

Political Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Andreas Motzfeldt Kravik, Deputy Foreign Minister of Norway, Met Within the Framework of the 11th Round of Political Consultations Between the Two Countries

# IRAN NEWS

The Spokesperson for the Constitutional Council Hadi Tahan Nazif Has Stated That the Constitutional Council Has Qualified 138 Assembly of Experts Candidates for the Upcoming Late Winter Election

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### Netanyahu Not to Survive for 10 Minutes If U.S. Stops Support Today



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian foreign minister has warned that the risk of a "wider" conflict in the region has sharply increased due to the United States' all-out support for Israel amid the regime's genocidal aggression against the besieged Gaza Strip. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in an exclusive interview with ABC News on Tuesday, as the bloody Gaza war still rages with no end in sight. "The scope of the war has become wider. This means that the danger of having a wider war in the region has gone up," he said. The top Iranian diplomat noted that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu "will not survive for 10 minutes" if the U.S. stops its support for the Gaza offensive today. "If the U.S. today stops its backing -- logistical and weapons, political and media support -- of the genocidal war launched by Israel, then I can assure you that Netanyahu will not survive for 10 minutes," he asserted. "So the key to solve the problem is in Washington before it is in Tel Aviv." He asserted that Iran only wants to see peace across West Asia, saying, "Nobody is going to benefit from any war. We believe that the solution is never war." In solidarity with the Palestinians in besieged Gaza, the Yemeni armed forces have targeted ships in the Red Sea with owners linked to Israel or those going to and from ports in the occupied territories. In response, the US and its allies have conducted illegal strikes on Yemen and alleged that Iran is transferring arms to the conflict-ridden country. The Iranian foreign minister rejected the baseless accusations, saying the US military is fabricating information against the Islamic Republic in this regard. "Mostly, this is a TV show," Amir-Abdollahian noted. He further described Hamas as "a Palestinian liberation group that is standing against occupation." "All those involved in Soleimani's assassination must be 'brought to justice' Also in his interview, Amir-Abdollahian said whether former US president Donald Trump won or lost his bid for another term in office would ultimately have little impact on Tehran-Washington relationship. "Individuals are not important, what matters is the behavior of the government that takes the office," he said.

### Iran Blasts U.S. for Preventing UN From Pressing for an End to Israeli Genocide



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian denounces the United States for its preventing the UN from fulfilling its duty to press for an end to the Israeli regime's ongoing war of genocide against the Gaza Strip. The top diplomat made the remarks, addressing a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on the situation in the Middle East, especially Gaza. The Israeli regime launched the war on October 7, 2023 following Operation al-Aqsa Storm by Gaza's resistance movements. Close to 25,500 Palestinians, mostly women and children, have lost their lives so far as a result of the onslaught. The United States has been providing Israel with unbridled military and political support in its onslaught against Gaza, arming Tel Aviv with more than 10,000 tons of military hardware. The US has also torpedoed the prospect of cessation of the Israeli aggression by stonewalling ratification of all Security Council resolutions that have been calling for a permanent ceasefire in the Israeli aggression. Amir-Abdollahian denounced the US for serving "as the practical supporter and main accomplice of the Israeli regime in its crimes." "Washington, he said, "has prevented this body (the UNSC) from effectively fulfilling its inherent duties in stopping the overt genocide of a nation and establishing a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip." "...the US must compel the Israeli regime to stop the war and pull itself out of the trap that the Israeli regime has set to drag the US into direct conflict." Amir-Abdollahian stressed that the killing of innocent civilians, especially women and children, had to be stopped immediately. "War is not the solution. Security cannot be achieved by resorting to the use of force and committing the crime of genocide in Gaza," he asserted. Amir-Abdollahian called on the UNSC to act on its duty to pass a resolution calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza, and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid to the territory. Such a resolution should also urge immediate and complete withdrawal of the Israeli regime from the coastal sliver, and extract a commitment from the regime to refrain from any efforts to relocate Palestinians to Egypt and Jordan. The foreign minister pointed to one of the goals that the Israeli regime has purportedly been seeking through waging the war, namely "total destruction" of the Palestinian resistance movement of Hamas that rules Gaza. "That time will never come," Amir-Abdollahian stated.



### Iran, Turkey Pledge to Boost Bilateral Trade in Joint Statement

TEHRAN - Iran and Turkey jointly declared their commitment to augmenting bilateral trade while also pledging collaborative efforts to achieve peace and stability in the region. Emphasizing the necessity of efforts to maximize the volume of bilateral trade in a joint statement, they highlighted the strong determination of both nations to expand bilateral relations based on mutual respect, common interests, friendship, and deep-rooted cultural and historical ties. The joint statement was issued during an official visit to Ankara by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Wednesday. The two nations also condemned the crimes committed by the usurping Zionist regime against the oppressed people of Gaza, stating that decisive actions to prevent the crimes of the Zionist regime are essential for the return to normal conditions in the Red Sea region. After ending his visit to Turkey, Raisi returned to the country early Thursday. The full text of the joint statement is as follows: The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey, based on their traditional relations, mutual respect, common interests, friendship, and deep-rooted cultural and historical ties, emphasized their strong political will to expand relations in all areas through mutual visits at high levels and enhancing people-to-people communications. Both countries expressed their determination to jointly combat all forms and manifestations of terrorism, which has become one of the biggest challenges of our time and has caused significant damage to the region. They emphasized combating the smuggling of goods, weapons, drugs, and organized crime along their common borders. Iran and Turkey also agreed to strengthen stable, sustainable, and fair economic and trade cooperation using existing mechanisms and bilateral agreements. They pledged to enhance their cooperation in maximizing the volume of bilateral trade and increasing collaboration in the energy sector. They aim to increase mutual investments by creating a suitable environment and encouraging private sector participation for mutual cooperation and investment. Considering the strategic position and central role of both countries in cargo and passenger transportation as gateways to Europe and Asia, they emphasized their willingness and commitment to strengthen cooperation in road, rail, and combined transit, collaboration on corridors, enhancing border trade, and establishing new border terminals. Cooperation in environmental matters and fair and sustainable use of shared water resources were among the main topics of discussion for the two nations. The importance of cultural, archival, youth, sports, higher education, and constructive media relations was also highlighted by both parties. Both sides strongly condemned insults to Islamic sanctities, the increase in Islamophobia, and hatred against Islam. They declared their close cooperation in the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to pass resolutions against attacks on holy books as religious hatred. The heinous crimes of the Zionist regime against the oppressed people of Gaza were another main focus of the talks between the two presidents. Expressing concern over the continuation of these crimes, they called for the immediate cessation of Israel's attacks, the immediate and unconditional lifting of the unjust blockade of Gaza, and the urgent, sufficient, and unimpeded dispatch of essential goods and services to the Palestinian people. They emphasized the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, especially the right to self-defense. The two sides also stressed the need to confront the impunity of political and military leaders of the Israeli regime and their trial in competent courts for war crimes, genocide, and other forms of crimes. They welcomed the legal actions of the South African government against the Israeli regime in the International Court of Justice. The two countries, while declaring support for the unity of Yemen, stressed the importance of finding a stable political solution and establishing permanent peace in this country. They also emphasized the urgent need for global community assistance, including food, medicine, and other essential items for the people of Yemen. The presidents of the two countries, emphasizing the importance of maintaining maritime security in regional and international waters, including the Red Sea, considered the regional tensions and the current situation in the Red Sea as a result of the heinous invasions of the Israeli regime against the people of Gaza. Meanwhile top officials from Iran and Turkey signed ten cooperation documents in various fields during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's official visit to Ankara, as the two neighbors weighed plans to meet the target of \$30 billion in annual trade exchange. Raisi traveled to Ankara on Wednesday for his first state visit to Turkey as the president of Iran. Following the 8th meeting of the High Council of Iran-Turkey Cooperation in the evening, senior officials from the two countries signed 10 cooperation documents in the fields of culture, media and communication, rail and air transportation, electricity, energy, and economic and free trade zones. Speaking at a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart Erdogan, Raisi highlighted the determination of the authorities of the two countries to promote relations in various sectors, especially in the commercial and economic field. Lauding the Turkish nation for supporting the Palestinian people and expressing disgust and hatred for the aggression of the Zionists, the president added, "Today, after more than 100 days of crimes against the people of Gaza, the victor of this field is the oppressed and powerful people of this region and the defeated party in this field is the Zionist regime and we believe that the final victory will belong to the Palestinian nation."

### Iraq, U.S. Agree to Discuss Timeline for Withdrawal of American Troops

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq's foreign ministry says Baghdad and Washington have agreed to set up a committee to start talks to set a timetable for a phased withdrawal of American forces from the Arab country. In a statement released on Thursday, the ministry said the talks on the future of the US-led military coalition in Iraq are set to take place between military officials. The two countries agreed to form working groups that would eventually lead to formulating "a specific and clear timeline... and to begin the gradual reduction of its (the coalition's) advisers on Iraqi soil," the statement read. The ministry noted the timeline would be contingent on evaluating the "threat posed by IS and its danger" as well as the "reinforcement of the capacities of the Iraqi security forces." In a statement, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin confirmed meetings "in the coming days" to discuss the "transition" of the coalition based on the outcomes of the Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue held between the two countries in August. The statement comes days after Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani said at the World Economic Forum in Davos that it was necessary to "immediately begin a dialogue,

to reach an understanding and a timetable regarding the end of the mission of international advisers." Senior Iraqi officials have said the end of the US-led coalition was a necessity for the security and stability of Iraq. Longstanding calls by Iraqi factions for the US-led coalition's departure have gained steam in the wake of a series of US strikes on Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which are part of Iraq's security forces. Iraq has condemned the US strikes, not least a recent attack against a senior PMU commander in the heart of Baghdad. Iraq's Islamic Resistance, an umbrella group of anti-US armed groups in the country, has conducted dozens of attacks on US bases in support of Gaza's resistance. Senior officials in Baghdad say only an end to Israel's war on the besieged Gaza Strip would stop the risk of a regional escalation. Iraq says Israel's mass killing and displacement of the Palestinians is a "textbook example of genocide." The US maintains some 2,500 troops in Iraq under the pretext of fighting the Daesh terrorist group, which in 2014 seized large swathes of Iraq and Syria.



### Iran, Russia, Turkey Stress Fighting Terrorism, Blast Israeli Attacks on Syria



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Iran, Russia and Turkey have jointly stressed fighting against terrorism in all forms, slammed Israeli attacks in Syria and emphasized the leading role of Astana format talks in promoting a sustainable settlement to the Syrian crisis. Delegations of the three guarantors made the remarks in a joint declaration adopted at the 21st international Astana meeting on Syria held in the Kazakh capital city of Astana on Wednesday. The Iranian delegation was headed by Ali Asgar Haji, Senior Advisor for Political Affairs at the Iranian Foreign Ministry, while those of Russia and Turkey were led by Russian President Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy for Syria Aleksandr Lavrentyev and Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmet Yildiz, respectively. The trio "expressed their determination to continue working together to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and stand against separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and threatening the national security of the neighboring countries, including through cross-border attacks and infiltrations," the final communiqué said. They also "emphasized the leading role of the Astana Process in promoting the lasting settlement of the Syrian crisis." "Since the outbreak of Israel's brutal war on the besieged Gaza Strip in October 7, the occupying regime has significantly increased its cross-border attacks against Syria. In response to such hostilities, Iran, Russia and Turkey also "condemned all Israeli military attacks in Syria. Considered these actions as a violation of international law, international humanitarian law, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, and recognized them as destabilizing and exacerbating tensions in the region and called for the ceasing of these attacks." The three guarantors also expressed concern over the negative impact of the Gaza war on the deterioration of the situation in Syria. They "underscored the importance of preventing the armed confrontation area from expanding and other states of the region from being dragged into the confrontation. Expressed deep concern over the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and stressed the need to end Israeli brutal onslaught against the Palestinians and sending humanitarian aid to Gaza. Called for the implementation of the UNGA Resolution A/ES-10/L.27 (2023) demanding an immediate ceasefire and compliance by all parties with their obligations under international law." The trio also stressed that there could be no military solution in Syria, reaffirming their "commitment to advancing a viable and long-term Syrian-led and UN-facilitated political process in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254." The Astana Format was launched in 2017 at the initiative of Iran, Russia and Turkey on how to reduce tensions and hostilities in war-torn Syria. Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as delegates from Syria's government, opposition and the United Nations take part in the 21st round of the Astana format talks.

### Iran Army highly Prepared to Give Crushing Response to Threats



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Force says the military unit is highly prepared to give a "crushing response" to any kind of threat. "Today, the Army stands at the highest level of combat readiness and defense capability, and any threat posed by the enemies will be met with a crushing response," Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari said in a meeting with a number of commanders and staff of the Army's Ground Force in Khuzestan Province. He added that units of the Army's Ground Force across the country, particularly in border areas, are defending Iran with the state-of-the-art equipment and weapons and are ready to give a firm response to enemies in case of any mistake. He emphasized that the presence of the Army and Ground Force in border areas is aimed at improving the force's intelligence command. Iranian military experts and technicians have in recent years made great progress in developing a broad range of military equipment, making the Armed Forces self-sufficient in the defense sector. Iranian officials have repeatedly said that the Islamic Republic will not hesitate to build up its defense capabilities, emphasizing that such abilities are entirely meant for the purpose of defense and will be never subject to negotiations. Pointing to ongoing political developments in the region, Heidari said the global arrogance does not accept that the Islamic Republic has introduced a new dialogue to the world. The global arrogance is retreating and is on the decline because of the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region, the senior commander added. He warned that the enemies have resorted to hybrid war to discourage the Iranian people from participating in the parliamentary elections in March, saying massive participation of Iranians in the vote would defeat the enemy.

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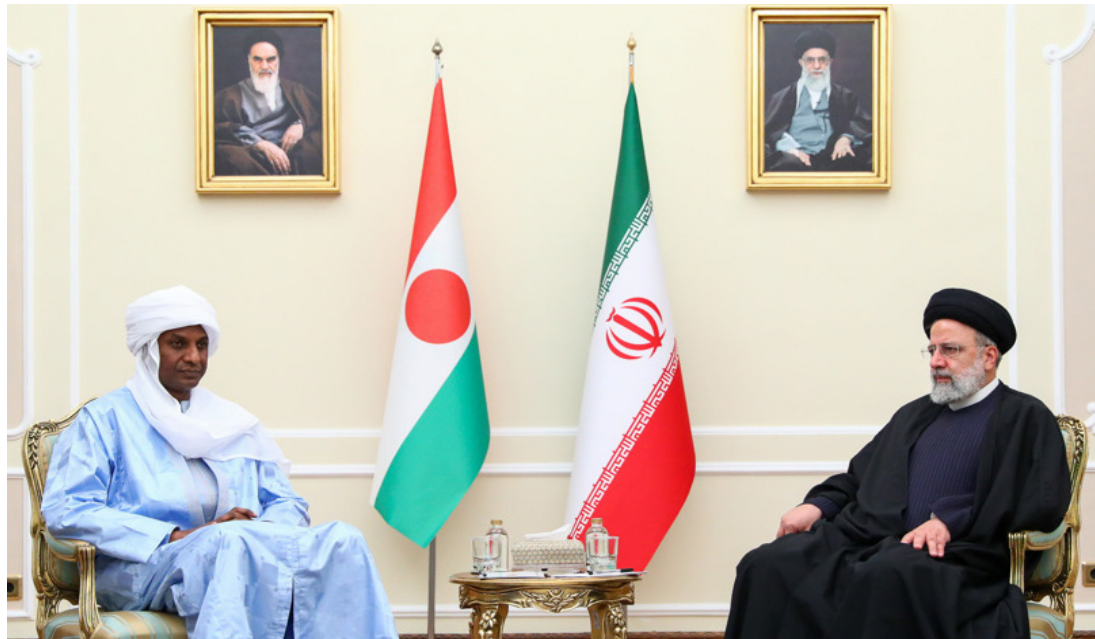
## Over 850 Tons of Medicinal Plants Exported Since Last March

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran exported over 850 tons of medicinal plants since the beginning of current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023), an official with the country's Natural Resources and Watershed Management Organization announced. Tarahom Behzad, the director-general of the pasture affairs office of the organization, said that 14 natural climates are known in the world, of which there are about 11 climates in Iran, and it is the breeding ground of all kinds of medicinal plants. So far, about 8,600 plant species have been identified in Iran, of which 2,300 species are medicinal and are directly used in the field of medicine, health and food supplements, the official added. He said benefiting from a special climate and the area of about six million hectares of medicinal plant habitats is a very suitable opportunity for Iran for proper exploitation, more serious entry into the field of processing, creating employment, more specialized exports in the field of processed products, and earning foreign currency. Although, problems such as not allocating an independent line of credit for the protection and modification of medicinal plants and boosting production of these plants, and the lack of necessary and expert personnel have caused the valuable and hidden capacities of this field to remain stagnant, the official lamented. In mid-December, 2023, an official with the Ministry of Agriculture announced that the production of medicinal plants in the country is anticipated to reach 450,000 tons in the current Iranian calendar year (ends on March 19). Hossein Zeynali, the director of the ministry's medicinal plants national plan, also announced that such plants are currently cultivated in near 260,000 hectares of land in the country. According to the published statistics, 400,000 people are working in the production of medicinal plants in Iran. Also, 32,000 people are working in packaging of these plants.

## Israel Upsetting Regional Stability



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - A political adviser to Iran's foreign minister warned against the detrimental role of the Israeli regime and its policies that have undermined stability and security in the region. The Iranian foreign minister's senior adviser for special political affairs, Ali Asghar Khaji, held a meeting with the United Nations' Deputy Special Envoy for Syrian Affairs Najat Rochdi on the sidelines of the 21st meeting of senior experts on the Astana peace process in the capital of Kazakhstan. The two sides discussed the latest developments in the region, the situation in Syria, and the Zionist regime's onslaught against Gaza. Denouncing the Israeli regime's ongoing genocidal crimes in Gaza, the Iranian diplomat noted that all countries in the region, especially Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, are affected by the Zionist regime's aggression, under the aegis of the West, and their insistence on the continuation of the war. Khaji asserted that the unilateral Western and US sanctions against the Syrian people as well as the aggressor Zionist regime's continued attacks on military bases in Syria and the assassination of Iranian military advisers who are in the Arab country to fight against terrorism, have complicated the developments in the region and has led to continued instability. After the meeting with the UN deputy special envoy for Syria, Khaji held separate meetings with the representatives of Lebanon and Iraq as observer states in the Astana process, as well as the representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross to exchange views on the latest developments in the region.



## U.S. Human Rights Slogans Aim to Serve Own Interests

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi says the U.S. uses human rights as a means to advance its own interests. In a meeting with Niger's Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine in Tehran on Thursday, Raisi said the United States and Western countries have a dark record of looting the resources and assets of other nations, all the while professing a commitment to human rights and security. "The ongoing situation in Gaza and what is happening to its oppressed people reveal the true nature of these countries that claim [to advocate human rights] and shows that the lives of humans have no value for them," he added. Israel started its relentless bombardment of Gaza on October 7 after the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas launched the surprise Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against the occupying regime. The regime's staunchest ally, the United States, has been providing the Israeli regime with unwavering military and political support. Around 25,700 Palestinians, some 70 percent of whom are women, children, and adolescents, have been killed in the brutal onslaught so far. Elsewhere in the

meeting, Raisi said Iran enjoys good ties with African countries, particularly Niger, which are beyond merely political and diplomatic relations. No obstacle can hinder the development of ties between Iran and Niger, the president said, expressing Tehran's readiness to exchange capacities with Niamey in various fields, particularly in the energy, industry and mining sectors as well as the export of technical engineering services. He hailed Niger people's major steps in the path of achieving independence and freedom, and expressed confidence that they would face a very bright future. Niger's prime minister, for his part, said Iran plays a leading role in regional and international equations. Zeine added that the Iranian and Nigerien people share views in religious principles, independence seeking and demand for rights. Niger regards Iran as a friend and reliable partner due to commonalities between the two countries, he noted. The prime minister emphasized that Niger is keen to expand relations with Iran in different sectors.

## Tehran-Ankara Trade Hits \$9.5b in 10 Months



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The president of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) put the value of the trade exchanges between Iran and Turkey in the first 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2023) at \$9.5 billion. The two countries exchanged 10.297 million tons of non-oil products, valued at \$9.541 billion, from March 21 to December 22, 2023, Mohammad Rezvanifar stated. The deputy minister of economy added that 6.751 million tons of goods, valued at \$3.498 billion, were exported from Iran to the neighboring country, showing a 47.51 and 47.11 percent decline compared to last year's corresponding period. In this period, Iran imported 3.546 million tons of products, valued at \$6.44 billion, from Turkey, registering a 16.93 and 18.74 percent hike compared to last year's corresponding period, he noted. Rezvanifar further said that Iran exported \$955 million worth of liquefied natural gas (LPG) and \$616 million worth of urea to Turkey from March 21 to December 22, 2023. Unprocessed gold, sunflower oil and tractors were among the main products imported into the country from Turkey, the IRICA chief added.

## Private Sectors Urged to Play Key Role in Realizing \$30b Trade Between Tehran, Ankara

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The chairman of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) said that Iranian and Turkish private sectors should make their utmost efforts in realizing the goal of achieving the \$30 billion annual trade between the two countries. Addressing a group of Iranian and Turkish businesspersons on Wednesday, Samad Hassanzadeh called on the private sectors of the two countries to play a leading role in realizing the objective. He made the remarks during a visit by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Turkey to participate in the 8th meeting of the High Council of Iran-Turkey Cooperation. He pointed to the deep cultural, religious and historical relations between Iran and Turkey that date back to long ago and noted that the two countries have managed to bolster bilateral cooperation in all fields, especially in the trade and economic fields. He added that the current volume of trade between the two countries is not acceptable and should grow, IRNA reported. The high-ranking officials of the two countries are seriously determined to strengthen mutual ties

based on firm and reliable principles, Hassanzadeh emphasized. Turning to the target of \$30 billion worth of annual trade between Iran and Turkey in the coming years, he called on the private sectors of the two countries to make their utmost efforts in realizing the economic objectives of the two countries. With the implementation of the important economic agreements inked between the two sides during the visit of the Iranian president to Turkey, the two countries will witness a considerable jump in the development of trade cooperation, the chairman of ICCIMA stressed. Elsewhere in his remarks, Hassanzadeh referred to the key role of chambers of commerce of the two countries in the development of the economic relations and noted that Iran and Turkey can work together in various fields including energy, mines, industrial and medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, knowledge-based activities, etc. The 8th meeting of the High Council of Iran-Turkey Cooperation was held in Ankara on Wednesday in the presence of the Iranian president and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

## FM Official Downplays Recent Rift in Relations With Baghdad



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Mousa Alizadeh, who is in charge of Iraq affairs at the Iranian Foreign Ministry, referred to recent events in Iran-Iraq relations and said that they will have no effect on bilateral relations. He was addressing a meeting between economic actors of Iran and Iraq in the headquarters of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) in Tehran on Tuesday. The official said that the recent events in relations between Tehran and Baghdad are like what Arab people call "the cloud of summer" and will not leave an impact on cordial ties between the two neighbors. Iran carried out a controlled missile strike in the Iraqi Kurdistan region last week targeting an alleged Mossad spy base operating against Iran. Following the attack, Erbil Chamber of Commerce called on the Iraqi people to boycott the purchase of Iranian goods. Alizadeh noted that such events are not inherent to relations between Iran and Iraq and have been rather caused by the intervention of the Zionists and will not be able to undermine bilateral ties between the two nations. He also added that the central banks of Iran and Iraq are working on operating trade in local currencies. The official, however, noted that trade in local currencies will cover a mere \$500 million of bilateral trade and considering the huge volume of trade between the two countries, other mechanisms are also on the agenda. He expressed hope that a visit to Iraq by President Ebrahim Raisi which he said will take place few after the beginning of the next Iranian calendar year (to begin on March 21) will lead to a breakthrough in economic relations.

## Iranian, Russian Security Chiefs Emphasize Continued Anti-Terror Cooperation

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Akbar Ahmadian and Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev discussed the expansion of bilateral relations, particularly in the fight against terrorism, during a meeting in Moscow. The talks covered various aspects, including security and defense ties, as well as addressing Israel's crimes in the Gaza Strip. Patrushev condemned the terrorist bomb attacks in the Iranian city of Kerman, expressing condolences for the January 3 bombings by the US-backed Daesh (ISIS or ISIL) terrorist group near the burial site of Iran's top anti-terror commander Lt. General Qassem Soleimani. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 95 people and injuries to hundreds. Highlighting ongoing cooperation, Patrushev mentioned the finalization of a long-term cooperation agreement between Iran and Russia, foreseeing enhanced relations and strategic cooperation. "Today, Moscow-Tehran ties are strengthening and upgrading to a new qualitative level in all fields," he said. Ahmadian, for his part, appreciated Russia's sympathy over the Kerman bombings and stressed the importance of continued Iran-Russia cooperation in the fight against terrorism, particularly in Syria. Additionally, he stressed the need for an end to Israel's actions against the Palestinian people in Gaza. Slamming Israel's offensive in Gaza since October 7, Ahmadian stated, "Israel's crimes against the oppressed Palestinian people, especially those in besieged Gaza, must stop." The Tel Aviv regime's atrocities have resulted in the death of at least 25,490 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and injuries to 63,354 others. Gaza remains under "complete siege" by Israel, with thousands more missing and presumed dead under the rubble.



# Taiwan Begins Extended One-Year Conscription

TAICHUNG (Dispatches) - The first batch of new recruits began serving their one-year compulsory military service in Taiwan after the conscription period was extended from four months due to government concerns about China's rising military threat. President Tsai Ing-wen announced the extension in late 2022. China has ramped up military, diplomatic and economic pressure on Taiwan to assert its sovereignty claims, including almost daily Chinese air force missions near the island over the past four years. At a recruitment centre in central Taiwan's Taichung, a group of young men gathered in the morning cold to be inducted, as dogs checked their bags for drugs and barbers shaved their heads before changing into army fatigues. "It is our shared responsibility to adjust the structure of the military and improve combat power. It is also a foundation for us to strengthen our military power," officer Lien Chih-wei told reporters. Taiwan's army said in a statement that it expected a total of 670 conscripts to join in the first batch under the newly extended scheme. "In the face of a complex international environment, it is our first priority to build the strong will to resist the enemy," it said.



# Edrogon Signs Off on Sweden's NATO Membership



ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's president finally approved Sweden's bid to join NATO, ending months of delay and leaving only Hungary standing in the way of Stockholm's membership of the military alliance. Tayyip Erdogan signed off on the Turkish parliament's earlier ratification of the bid, the presidency's official gazette showed, about 20 months after Stockholm first asked to join NATO following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "We welcome Turkey's ratification of Sweden's NATO application. We have now reached a decisive milestone on the road to full membership in NATO," Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said on social media network X. "Only Hungary's ratification remains before Sweden can become a member of NATO," Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom added on the same platform. Turkey's parliament ratification on Tuesday cleared the biggest remaining hurdle to expanding the Western military alliance. The presidency's communications directorate said Erdogan had "decided to publish the law" on Sweden's NATO accession, passed by parliament, and signed a presidential decree approving Stockholm's accession protocol. The delay had frustrated some of Ankara's allies but allowed it to extract certain concessions. Ankara will now expect the United States to begin working on securing the U.S. Congress' endorsement for a sale of \$20 billion worth of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey, which both Erdogan and members of Congress had linked to Sweden's ratification. Erdogan's approval of the Swedish bid comes a day after U.S. President Joe Biden sent a letter to leaders of key Capitol Hill committees, informing them of his intention to begin the formal notification process for the F-16 sale once Ankara completes Sweden's NATO accession process. Earlier, the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey told Reuters that the State Department will immediately send Congress the notification once the instrument of ratification is received in Washington. The final accession document from Ankara - the instrument of ratification - will now be sent to Washington as per NATO rules.

# World Court Orders Israel to Prevent Genocide Against Palestinians

THE HAGUE (Dispatches) - The World Court ordered Israel on Friday to prevent acts of genocide against the Palestinians and do more to help civilians, although it stopped short of ordering a ceasefire as requested by South Africa. While the ruling denied Palestinian hopes of a binding order to halt the war in Gaza, it also represented a legal setback for Israel, which had hoped to throw out a case brought under the genocide convention established in the ashes of the Holocaust. The court found that Palestinians were protected under the convention, and that there was a case to be heard about whether their rights were being denied in a war that the court said was causing grievous humanitarian harm. It also called for Palestinian armed groups to release hostages captured in the Oct. 7 attacks that precipitated the conflict. Palestinian officials largely hailed the decision. The Palestinian Foreign Ministry said it was a welcome reminder "no state is above the law". Sami Abu Zuhri, a senior Hamas official told Reuters the decision would contribute to "isolating the occupation and exposing its crimes in Gaza." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the court had "justly rejected the outrageous demand" to deprive Israel of what he called the "basic right to defend itself", by ordering it to halt fighting. "But the mere claim that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians is not only false, it's outrageous, and the willingness of the court to even discuss this is a disgrace that will not be erased for generations." Israeli Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir mocked the ruling in a two-word social media post with a Yiddish-style putdown: "Hague shmague". South Africa brought the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) earlier this month, asking it to grant emergency measures to halt the fighting, which has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians and displaced the majority of the population in a more than three-month campaign of intensive bombardment. It accused Israel of state-led genocide in its offensive, begun after Hamas militants stormed into Israel killing 1,200 and kidnapping more than 240. Israel sought to have the case thrown out. The judges ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent its troops from committing genocide, punish acts of incitement, take steps to improve the humanitarian situation and report back on its progress in a month. It did not decide the merits of the genocide allegations,

which could take years. Although the ruling cannot be appealed, the court has no mechanism to enforce its decision. Israel had demanded the case be thrown out, calling South Africa's allegations false and "grossly distorted". It says it has acted in Gaza in self defence against a foe that attacked first, and blames Hamas for harm to civilians for operating among them, which the fighters deny. The South African government, allowed to make the case under the legal principle that genocide is such a grave crime that all countries are duty-bound to prevent it, hailed the court order as a "decisive victory" for international rule of law. "South Africa sincerely hopes that Israel will not act to frustrate the application of this Order, as it has publicly threatened to do, but that it will instead act to comply with it fully, as it is bound to do," its foreign ministry said in a statement. The country's Deputy President Paul Mashatile and Justice Minister Ronald Lamola were seen cheering and dancing at a gathering of the governing African National Congress party following the court's verdict, which was televised live. On the ground in Gaza, the war has entered a particularly destructive phase, with the heaviest fighting in weeks now taking place in crowded areas jammed with hundreds of thousands of people who fled from earlier fighting elsewhere. On Friday, Israel kept up its bombardment of the main Southern city of Khan Younis, where it said it was involved in "intensive battles", with forces striking dozens of Hamas fighters and infrastructure from the air and ground. Residents said gunbattles raged overnight, with Israeli forces blowing up buildings and houses in the western part of the city in what has become one of its biggest offensives so far, waged among hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians. Israel said it had discovered some 200 tunnel shafts and destroyed more than 130 militant infrastructure sites in its latest operations, as well as killing "numerous militants". Palestinians say Israel has blockaded hospitals making it impossible for rescuers to reach the dead and wounded. Israel denies blockading hospitals and says Hamas fighters are to blame for fighting near them for operating there. "We believe many victims are still under the rubble and on the roads, the occupation prevents ambulance and civil emergency teams from reaching them," Gaza health ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qidra said.

# Ukraine and Russia Trade Accusations Over Fatal Plane Crash

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia and Ukraine traded accusations over the crash of a military transport plane that Moscow said was carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war and was shot down by Kyiv's forces, another heated episode in the information war that has been a feature of the conflict. Though investigators reportedly found the flight recorder a day after Wednesday's crash there was little hope that the circumstances would be clarified in a war where both sides have often used accusations to sway opinion at home and abroad. The Il-76 crashed in a huge ball of fire in a rural area of Russia's Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine, and authorities there said all 74 people on board, including 65 POWs, six crew members and three Russian servicemen, were killed. The crash triggered a spate of claims and counterclaims, but neither side offered evidence for their accusations, and The Associated Press could not independently confirm who was aboard or how the plane was downed. Russia alleged that Kyiv shot down the plane with two missiles and said the prisoners of war were headed for an exchange. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described it as "a totally monstrous act." Russia's top investigative agency, known as the Investigative Committee, opened a criminal probe Thursday on charges that the crash was a terrorist act. Ukraine responded by casting doubt on the fact that POWs were aboard and putting forward their own theories, including implying that the plane may have posed a threat. Without mentioning the crash, the general staff of the Ukrainian military said the country would target any Russian military transport plane believed to be delivering missiles, especially near the border. Ukrainian officials have noted that Moscow did not ask for any specific airspace to be kept safe for a certain length of time, as it has in past prisoner exchanges. Mykola Oleschchuk, Ukraine's air force commander, alleged that "rampant Russian propaganda is directing a fake stream of information to the international audience, attempting to discredit Ukraine in the eyes of the global community." Ukrainian officials confirmed that a prisoner exchange was due to happen Wednesday. But they said it was called off. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine would push for an international investigation. At an emergency meeting of the UN Security



Council called by Russia late Thursday, Russian and Ukrainian diplomats clashed in person. Russia's deputy UN ambassador Dmitry Polyansky accused Ukraine of a premeditated attack that sacrificed its own citizens "to Western geopolitical interests." He said that if a preliminary investigation showing the plane was hit by an American or German missile is confirmed, the Western countries that supplied the weapons "will become direct participants of this crime." Polyansky reiterated Russian claims that the Ukrainian General Staff initially issued a congratulatory statement saying the plane was downed intentionally, and started a cover-up when they realized Ukrainian prisoners were on board. He praised the "heroism" of the Russian pilots who at the last moment flew the plane away from residential areas so there were no casualties on the ground. Ukraine's deputy UN ambassador Khrystyna Hayovshyn said Ukraine fulfilled its obligations Wednesday and transferred Russian prisoners safely to the agreed location for the swap. The Russian side was supposed to ensure the safety of Ukrainian prisoners, but she said the Ukrainian side wasn't informed of the route and means of transportation of the captives, or told to secure the airspace in the vicinity of the city of Belgorod during a specified period. Following the crash, Hayovshyn said, Russian military and security officials didn't allow emergency workers to inspect the site "as per protocol." And she said that according to Ukrainian military intelligence, "only five bodies were sent to the local morgue in Belgorod" and no human remains are visible on footage from the site. The discovery of the transport plane's flight recorders was reported Thursday by the state-owned RIA Novosti news agency, citing emergency services. Ukraine's human rights ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, demanded access to the crash site for international experts and said Ukraine is ready to provide information. "We definitely don't have anything to hide," he told AP reporters. As the conflict approaches the two-year mark, the 1,500-kilometer (930-mile) front line has been largely static amid a second winter of fighting. With both sides seeking to replenish their weapons stockpiles, the war recently has focused on long-range strikes.



# Maduro Says Election Deal With Opposition Could Collapse

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro warned that a deal with the political opposition for elections to be held later this year was in danger of collapse, after what he has described as "conspiracies" against him. Last year, the government of Maduro's ruling socialist reached a deal with the political opposition over talks in Barbados to hold elections sometime during the second half of this year. The deal caused the United States to temporarily ease economically debilitating oil sanctions on the crude-exporting country. U.S. officials stressed that the relief was dependent on Caracas lifting bans on opponents holding public office, as well as releasing political prisoners and "unjustly detained" Americans. Venezuela has yet to lift a ban on Maria Corina Machado, the opposition's presidential candidate. This week, Maduro said "conspiracies" against him and high-ranking government officials were dismantled last year, with nearly three dozen civilians and military personnel detained. Later, U.S. officials said they were "concerned" about the arrests, which included members of the political opposition. "Today the Barbados agreements are mortally wounded, they're in intensive care, they were stabbed, kicked," Maduro said in a televised state broadcast. "Hopefully we can save the Barbados agreements and, through dialogue, reach real overarching agreements through national consensus," he added. The government's arrest of opposition members could put the agreements at risk, and cause the sanctions to snap back. The arrest of opposition figures also threatens Machado's electoral chances, after she formed an alliance on Tuesday to mobilize her campaign.

# French Farmers Block Highway Near Paris to Protest Low Prices



PARIS (Dispatches) - French farmers blocked one of the main motorways linking Paris with the northern city of Lille and Belgium on Friday, causing lengthy traffic jams as part of nationwide protests over low food prices and excessive bureaucracy. Unions have called for the roadblocks in and around Paris to increase pressure on Prime Minister Gabriel Attal's government, which the farmers accuse of not doing enough to help them. "We will go right into Paris to highlight our rage, our grievances," said farmer Matteo Legrand. The Paris region branch of the farmers' FNSEA union plans to set up 11 roadblocks on the main commuter axes around Paris, including the A6, A10 and A13 highways, according to a planning document seen by Reuters. Attal's office said he would make a speech addressing the farmers' concerns at around 1500 GMT in a mountain village near the Spanish border, some 800 km (500 miles) from Paris. Scrambling to ease tensions, the finance and farm ministers discussed with food industry officials on Friday fair prices for produce - a "number one priority" for farmers who say they are suffering from the government's drive to lower consumer prices. "The central issue is the farmers' revenue," Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said after the meeting, adding that the government would "double down" on enforcing a law aimed at guaranteeing fair prices for farmers. Le Maire has previously spent months pressuring food giants like Carrefour and Danone to lower their prices after a phase of high inflation, thereby earning the ire of farmers. But on Friday he vowed to be "pitiless" towards the food company giants and supermarkets to help ensure adequate financial compensation for agricultural producers. Many farmers in France, the European Union's biggest agricultural producer, say they face increasing pressure from retailers to cut their prices and that this threatens their livelihoods. Among other grievances, farmers also cite a government tax on tractor fuel, cheap imports of foreign food, access to water, excessive red tape and environmental rules. France has witnessed two weeks of protests in rural regions while other European countries including Germany and Poland have also seen demonstrations by farmers angry over eroding living standards.

# Trump Opens Up Lead Over Biden in Rematch Many Americans Don't Want

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Donald Trump leads Democratic President Joe Biden by six percentage points in a Reuters/Ipsos poll that showed Americans are unhappy about an election rematch that came into sharper focus this week. The nationwide poll of 1,250 U.S. adults showed Trump leading Biden 40% to 34% with the rest unsure or planning to vote for someone else or no one. The poll had a margin of error of three percentage points. That represented a gain for Trump after a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted earlier this month showed him and Biden tied, though a nationwide survey does not capture the subtleties of the electoral college contest that will be decided this fall in just a handful of competitive states. As Trump handily beat his sole remaining primary challenger, Nikki Haley in New Hampshire on Tuesday, some 67% of respondents polled Monday through Wednesday said they were "tired of seeing the same candidates in presidential elections and want someone new." Still, just 18% said they would not vote if Biden and Trump were their choice. "I hate to think that we're constantly navigating the lesser of two evils," said Kimberly Sofge, a 56-year-old project manager in Washington, D.C., this week. "I honestly feel that we can do better." The two candidates themselves seem ready for a rematch following Trump's back-to-back wins in Iowa and New Hampshire, with the White House regarding Trump as a beatable challenger, and Trump fuming because Haley did not immediately drop out of the Republican race. Trump's six-point lead held even when respondents were given the option of voting for third-party candidates, including anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr., with Trump drawing 36% support, Biden 30% and Kennedy 8%. Slightly more than half of respondents said they were dissatisfied with the U.S. two-party system, with just one in four satisfied by it. Whitney Tallarico, 33, a consultant interviewed in Washington, is among those considering an alternative. "The independents don't really have a voice. Polarizing

characters usually take the front seat, and it's a little sad for our country," Tallarico said this week. Asked whether she would vote for Biden or Trump, she said, "I'll probably go for a third party." Overall, the poll gave numerous signs that voters are not happy with their choices. Seventy percent of respondents - including about half of Democrats - agreed with a statement that Biden should not seek re-election. Fifty-six percent of people responding to the poll said Trump should not run, including about a third of Republicans. Biden has been weighed down by the widespread view that at 81, already the oldest person ever to be U.S. president, he is too old for the job.





## Hsieh, Zielinski in Thrilling Mixed Doubles Win at Australian Open

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Taiwanese-Polish duo Hsieh Su-wei and Jan Zielinski won a match tiebreaker to claim the Australian Open mixed doubles title on Friday, with an nail-biting 6-7(5) 6-4 (11-9) victory over American Desirae Krawczyk and Britain's Neal Skupski. The victory earned Hsieh her first mixed doubles Grand Slam title, and the 38-year-old is also in the running to win her seventh major women's doubles trophy, having reached the final Down Under with partner Elise Mertens. "It was a really tough match but we made it," Hsieh said. "Thank you so much for such a great match, it was really fun on court to play you guys." "We didn't have anyone to play mixed doubles with. We found each other on the looking list and it's worked out pretty well," Zielinski added. "Maybe we can keep it going." The match was a thrilling encounter of contrasting styles, with Krawczyk's raw power coming up against Hsieh's inventive shot making as the first set went down to the wire. Krawczyk and Skupski broke to take a 4-3 lead, but faltered when serving out the set, allowing Hsieh and Zielinski to break back and level at 5-5. As the opener headed into a tiebreak, it was the British-American duo who held their nerve. The second seeds broke again to take a 4-2 lead in the second set, but Hsieh and Zielinski roared back with two service breaks of their own to send the match into a 10-point match tiebreak. Hsieh and Zielinski raced into a 4-0 lead in the decider but the second seeds levelled at 7-7, with Skupski then bringing up a championship point at 9-8 with a second serve ace, but the British-American pair were unable to convert. It was Hsieh and Zielinski who claimed the next three points, with Zielinski sealing a memorable victory in just under two hours with a blistering forehand. Meanwhile Aryna Sabalenka continued her confident march towards a second successive

Australian Open crown with a 7-6(2) 6-4 victory over Coco Gauff in a blockbuster semi-final to set up a title-decider against Chinese 12th seed Zheng Qinwen. Zheng ended qualifier Dayana Yastremska's remarkable run 6-4 6-4 in the day's second semi but will be long odds to land her first Grand Slam title against the second seed on Saturday and match compatriot Li Na's triumph a decade ago. Sabalenka again looked in almost irresistible form as she avenged her loss to Gauff in last year's U.S. Open final in a high-quality contest to reach the championship match without losing a set for the second year in a row. The American teenager, also looking to land her second Grand Slam title, is one of the most athletic players in women's tennis and tore around Rod Laver Arena to stay in the contest until the Belarusian's power finally overwhelmed her. "It was an incredible match," said Sabalenka. "She's a great player, always tough battles against her. I think the key was that I was able to stay focused no matter what, no matter what the score was, I just keep trying my best, keep fighting for it." "It's one more to go, and I'll do my best." The two reigning hardcourt Grand Slam champions made contrasting starts as Belarusian Sabalenka fired an ace and revved up her forehand to hold before pouncing on two double faults by Gauff to break. Gauff hit back right away and the pair swapped breaks again but the 19-year-old New York champion continued to teeter on her serve, allowing Sabalenka to settle her nerves after going 6-5 down in a frantic spell to clinch the first set in a tiebreak. The pair were locked together until 4-4 in the second set as Sabalenka countered Gauff's speed with power and the 25-year-old second seed edged ahead with a decisive break when the teenager hit a shot long before sealing victory with two massive serves.

## LeBron Sets Record With 20th Career NBA All-Star Game Spot



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James was voted into the NBA All-Star Game for a record 20th time on Thursday, named among 10 starters for next month's 73rd All-Star contest. James, a four-time NBA Most Valuable Player, was named an All-Star starter for the 20th consecutive year, a streak that began in 2005, his second NBA campaign. The 39-year-old US playmaker, a four-time NBA champion, broke the record for All-Star appearances that he had shared with another Lakers legend, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The NBA All-Star Game will be played on February 18 at Indianapolis between elite squads from the Eastern and Western Conference. As the top West point-getter, James will serve as captain and join a starting lineup that also includes Phoenix's Kevin Durant and Serbian center Nikola Jokic, a two-time MVP from the defending champion Denver Nuggets. West guards included Slovenian Luka Doncic of Dallas and Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander of Canada. Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks was named captain for the East, whose frontcourt starters also include Cameroon's reigning NBA MVP and this season's top scorer Joel Embiid of the Philadelphia 76ers and Boston's Jayson Tatum. "You never want to take it for granted," Tatum said. "For the fans to consistently vote me in is truly an honor. I grew up wanting to be in All-Star weekend every year and to live out that dream in real time is pretty cool. I'm very grateful." East guards included Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton, the NBA assists leader, and Milwaukee's Damian Lillard, making his eighth All-Star appearance after being traded from Portland to the Bucks before this season. Fan balloting to determine starters ended last Saturday. Fan votes counted 50% with a media panel and NBA players each counting 25%. The All-Star Game reverts to an East versus West format after several years where two top vote getters were named captains and drafted lineups from among other top vote-getters. Reserves for both teams will be announced next Thursday, with all 30 NBA coaches selecting two guards, three frontcourt players and two others at any position from their respective conference. NBA commissioner Adam Silver will select the replacement for any player unable to play in the All-Star Game, selecting a substitute from the same conference.

## Siakam Powers Pacers Past 76ers, Celtics Rout Heat

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Indiana Pacers, fueled by a triple-double from recent arrival Pascal Siakam, snapped the Philadelphia 76ers' six-game NBA winning streak on Thursday as Boston crushed Miami in an Eastern Conference finals rematch. Elsewhere, another sparkling effort from OG Anunoby helped the New York Knicks thump the defending champion Denver Nuggets 122-84 and Western Conference contenders Minnesota held on for a 96-94 victory over the Nets in Brooklyn. The Pacers were in charge throughout on the way to a 134-122 victory in Indianapolis, where Siakam scored 26 points with 13 rebounds and 10 assists to lead the charge against the sluggish 76ers. "We just didn't have any kind of defensive success," admitted Sixers coach Nick Nurse. Philadelphia's reigning NBA MVP Joel Embiid scored 31 points, but Nurse pulled Embiid and the rest of his starters for the fourth quarter as the Pacers romped despite the continued absence of injured Tyrese Haliburton. Siakam's first win since he was traded from Toronto last week came against his former Raptors coach Nurse. "He's shown what he can do," Pacers center Myles Turner said of Siakam. "He sees the floor well -- obviously he had a triple-double tonight." "He plays with a lot of passion and energy. He fits right into our mold." In Miami, Jayson Tatum scored 26 points to lead seven Celtics players in double figures as Boston routed the Heat 143-110. Five Boston players made at least three of the Celtics' 22 three-pointers and the Celtics connected on better than 63% of their shots against the team that ended their title hopes last season. After their agonizing exit to Miami last season, Tatum said the Celtics are fueled by a determination to "get over the hump." But he refused to get too excited about the gaudy margin of victory over their Eastern Conference rivals. "If you win by 30 or two, it just counts as one win. We've still got a long way to go, but it's a great way to close out the road trip." Boston got a scare when big man Kristaps Porzingis twisted his left ankle when he landed on Bam Adebayo's foot midway through the third quarter. He had to be helped to the locker room, but returned to watch the fourth quarter from the bench seeming not too worse for wear. At Madison Square Garden, British forward Anunoby led the Knicks with 26 points and came up with six steals to help New York withstand a 31-point, 11-rebound double-double from Nuggets star Nikola Jokic. Jokic hit the floor in pain after getting Knicks guard Donte DiVincenzo's hand in his left eye late in the first half. He exited briefly but returned to start the second half. Jokic connected on 13 of 18 shots from the floor and sat out the fourth

quarter along with the rest of Denver's starters with the game out of reach. It came down to the wire in Brooklyn, but 27 points from Karl Anthony-Towns and 24 from Anthony Edwards proved enough for the Timberwolves, who were up by 10 midway through the fourth quarter before the Nets closed the gap with an 8-0 run. It was tied at 94-94 with 1:11 left to play, but an alley-oop dunk by Rudy Gobert with 58.1 seconds remaining proved to be the game-winner.



## Harder to Win in England Than Anywhere Else



LONDON (Dispatches) - Aston Villa boss Unai Emery claims winning trophies in England is harder than anywhere else in the world. Villa travel to Chelsea in the FA Cup fourth round today as Emery steps up his bid for a first piece of silverware in English football. The 52-year-old Spaniard won Ligue 1, the Coupe de France and the Coupe de la Ligue with Paris Saint-Germain. He also lifted the Europa League with Sevilla and Villarreal. But Emery went without a trophy during a troubled spell at Arsenal that ended in the sack in 2019. "To win a cup is very difficult, and here in England I think it's more difficult than in other countries," he told reporters on Thursday. "I want to do something but every opportunity I have is a challenge, like tomorrow. I know that everything I've done in different cups in Spain, France or England was an experience for me." "Here in England, I didn't achieve when I was at Arsenal and last year here in Aston Villa, but I haven't had many opportunities. Hopefully, I will have more." "It's a trophy; it's a way to get into Europe; it's a way to feel something with our supporters in case we are going ahead in this competition." Chelsea will face Villa on a high after reaching the League Cup final against Liverpool with a 6-2 aggregate win over Middlesbrough in midweek. Emery said he has seen improvement in Mauricio Pochettino's team, even though they are languishing in ninth place in the Premier League — 12 points behind fourth placed Villa. "They are getting stronger and I think they are progressively getting better," Emery said. "They achieved reaching the final of the Carabao Cup on Tuesday and they're going to face us at home with their supporters." "I think they will play thinking of another way to get a trophy in this competition and play in Europe."

## Atletico Beat Sevilla to Reach Copa Semis

MADRID (Dispatches) - Memphis Depay fired Atletico Madrid into the Copa del Rey semi-finals by earning his team a 1-0 win over Sevilla. The Dutch forward, on as a substitute, prodded home in the final stages to help Atletico join Real Sociedad, Athletic Bilbao and Real Mallorca in the final four. Antoine Griezmann skied a first-half penalty for Diego Simeone's side who ground out their win against their resilient visitors at the Metropolitano stadium. Atletico survived a late scare when Pablo Barrios conceded a penalty but the decision was overturned after the referee reviewed the incident with VAR. "Games against Sevilla are always hard, they were very solid in defence," Simeone told Movistar. "This (win) gives us excitement and hope." Players observed a moment of silence before the game to pay respect to three Sevilla fans who died in the morning in a traffic accident on the way to Madrid. Sevilla coach Quique Sanchez Flores said the game should not have taken place as a result. "I've come to my press conference to give my condolences to Sevilla fans ... we were playing on a day on which we should have been holding vigil over people who had been coming to this game, it's very sad," he said, not taking any questions. Sevilla defender Sergio Ramos, formerly captain of Atletico's rivals Real Madrid, came in for jeers from the start and almost silenced them as he narrowly failed to reach a free kick. Sanchez Flores' Sevilla, struggling badly in La Liga, made a strong start but gave away a penalty when Marcao clumsily fouled Nahuel Molina. However Griezmann slipped as he shot, sending the ball wildly looping off target. Sevilla sat deep to defend and frustrate the hosts, who failed to create any further clear chances until late on. Griezmann had a goal ruled off for offside before Simeone took him and strike partner Alvaro Morata off after 66 minutes to shake up his attack, with Depay and Angel Correa coming on. Depay quickly struck and although it was chalked off for offside, eventually he did break the deadlock. Correa cut in well from the right and slid the ball into the area for Depay to poke home after 79 minutes as Simeone's substitutes teamed up. Ramos had the chance to equalise late on but could only send the ball over from point-blank range as he lunged in

desperately. Atletico midfielder Barrios lunged in desperately too, on the edge of his own box deep in stoppage time, appearing to trip Erik Lamela, with the referee pointing to the penalty spot. The official, Jesus Gil Manzano, was called by VAR to review the incident and changed his mind, letting Barrios and Atletico off the hook. Gil Manzano apparently decided Barrios touched the ball, although it was not immediately clear if he did from replays, and

Sevilla players remonstrated with the referee at full time. "If I say what I think I'll be banned for two or three months, I prefer not to speak," said Sevilla defender Marcao. Atletico coach Simeone punched the air in delight as he sprinted down the tunnel. Rojiblanco goalkeeper Jan Oblak said he was sure it was not a penalty. "From behind I saw that (Barrios) got the ball, I was calm," Oblak told Movistar.

