this land was successful, and therefore we witnessed the repeated victories of the Palestinians and the current of resistance over the Zionists in 33-day, 22-day, 8-day, and 2-day wars, and even today, the Zionist regime has not been able to achieve any of its goals despite almost 100 days of crimes, and the victors in this field will definitely be the oppressed and powerful Palestinians and the defeat belongs to the Zionists." Analyzing the current events in Gaza and Palestine, the President added, "Some people want to insinuate that the current events began on October 7, but this analysis is not correct. The history of these events goes back to 75 years of crime, killing and destruction." Stating that today the upper hand and the right belong to those who believe in resistance and with their own creativity and initiatives, they have achieved resistance with rockets and drones, while starting with stones, adding, "The Islamic Republic of Iran has announced in a loud voice and without any stuttering that it supports the movement of resistance and the rights of the Palestinian people. Basically, everyone should support those who defend their identity, religion, land and family against the aggressors".

Iran Lawyers Back South Africa's ICJ Bid Against Israeli Regime



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The National Union of Lawyers Associations of Iran has voiced its support for the freedom-seeking lawyers of South Africa in their lawsuit against the Zionist regime's genocide of the people of Gaza at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In a statement on Saturday, the union announced the complete readiness of Iran's humanitarian and human rights legal community to help their South African counterparts in the case brought against the occupying regime at the ICJ. It also said that South African lawyers, who have experienced discrimination of apartheid with all their heart and soul, are determined to prove the Zionist regime's widespread genocide and crime against humanity in the besieged Gaza Strip. The union expressed hopes that the proceedings at the ICJ will be free from political pressures and will move toward realizing the rights of the oppressed. South Africa filed a case against Israel at the ICJ in November, accusing the regime of committing crimes of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza as part of a relentless military campaign that has killed more than 23,000 people and caused widespread destruction in the besieged enclave since it started in early October. Iran is among several countries that have supported South Africa's lawsuit at the top UN court in The Hague.

Regional Security Guaranteed by Insiders



TEHRAN - An Iranian Navy commander says regional security cannot be guaranteed by outsiders and can only be ensured by the countries in the region. Rear Admiral Qader Vazifeh, commander of the first naval district of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, made the comment in a meeting with commanders of a Pakistani flotilla, which arrived in the southern Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas on Saturday to promote peace and friendship between the two neighboring countries. "Enemies are extremely afraid of unity among the Muslim countries," Vazifeh said. He added that the Iranian naval forces have a strong and active presence in the international scene and are fiercely defending the national interests. The Iranian commander hailed the high level of relations with Pakistan and educational and combat interactions between the two countries. The commander of the Pakistani flotilla, for his part, commended historical relations between Tehran and Islamabad and expressed hope that the current visit by the Pakistani commanders would lead to further improvement of ties. He added that Iran plays a determining role in maintaining regional and global peace and stability.

Iraqi Resistance Hits U.S. bases in Syria



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraqi resistance fighters have hit two military bases housing American occupation forces in Syria in protest at the U.S. presence in Iraq and in support of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip amid the Israeli regime's military onslaught. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of the country's anti-terror movements, announced the development in a statement on Saturday. The Iraqi resistance said its fighters had launched drones to hit the targets, which it identified as two American occupation bases in the al-Omar oil field and the Green Village in the eastern Syrian province of Dayr al-Zawr. The resistance said it had conducted the strikes "in continuation of our path in resisting the American occupation forces in Iraq and the region." A U.S.-led coalition rolled into Iraq and Syria in 2014 under the pretext of fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group, and is still present in those countries,

although they defeated the terror outfit in late 2017. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani recently said his government is planning to set up a committee to arrange the ouster of U.S. forces. Elsewhere in his statement, the Iraqi resistance said the strikes also took place "in response to the massacre of our people in Gaza by the Zionist entity." The relentless Israeli military aggression, which started on October 7, 2023, has so far killed at least 23,843 people, most of them women and children, while 60,317 others have been wounded. The U.S. has been providing ample military support for Israel's genocidal war, arming the regime with more than 10,000 tons of military hardware. Washington has also defended the Israeli onslaught as an instance of "self-defense," blocking passage of all United Nations Security Council resolutions that called for cessation of the regime's aggression.

U.S. Seeks to Spread War Across Region



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Yemeni ambassador to Iran says the United States and its Western allies seek to prevent Yemen from supporting the people of Gaza amid Israel's genocidal war on the besieged Palestinian territory. Ibrahim Mohammad al-Deilami made the comment while elaborating on the recent attacks on Yemen by the US and the UK in an interview with Iran's ISNA news agency on Saturday. "The Americans seek to expand the scope of the war across the region, and we have already warned them to avoid any foolish act," Deilami said, adding, "The United States is responsible for whatever that may happen in the Red Sea." The Yemeni diplomat asserted that his country does not want further spread of the war in the region, adding, "However, the Americans are trying to expand the scope of the war [in order] to deflect attention from the issue of Palestine." The attacks on Yemen began on Friday, when the United States and Britain started targeting the country with warplanes and Tomahawk missiles. The attacks came in response to a series of anti-Israel operations that Yemeni forces have been staging in the Red Sea in support of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which is under a genocidal Israeli war with Washington's full support. Deilami said the attacks carried out against his country by the US and the UK lacked legitimacy from the viewpoint of international law, because "Americans tried to get the United Nations' authorization for attacking Yemen, but failed to do so." "Their main goal is to prevent [Yemen from providing] support for the people of Palestine," he said, noting that the Western allies also seek to support and protect the Zionist regime through their strikes on Yemen. Ever since Friday, the US has followed up the attacks with more offensives against various parts of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a and the western port city of Hudaydah. The US-led attacks came after Washington failed to get a resolution passed through the United Nations Security Council that would accuse Yemen of endangering maritime security in the Red Sea with its anti-Israeli strikes.

IRAN NEWS



Iran Ready to Meet North Africa's Need to HPV Vaccine

TEHRAN (IP) - An Iranian knowledge-based company that has managed to produce a vaccine to prevent cancers caused by human Papilloma virus and can provide it to the region and north of Africa. The technical knowledge of producing the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine is among the most sophisticated in the world, which an Iranian company could fully achieve it. Clinical studies of the vaccine were started in July 2019; it was tested on healthy volunteers after passing quality-control tests and preclinical studies. Containing proteins of HPV types 16 and 18, Papillguard is a recombinant vaccine given to individuals 9 through 26 years of age to help protect against diseases caused by some types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). After being approved for its effectiveness in increasing the antibody titer and its safety, the Iranian-made HPV vaccine received approval from the Food and Drug Organization of Iran to enter the market in the winter of 2020. The research and development process of the product in laboratory and semi-industrial scales took three years.

Four Elements Behind Rask Terrorist Attack Captured



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's police chief Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan has announced the arrest of the perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Rask, southeastern Iran, in an extensive counter-terrorism operation. "After the Rask incident, I promised the dear people of Iran that we will take deadly revenge on the terrorists, and I hereby announce that in the past few days, the police units have achieved a significant success in the fight against terrorism," Radan said on Sunday. He explained that the four main perpetrators of the terrorist attack were captured alive, shocking the masterminds of the attack who thought they were out of the Islamic Republic's radars. "We have received good information in order to arrest the other perpetrators and masterminds of the Rask incident, and we will burn the root of terrorism by the grace of God," the police chief added. In mid-December, the police headquarters in Rask County, in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchestan, was attacked by the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group. Eleven police forces were killed and seven more wounded.



Azeri Cadets Can Enroll in PhD Courses in Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The president of Iran's Supreme National Defense University expressed the military academy's readiness to accept PhD students from the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Supreme National Defense University of Iran is prepared to admit Azeri students in PhD courses as of the next academic year, Brigadier General Esmail Ahmadi Moqaddam said in a meeting with the vice president of the National Defense University of the Republic of Azerbaijan, held in Tehran on Sunday. Heading a three-strong delegation, Azerbaijan Republic's Major General Arif Hasanov has traveled to Iran to weigh plans to promote military cooperation and strengthen scientific diplomacy between Baku and Tehran. The Azeri general, for his part, said the National Defense University of the Republic of Azerbaijan is prepared to sign a memorandum of understanding with the Iranian side, launch academic cooperation programs, and exchange delegations and students.

Iran Voices Support for One-China Principle After Taiwan Election

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran reaffirmed Tehran's support for the one-China principle and for China's right to protect its national sovereignty after Taiwan held presidential election. In comments on Sunday, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani answered a question about the outcome of the presidential election in Taiwan. "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers respect for the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of states as a principle of its foreign policy and, within that framework, has always expressed its support for the One-China principle," he said. "In this regard, the Islamic Republic of Iran once again declares its firm support for the People's Republic of China's right to defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity and also for China's reunification on the basis of peaceful cross-strait development," Kanaani stated. Responding to a question about the outcome of election in Taiwan, Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson Chen Binhua said in a statement carried by state news agency Xinhua that "Taiwan is China's Taiwan".

Permits Issued for 580 New Village Administration Offices



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A total of 581 new village administration offices will be established across the country as per permission issued by Interior Ministry. Accordingly, all villages with more than 20 households and run by Islamic councils are allowed to set up village administration offices, IRIB quoted Mahyar Noorali, an official with Municipalities and Village Administration Organization as saying. In this regard, 118 village administration offices will be established in Ardabil province, 165 in Lorestan, 142 in Mazandaran, 119 in Kerman, and 37 in Hamedan. Established in 2003, the Municipalities and Village Administration Organization has implemented numerous development projects across the country's rural areas. The organization has been set up with the aim of improving the environmental situation of villages, recognizing the deficiencies and social, economic, health, cultural, and educational needs, preparing practical plans in the mentioned fields, and presenting them to the relevant officials for necessary action, as well as encouraging the villagers not to migrate to the cities. Village administrators are elected by the members of the Council of the village, who are elected by the people and are tasked with local management. Currently, some 40,000 village administration offices are active in villages with over 30 households. Since the incumbent government took office two years ago, 951 new village administrations have so far been established across the

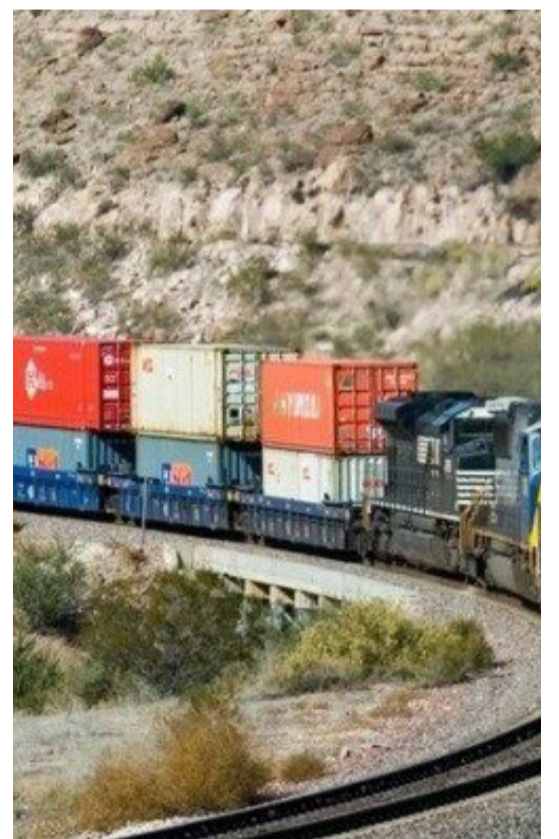
country. In fact, 38,816 village administrations are currently offering services to some 96 percent of people in rural areas. Currently, 26 percent of the country's population lives in villages, around 39,000 villages have more than 20 households and 23,000 villages have less than 20 households. In Iran, where villages account for 20-23 percent of the value-added income in the country, the development of rural areas has always been a top agenda of the government's activities. The development of rural areas has always been a top agenda of the government's activities. Many efforts have been made over the past couple of years by the government to support villagers and slow down the trend of migration from rural areas to cities. Rural tourism, agritourism, religious tourism, and ecotourism are alternatives or complementary economic activities that could further stimulate rural development while decreasing rural community dependency on one main economic sector (agriculture, forestry, energy, or mining). Rural councils and village administrations play an effective role in reducing the costs of implementing development and service projects by attracting the participation of people and beneficiaries. Village administrations coordinate executive bodies and follow up on affairs related to rural areas, facilitating the implementation of development projects. Over the past two years, 11,384 projects costing 7.65 trillion rials (about \$15 million) have been carried out by village administrations.

Israeli Regime Behind Most Conflicts in Region



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's top nuclear official Mohammad Eslami has said that Israel is behind most of conflicts in West Asia, as the regime benefits from the conflicts to protect its interests. "The footprint of the Zionists is seen in most of the conflicts in the region. If there is no conflict, they will have no comfort, and these conflicts are in line with their interests," Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said on Saturday at a TV program on Palestine. He also criticized the "apartheid" Israeli regime for using United Nations capacities to establish immunity for itself, as no resolution has so far been issued against the regime over its undeclared nuclear weapons program. Eslami meanwhile said that weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran's defense doctrine, and that the country does not intend to use nukes to achieve a balance of power, as its foreign policy is based on active interaction. The official also said that Iran is among the world's top producers of radiopharmaceuticals, with 220 medical centers across the country currently using these types of medicines. The country is also using nuclear energy in its agriculture and industry sectors, despite foreign attempts to prevent Iran from gaining those achievements, Eslami said.

Gov't Has Allocated \$230m for Transportation Projects in a Month



TEHRAN, Jan. 14 (MNA) - The latest data released by Iran's Planning and Budget Organization (PBO) indicates that some 115 trillion rials (about \$230 million) have been allocated to transportation projects over the past Iranian calendar month. The mentioned budget has been allocated to complete provincial and national projects, mostly those that have been approved during President Raisi's provincial trips. As reported, the said projects include freeways, highways, railways, and the improvement of main and rural roads. Improving the fleet, renovating and maintaining railway lines and removing bottlenecks of railway lines, connecting Chabahar Port to the national rail network, removal of accident-prone points on the arterial roads of the country with priority on high-traffic routes are also among the projects that are going to be implemented using the mentioned credit.

17% Increase in School Dropouts in Iran

TEHRAN - According to Majlis Research Center's recent report, there has been a 7% increase in school dropouts in the previous academic year compared to the 2015-2016 academic year and over 911,000 individuals dropped out of school in the past academic year. The report emphasized that more than 279,000 individuals also discontinued their education during this period. The report reads in part that more than 279,000 individuals also dropped out of school during this time period. These statistics were released at a time when, according to published statistics from the Statistical Center of Iran, nearly 930,000 students dropped

out of elementary, middle, and high schools during the academic year. Based on these figures, more than 175,000 elementary school students, 198,000 middle school students, and 557,000 high school students have discontinued their education. The Statistical Center of the Iranian regime had also announced in October 2023 that at least "556,000 young Iranians" are forced to drop out of school before entering high school due to reasons primarily related to "poverty and deprivation." A review of inflation statistics shows that inflation in Iran was around 10% in 2016 and 2017, but it rose to over 27% in 2018.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



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Iranian Researchers Produce 2 Recombinant Drugs for Treating Cancer Disease

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Researchers at the University of Tehran managed to produce two types of recombinant drugs to treat self-immune diseases and some cancers. Fatemeh Asgari, a researcher at the research team of the university, pointed to the production of the two recombinant medicines used for the treatment of self-immune diseases and also some cancers including lung, liver and skin cancers and stated that the developed medicine is licensed by the Iranian Food and Drug Administration (FDA). There is a foreign-made similar drug in which "Interleukin 21" has been used but "we used Interleukin 21 that has fewer side effects and has the same function," she said. Interleukin (IL) 1 is a highly potent pro-inflammatory mediator that is important in immune defense and in immune-mediated disease, she added. Interleukins are among the chemicals that are used to regulate and accelerate the processes that are supposed to happen in the human body, she said, adding that interleukin 21 is used to treat cancer diseases.

Transport, Transit - Key Factors for Iran-Azerbaijan Ties



Iran Eyes Direct Flights, Shipping Lines to South Africa

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's newly-appointed ambassador to Pretoria says the country is seeking to launch direct flights and shipping lines to South Africa, adding that the obstacles on this way have been nearly removed. Mansour Shakibmehr made the remarks during a visit to Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) where he met with the members of Iran-South Africa Joint Committee of Commerce. The meeting took place prior to the ambassador's departure for Pretoria. Vice-President of Iran Chamber of Commerce Mohammad-Reza Bahraman, who was also present at the meeting, hailed 55 years of relations between Iran and South Africa and said that Iran can provide South Africa with its technological and techno-engineering needs. He referred to the launch of an Iranian trade center in South Africa, stressing that this center has to operate in a way

that will pave the way for closer relations between economic sectors of the two countries. "We should offer our capacities, especially those in the areas of energy and mining, through this center," Bahraman said. Speaking in the meantime, the Iranian new ambassador to Pretoria vowed to make every effort to facilitate cooperation between the private sectors of Iran and South Africa. Noting that Iran's share of South Africa's \$180 billion trade is very insignificant, Shakibmehr said that if introduced well, the Iranian techno-engineering services would gain a good place in the South African market. Babak Hedayati, the head of Iran-South Africa Joint Committee of Commerce, was another one who addressed the meeting. He stressed that the areas of energy and tourism, health tourism in particular, are among the areas on which the two countries can cooperate.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Transport and transit are among the main areas of Iran's economic cooperation with its neighbors, especially Azerbaijan, Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Seyed Abbas Mousavi said. He stated this at the meeting with the governor of Iran's Gilan Province, Asadollah Abbasi. Mousavi said that the current Iranian government is working to improve relations with neighboring countries in this context. He also said that Iran's Gilan Province needs to enhance its transport infrastructures to match its potential in light of the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. The ambassador pointed out that trade opportunities between Iran and Russia have been facilitated by road and railway through Azerbaijan. As a result, 700,000 tons of goods were shipped from Iran to Russia via the Astara railway in the last year. The latest data from the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) shows that Iran exported 583,000 tons of non-oil products valued at \$380 million via Astara Customs in the first three quarters of the current Iranian year (March 21 through December 21, 2023), and imported 118,000 tons of goods valued at \$144 million. In addition, cargo transit via the mentioned customs stood at 559,000 tons in the specified period.

NDFI Earmarks €1b to Makran Coast



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The National Development Fund of Iran (NDFI) allocated €1 billion for the development of the Makran Coast south of the country. Iran is drawing on the resources of the National Development Fund of Iran (NDFI) for the development of the Makran Coast and the completion of the National Housing Movement Plan. According to Article 138 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Cabinet of Ministers approved a plan in a meeting held on January 3, 2024 for allocating €1 billion in support of the National Development Fund for the development of the Makran Coast. After the approval of the relevant legal bodies and within the framework of laws and regulations, the Fund will deposit €1 billion in banks and it will be paid in the form of facilities to the applicants introduced by the Secretariat of the Supreme Council for the Development of Makran Coast based on the rules and regulations. This is in line with Iran's plans for the development of the Makran Coast, the development of a sustainable sea-based

economy, and the growth of industries in the ports, the report added. Similarly, Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development is proposing to use the resources of the NDFI for the housing sector. To this end, \$2 billion credit gained from the oil bartering will be allocated for the completion of superstructure and infrastructure services of the National Housing Movement Plan, the website of Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (MRUD) reported. This was proposed in the meeting of the Supreme Council of Housing held on January 11 with the presence of Iran's President. Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development considers the housing sector as a drive for economic development that can boost employment, control inflation, and promote economic development. Considering the main mission of the National Development Fund of Iran in the development of the country's economy, it is expected that this fund would play a substantial role in the development of major infrastructure projects.

42nd Fajr Int'l Theatre Festival With Five New Sections



TEHRAN (IP) - Student sections, television theater, the national identity of Gaza, and inclusive sections are held for the first time in the 42nd Fajr Theater Festival while teletheater has also returned to the festival after several years of closure. The press conference of the 42nd Fajr International Theater Festival and the poster unveiling ceremony of this festival was held on Sunday with the presence of Kazem Nazari, Director General of Performing Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mehdi Hamedsagayan, Secretary of the 42nd Festival in Tehran. The secretary of the 42nd Fajr Theater Festival said: From mid-August, I established the main policy of the festival and chose revolutionary, Islamic, national, and historical values. The motto of the festival is hope, cheerfulness, and empathy. Stating that this year's festival has 12 sections, five of which are new, Hamed Saqayan explained: These five sections include student sections, television theater, Gaza's national identity, and an inclusive section, for the first time. He added: This year we had a theater festival in all provinces and competitions were held in four regions. The secretary of the 42nd Fajr Theater Festival stated: In this event, we will have 34 shows in the Iranian Theater Competition. 25 shows compete in the student section and 33 shows are performed in the street section. Also, 11 shows compete in the radio theater section. In the international section Armenia, Greece, Tajikistan, Iraq, and Italy are present, he noted. Saqayan stated: The national identity section deals with martyrs and national heroes such as Qassem Soleimani and Malik Al-Shaarai Bahar. This section has a separate jury. There are 9 shows in the Gaza section and 21 shows are competing in the inclusive (disabled) section with the help of the welfare organization, he concluded.

3.2m Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Week



TEHRAN – Iran Mercantile Exchange last week witnessed trade of 3,274,049 tons of commodities and 4 apartments with a total trading value of more than \$850m on its physical market, posting growths of 5% and 36% in volume and value of trades compared to the figures of the previous week. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,645,213 tons of commodities valued at more than \$596m. On this floor the IME sold 1,246,030 tons of cement, 655,000 tons of iron ore, 653,527 tons of steel, 76,000 tons of sponge iron, 62,855 tons of zinc, 8,135 tons of copper, 6,650 tons of aluminum, 600 tons of coke, 200 tons of cast iron, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 12 tons of precious metals concentrate. Based on this report, the IME saw trade of 4 apartments on its real estate trading floor. Furthermore, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 667,115 tons of commodities worth more than \$270m. Commodities traded on this floor included 201,156 tons of bitumen, 169,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 101,595 tons of polymeric products, 35,824 tons of chemicals, 18,000 tons of lube cut, 15,820 tons of sulfur, 4,529 tons of oil, 750 tons of feedstocks and 500 tons of waterproofing materials. The IME also traded within the same week 21,065 tons of goods on its side market.



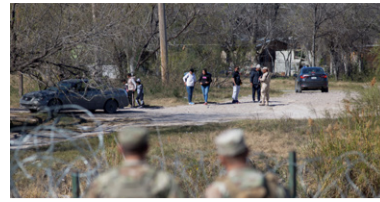
Official Rejects Decline in Iranian Gas Exports to Iraq

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Saeed Aqli, the head of dispatching operations at the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC), has said that Iran continues to pump natural gas to neighboring Iraq in accordance with a gas deal between the two countries. Noting that Iran exports gas to Iraq from two different exchange points, he said that based on an agreement reached two months ago, Iran stopped gas exports from one of these points as of the beginning of the 2024 for normal calibration processes. He, however, stressed that Iran's commitments are being fully implemented from the other exchange point. Aqli added that the calibration of devices and gadgets used in the gas exports is a normal process and is not limited to exports to Iraq. Iran exports up to 50 million cubic meters a day (mcm/d) of natural gas to Iraq under an exports agreement between the two countries.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Three Migrants Drown at U.S. Border

EAGLE PASS (Dispatches) - A woman and two children drowned in the Rio Grande as they tried to enter the U.S. from Mexico on Friday night after Texas military officers prevented federal border officials from aiding them, according to U.S. border officials and a member of Congress. The deaths come as a dispute over immigration intensifies between Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, and the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden, a Democrat, as a record number of migrants have illegally crossed the border since Biden took office in 2021. The migrants were attempting to cross the river near Shelby Park in Eagle Pass, according to officials, which is not a legal port of entry, and where the Texas National Guard this week added new concertina wire and fencing. In a court filing in the U.S. Supreme Court on Friday, the U.S. government accused Texas of erecting the new barriers to block federal Border Patrol agents from reaching a boat ramp they use to access the Rio Grande.



German Conservatives Vow to Fight Far-Right



HEIDELBERG (Dispatches) - The leader of Germany's conservatives vowed to ban a hard-right group from his party and take on the Alternative for Germany, including on immigration, amid criticism he has moved too close to the far-right party's policies as it surges in the polls. Friedrich Merz was speaking at his opposition Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) congress after the revelation that members of the hard-right Values Union group last year discussed plans to deport "unassimilated" citizens at a retreat with far-right influencers and Alternative for Germany (AfD) politicians. Rising prices, the economic shock caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the burden placed on public services by high immigration have contributed to a sullen mood in Germany that is punishing all the mainstream parties. "At the next party congress I will bring a motion making Values Union membership incompatible with CDU membership," Merz said on Saturday, in his first comments on November's meeting at a villa outside Berlin. After a period in which the CDU has been among the most hawkish voices on immigration in German politics, Merz used a news conference to emphasise his party's distance on that - and other issues - from the AfD. The CDU is on around 30% in the polls - a historically low level for the party - around twice the level of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats and his Green coalition partners, with the AfD snapping at Merz's heels on as much as 24%. "Germany has been a country of immigration for decades," he said. "One that very successfully integrated immigrants." The balancing act was still present, however, as he warned that some groups, "often but not always of Islamic faith", were less well integrated. All mainstream parties have been criticised for focusing on the AfD's themes, promising to deal more toughly with illegal immigration despite warnings from experts that this only legitimises the insurgent far-right's discourse. The congress is being held to adopt a new fundamental programme that Merz bills as a return to clear-cut conservatism after the long years of centrism under four-term Chancellor Angela Merkel. The new program, the fourth in the CDU's history, strikes populist notes on immigration, pledging to keep asylum applicants outside the European Union while their applications are assessed. "We are going to target the AfD," Merz said. "On their Europe policy, on their foreign policy and their ties to Russia. And especially on their economic policy ... Many entrepreneurs have sympathies for the AfD."



Thousands March in Washington, London for Gaza "Day of Action"

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Thousands of pro-Palestine protesters marched in Washington, London and elsewhere on Saturday as part of a "global day of action" to demand an immediate cease-fire in the Gaza fighting and to oppose U.S. and British support for Israel. In Washington, large crowds waved Palestinian flags as the mostly young protesters -- many wearing the traditional keffiyeh -- gathered in a show of solidarity on the 99th day of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. "Cease-fire now," people chanted, while carrying banners and posters that read "Free Palestine" and "End the War on Gaza." On a stage a few blocks from the White House, several Palestinian-Americans -- originally from Gaza, but now living in US states from Michigan to Texas -- offered emotional accounts of friends and relatives killed or wounded in Gaza. They exhorted US President Joe Biden to end military and financial support for Israel. "President Biden can easily stop this madness" by pressuring Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, one speaker said to wide applause. London, meantime, saw its seventh pro-Palestinian demonstration since October 7, when Hamas militants invaded southern Israel and killed around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official figures. Israel vowed to destroy Hamas and launched a relentless bombardment of Gaza that has killed at least 23,843 people, mostly women and children,

according to the latest toll from the territory's health ministry. Around 1,700 police were on duty Saturday to ensure security for the London protest. "We want to show the people of Palestine we are with them, and to speak up against our government as well," 27-year-old health service worker Maleeha Ahmed, who was at the march with her family, told AFP. "They are playing a very, very big role in allowing Israel to continue what they are doing and it's just not acceptable," she said. Another marcher, Dipesh Kothar, 37, said it was "very frustrating to sit and watch the world do nothing." "That's why we come out to show support for the Palestinian people and show our unhappiness with the governments around the world," he said. Saturday's marches held particular significance given US and British air strikes in Yemen this week against Houthi bases, after the Iran-backed militants attacked ships in the Red Sea in solidarity with Gaza. The day of action, called by a British organizing coalition, involved protests in 30 countries. Kate Hudson of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which is part of the coalition, said the event was "to demand a permanent cease-fire and a lasting political settlement for all Palestinians." She said the British government "must end its support for Israel's brutal war in Gaza, and join the wider international community in condemning its war crimes."

Protest in Georgian Capital Amid Anger Over Desecration of Stalin Icon



TBILISI (Dispatches) - A large protest was held in Tbilisi on Saturday to demand harsh punishment for a woman accused of defacing a religious icon depicting Soviet dictator Josef Stalin which was recently installed in the Georgian capital. The suspect is alleged to have splashed paint on the icon, which was on display in the city's main Holy Trinity Cathedral, on Tuesday in an act of protest that exposed deep divisions in Georgia over the former Soviet dictator's legacy in his homeland. Alt-Info, the pro-Russian ultra-conservative movement that organised the protest, used a post on the Telegram messaging app to compare the "desecration" of the icon to repression of religion that occurred under Stalin's regime. "We express our position regarding the current events and emphasize that the fact of pouring paint on the icon in the Patriarchal Church is a kind of raid on the church and repeats the experience of the Bolshevik past," it said. Thousands of Orthodox believers and Alt-Info supporters gathered on Saturday in front of the country's parliament before marching through the city to the cathedral to pray before the Stalin icon. The crowd - estimated by a Reuters reporter to be up to 3,000-strong - was monitored by the police and addressed by a speaker critical of the attack on the icon. A Georgian nationalist party, called the Alliance of Patriots, which has also expressed pro-Russian views, said it had gifted the icon to the cathedral. A side panel of the icon includes a depiction of the Georgian-born Stalin - an avowed atheist who violently repressed religion across the Soviet Union - being blessed by St Matrona of Moscow, a Russian Orthodox saint, during World War Two.



Taiwan Voters Rebuff China by Electing Lai as President

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwanese voters swept the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) presidential candidate Lai Ching-te into power on Saturday, strongly rejecting Chinese pressure to spurn him, as China said it would not give up on achieving "reunification". Lai's party, which champions Taiwan's separate identity and rejects China's territorial claims, was seeking a third successive four year term, unprecedented under Taiwan's current electoral system. However, in a measure of public frustration at domestic issues like the high cost of housing and stagnating wages after eight years in power, the DPP lost its majority in parliament, making Lai's job harder in passing legislation. Lai also only won 40% of the vote in Taiwan's first-past-the-post system, unlike current President Tsai Ing-wen who was re-elected by a landslide four years ago with more than 50% of the vote. Still, Lai lauded his victory. "We've written a new page for Taiwan's history of democracy," Lai, long the frontrunner in the polls, told reporters after both his opponents conceded defeat. Lai said he would maintain the status quo in relations across the Taiwan Strait, but that he was "determined to safeguard Taiwan from threats and intimidation from China". At the same time, he emphasized the need for cooperation and dialogue with Beijing on an equal basis to "replace confrontation", though he didn't give specifics. In the run-up to the election, China denounced Lai as a dangerous separatist, and called on the people of Taiwan to make the right choice while noting the "extreme harm of the DPP's 'Taiwan independence' line". They have also repeatedly rebuffed Lai's calls for talks. China's Taiwan Affairs Office struck a gentler tone in its response to Lai's election and did not mention him by name, saying that the results reveal that the DPP

"cannot represent the mainstream public opinion" on Taiwan. "Our stance on resolving the Taiwan question and realizing national reunification remains consistent, and our determination is as firm as rock," it said. However, it added China will work with "relevant political parties, groups and people" from Taiwan to boost exchanges and cooperation, and "advance the peaceful development of cross-strait relations as well as the cause of national reunification". Taiwan's election took place at a time of growing geopolitical tensions between Beijing and Washington. The arms race across the Taiwan Strait and Chinese military pressure on the island Beijing claims as its "sacred" territory is unlikely to end. Since the last election in 2020, China has engaged in an unprecedented level of military activity in the Taiwan Strait, including holding two rounds of major war games near the island. Lai, however, said "only peace will benefit both sides". There were jubilant scenes among a sea of cheering supporters outside Lai's campaign headquarters. "The DPP is the only party that can truly protect Taiwan," said tattoo artist Cony Lu, 28, who broke down in tears of happiness. "So many people are willing to stand together to preserve Taiwan's sovereignty." Lai admitted that with losing its parliamentary majority, the DPP had "many areas that need improvement". However, he offered an olive branch to his opponents in saying he would include talent from their parties. Lai said he would cooperate with his electoral rivals, Hou Yu-ih of Taiwan's largest opposition party the Kuomintang (KMT) and former Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), in resolving the problems Taiwan faces. Taiwan's media reported the DPP won 51 seats to the KMT's 52, while the TPP got eight. Ko appeared open to working with Lai.



President Tshisekedi's Ruling Party Leads in Congo Legislative Election

KINSHASA (Dispatches) - Democratic Republic of Congo President Felix Tshisekedi's UDPS party won 66 seats in the December parliamentary election, placing it ahead of 44 other parties that won one or more seats in the 500-member house, provisional results showed on Sunday. The increased number of UDPS seats, up from 35 in the 2018 election, along with gains by allied parties, could enable Tshisekedi to maintain his ruling big tent Sacred Union coalition, giving him the majority needed to name a new government. The coalition controlled over 390 seats in the outgoing legislature. Provisional results announced by Congo's national election commission early on Sunday showed that parties led by some of Tshisekedi's allies including Senate President Modeste Bahati Lukwebo, Defence Minister Jean Pierre Bemba and Economy Minister Vital Kamerhe won 35, 17, and 32 seats respectively. The results of the legislative vote follow the Constitutional Court's confirmation of Tshisekedi's landslide re-election in the disputed Dec. 20-24 general election that was marred by allegations of fraud, logistical shortcomings and disruptions. Opposition parties and independent observers have raised concerns about the election's transparency, citing chaotic voting conditions and a murky tabulation process. Several western governments made similar observations in congratulatory statements to Tshisekedi, who is set for another five years as leader of Africa's second-largest country after a first term hampered by economic woes and a security crisis in the eastern regions. The fallout of the vote threatens to further destabilise Congo, the world's third-largest copper producer, and the top producer of cobalt, a battery component needed for the green energy transition.

France Renews Support for Ukraine after Russia launches overnight strike

PARIS (Dispatches) - France's newly appointed Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on Saturday on his first official visit abroad, vowing that Paris would maintain its support as Russia's full-scale invasion nears its second anniversary. His visit came a day after British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak unveiled a fresh package of military help in Kyiv, and as Ukraine waits to see if Brussels and Washington will unlock massive sums of new aid. "Despite the multiplying crises, Ukraine is and will remain France's priority," Séjourné told Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba at a joint news conference earlier Saturday. Later, he held talks with Zelensky that lasted for about an hour, a source close to the minister told AFP. "I appreciate France's unwavering defence support for our soldiers and assistance to our people," Zelensky wrote on X. Zelensky also made it clear he appreciated the significance of Séjourné making Ukraine his first official stop following his appointment. "We are grateful for this signal," he told the minister. In his evening address, Zelensky said they had discussed Ukraine's defence needs, "including joint production of drones, artillery, and further strengthening of air defence". Ukraine endured another wave of overnight strikes by Russia from Friday to Saturday. Moscow has stepped up its aerial attacks in recent weeks. Séjourné's visit came at a time when allies are struggling to secure funding and as some worry that Kyiv could be forgotten as other conflicts, such as that between Israel and Hamas, take center stage. Major blocks of funding, in Brussels and in Washington, have also been tied up for political reasons. The European Union is due to hold a meeting on February 1 to unblock the 50-billion-euro aid package for Ukraine, vetoed by Hungary's leader Viktor Orban. But with the EU package stalled and the US Congress still divided over sending additional aid to Ukraine, Kyiv is feeling the pressure. Aid promised to Ukraine between August and October 2023 fell almost

90 percent from the same period in 2022, reaching its lowest point since the start of the war, according to a Kiel Institute survey from December. Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials have warned that any delay would seriously affect the course of the war. Séjourné earlier promised that France would do all it could to help. Its military support so far amounts to 3.2 billion euros, according to a parliamentary report published in November. Britain's aid to Ukraine, after Sunak unveiled its latest package in Kyiv on Friday, now takes the UK's overall support for Ukraine's war efforts to nearly £12 billion. "The fundamental principles of international law and the values of Europe, as well as the security interests of the French" are at stake in Ukraine, Séjourné said at the press conference with Kuleba. "Russia hopes Ukraine and its supporters will get tired before it does. We will not falter," Séjourné added. But Russia, bolstering its arsenal, has geared up for a long war and reoriented its economy. It has in recent weeks intensified its aerial assaults on the war-torn country. Russia launched 40 missiles and drones over the country in an overnight barrage, the Ukrainian air force said, adding that it destroyed eight missiles and disabled over 20 devices. Russia said it targeted places producing ammunition and drones and had hit "all designated facilities". Ukrainian authorities did not report any dead in the latest barrage but one civilian was wounded in the Sumy region. At the press conference with Séjourné, Kuleba said the two had "discussed the further supply of systems and missiles to protect the Ukrainian sky, as well as the supply of drones to Ukraine". "We are entering a new phase of defence cooperation" aiming to "strengthen Ukraine's capacity to produce the weapons it needs on its own soil," Séjourné said. Kuleba confirmed that the two countries had agreed to "work on creating the most favourable conditions for the interaction of our defense companies", including legally.



Why the Cold Isn't Necessarily Bad for Your Health

LONDON (Dispatches) - The recent drop in temperatures in Northern Europe and parts of North America may have discouraged some from stepping outside, or led to fears of an increase in certain winter illnesses. But is the cold really so bad for your health? Perhaps not, according to the numerous scientific studies published on the subject. In fact, it may even be beneficial for boosting the immune system, promoting sleeping or, more simply, helping us to relax. While it's important to take certain precautions during cold spells, such as covering up with warm clothes and airing out your home, this doesn't mean that the cold is necessarily bad for your health. Numerous scientists have studied this subject, and have demonstrated, if not suggested, that cold can have certain superpowers. This has even spurred the emergence of all kinds of cold-based techniques and practices, from ice baths to cryotherapy, designed to treat certain ailments thanks to its many properties.



Sweden Studies How to Save Cash From Extinction



STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - The Swedish government said it wants to ensure cash can be used for basic necessities as electronic payments come to dominate transactions in the Scandinavian country. Only 8 per cent of Swedes had used cash for recent purchases in 2022 compared to 40 per cent in 2010, according to a survey by the Swedish central bank, the Riksbank. "We need to quickly take another look at being able to pay for certain things in cash, in particular there are groups, for various reasons, have trouble with electronic payment methods," said Financial Markets Minister Niklas Wykman. He said the ability to use cash is also important in case of a crisis. The government said this was shown by the rare cash machines in service seeing a 30 per cent jump in withdrawals following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such a trend was also seen in several other European countries, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, according to the European Cash Management Companies Association. The government, which has launched a parliamentary panel on the subject, believes it should be possible to pay cash for certain products such as food, fuel and medicines. "It is difficult to pay with cash in Sweden today," said the head of the parliamentary commission, Dennis Dioukarev, who noted one million Swedes are excluded from the digital world. He said it is important that there be more than one payment system available, especially during a crisis. Sweden's civil protection agency still recommends citizens keep cash available, although most Swedes now consider physical money an anachronism. The parliamentary commission is expected to present its proposals by the end of the year.

Asian Travelers' Destinations Are Trending for 2024



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - While Dubai received the most positive comments from travelers on TripAdvisor, Asia is expected to be central to many vacation plans in 2024, if the growth of interest in destinations such as Tokyo, Seoul or Vietnam's Halong Bay is anything to go by. As the New Year dawns, thoughts can turn to projects for the months ahead, including vacation plans. Nearly four years after the pandemic closed borders, Asia stands out as the most trending direction of travel in 2024, according to the growing popularity of destinations on this continent on the reviews site, TripAdvisor. Every year, the American giant analyses the content of millions of comments, as well as the variation in the ratings given to hotels and restaurants, in an attempt to identify the places attracting the most interest from internet users. In the resulting 10 destinations named as the trending travel hotspots for 2024, Asia not only takes the top five places, but also counts a total of eight entries. TripAdvisor considers Tokyo to be the top trending destination for 2024. If the forecasts prove right, this popularity would build on a success story that began with the reopening of Japan's borders in October 2022. Between January and June alone, 10.7 million visitors travelled to Japan, more than during the pre-pandemic period in 2019. By the summer of 2023, no fewer than four million hikers had made their way to Mount Fuji. In fact, the Japanese authorities have announced plans to introduce an entry quota to avoid turning the sacred mountain into an overwhelmed tourist attraction. It remains to be seen whether this predicted popularity will be confirmed over the coming months, and whether the recent earthquake on the Noto Peninsula or the fire on a Japan Airlines Airbus A350 at Haneda airport might have dampened travelers' enthusiasm. Tokyo isn't the only destination in Asia trending among travellers for 2024, according to TripAdvisor. Vietnam is the only country in the top 10 to benefit from two representatives, namely Halong Bay and the town of Sapa, a gateway to trekking in the country's mountains. Otherwise, South Korea and its capital Seoul, and Palawan Island in the Philippines rank highly in the list. Asia's strong presence in this list — based on the greatest year-over-year growth in interest on the reviews platform — varies greatly from the list of travel hotspots that have proved most popular with TripAdvisor users in recent years. Dubai, for example, tops the list of travellers' favourite destinations for the third year running. It is followed in this year's ranking of favourite spots by Bali and London.



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - It's no secret human activity is warming the planet, driving more frequent and intense extreme weather events and transforming ecosystems at an extraordinary rate. But the record-shattering temperatures of 2023 have nonetheless alarmed scientists, and hint at some "mysterious" new processes that may be under way. NASA's top climatologist Gavin Schmidt tells AFP. It wasn't just a record. It was a record that broke the previous record by a record margin. We started with La Nina, this cool phenomenon in the tropical Pacific. That was still around until March. And then in May, we started to see the development of an El Nino, the warm phase of that cycle. It normally affects the temperatures in the following year. So that would be 2024. But what we saw in 2023 was that the temperatures globally seemed to go up with the El Nino event, in a much greater way than we'd ever seen it before. The long-term trends we understand, and it's being driven by the greenhouse gases, it's being driven by anthropogenic effects. We're expecting that to continue, decade by decade, until we stop emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, which we haven't done yet. But what happened in 2023 was that, and then plus something. And that 'plus something' is much larger than we expect, or as yet can explain. There have been emails and conversations going on around the world, among the scientists

who are looking at this, and people say, 'Oh, let's look at the Earth's energy imbalances. Let's look at the aerosols, let's look at the El Nino, at what's happening in the Antarctic, in the North Atlantic.' And everybody has lots of ideas, but it doesn't quite add up. It may be that El Nino is enough. But if I look at all of the other El Ninos that we've had, none of them did this. So either this El Nino is really super special, or the atmosphere is responding to this El Nino in a very special way. Or there's something else going on. And nobody has yet really narrowed these possibilities. That long-term trend is still within the bounds of what we've been predicting for many years. But the specifics of what happened in 2023 are a little mysterious. It matters why 2023 was the way it was, because does that mean it's going to continue? Does that mean the impacts are going to start to accelerate? We don't know! And that's problematic. 2023 did not follow the old patterns. If the old patterns come back, and 2023 was just a blip, then 2024 will be very close to 2023. If it's not a blip, if it's something systematic that's changed, or that's changing, then you would expect 2024 to actually be warmer. Because you have the warmth that you would expect, and then there's this extra thing. And that has implications for the weather, and heat waves, and intense rainfall, and coastal flooding, and all the rest of it, that we can expect this year.

Global Warming Pushes Ocean Temperatures Off the Charts

PARIS (Dispatches) - In 2023, the world's oceans took up an enormous amount of excess heat, enough to "boil away billions of Olympic-sized swimming pools," according to an annual report published last week. Oceans cover 70 per cent of the planet and have kept the Earth's surface liveable by absorbing 90 per cent of the excess heat produced by the carbon pollution from human activity since the dawn of the industrial age. In 2023, the oceans soaked up around 9 to 15 zettajoules more than in 2022, according to the respective estimates from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Chinese Institute of Atmospheric Physics (IAP). One zettajoule of energy is roughly equivalent to ten times the electricity generated worldwide in a year. "Annually the entire globe consumes around half a zettajoule of energy to fuel our economies", according to statement. "Another way to think about this is 15 zettajoules is enough energy to boil away 2.3 billion Olympic-sized swimming pools." In 2023, sea surface temperature and the energy stored in the upper 2000 meters of the ocean both reached record highs, according to the study published in the journal Advances in Atmospheric Sciences. The amount of energy stored in the oceans is a key indicator of global warming because it is less

affected by natural climate variability than sea surface temperature. Some of the colossal amounts of energy stored in the ocean helped make 2023, a year rife with heatwaves, droughts and wildfires, the hottest on record. That's because the warmer the oceans get, the more heat and moisture enters the atmosphere. This leads to increasingly erratic weather, like fierce winds and powerful rain. Warmer sea surface temperatures are driven mostly by global warming, caused mainly by the burning of fossil fuels. Every few years, a naturally occurring weather phenomenon, El Nino, warms the sea surface in the southern Pacific, leading to hotter weather globally. The current El Nino is expected to peak in 2024. Conversely, a mirror phenomenon called La Nina periodically helps cool the surface of the ocean. Increasing water temperatures and ocean salinity — also at an all-time high — directly contribute to a process of "stratification", where water separates into layers that no longer mix. This has wide-ranging implications because it affects the exchange of heat, oxygen and carbon between the ocean and atmosphere, with effects including a loss of oxygen in the ocean. Scientists are also concerned about the long-term capacity of the oceans to continue absorbing 90 per cent of the excess heat from human activity.



ZURICH (Dispatches) - Artificial intelligence raises serious concerns for jobs but it will also create new positions, the head of Adecco, the world's biggest temporary staffing agency, told AFP. From meteorologists to lawyers and screenwriters, generative AI capable of creating content — such as the chatbot ChatGPT — could change the contours of many professions. But it will also create new positions, according to Denis Machuel, the chief executive of Zurich-based Adecco. Machuel: "It's probably the largest disruption and revolution that we've seen in decades. It's going to be massive. And let's be clear, no one really knows or can really anticipate with a precise view what's going to happen in the next five years." All this productivity enhancement helps people do more but also destroys some of the jobs people are doing. There is definitely an element of jobs being created and jobs that are being destroyed. We've seen that with the internet, with digitalisation. "What we've seen in the past tells us that there is more or less a balance between the two. "Technology brings a lot of better understanding of interaction between people and markets but it also brings complexity. And that complexity requires more people to deal with it. "GenAI will bring productivity on one side but it will also bring more proof-points, more data, more ways of looking at relationships, products and services. And for all these, we need people." Machuel: "It's probably a bit too early to precisely describe jobs that are fundamentally at risk. Because we have to look at the tasks behind them. "If you only compute information, gather information and synthesise it, then your job is at risk, be it a job in finance, in legal, in business, because... it is what GenAI does. "Probably white-collar

workers will be more impacted than blue-collar workers — at least in the short term. "Within the white collar space, the things that are linked to massive information management will be more disrupted than the skills that are linked to relationship building, to strategic thinking or problem-solving. "However, we know that there are limits. "Take the example of a lawyer or of a paralegal: computing an immense number of legal decisions can be done by GenAI. "However, the deep and subtle understanding of a complex legal situation and problem-solving skills that are needed to put things together is still very human-related. "Usually, the sort of mundane tasks that can be automated are not the most exciting for people to do. So if you can automate that, it gives you more time to concentrate on the nicer things. "We've signed a partnership with Microsoft to create a career platform that will advise companies and workers on their path, supporting their reflection on the type of skills and jobs they could go for. "Opening horizons on things people didn't necessarily imagine but could be achievable for them. "There are quite a few workers whose skills are transferable. "The good news about GenAI is that there is a positive explosion of possibilities of upskilling and re-skilling through these tools. "We've created a curriculum vitae maker with an AI-powered tool that helps people generate their own CV. "On the daily tasks of our recruiters, I was mentioning this chatbot that interacts with thousands of candidates very quickly. "It gives the possibility for our recruiters to spend more time in the human relationship, and not in a database search. "That means a recruiter can spend more time with people than doing the mundane tasks."

IRAN NEWS



Venezuela's 2023 Inflation Hit Nearly 190%

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's annual inflation rate settled at 189.8% last year, according to data from the central bank released on Friday, marking a slight easing of the still sky-high rate of rising consumer prices in the South American nation's battered economy. The inflation rate during the previous year clocked in at 234%, one of the highest inflation rates anywhere in the world. But Venezuela's monthly inflation for December eased to just 2.4%, according to the bank. While Venezuela's economy has suffered a prolonged meltdown marked by triple-digit inflation and a mass exodus of millions of migrants seeking better prospects elsewhere, its inflation rate is no longer Latin America's steepest since Argentina's spied past 200% last year.

Turkey's Current Account Swings to \$2.7b Deficit in November



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's current account balance turned to a deficit in November, the central bank data showed, after two months of surpluses. The shortfall of \$2.72 billion (TL 81.86 billion) followed surpluses of nearly \$1.9 billion and \$186 million in September and October, respectively, due to stronger tourism revenues and a narrower trade deficit. The current account is the most complete measure of trade because it includes investment flows and trade in merchandise and services. A deficit means Turkey is consuming more from overseas than it is selling abroad. The deficit for the January-November period stood at \$43.6 billion, according to the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) data. The annualized gap fell to \$49.6 billion from \$50.9 billion in October, declining by \$10.7 billion from May. Treasury and Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek said. "The improvement in the annual current account balance continued in November," Şimşek wrote on social media platform X, formerly Twitter. "The annual current deficit, which decreased by \$10.7 billion compared to May to \$49.6 billion, is at the level of \$22.5 billion excluding gold," he said. The fall came as Türkiye embraced more conventional policymaking after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointed a new team of technocrats, including Şimşek, following his reelection in May. The country's central bank delivered seven consecutive interest rate hikes that took its benchmark one-week repo rate from 8.5% to the current 42.5% to tame inflation, which neared 65% last month. The policy shift seeks to cap strong domestic demand, one of the main reasons for higher imports, and to boost investments and exports to ensure improvement in the current account balance. Ankara said in September it expects a deficit of \$42.5 billion in 2023 from 2022's \$48.8 billion, which was largely driven by energy and gold. Şimşek said despite the foreign trade deficit being \$6 billion below the medium-term program estimate in 2023, they evaluate that the year-end current account deficit will exceed the MTP forecast. "The weakened service revenues due to geopolitical tensions are effective in this development," he noted. "The measures we have taken toward economic balancing, normalization in gold imports, and the reduction of external dependency in energy will result in the continued improvement in the current account balance." The trade deficit, a major component of the current account, declined 32.6% year-over-year in November to \$5.92 billion from earlier average levels of around \$10 billion. Excluding gold and energy, the current account showed a surplus of \$2.2 billion in November, the central bank data also showed. The services sector recorded a net surplus of \$3 billion in November. During the month, travel items under services saw a net inflow of \$2.35 billion. "Primary income recorded a net outflow of \$1,325 million, whereas secondary income indicated a net inflow of \$13 million," the bank said. It added that direct investments in November saw a net inflow of \$921 million.

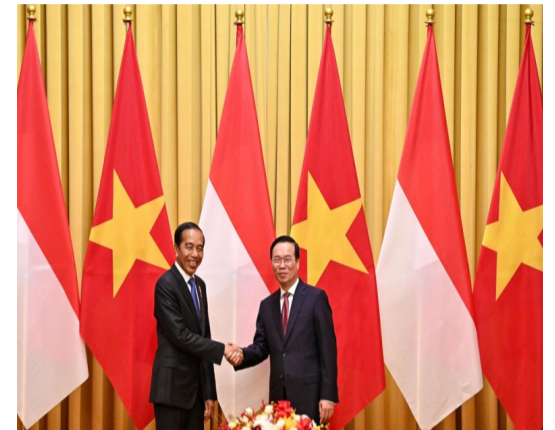
China Exports Fall in 2023 for First Time in Seven Years



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's exports fell last year for the first time in seven years, data showed Friday, as tensions with the United States and a stuttering global economic recovery compound Beijing's struggles to kickstart growth at home. Overseas shipments have traditionally been key to feeding GDP expansion over the past four decades and the figures came as a separate report showed the country in danger of slipping into a deflationary spiral that could further complicate officials' plans to stimulate activity. The reading also highlighted a geopolitical pivot as annual trade with the United States fell for the first time in four years, while commerce with Russia hit a record high despite international pressure to isolate Moscow over its war in Ukraine. And customs officials warned that there would be more hurdles to come over the next 12 months. "The complexity, severity and uncertainty of the external environment are on the rise, and we need to overcome the difficulties and make more efforts to further promote the growth of foreign trade," vice minister of the General Administration of Customs Wang Lingjun said. Exports rose in November for the first time since April, and while December also saw an on-year increase of 2.3 percent, the data compare with the low base of 2022 when the impact of zero-Covid policies were being felt the most. Overall, exports fell 4.6 percent in 2023, the first annual drop since 2016. The report also showed imports dropped 5.5 percent last year. The weak demand for goods from overseas was reflected in data showing the consumer price index (CPI) fell 0.3 percent last month, the third straight monthly drop and the longest streak since October 2009, according to Bloomberg News. For the whole year inflation came in at an average of 0.2 percent, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) figures showed. China slipped into deflation last July for the first time since 2021 and following a brief rebound the following month, prices have

been in decline since September. "Ongoing low core CPI inflation likely reflects dampened domestic demand due to ongoing property downturn and stressed labour market," Goldman Sachs analysts wrote in a note. Beijing has unveiled a number of targeted stimulus measures aimed at supporting key sectors, particularly the troubled property industry. "Fiscal and monetary policies started to move in the right direction in the fourth quarter 2023, but it takes time for these policies to be transmitted to the economy," Zhiwei Zhang from Pinpoint Asset Management wrote in a note. "It is also unclear if these policies are strong enough to offset the deflationary pressure in the economy." While deflation suggests goods were cheaper, it poses a threat to the broader economy as consumers tend to postpone purchases, hoping for further reductions. A lack of demand can then force companies to cut production, freeze hiring or lay off workers, while potentially also having to discount existing stocks -- dampening profitability even as costs remain the same. The NBS also said producer prices sank 2.7 percent, the 15th consecutive month of declines. The PPI index, which measures the cost of goods leaving factories and provides an insight into the health of the economy, fell three percent in November. China-Russia trade in 2023 reached more than \$240 billion, according to customs data, overshooting a goal of \$200 billion set by the neighbours in bilateral meetings last year. The figure is a record for the two countries, who have grown closer politically and economically since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Beijing has drawn criticism from Western countries for its stance on the Ukraine war. China insists it is neutral in the crisis but has refused to criticise Moscow's invasion. The trade figures represented a year-on-year increase of 26.3 percent, according to the data. In contrast, trade between the United States and China fell 11.6 percent to \$664 billion last year, the first fall since 2019.

Indonesia, Vietnam Agree to Set New Bilateral Trade Targets



JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) held a bilateral meeting with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi, Vietnam, during which they agreed to increase new bilateral trade targets. The agreement was reached after the target of US\$10 billion, set for 2023, was achieved in 2022, reported Antara news agency. "I am sure that PM Chinh has also agreed to set a trade target of above US\$15 billion for 2028 by expanding market access and reducing trade barriers," the president noted in a statement issued by the Presidential Secretariat Press Bureau. He also lauded the strategic partnership between the two countries that has resulted in various concrete collaborations, such as a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on information and communication technology signed. "This is in line with our goal to strengthen bilateral partnerships by taking advantage of the demographic bonus, digitalisation, and high-tech industry to achieve mutual prosperity," Jokowi added. Discussions between the two leaders also covered the investment sector in which President Jokowi lauded the increased investment by Indonesian companies in Vietnam and hoped that PM Chinh would continue to support a good investment climate. "We ask PM Chinh to encourage an investment climate that prioritizes investor protection aspects by the agreement between the two countries and the Asean Comprehensive Investment Agreement," Jokowi remarked. He then sought PM Chinh's support to ensure rice imports from Vietnam to Indonesia run smoothly. In addition, the Indonesian head of state sought intensified agricultural cooperation through research on quality control and smart farming, encouraging the implementation of the MoU on fisheries cooperation, and eradicating illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Surprise U.S. Inflation Increase Signals Bumpy Road Ahead



German Insolvencies Set to Rise

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German companies are expected to go bust at a higher rate this year following a sharp increase in insolvencies in 2023, as businesses hit by high energy costs and the end of pandemic aid throw in the towel. Restructuring experts warn that many "zombie" companies kept afloat after the coronavirus pandemic by generous government aid and a suspension of the obligation to file for bankruptcy — which caused insolvencies to drop to unusually low levels — are now collapsing. Since the start of this year, several well-known German companies — including the department store chain Galeria Kaufhof and Hamburg-based bag maker Bree, whose customers include Chancellor Olaf Scholz — have filed for insolvency. The ranks of struggling companies have been swelling because of Germany's economic stagnation, combined with high interest rates, rising wages, elevated energy prices and a government budget squeeze. This is expected to push insolvencies up by between 10 per cent and 30 per cent this year, experts warn, taking them above pre-pandemic levels. One such company is 85-year-old wooden toymaker Haba. Delivery failures caused by "wrong decisions" on IT systems at Haba's online children's clothing operation compounded the "heavy burden" the company was already enduring from the soaring cost of energy and wood, according to spokesperson Ilka Kunzelmann. Ultimately, it was too much for the family-owned business based in Bad Rodach, a spa town in central Germany. Haba was granted insolvency by a court in December and expects to emerge in March after it has shed about a third of its 1,500 employees, shut its online clothing arm and sold a school furniture factory.

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Inflation in the United States rose more than expected in December, propelled by higher energy and housing prices, signaling a bumpy road ahead for the Federal Reserve (Fed), and President Joe Biden as the election looms in November. Biden conceded "there is much more work to do" after Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that overall prices rose 0.3% from November and 3.4% from 12 months earlier. Those gains exceeded the previous 0.1% monthly rise and the 3.1% annual inflation in November. The December figures were slightly above economists' forecasts. More than half the increase in prices from November to December reflected higher housing costs. Energy costs, led by electricity and gasoline, along with food prices, also contributed to inflation. Since slowing to an annual increase of 3% last June, further progress toward lower consumer inflation has been limited by persistently high rents. Excluding volatile food and energy costs, though, so-called core prices rose just 0.3% month over month, unchanged from November's increase. Core prices were up 3.9% from a year earlier — the mildest such pace since May 2021. Economists pay particular attention to core prices because, by excluding costs that typically jump around from month to month, they are seen as a better guide to the likely path of inflation. Inflation has cooled more or less steadily since hitting a four-decade high of 9.1% in mid-2022. Still, despite the slowdown in price increases, along with steady economic growth, low unemployment and healthy hiring, polls show many Americans are dissatisfied with the economy. That disconnect, which will likely be an issue in the 2024 elections, has puzzled economists and political analysts. A major factor is the lingering financial and psychological effects of the worst bout of inflation in four decades. Stubbornly high inflation is a political risk for President Joe Biden, who heads into his reelection campaign facing persistent negative perceptions about the economy. "The economy has created more than 14 million jobs since I took office, and wealth, wages, and employment are higher now than under my predecessor," said Biden in a statement Thursday. "But there is much more work to do to lower costs for American families and American workers." Much of the public remains exasperated by prices, which are still 17% higher than they were before the inflation surge began and are still rising. Pollsters and economists say there has never been as wide a gap between the underlying health of the economy and public perception. Wage gains have outpaced inflation in recent months, meaning that Americans' average after-inflation take-home pay is up. Yet, in a poll conducted in November by The Associated Press-



NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about three-quarters of respondents described the economy as poor. Two-thirds said their expenses had risen. Thursday's figures reflected the outsized role that housing plays in the U.S. consumer price index (CPI) — roughly a third of the index. A measure of homeownership alone makes up roughly 25% of it. The government measures homeownership costs by calculating how much rent a homeowner would likely charge if that home were actually being rented — a figure seen as equivalent to the cost of owning the property. Overall housing prices rose 0.5% from November to December. Rents were up 0.4%, homeownership 0.5%. Over the past year, consumers have enjoyed some price declines for some individual items. Furniture and bedding prices are down 4%, for example. Men's suits and coats are down 6%, televisions 10%, sporting goods nearly 3%, sausages nearly 4%. The Federal Reserve, which began aggressively raising interest rates in March 2022 to try to slow the pace of price increases, wants to reduce year-over-year inflation to its 2% target level. The central bank has hiked its policy rate by 525 basis points to the current 5.25%-5.50% range since March 2022. Early on Thursday, financial markets saw a roughly 69% chance of a rate cut at the Fed's March 19-20 policy meeting, according to CME Group's FedWatch Tool. With the resilient labor market keeping wage growth elevated, some economists expect a rate cut in May or June. Expectations for a rate cut in March were also tempered by other data on Thursday showing the labor market remaining tight at the turn of the year, with the number of people filing new claims for unemployment benefits unexpectedly falling last week. The reports followed news last Friday that the economy added 216,000 jobs in November and annual wage growth picking up. "Overall, today's inflation data makes a March rate cut seem like a less likely scenario," said Charlie Ripley, senior investment strategist at Allianz Investment Management in Minneapolis. Still, there are solid reasons for optimism that inflationary pressure will continue to recede in the coming months. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York reported this week, for example, that consumers now expect inflation to come in at just 3% over the next year, the lowest one-year forecast since January 2021. That's important because consumer expectations are themselves considered a telltale sign of future inflation: When Americans fear that prices will keep accelerating, they will typically rush to buy things sooner rather than later. That surge of spending tends to fuel more inflation. But that nasty cycle does not appear to be happening.

IMF Board Approves \$700m Loan as Part of Pakistan Bailout



KARACHI (Dispatches) - The International Monetary Fund's board has approved a roughly \$700 million loan for Pakistan under a \$3 billion bailout, the fund and the finance ministry said. The IMF's completion of its first review of the programme and the board's decision brings the total disbursements under the Standby Arrangement (SBA) to about \$1.9 billion, the fund said. "There are now tentative signs of activity picking-up and external pressures easing," said in a statement Antoinette Sayeh, a deputy managing director at the fund. "Continued strong ownership (of the program) remains critical to ensure the current momentum continues and stabilization of Pakistan's economy becomes entrenched." The South Asian country is operating under a caretaker government and the IMF loan programme, approved in July, helped avert a sovereign debt default. Ahead of the bailout, Pakistan had to undertake a slew of measures demanded by the IMF, including revising its budget, a hike in its benchmark interest rate, and increases in electricity and natural gas prices. "Continuing with regularly-scheduled adjustments and pushing cost-side power sector reforms are vital to improving the sector's viability and protecting fiscal sustainability," Sayeh said. An IMF mission led by Pakistan mission chief Nathan Porter concluded its visit in November. It reviewed whether Pakistan was on track to meet benchmarks set under the SBA agreed in July and signed a staff level agreement. Under the bailout deal, the IMF also got Pakistan to raise \$1.34 billion in new taxation to meet fiscal adjustments. The measures fuelled all-time high inflation of 38% year-on-year in May, which is still hovering above 30%. The fund said that despite elevated inflation, "with appropriately tight policy" it could fall to 18.5% by end-June. It added the exchange rate has been "broadly stable." IMF funding along with recent inflows from multilateral lenders will further help the Pakistani rupee, that is fairly stable (over the) last few months," said Mohammad Sohail, CEO of Topline Securities. He added that this new tranche would help Pakistan in getting rollovers from friendly countries like the United Arab Emirates, China and Saudi Arabia and ease external debt repayment pressure. Pakistan's international bonds, which had already clocked healthy gains earlier on Thursday, soared after the announcement. The 2036 issue enjoyed the biggest gains, jumping 3.5 cents to trade at 62.59 cents in the dollar. Tradeweb data showed Pakistan's caretaker government, under interim Prime Minister Anwaar ul Haq Kakar, is meant to oversee a general election.

Exposure Therapy for One Phobia May Also Improve Other Fears

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Folks who use exposure therapy to overcome one phobia can find themselves less afraid of other things, according to the results of a study published recently in the journal *Translational Psychiatry*. It's very often the case that people prone to phobias often develop more than one, said lead researcher Iris Kodzaga, a doctoral student with Ruhr University Bochum's Department of Behavioral and Clinical Neuroscience. "Anxiety rarely comes alone," Kodzaga said in a university news release. "Patients who suffer from one fear often subsequently develop another." Exposure therapy has proven to be the most effective treatment against phobias, researchers said. By confronting a fear-inducing situation under the supervision of a therapist, patients learn to overcome their fear. However, it has been long assumed that a person with multiple fears would require multiple rounds of exposure therapy, with each round targeting a different phobia, Kodzaga noted.



Trump's Republican Rivals Make Final Push in Iowa



DES MOINES (Dispatches) - Nikki Haley has overtaken Ron DeSantis in Iowa in a closely watched poll just two days before a first-in-the-nation presidential nominating contest will determine whether either Republican can emerge as a viable alternative to Donald Trump. Trump remains the dominant candidate in Iowa and the favorite to win their party's nomination and take on U.S. President Joe Biden in what is expected to be a close and deeply acrimonious November vote that has raised questions about the depth of support for Europe and even basic democratic values. The Des Moines Register/NBC News/Mediacom Iowa Poll shows that Trump, the only current or ex-U.S. president to be charged with criminal activity, was the top pick for 48% of respondents, with former United Nations Ambassador Haley the favorite for 20%, followed by Florida Governor DeSantis with 16%. Critically, support for Haley rose 4 percentage points from the prior poll in December, while support for DeSantis and Trump each slipped 3 points. Those shifts, however, are close to the poll's margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 points. The poll is the latest sign of momentum for Haley, who has been closing the gap with Trump in New Hampshire, which hosts the second nominating contest on Jan. 23. A third-place finish for DeSantis in Iowa could doom his campaign, as he has invested more time and effort than any candidate on the state. "If she actually beats DeSantis, that will give her momentum going into New Hampshire and Trump is in striking distance there," said University of Iowa professor Tim Hagle. Hagle noted, however, that only 9% of Haley supporters in the poll were very enthusiastic about her candidacy, significantly lower than for DeSantis and Trump. That could mean fewer of her supporters show up on Monday if the projections for record low temperatures hold, Hagle said. The DeSantis campaign pointed to their expansive ground operation and predicted a strong performance on Monday night.



EU Investigators to Inspect China's BYD, Geely and SAIC in EV Probe

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - European Commission investigators are to inspect Chinese automakers in the coming weeks as part of a probe into whether to impose punitive tariffs to protect European electric vehicle (EV) makers, three people involved in the process said. The inspectors will visit BYD, Geely and SAIC, two sources said, with one of them saying the investigators will not visit non-Chinese brands produced in China, such as Tesla, Renault and BMW. The probe, launched in October and scheduled to last 13 months, seeks to determine whether cheaper, Chinese-made EVs benefit unfairly from state subsidies. Called protectionist by China, the investigation has escalated tensions between Beijing and the EU. The European Commission confirmed it would carry out the visits. "The Commission selected a representative sample of Chinese and EU producers, which have already replied to the questionnaires," Olof Gill, European Commission Spokesperson for Trade said. "The Commission will carry out verification visits at their premises in January-February 2024," he said. China's commerce ministry, BYD and SAIC did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Geely declined to comment but cited its October statement that the company followed all laws and supported fair market competition globally. One source said the investigators have arrived in China, while another said visits are scheduled for this month and February. The visits are for verification work - on-site inspections checking responses the automakers gave

to questionnaires - one source said. European Commission documents for the probe say it is in the "initiation stage", with verification visits due by April 11. The sources asked not to be named as details of the visit were confidential. Last week, China opened an anti-dumping investigation on brandy imported from the European Union, a step that appeared targeted at France, which backs the EV probe. Popular Chinese models exported to Europe include SAIC's MG and Geely's Volvo. Chinese-made vehicles' share of the European Union's EV market has risen to 8% and could reach 15% in 2025, with these EVs typically selling for 20% less than EU-made models. In October, China's Great Wall Motor said it was the first automaker to submit responses to the EU subsidy investigation. Relations between China and the EU have been strained by factors including Beijing's closer ties with Moscow after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU is seeking to reduce its reliance on the world's second-largest economy, particularly for materials and products needed for its green transition. At the same time Chinese EV makers, from market-leader BYD to smaller rivals Xpeng and Nio, are stepping up efforts to expand overseas as competition intensifies at home and domestic growth eases. Many have made sales to Europe a priority. China is estimated to have overtaken Japan as the world's largest auto exporter last year, shipping 5.26 million vehicles valued at about \$102 billion, a Chinese auto association said this week.

Extreme Weather and Misinformation Top Global Risks

DAVOS (Dispatches) - Risk specialists see extreme weather and misinformation as most likely to trigger a global crisis in the next couple of years, a World Economic Forum (WEF) survey released last week said. While extreme weather was identified as the bigger risk in 2024, misinformation and disinformation came second and were found to be the most severe global risk over the next two years. This could pose a particular threat as billions of people head to the polls in the biggest election year in history. Major economies from the United States to India and Mexico will hold elections this year, leaving industry and political leaders reliant on polls and forecasts to assess what the policy environment will look like by 2025. "The widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate it, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments," the report warned. "Resulting unrest could range from violent protests and hate crimes to civil confrontation and terrorism," added the report, which was prepared in partnership with Zurich Insurance Group and Marsh McLennan ahead of next week's annual WEF

meeting. Over a 10-year horizon, environmental risks including biodiversity loss and critical change to the Earth's systems topped the rankings, with misinformation, disinformation and adverse outcomes of artificial intelligence (AI) just behind. Meanwhile, two thirds of risk experts surveyed expect a multipolar or fragmented world order to emerge in the next decade, "in which middle and great powers contest, set and enforce regional rules and norms", the survey said. WEF president Borge Brende told a press conference on Tuesday that the 54th annual WEF gathering in the Swiss ski resort of Davos would occur against its most complicated geopolitical backdrop to date, ranging from wars in Gaza and Ukraine to rising debt and living costs. The survey's pessimistic outlook was likely triggered by the series of risks unleashed in the past four years with knock-on effects on society, said John Scott, head of sustainability risk at Zurich Insurance Group, highlighting the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "It's been one blow after the other to global supply chains," added Carolina Klint, Chief Commercial Officer for Europe at Marsh McLennan.



Universal Coronavirus Vaccine May Save Lives, Money in Future Pandemic

LONDON (Dispatches) - A universal coronavirus vaccine could have saved millions of lives and billions of dollars if one had been available prior to the pandemic, a new study argues. Further, a universal vaccine - one that targets parts of the virus common to all coronaviruses - could still be a game-changer in the future, researchers say. But that's only possible if one is developed before another variant mutates and runs rampant through the human population. "COVID-19 was the third major and serious coronavirus epidemic or pandemic following SARS in 2002 and MERS in 2012, thus, we should anticipate a fourth coronavirus outbreak within the next decade or so," said researcher Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of Baylor College's National School of Tropical Medicine and co-director of the Texas Children's Hospital Center for Vaccine Development. "A universal vaccine is cost-effective and cost-saving, and a priority for advancement," Hotez added. To figure out the potential value of having had a universal vaccine at the start of the pandemic, Hotez and his colleagues developed a computer model that simulated the entire U.S. population through the introduction and spread of COVID in 2020. Specifically, the simulation weighed what might have happened if a universal coronavirus vaccine had been available at the start. As history shows, scientists developed a strain-specific COVID vaccine in record time, but that still left 10 months of unchecked infection, illness and death. Using the simulation, researchers determined that a universal vaccine would have saved money even if it had only been 10% effective against COVID and a minority of the populace had received the jab. For example, a vaccine with 10% efficacy administered to a quarter of the U.S. population within two months of the start of the pandemic would have averted 14.6 million infections and saved more than \$27 billion in direct medical costs, researchers estimate. The benefits of a universal coronavirus vaccine would have held even if pharmaceutical companies had later crafted a better, more variant-specific vaccine, the model showed.

Lagarde Says Trump Represents a Threat to Europe

LONDON (Dispatches) - Donald Trump's potential election as US president is "clearly a threat" to Europe judging by the policies in his first term in office, European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde has said. Lagarde's comments in an interview with France 2 broke with the tradition for central bank bosses to steer clear of politics. However, her comments encapsulated the rising anxiety among European leaders about the prospect of a Trump victory in November's election. The ECB president said a return of Trump to the White House next year was likely to put the US at odds with Europe in several areas, including trade protectionism, military support for Nato and the fight against climate change. "If we learn lessons from history, from looking at the way he led the first four years of his mandate, it is clearly a threat," Lagarde said. "It is enough to look at trade tariffs, the commitment to Nato, the fight against climate change," she said, adding: "In these three areas alone, in the past, US interests were not aligned with those of Europe." Asked if Trump's presidency could leave Europe alone in supporting Ukraine against Russia's full-scale invasion, Lagarde said this was unlikely "because in the US Congress there are a number of elected members who are deeply hostile to Russia's horrific war against Ukraine and who will continue to finance and support Ukraine". Lagarde, who was a minister in the French government before she became head of the IMF in 2011 and then ECB president, dismissed rumours that she might leave the ECB before her eight-year term expires in 2027 to rejoin politics. Addressing a rumour that she had been asked to join the reshuffled French government as foreign minister, she said she would not leave the ECB when it was still in the middle of its battle against inflation "even to become Queen of Prussia". The 68-year-old said the "hardest and worst bit" of the recent inflation surge was over and that the next move by the ECB, barring a fresh shock, was likely to be a cut in interest rates - but she refused to say when that was likely to happen. She said the ECB was "in the process of winning the battle" against inflation, which has fallen from a eurozone record of 10.6 per cent in October 2022 to 2.9 per cent last month, but remains above the central bank's target of 2 per cent.





NFL Rookie Stroud Marches on as Flacco Comeback Dream Ends

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Rookie quarterback C.J. Stroud continued his remarkable season, throwing three touchdowns as the Houston Texans delivered a brutal ending to Joe Flacco's comeback story with a 45-14 victory in the opening NFL wildcard playoff game. The 38-year-old Flacco was brought out of semi-retirement by the Browns after they lost three quarterbacks to injury and a run of four straight wins had propelled the Browns into the post-season. But there was to be no Hollywood ending for the former Baltimore Ravens Super Bowl-winning quarterback, with Flacco throwing two interceptions, both returned for touchdowns, as the impressive Texans ran away with the game in the second half. Stroud, drafted out of Ohio State last year with the number two overall pick, has had an outstanding debut season, leading the Texans to a 10-7 record, and he was faultless in throwing for 274 yards, completing 16 of 21 passes with no interceptions or sacks. It began so well for Flacco, who was without a team until late November after he was released in the off-season by the New York Jets. He led the Browns on a six-play, 75-yard drive that ended in Kareem Hunt's one-yard touchdown run to put Cleveland ahead 7-3. Houston responded immediately with a swift, four-play, 75-yard drive, culminating in Stroud finding Nico Collins short left who powered into the corner of the end zone. Flacco put his side back in front with a clever shovel pass to Hunt who

ran in for an 11-yard score. Once again, though, Houston bounced back -- Stroud found Brevin Jordan to his right and he worked some space before sprinting home for a superb 76-yard touchdown. The Texans extended their lead to 24-14 at the end of the half when Stroud showed great awareness to spin to his right, finding space and time to throw deep to Dalton Schultz for a 37-yard score. Both quarterbacks had looked composed and efficient in the opening half but then came the two 'pick sixes' that ruined Flacco and the Browns' dream of a deep playoff run. Under pressure, Flacco attempted to throw the ball out of play but his effort was intercepted by Steven Nelson, who gleefully charged 82 yards for the touchdown. Then a Flacco pass intended for Harrison Bryant was snaffled up by Christian Harris, who returned it 36 yards to increase the lead to 38-14. The game was over when, early in the fourth quarter, Texans running back Devin Singletary spotted a gap and ran unhindered for a 19-yard touchdown. Stroud was delighted at the win and quick to spread the credit around the team. "I'm blessed to be playing at a high level right now and we've got to just keep it going," he said. "There's no me without my teammates, my O-line, my tight ends, my running backs, receivers and my defense. We all put it together. When we play complimentary football we're hard to beat." Later on Saturday, the Kansas City Chiefs host the Miami Dolphins in sub-freezing cold at Arrowhead Stadium.

Agassi Anoints Djokovic as Greatest Ever



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Eight-time Grand Slam champion Andre Agassi has anointed Novak Djokovic as the greatest men's player of all time, saying you cannot argue with the weight of his achievements. The popular American former world number one, himself widely considered among the best the sport has seen, also had lavish praise for Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. But he said numbers do not lie. "There's so many ways to look at it, but when you look at it on paper you just can't argue with what he's accomplished," Agassi told The Australian newspaper in Melbourne, where he is attending the opening Grand Slam of the year. "The amount that he's won, the head-to-heads, the Masters (titles), the year-end number ones, the weeks at number... all those stats." Like Djokovic, Agassi played some of his best tennis at Melbourne Park, with four of his major titles coming at the Australian Open -- in 1995, 2000, 2001 and 2003. But they pale against the Serb's 10, with the 36-year-old favourite to add an 11th this year, which would take his Slam total to an all-time record 25, surpassing Margaret Court's 24. Nadal, who pulled out of this year's Australian Open with a muscle tear, has won 22 Grand Slams and the retired Federer, 20. "Novak has won more Australian Opens than I've won Slams for crying out loud... what do you do but laugh? I don't know what to say to that," said Agassi. The 53-year-old, who bagged 60 career titles, including an Olympic gold, said Djokovic, Federer and Nadal had all brought so much to the game. "I'm such a traditionalist for the game itself... when I look at what people bring to the sport, he (Djokovic) has brought so much, unquestionably," he said. "But then you look at what Roger has brought to the sport -- the elegance and the class and the way that he did it."

Odermatt Strikes Again in Downhill Marred by Kilde Crash

WENGEN (Dispatches) - Switzerland's Marco Odermatt consolidated his place atop the overall World Cup standings with a second downhill victory in three days in Wengen. But a day after a season-ending injury to Alexis Pinturault in a heavy fall in the super-G, the dangers of ski racing again surfaced as Norway's Aleksander Aamodt Kilde was helicoptered off after crashing awkwardly with the finish line in sight. Kilde, last season's downhill champion and 2020 overall World Cup winner, failed to control a jump into the final stretch of the demanding course in sunny conditions while travelling at an eye-watering 145km/h. The 31-year-old went head over heels and flew back-first into the course netting. First aiders were quickly on the scene and tied an orange tourniquet round his right thigh before his evacuation to hospital by helicopter. "Three days of racing here, to finish by the longest (downhill), it's too much, much too much," said France's second-placed finisher Cyprien Sarrazin after watching Kilde's crash in a criticism of the packed calendar. "When you see Kilde, who is one of the strongest of all of us, bomb out like that, it's not normal." Odermatt, who won downhill and giant slalom golds in last year's World Ski Championships in Courchevel, started with bib number eight and clocked a winning 2min 25.64sec in his descent of the 4.2km-long Lauberhorn piste. "My performance was probably one of the best ever, from my side," Odermatt said. "I came into the finish and I knew this would probably be hard to beat." Odermatt added, however, that his win was "bittersweet... when you see a friend like Alek crashing that hard". "I hope he is a little bit well, even



if it didn't look so good. It was a very hard week for all of us, especially if you were sick like he was. Maybe the energy level was not high enough for today." To see a friend crash like this, it's always very, very sad. "It was the 26-year-old Swiss racer's second career downhill victory, having notched up his maiden win on the same Wengen piste on Thursday. That win had made him the first male skier to win a giant slalom, a super-G and a downhill World Cup event in a single season since his compatriot Didier Cuche in 2009/10. Saturday's victory was the 31st in Odermatt's career, 18 having come in the giant slalom, 11 in the super-G and now two in the downhill. It leaves him on top of the overall standings on 1,016 points, a massive 552pts ahead of Austrian Marco Schwarz, since ruled out for the season with a knee injury. Sarrazin is in third place, 4pts further adrift, with Kilde in fourth, 576pts behind his Swiss rival. Odermatt has won two consecutive overall World Cup titles as well as Olympic giant slalom gold in Beijing in 2022. Sarrazin continued his rich vein of form to finish second, at 0.59sec. It was a boost for a France team hit by Friday's injury to Pinturault. Sarrazin, after finishing second in the opening downhill, gave France their first men's super-G victory in a decade, but Pinturault ruptured knee ligaments in a spectacular fall during that race, an injury that has ruled the 2021 overall World Cup winner out for the rest of the season. Italian veteran Dominik Paris finished third on Saturday, a massive 1.92sec behind Odermatt, as only 10 racers came within three seconds of the Swiss racer's dominant winning time.

Bucks Overpower Curry-Less Warriors, 129-118



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Giannis Antetokounmpo, Damian Lillard and Khris Middleton combined for 84 points, and the well-rested Milwaukee Bucks overpowered the short-handed Golden State Warriors late for a 129-118 victory Saturday night in Wisconsin. Antetokounmpo led the way with a game-high 33 points. Lillard had 27 and Middleton 24 as part of a double-double with a game-high 10 assists for the Bucks, whose only game since Monday was a 33-point breeze over the visiting Boston Celtics. Playing the second night of a road back-to-back and doing so without Stephen Curry (rest), the Warriors also had three players score 20 or more points, led by Jonathan Kuminga with 28. Brandin Podziemski totaled 23 in a double-double with a game-high-tying 10 rebounds, and Klay Thompson had 21. The Warriors led by as many as seven points, that coming when Thompson nailed a 3-pointer to give the visitors a 72-65 lead at the midpoint of the third quarter. But two bursts eventually allowed the Bucks to win for just the third time in their last seven games. Less than two minutes later after the Warriors had gone up by seven, Milwaukee regained a 75-72 advantage after two Antetokounmpo dunks and consecutive 3-pointers by Bobby Portis and Lillard in a 10-0 burst. Golden State managed six subsequent ties, the last at 96-all on a Kuminga 3-pointer with eight minutes to play. But Antetokounmpo and Middleton countered with three-point plays and Andre Jackson Jr. scored on a dunk. When Malik Beasley bombed in a 3-pointer with 6:25 to go, the Bucks had control of the game for the first time at 107-98. Antetokounmpo shot 13-for-22, Lillard 9-for-19 and Middleton 10-for-13 for the Bucks, who connected at a 54.3 percent rate. Jackson had a second Bucks double-double with 10 points and a game-high-tying 10 rebounds, while Brook Lopez and Beasley added 11 points each and Portis 10. Dario Saric had a team-high six assists to go with 12 points and six rebounds, while Trayce Jackson-Davis added 12 points for the Warriors, who have lost seven of 10.

De Bruyne Inspires Man City Comeback to Stun Newcastle

LONDON (Dispatches) - Pep Guardiola said Manchester City showed the heart of champions to fight back to beat Newcastle 3-2 thanks to a Kevin De Bruyne masterclass on his return to Premier League action. The Belgian came off the bench to score and set up Oscar Bobb's stoppage-time winner to announce his comeback from a five-month injury layoff in style. Victory takes City up to second in the table, two points behind Liverpool, and ominously poised to strike when they return from a two-week winter break, by which point Erling Haaland may be fit to join De Bruyne in terrorising opposition defences. "That was really good, sometimes it is better winning that way," said Guardiola. "We played with a huge personality. They showed me they want to be there, to fight until the end that they want to retain the title." A cruel late twist for Newcastle saw Eddie Howe's men succumb to a sixth defeat in their last seven Premier League games. But a point would have been more than Newcastle deserved after being thoroughly outplayed but for two goals in two first-half minutes that threatened to frustrate the champions. A frantic encounter got off to a disrupted start as City goalkeeper Ederson was forced off injured in his attempt to stop Sean Longstaff putting the ball into the net. The goal was ruled out as Alexander Isak was clearly offside in the build-up and City were furious the flag was not raised earlier to prevent any damage being done to the Brazilian. Guardiola's men dominated for the opening half-hour but lacked

the poise of De Bruyne or presence of Haaland up front to turn their possession into a cutting edge. When City did break the deadlock, it took a moment of brilliance from Bernardo Silva. The Portuguese backheeled Kyle Walker's low cross into the far corner on 26 minutes. Moments later only a brilliant save from Martin Dubravka turned another sweet strike from Silva onto the post. However, the match was transformed in a

stunning two-minute period just before half-time. Bruno Guimaraes cut open the City backline with one pass that freed Isak, who cut inside Walker and curled brilliantly into the far corner. Seconds later, the Swede's strike was surpassed as Anthony Gordon followed a similar route by turning inside onto his right foot and firing into the far corner. City restored their control of the game at the start of the second period, but again lacked a punch in attack until De Bruyne made his return to Premier League action for the first time since the opening day of the season. The 32-year-old, who made his comeback as a substitute in a 5-0 rout of Huddersfield in the FA Cup last weekend, quickly showed what the European champions have been missing. De Bruyne latched onto Rodri's pass 16 minutes from time and drove forward before placing a low precise finish beyond Dubravka from outside the box. Despite his lack of game time this season, De Bruyne has still produced more assists than any other player in Europe's top five leagues since the start of last season. And another wonderful pass over the top for Bobb created the winner. The young Norwegian still had plenty to do, but showed quick feet to round Dubravka and tap into an unguarded net for his first Premier League goal.

