

Iran Imported Commodities Valued at \$1.6b From Germany During the First Nine Months of the Current Iranian Calendar year (March 21-Decemehr 21, 2023), the Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) Announced

# IRAN NEWS

Managing Director of the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) Jalil Salari Says Average Daily Gasoline Consumption in Iran Has Reached About 115m Liters While Heavy Vehicles Consume 63m Liters of Gasoil Per Day

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### Iran Private Sector Calls for Solving Transportation Problems With Tajikistan

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### Hamas Appears to Show Dead Bodies of Two Hostages



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### IRGC Missiles Hit Terrorists' Bases, in Syria Espionage Center in Iraqi Kurdistan



TEHRAN (PresTV) - The IRGC said the first missile strike targeted gathering places of commanders and main elements of recent terrorist attacks in the Iranian cities of Kerman and Rask. It added that the strike came after gathering points of the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group were identified in the occupied territories of Syria and destroyed with a number of ballistic missiles. The Takfiri group claimed responsibility for two explosions that killed nearly 100 people and wounded scores of others at a memorial for Iran's top anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman on January 3. Last month, another terrorist attack hit a police station in the southeastern Iranian city of Rask, killing 11 police officers and injuring at least six others. The IRGC said in a later statement that another missile strike has been launched at a main espionage center of the Israeli regime's Mossad spy agency in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. It said the strike was a sign of the IRGC's full intelligence superiority over the Zionist regime's bases and activities in the region. The IRGC added that its missile strike on the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has totally destroyed the Mossad center there. It noted that the Mossad center was used "to develop espionage operations and plan acts of terrorism" across the region, especially in Iran. The missile strike against the Mossad center, the statement said, was in retaliation for the recent assassinations of the resistance front's commanders, especially those of the IRGC, by the Zionist regime. The IRGC also assured "the great nation of Iran" that it will find "the malicious terrorist groups" that are active against the Iranian nation "wherever they are and will punish them for their shameful deeds." Later commenting on the IRGC anti-terrorist operations on Tuesday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman said that the operations were part of Tehran's just punishment against those who act against the country's security. The operation was in line with the authoritative defense of the country's sovereignty and security and countering terrorism, Nasser Kanaani said on Tuesday. "The Islamic Republic of Iran always supports the peace, stability, and security of the region and adheres to the observance of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries," he said, adding that at the same time, the country will not hesitate to take deterrent action against the threats to its national security and punish the criminals. The Islamic Republic, with its high intelligence power, identified the criminals' headquarters and targeted their base in a precise operation, the senior Iranian diplomat underlined, emphasizing that this was only part of the response of the Islamic Republic of Iran to those who took action against the country's national security and the security of Iranian citizens.

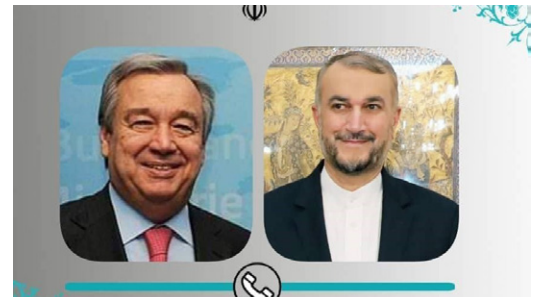
IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

### Leader Hails Yemenis' Great Achievement in Supporting Palestinians in Gaza



TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has hailed the Yemenis' anti-Israel naval operations in the Red Sea, saying they did a "great job" in defiance of U.S. threats. Speaking during a meeting with Friday Prayer leaders on Tuesday, Ayatollah Khamenei said that the Yemeni maritime campaign in support of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip "deserves admiration and appreciation." At the beginning of this meeting, Imam Khamenei spoke about the significance of the Islamic month of Rajab, describing it as one of the most virtuous days of the year. He advised the people and the believers to make the most of this great divine blessing by engaging in meaningful supplications, invocations, and repentances. "The Yemeni nation and the Ansarullah government did a great job... They damaged the vital channels of the Zionist regime. The United States threatened [them], but they were not afraid of the US," he then stated. "Their job is rightly and fairly an example of jihad (endeavor for the sake of God). We hope that these efforts, acts of resistance and activities will continue until victory." The Leader also said the people of the world acknowledge that the Gazans are "innocent and victorious" while the usurping regime is "cruel and bloodthirsty" as well as "defeated and disintegrated." "The innocent and powerful people of Gaza were able to influence the world with their struggles, and today the world views these people, fighters and their resistance group as hero," he noted. Through their resilience, the Gazans promoted the holy faith of Islam and popularized the Qur'an, the Leader said, wishing pride for resistance fighters, especially the Gaza people and fighters. Then the Leader said that it is not possible to achieve Islamic goals without people's presence. He also said that taking part in the elections is not just a duty, it is people's right. "Encouraging people to do good social works such as participating in the construction of schools and hospitals and helping to release needy prisoners or encouraging them to participate in the political field such as elections is a necessary task," he stressed. Referring to Iran's parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections scheduled for March 1, Ayatollah Khamenei said, "Participation in elections is not just a duty, but it is the right of the people."

### U.S.-UK Strike on Yemen a Strategic Mistake



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The foreign minister of Iran decried a recent joint military strike by the U.S. and the UK against Yemen as a strategic mistake that will exacerbate tensions in the region. In a telephone conversation with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Monday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stressed the need to stop the Zionist regime's crimes in Gaza. Commending the UN chief for his efforts and positions on the need to stop the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, the Iranian foreign minister expressed concern about the complicated and painful humanitarian situation in Gaza and said Iran is ready to deliver humanitarian aids to the enclave. Pointing to the recent developments in the Red Sea, the foreign minister reiterated Iran's principled stance on protecting shipping and navigational security and asserted that Yemen's goal is to prevent ships from sailing towards the occupied territories in order to stop the Zionist regime's crimes and genocide against the people in Gaza. Amir-Abdollahian denounced the illegal US-UK strike on Yemen as a strategic mistake, saying it would escalate tensions in the region. Guterres, for his part, condemned the Gaza conflict and stressed that the war should stop and humanitarian aid be delivered to Gaza, the Foreign Ministry's website reported. On the recent developments in the Red Sea, the UN chief said he was worried about the spread of conflicts in the region and added the UN has concentrated its efforts on stopping the war and reducing the suffering of the people in the region. He also expressed opposition to resorting to force and said all sides should stick to the UN Charter and avoid war. Iran plays a significant role in boosting peace and stability in the region, Guterres noted.

### Seizure of U.S. Tanker Conforms to Int'l Law



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The American oil tanker that the Iranian Navy confiscated in the Sea of Oman on January 11 has been seized in compliance with international law, as Iran has taken back what had been stolen by the U.S., Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani said. Speaking to reporters in Iran's southern port city of Bushehr on Monday, Rear Admiral Irani said Iran has retrieved what has been stolen by the U.S. The American forces had committed a theft in a bullying manner, so it was necessary for Iran to earn back its right, the commander stated. The Navy commander underlined that Iran has acted in accordance with the norms of international law in seizing the oil tanker. Echoing remarks from Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the Navy chief warned the enemies that the era of hit and run is over. On Thursday, the Iranian naval forces captured ST Nicolas in the Sea of Oman. The US oil tanker had renamed itself after stealing Iran's oil in May 2023. The vessel had illicitly taken a cargo of Iranian oil under the guidance of the United States and transported it to American ports.

### Yemeni Retaliatory Strikes to Iran Meant to Conceal Israeli Crimes in Gaza

TEHRAN (PresTV) - Iran's permanent ambassador to the United Nations has roundly dismissed Western allegations about the Islamic Republic's involvement in attacks by Yemeni forces in the Red Sea, stating that such claims are meant to deviate the world public opinion from Israeli atrocities in the Gaza Strip. In two identical letters addressed to UN Security Council António Guterres and rotating President of the UN Security Council Nicolas de Rivière on Monday, Amir Saeid Irvani underlined that the ongoing Israeli genocide and barbaric massacres, which the Israeli regime is committing with the full support of the United States, is the root cause of the current situation in the Red Sea. "The United States cannot deny or cover up the incontestable reality that recent incidents in the Red Sea are directly related to Israel's continued atrocities against the Palestinian people in Gaza," he said. The Iranian diplomat noted that any attempt to attribute Yemeni retaliatory strikes to his country is a mere diversion from the reality on the ground in Yemen, as well as a distraction from the brutalities being perpetrated by Israel in Gaza. "I wish to emphasize that the caretaker government in Sana'a maintains independent sovereignty, making decisions

and taking actions in its own interest," Irvani emphasized. He also unequivocally condemned and categorically rejected the unfounded allegations made by the representative of the United States to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, against Tehran in the recent Security Council sessions, stressing that she has misappropriated the platform to disseminate falsehoods and exercise deliberate disinformation. "Iran has never taken any activities in violation of Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015), including any engagement in the sale or transfer of arms or weaponry systems that would contravene this resolution. Furthermore, Iran has always advocated for resolving the Yemen crisis through political means," Irvani said. The Iranian UN ambassador also sharply criticized the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies for their recent acts of aggression against Yemen, saying these countries bear full responsibility for the violation of international law. Irvani finally urged the international community to unequivocally condemn the US and UK military aggression against Yemen, stating that the attacks amount to a clear violation of international law and the UN Charter.



### Lower Liquidity Growth Rate Signals Stability in Iran's Macro Economy



TEHRAN - Finance Minister says the lower liquidity growth rate this year suggests stability in the Islamic country's macro economy. Speaking at his weekly presser, Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi, said: "The growth of liquidity this year is much lower than the previous years, which indicates stability in the macro economy." Referring to the decrease in the inflation rate in Iran, Khandouzi said: "The reports of the International Monetary Fund and other international organizations indicate that we will have a decrease in inflation in the next year." He also said about employment: "According to the report of the Statistics Center, 700 thousand new jobs were created this fall compared to last year, and the unemployment rate reached the lowest figure in the last four decades, i.e. 6.7%, which is 0.6% lower compared to the fall of last year." "705,000 new jobs were created this fall compared to last year's fall, which is a three-fold increase in job creation compared to the previous year," added Khandouzi. The unemployment rate of university graduates has also decreased in the new year, but it has not yet reached the desired point and is unsatisfactory. He also expressed hope that Iran would not face the fluctuations of the currency market in the future. Regarding investment in Iran, Iran's top economic official said: "The National Development Fund has a significant place in the discussion of investment." During the Raisi administration, we had 529 cases of foreign investment plans, 173 of which belong to the nine months of 1402, with more than 9 billion dollars approved and implemented. Also, 31 investment plans have been proposed by the foreign investment board, and if approved, this number will be added to more than one billion dollars of new investment that has been put on the agenda since the beginning of the government.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iran, Saudi Arabia Talk on Increasing Economic Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's ambassador to Saudi Arabia Alireza Enayati and Chairman of the Federation of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry Hassan Al-Huwaizi have held talks over expanding the bilateral relations between the two countries, especially trade ties. In this meeting held on Monday, the two officials discussed expansion of ties and cooperation between the two Muslim countries. Referring to the initial agreement for the development of bilateral ties in economy and trade between the two countries, Enayati said that Tehran welcomes expanding ties with Saudi Arabia in economic fields. He said that Iran and Saudi Arabia have much potential in industry, agriculture, and technical and engineering services, energy, and tourism, and can take steps towards the development and prosperity of the region by cooperating.

## Iran Dismisses Australian PM's Baseless Allegations



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Iranian Foreign Ministry rejected the groundless accusations the prime minister of Australia has made against Iran, advising Canberra to reverse the wrong policy of siding with the U.S. In a statement released on Tuesday, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani dismissed Australia's "unfair and groundless" allegations against Iran. Speaking to reporters in Melbourne on Thursday, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese accused Iran of playing a "very destructive role" in the Middle East, saying Iran "should stop meddling". In response to those comments, Kanaani said the government of Australia is well aware of Iran's major role in establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan, in the effective fight against Daesh (ISIL or ISIS) terrorists and other extremist groups in the region, and in ensuring the security of energy in one of the world's most important maritime routes. The spokesman also hit back at Australia for the reversed perception of realities across the region, the one-sided supports for the Zionist regime's crimes in Gaza, and the backing for the arbitrary military attacks by the US and the UK against Yemen that have violated the Arab nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity. "After the bitter experience of siding with the US-led coalition in Iraq and Afghanistan, Canberra has once again taken a wrong course and is aiding and abetting the United States' destabilizing measures in the region," Kanaani stated.



TEHRAN - Hamed Asgari, the director of the international affairs of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA), has urged the need for solving the problems hindering transportation between Iran and Tajikistan. Addressing an Iran-Tajikistan Business Forum in Tehran on Monday, Asgari referred to transit problems as the main obstacle to enhancement of Iran-Tajikistan trade. He stressed that launching production lines and making joint investments are the best ways for establishment of long-term trade relations between Tehran and Dushanbe. Asgari also expressed hope for implementing of an agreement for cancelling visa requirements between the two countries and facilitating commercial travels. Iran and Tajikistan can cooperate in different areas, including agriculture, food, textile, mining, technology and machinery, he said, adding that Iran can provide Tajikistan's access to the high seas. Noting that last year's volume of trade between Iran and Tajikistan grew to \$250 million from \$100 million a year earlier, he however added that trade exchanges between the two countries are still far below the existing potentials. Asgari expressed hope that Iran and

Tajikistan will reach a \$500 million target for annual trade exchanges within the next few years. Haydar Rajabov, the deputy chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Republic of Tajikistan, was another one to address the forum. He referred to mining industry, extraction of constructional materials, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture are the main areas on which Iran and Tajikistan can cooperate. Noting that Tajikistan is offering different incentives to support further investment in the country, he called for further presence of Iranian investors in Tajikistan's projects. In November, Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian said the trade between Iran and Tajikistan has increased by 10 times over the past two years. According to Mehrabian, the value of trade between the two countries which was \$23 million in the Iranian calendar year 1399 (2020-2021) reached \$280 million in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20, 2023). The trade between the two countries also reached \$150 million in the first six months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-September 22) and it is expected to exceed \$300 million by the end of the year (late March 2024).

## Russia's Adherence to Iran's Sovereignty to Be Included in Bilateral Deal



TEHRAN (IRNA) - In a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart, the Russian Defense Minister emphasized his country's complete adherence to sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammadreza Ashtiani had a phone call on Monday during which they discussed ways to expand cooperation and security in the region. "This issue will be explicitly mentioned in a deal that will be signed between the governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia," General Shoigu said. In this telephone consultation, the two ministers also pointed out the importance of issues related to regional security and emphasized that Moscow and Tehran will continue their joint efforts in establishing a multipolar world order and negating the unilateralism of the United States. Also, the Minister of Defense of Russia emphasized on full adherence to sovereignty and territorial integrity, noting that this issue will be explicitly mentioned in the forthcoming agreement that will be signed by the governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia.

## Iran-Pakistan Border Trade Committee Meets in Chabahar



CHABAHAH (IRNA) - The 11th meeting of a joint border trade committee between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan kicked off on Tuesday in Chabahar, in southeastern Iran. Head of Industry, Mine, and Trade department of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province Iraj Hassanpour will lead the Iranian delegation in the two-day meeting with the Pakistani delegation led by chief of Balochistan's Customs office Abdul Qadir Memon. The meeting aims to boost commercial exchanges and to speed up transportation and to facilitate customs affairs between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Iran and Pakistan have held 10 rounds of border trade committee meetings to boost their trade relations. The two countries seek to raise their annual trade value to \$5 billion. Abdul Qadir Memon said in the meeting with Iranian officials in Chabahar that the two sides will try to reduce cargo transit and transportation costs for businesses during the joint meeting. Iran and Pakistan had held a 10th edition of their border trade committee talks in Quetta on Jan 15, 2023.

## Iran Supports Navigation Safety in Region

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The foreign minister of Iran expressed Tehran's support for the security of the shipping industry in the region, warning the US and the UK to stop their military strikes on Yemen. Speaking at a joint press conference with his Indian counterpart in Tehran on Monday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the Islamic Republic "vigorously supports shipping security across the region." "We warn the U.S. and the UK to stop the war against Yemen and Gaza. There is no military solution," the Iranian foreign minister added. The comments came after a series of joint American and British strikes targeted the positions of the Houthi movement -officially known as Ansarullah- in Yemen. In his comments at the press conference, Amir-Abdollahian said Iran insists on the avoidance of expansion of war, noting that Tehran has discussed maritime security with the Yemeni forces. The National Salvation Government of Yemen has assured Iran that Yemenis won't disrupt the security of the shipping industry, but they maintain that they will act against the Israeli ships as long as the war on Gaza persists, the Iranian minister added. On the promotion of relations between Tehran and New Delhi, Amir-Abdollahian said

negotiations have been held on a range of multilateral issues, such as the development of Iran's southeastern port city of Chabahar and the North-South Corridor project. He also hailed India's role in the process of Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. Amir-Abdollahian also stated that Iran and India share views about the need for an end to the Israeli war and genocidal crimes in Gaza and preventing the spread of clashes. For his part, India's Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said his country and Iran are two allies that have focused on political and economic cooperation. Expressing India's willingness to use Iran's capacities to gain access to the northern countries, he said the two states have a common view about the development of Chabahar and have developed a good road map to the completion of joint projects.

Both Iran and India are concerned about the developments in West Asia and stress the need to prevent an escalation of violence and hostilities, Jaishankar added. Emphasizing the necessity of countering threats to the shipping industry, he said a number of attacks have happened near India, adding, "This is worrying and has affected India's energy and economic interests."



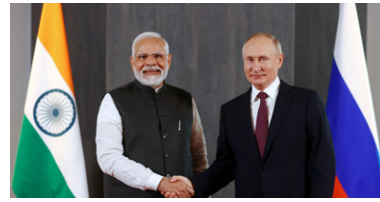
## NISOC Says Ready to Participate in Iraq's Oil Projects

TEHRAN (Shana) - The National Iranian South Oil Company (NISOC) on Monday expressed its readiness to participate in various projects of Iraq. The NISOC managing director made the announcement in his meeting with a visiting Iraqi delegation of Nasiriyah Chamber of Commerce on the sidelines of the second day of the 14th Khuzestan Specialized Exhibition of Petroleum Industry Equipment Manufacturing in Ahvaz, the capital city of southwestern province of Khuzestan. Alireza Daneshi briefed the Iraqi delegation on NISOC's capabilities and said the company is keen to help Iraq promote its technical know-how and solve its problems in different sectors of oil industry. The CEO of NISOC also discussed cooperation with the Iraqi officials in the fields of collecting associated gases, constructing oil and gas networks, and injecting gas into reservoirs. The Iraqi side put great emphasis on developing bilateral cooperation, inviting Daneshi to pay a visit to oil fields, installations, and companies in Nasiriyah.



### Putin and Modi Discuss Ukraine

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin held a phone call with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, discussing Ukraine and wishing each other well in upcoming elections, the Kremlin said. The two leaders "expressed interest in further intensifying mutually beneficial bilateral ties" and touched upon "the situation in Ukraine", according to a statement posted on the Kremlin's website. They also wished each other success in upcoming parliamentary elections in India and a presidential poll in Russia, it said. India has maintained its traditionally friendly ties with Russia since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, even as it has remained close to Western countries including the U.S., while occasionally criticising Moscow's military campaign.



### North Korea's Kim Calls for South to Be Seen as "Primary Foe"



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for the constitution to be changed to ensure that South Korea is seen as the "primary foe" and warned his country did not intend to avoid war should it happen, state media KCNA reported on Tuesday. In a speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, Kim said he had concluded that unification with the South was no longer possible, and accused Seoul of seeking regime collapse and unification by absorption. Kim said the constitution should be amended to educate North Koreans that South Korea is a "primary foe and invariable principal enemy" and define the North's territory as separate from the South. "We don't want war but we have no intention of avoiding it," Kim was quoted as saying by KCNA. North Korea should also plan for "completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming" South Korea in the event of a war, and South Koreans should also no longer be referred to as fellow countrymen, Kim added, calling for the severing of all inter-Korean communication and the destruction of a monument to reunification in Pyongyang. Three organisations dealing with unification and inter-Korean tourism would also be shut down, state media added. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, at a cabinet meeting, said Pyongyang was being "anti-national" for calling the South a hostile country. Kim's call for constitutional changes come as tensions have worsened in the Korean Peninsula recently amid a series of missile tests and a push by Pyongyang to break with decades of policy and change how it relates to the South. Analysts have said North Korea's foreign ministry could take over relations with Seoul, and potentially help justify the use of nuclear weapons against the South in a future war. Ruediger Frank, professor of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, said Kim's new policies "will trigger a cascade of changes across inter-Korean relations and regional dynamics". "This opens the door to regular interstate relations, including both diplomatic normalisation and potential conflict," Frank wrote in the report for the U.S.-based 38 North project.

### Hamas Appears to Show Dead Bodies of Two Hostages



GAZA (Dispatches) - Hamas appeared to show the dead bodies of two Israeli hostages on Monday after warning Israel they might be killed if it did not stop its bombardment of Gaza. A new video released by the Palestinian militant group purportedly showed the bodies of Yossi Sharabi, 53, and Itai Svirsky, 38, who had appeared in an initial video on Sunday. It also showed a third Israeli hostage, university student Noa Argamani, 26, seemingly reading a script in front of a blank white wall, saying the two were killed by Israeli strikes. Reuters was unable to verify what had happened to the three, who were among some 240 people taken hostage by Islamist Hamas militants during a surprise cross-border rampage into southern Israel on Oct. 7. Around half of those hostages were released during a short-lived November truce, but Israel says 132 remain in Gaza and that 25 have died in captivity. The three Israelis were shown in a Hamas video on Sunday in which the group urged the Israeli government to halt its aerial and ground offensive and bring about their release. It ended with the caption: "Tomorrow (Monday) we will inform you of their fate." Israeli officials have generally declined to respond to Hamas' public messaging on the hostages. Forensic officials have said that autopsies of slain hostages who had been recovered found causes of death inconsistent with Hamas' account they had died in air strikes. Israel has also made clear it is aware of the risks to hostages from its offensive and is taking precautions. As night fell, residents said Israeli planes and tanks intensified their bombardment again across Gaza. In Al-Bureij in central Gaza, medics said an Israeli missile strike killed four people and wounded others, while in the Tel Al-Hawa suburb of Gaza City in the north, they said two people were killed and others wounded by an Israeli strike. Israel's military said it had withdrawn another division of troops as part

of plans for more targeted operations against Hamas leaders in the south after an initial all-out offensive centred on the heavily built-up northern end of the Strip. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, speaking around the same time as the latest hostage video was shown, said intense military operations in southern Gaza were almost over, but that Hamas would not agree to release any more hostages without military pressure. The armed wing of Hamas said its fighters had ambushed and killed five Israeli soldiers in the southern city of Khan Younis. Palestinian health officials said earlier that seven people had been killed and others hurt in an Israeli air strike near the city's Nasser hospital. Israel's campaign in Gaza since the Oct. 7 Hamas assault has turned much of the Palestinian territory into a wasteland and killed, health officials say, some 24,100 people and wounded nearly 61,000. Health officials said 132 were killed in the past 24 hours, suggesting to Palestinians that there has been little let-up in the intensity of Israel's offensive despite its announcement of a shift to the new, more targeted phase. Almost two million displaced people are sheltering in tents and other temporary accommodation in southern Gaza amid the fighting, and are facing increased risks of starvation and disease due to chronic shortages of food, fuel and medicines. The more than three-month-old conflict has intensified violence in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and in the wider Middle East and on Monday it reached further into Israel. Palestinians carried out coordinated car-rammings in the central Israeli town of Raanana, killing a woman and injuring 12 other people, police and medical officials said. France said two of its nationals were among the injured. The two suspects were from the same family in Hebron in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and at least one of the vehicles used in the attacks had been stolen, police said.

### Britain's Conservatives Set for 1997-Style Election Defeat



LONDON (dispatches) - British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party is set for an electoral defeat on a par with its heavy loss to the Labour Party in 1997, according to a YouGov opinion poll published in the Telegraph newspaper. Ahead of an election expected later this year, the poll predicted Labour was on course to win 385 seats in parliament while the Conservatives will retain just 169, losing more seats than they did in 1997 when Tony Blair led Labour to power. That would represent an 11.5% swing to Keir Starmer's Labour, the biggest collapse in support for a governing party since 1906, the newspaper said. The 14,000 people surveyed by YouGov represented about seven times the usual number of people involved in the firm's polling. The survey was commissioned by a group of Conservative donors, the Telegraph said. Recent polls have repeatedly shown the Conservatives trailing Labour. A YouGov poll in November put Sunak's party behind by 19 percentage points. Asked about the latest forecast of a heavy electoral defeat, Sunak said the only poll that mattered was the national election which must be held by January 2025 but which he has suggested will take place later this year. "There have been lots of polls over the last year. There'll be hundreds more polls. The only one that matters is the one when the general election comes," he told reporters. "And the choice of that election is clear. It's to stick with our plan that is working." Starmer said he was not taking anything for granted in the run-up to the election. "We have to earn every vote, respect every vote, and we should always, always fight like we're 5% behind," he told reporters on Monday.



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Donald Trump romped to a lightning-quick victory Monday in Iowa's caucuses -- the first vote in the U.S. presidential race -- cementing his status as the presumptive Republican standard-bearer to challenge President Joe Biden in November's election. The former president has led polling for more than a year, but the contest was seen as the clearest insight yet into whether he can convert his advantage into a stunning White House return. Major U.S. networks took just 30 minutes to project the winner, with Trump opening up an unprecedented 32-point lead over second-placed Ron DeSantis over the following hour or so. The Florida governor and Trump's other main rival -- former UN ambassador Nikki Haley -- appeared to be locked in a tussle for the runner-up spot at around 20 and 19 percent respectively. There had been questions as to whether Trump might have been hamstrung by his legal problems, as he faces civil and criminal trials in multiple jurisdictions in 2024. But the Iowa victory demonstrated the 77-year-old's success in turning his prosecutions into a rallying cry that has galvanised his followers as he takes his momentum into New Hampshire, the next state to nominate, next Tuesday. Heart doctor Allan Latham, 62, who voted before heading to Trump's election party in Des Moines, hailed a "night for victory," although he admitted he was surprised by the speed of the result call. Latham told AFP that he wanted Trump to "get back to DC," adding that the Republican was "going to help (control) the border" where migrants cross from Mexico -- a key issue in U.S. politics. Bundled up Iowa residents shuffled into more than 1,600 voting locations, braving sub-zero temperatures in a winter storm that forced candidates to cancel

events at the last minute. Aides of all the hopefuls had fretted over turnout, with some justification, as the number of caucus-goers was estimated shortly after the contest opened to be around 130,000 -- substantially down on the 187,000 who turned out in 2016. The margin of Trump victory was always the main question of the night, with analysts arguing that a gap above 30 points, or a voting share of more than 50 percent, would be far above par. The Trump machine is better organized than when he lost Iowa in 2016, with boots on the ground across the early nominating states. He has been staging rallies in front of crowds where he has driven home with uncharacteristic discipline his message that immigration and border security are America's biggest issues. The RealClearPolitics polling average shows Trump leading the Republican field nationally with 61.4 percent support. Haley and DeSantis trail at 12 percent and 10.7 percent, respectively. The Iowa result is seen as critical for DeSantis, who shifted significant resources to the state and spent months wooing voters in all 99 counties. Analysts say anything short of a second-place finish would be disastrous for the hard-line conservative, who is seeking to regain ground lost to Haley. "I knew Trump would win. I just wanted to help DeSantis maybe get into second," said Julia Talerico, who came with her mother to caucus in Des Moines for the Florida governor. Haley, the only woman in the Republican contest, was looking to outperform expectations in Iowa and ride into a one-on-one match-up with Trump in her preferred battleground of New Hampshire. "Iowa is Trump country, and it's heavily Republican and evangelical. New Hampshire will be much more interesting," said veteran political analyst Larry Sabato.



### Dozens of Prisoners Escape Ecuador Jail

QUITO (Dispatches) - Forty-three prisoners remain at large after escaping a prison in northern Ecuador, the SNAI prisons agency said, as security forces continued operations throughout the country. President Daniel Noboa declared a 60-day state of emergency last week, including a nighttime curfew, and designated 22 criminal groups as terrorists. The recent explosion of violence - including the storming by gunmen of a live TV news broadcast, explosions in several cities and the kidnapping of police officers - appears to be a response to Noboa's plans to address Ecuador's serious security crisis. Police and military personnel are present in jails throughout Ecuador after some 200 kidnapped guards and administrative officials were freed from at least seven prisons over the weekend. The inmates escaped a jail in Esmeraldas, a city close to the border with Colombia, SNAI said in a statement on Monday, after some 2,000 members of Ecuador's security forces conducted a search operation in the prison on Sunday. "As a result of this inspection, the escape of 48 people inmates was discovered," the statement added, noting that five prisoners were recaptured. Security forces also learned that one prisoner had died in the prison, SNAI said, without giving further details. Since the state of emergency was declared, security forces have detained more than 1,500 people and have carried out 41 operations against terrorist groups, according to the government. Operations will continue throughout Ecuador this week, the government said in a separate statement. "The stated objective is clear: to be implacable with those who have terrorized and abused citizens," the government said. Noboa, elected last year on pledges to restore security, has promised to keep gang leaders imprisoned in new high-security prisons, among other measures.

## Venezuela Economy Grows 5% in 2023

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's economy grew more than 5% in 2023 and growth will reach 8% this year, President Nicolas Maduro said during his annual address to the government-allied legislature. 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, though its inflation rate is no longer Latin America's steepest since Argentina's sped past 200%. Inflation reached just under 190% last year, according to the central bank, marking an easing from 234% the year before. "In 2024 we will continue the policy of stoking national production, of recovering national income, of recovering income for workers," Maduro told lawmakers. "For this year we project a gross domestic product growth of around 8%." Growth was 15% in 2022, Maduro has said. Inflation will be two digits this year, Maduro said. State oil company PDVSA contributed \$6.23 billion to the country's coffers last year, Maduro added. The figure, which Maduro said funded salaries, healthcare, education and housing, corresponded to what the company handed over to the government, not to total earnings. According to a document seen by Reuters late last year, the government foresees a 27% increase in its income from PDVSA this year, after a relaxation in U.S. sanctions and despite stagnant production. Sanctions relief, which is set to last until April, has increased prices for Venezuelan crude and analysts expect the income to lead to more social spending as the government tries to ensure support in a coming

presidential election. Oil income has previously been battered by low production due to deteriorated infrastructure and lack of investment. Maduro's administration estimates total spending in 2024 will be equivalent to \$20.5 billion and income from oil exports and taxes paid by PDVSA would cover 58%, the document seen in December showed. The U.S. eased sanctions in October after the government inked an elections deal with the opposition. In December, United States President Joe Biden granted clemency to a Maduro ally in exchange for the release of 10 Americans and at least 24 opposition-linked Venezuelans. A date for the election has not been set, but it is expected in the second half of the year.







## Messi, Bonmati Scoop Awards for FIFA's Best in 2023

LONDON (Dispatches) - Lionel Messi was controversially crowned as FIFA's best men's player for 2023 on Monday, while Aitana Bonmati added to her collection of individual accolades at the awards ceremony in London. Messi claimed the award for the third time, but the 36-year-old was a surprise victor ahead of Erling Haaland on an otherwise glorious night for Manchester City. The award only covered the period after Messi had led Argentina to World Cup glory in December 2022 to August 2023. During that time the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner had a subdued end to his career at Paris Saint-Germain, despite winning the Ligue 1 title, before joining MLS side Inter Miami in June. Messi quickly made his mark in the United States as he helped the franchise, part-owned by David Beckham, to their first trophy by winning the Leagues Cup in August. Haaland was favourite to win after scoring 52 times in his debut season with City as the English side won a treble of Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup. After receiving the same number of points from a scoring system based off votes from national team captains, coaches, journalists and fans, Messi was crowned victor thanks to more first-choice nominations. Messi's former club teammate Kylian Mbappe was third. However, all three of the men's finalists did not attend the ceremony leaving Arsenal and France legend Thierry Henry, who was co-hosting the event, to pick up the award in Messi's absence. Bonmati's selection as the best women's player was never in doubt as she completed a clean sweep of personal awards after helping Spain to win the World Cup and Barcelona to Champions League glory in 2023. The 25-year-old also won the Ballon d'Or, Golden Ball for player of the World Cup and UEFA's player of the year in recent months. "A couple

of weeks ago when 2023 came to an end I was nostalgic because 2023 was an exceptional and unique year I will remember for the rest of my life," said Bonmati. "I'm proud of being part of a powerful generation of women who are changing the rules of the game and the world." "We're here because we won a lot and the thousands of people involved in our success," said Guardiola. "I'm really happy for the season we had because it was an incredible journey. In the end we did it, but the pleasure of being there was incredible." Haaland was joined by five of his club teammates -- Kyle Walker, John Stones, Ruben Dias, Bernardo Silva and Kevin De Bruyne -- in the team of the year. Real Madrid's Thibaut Courtois, Jude Bellingham and Vinicius Junior, Messi and Mbappe made up the 11. City's Ederson won men's goalkeeper of the year, while England and Manchester United stopper Mary Earps picked up the women's award. England national team boss Sarina Wiegman won the women's coach of the year after leading the Lionesses to the World Cup final. Seven of England's women were included in the team of the year: Earps, Lucy Bronze, Alex Greenwood, Keira Walsh, Alessia Russo, Lauren James and Ella Toone. Olga Cammona, who scored the winning goal in the World Cup final, was the only other Spaniard included alongside Bonmati with American star Alex Morgan and Australia's Sam Kerr also selected. The Brazilian men's team won the fair play award after they dawned an all black shirt for the first time in a show of support for forward Vinicius, who suffered several incidents of racist abuse while playing for Madrid last year. There was also Brazilian success in the Puskas award for the best goal, scored by Botafogo's Guilherme Madruga for his spectacular overhead kick.

## Nadal Sees Potential in Saudi Arabia



RIYADH (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal was named ambassador for the Saudi Tennis Federation on Monday, as the Gulf kingdom aims to host more professional tournaments as part of a broader sports push. "Everywhere you look in Saudi Arabia, you can see growth and progress and I'm excited to be part of that," the 37-year-old Spaniard, winner of 22 Grand Slams, said in a federation press release. "I continue to play tennis as I love the game. But beyond playing I want to help the sport grow far and wide across the world and in Saudi there is real potential." Nadal was due to feature in the ongoing Australian Open having been out of the game since injuring his hip at the 2023 edition. After winning his opening two matches at the warm-up event in Brisbane, however, to tore a muscle and was forced to miss the first Grand Slam of the year. Nadal had previously said there was a "high percentage" that 2024 would be his farewell to the tour. The announcement comes after a busy 2023 for tennis in Saudi Arabia, which hosted its first ATP Tour event -- the Next Gen ATP Finals in Jeddah -- and closed out the year with exhibition matches pitting Novak Djokovic against Carlos Alcaraz and Aryna Sabalenka against Ons Jabeur. Nadal recently visited a junior tennis clinic in Riyadh, and his new role will involve "dedicated time in the kingdom each year" to grow the sport as well as the development of a new Rafa Nadal Academy, the Saudi federation said on Monday. Sport is a major component of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform agenda, which aims to transform Saudi Arabia into a tourism and business hub while transitioning the world's biggest crude oil exporter away from fossil fuels. Saudi Arabia has lured football stars like Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar to play in the Saudi Pro League, hosted heavyweight bouts and funded the upstart LIV Golf tour to take on the PGA Tour. The kingdom has also been named host of the 2034 World Cup. But Saudi Arabia has been accused by its critics of "sportswashing" by using sport to improve its international reputation after widespread criticism for its human rights and environmental record.

## Embiid Scores 41 on Return for Sixers, Celtics Roll on

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Joel Embiid scored 41 points in a dazzling return from injury on Monday as the Philadelphia 76ers romped past the Houston Rockets 124-115. Kicking off a packed slate of NBA fixtures as the US marked the Martin Luther King Jr. public holiday, the Sixers were always in control as they cruised to victory. Embiid missed the Sixers' past three games after twisting his left knee in a January 5 defeat to the New York Knicks. But the NBA's reigning Most Valuable Player showed no sign of rustiness as he posted his seventh 40-point game of the season, adding 10 rebounds and three assists. Embiid shot 12-of-21 from the field and was near-perfect from the foul line, making 16 of 17 free throws in a comfortable win for the Sixers, who improved to 25-13 to remain in third place in the Eastern Conference. Embiid's performance also extended a remarkable scoring streak. The 29-year-old has now gone 16 consecutive games with at least 30 points and 10 rebounds, tying Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the second-longest streak of its kind in NBA history. Only Wilt Chamberlain is ahead of Embiid and Abdul-Jabbar. Embiid received scoring support in Monday's rout from Tyrese Maxey with 27 points while Patrick Beverley added 11 from the bench and Tobias Harris 10. Jalen Green led Houston's scoring with 20 points while Alperen Sengun finished with 19. While Embiid made a successful return from injury, there was less to celebrate for Golden State Warriors star Draymond Green in his first game back since missing 16 games through suspension. Green, who was given an indefinite ban by the NBA last month after striking Phoenix Suns player Jusuf Nurkic, played 23 minutes off the bench in the Warriors' 116-107 loss to the Memphis Grizzlies. A close game was settled by a late fourth quarter rally by Memphis, who compiled a 10-1 run to open up a 12-point lead with four minutes remaining. "Draymond played well, played hard -- it's good to have him back," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said after the loss. "Obviously as a team we didn't play well, but Draymond competed and it's good to get him back in the fold." In other games on Monday, Kyrie Irving scored 42 points and Tim Hardaway Jr. 41 as the Dallas Mavericks staged

a fourth quarter rally to defeat the New Orleans Pelicans 125-120. Irving and Hardaway scored 20 points between them in the fourth quarter as the Mavericks fought back from a double-digit deficit late in the third to snatch victory. Only one other Dallas player -- Josh Green, with 13 points -- cracked double figures. Dallas coach Jason Kidd meanwhile singled out Hardaway for praise after the 31-year-old slipped seamlessly into the starting line-up due to Luka Doncic's absence through injury. "He's the substitute teacher in the starting line-up and he's being a pro about it," Kidd said after the win. "He's just a pro. This afternoon was a perfect example of that -- he took his shots and was aggressive, and we need that no matter if he's starting or coming off the bench." Zion Williamson led the Pels scoring with 30 points while C.J. McCollum added 23. In Toronto, the Eastern Conference-leading Boston Celtics rolled on with a 105-96 defeat of the Raptors, Derrick White and Jrue Holiday leading the scoring for the visitors with 22 points apiece. The Celtics lead the Eastern standings with 31 wins against nine defeats, three games clear of the second-placed Milwaukee Bucks (28-12). In Atlanta, Trae Young's 36 points helped the Hawks hold off the San Antonio Spurs for a 109-99 victory. San Antonio's No. 1 draft pick Victor Wembanyama produced another eye-catching performance in defeat for the Spurs, finishing with 26 points -- 18 of them in the fourth quarter.



## De Minaur Advances to Round Two After Raonic



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Home favorite Alex de Minaur eased into the second round of the Australian Open with a 6-7(6) 6-3 2-0 victory after his Canadian opponent Milos Raonic retired injured early in the third set. Raonic, a former world number three, arrived in Melbourne ranked 317th in the world after struggling with various injuries for more than two years and having not played a competitive match since November. But the 33-year-old Canadian rolled back the years with a serving masterclass in the opening set, racing through his service games without facing a break point before winning a tiebreak to take a shock lead in the match. De Minaur, the 10th seed, came out firing at the start of the second as Raonic visibly tired and appeared to be favoring his hip. The Australian broke to take a 4-2 lead in the second as his opponent's levels dropped further, and levelled the match when Raonic missed with a backhand. The Canadian was broken again at the start of the third set, before throwing in the towel in the next game. "Look first of all I hope Milos a speedy recovery. It's not great to see him like this," De Minaur said in his court-side interview. "As you saw I was just chasing his serve for the better part of that match. I was a bit unlucky not to win the first set but I just reset at the start of the second." "It's no secret I've started the year pretty well and now it's all about keeping my head down and keep working hard. It's one down and on to the next." Up next for the home hope is a second round clash with Italy's Matteo Arnaldi, who beat Australian wild card Adam Walton in his opening encounter.

## Spurs Spoil Ratcliffe's First Visit as Man Utd Co-Owner

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United failed to welcome the club's new co-owner Jim Ratcliffe to Old Trafford with a win as Tottenham twice came from behind to claim a 2-2 draw on Sunday. Ratcliffe was in attendance for the first time since agreeing a deal to take a 25 percent stake of the English giants for \$1.3 billion. Goals for United forwards in the Premier League have been in short supply at Old Trafford this season but both Rasmus Hojlund and Marcus Rashford struck in the first half, either side of Richarlison's equaliser. Rodrigo Bentancur's strike in the first minute of the second half levelled the scores once more. A point moves Tottenham level with north London rivals Arsenal, just outside the top four only on goal difference. But they will be the happier by the draw as they remain eight points ahead of United, who edge up to seventh. "Outstanding performance given the challenges we had to put a team out," said Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou, who was missing captain Son Heung-min, who is away at the Asian Cup, among five first-team regulars who were absent. "We're not here because everything is running our way. We've not had an easy year and the only reason we are in the position we are is because the players are willing to put aside adversity." Ratcliffe declared before kick-off that taking a share in his boyhood club is the most exciting investment he has been involved in. But the British billionaire, who was sat alongside legendary former United manager Alex Ferguson in the directors' box, got an early introduction to the rollercoaster ride of owning a football club. Erik ten Hag's men desperately needed the three points to reel in Spurs in the race for a place in next season's Champions League. And the Red Devils could not have wished for a better start. Hojlund took 15 games to score a Premier League goal after his £72 million (\$92 million) move from Atalanta. But the Dane now has two in as many appearances in the English top flight as he blasted a loose ball high past Guglielmo Vicario after just three minutes. Tottenham's absences forced Postecoglou's hand in throwing new loan

signing Timo Werner straight into his starting line-up. The German struggled during a previous spell in England with Chelsea, but was unfortunate not to

have a debut to remember when his goalbound header was flicked to safety by Jonny Evans.

