

Iranian Pilgrims Are Expected to Soon Visit Saudi Arabia for the Umrah Hajj Pilgrimage Following Negotiations Between the Two Countries, Which Have Been Described as Positive

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Abbas Aliabadi During a Visit to Uzbekistan Held Talks With the Ministers of Industry and Energy of Uzbekistan to Broaden Bilateral Ties in Trade, Economic and Energy Fields

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Sweden Needs to Uphold Vienna Convention



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has urged the Swedish government to adhere to its obligations stipulated in the Vienna Convention with regard to the protection of diplomatic missions and staffers in the country. Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks following an illegal gathering outside the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Stockholm and the subsequent attack on one of the embassy employees. The Iranian foreign minister assessed the situation in a telephone conversation with Mohammad Ahmadi, the temporary charge d'affaires of the country's embassy in the Swedish capital. "Soon after the unlawful act outside the diplomatic mission, strong complaint, in Tehran and Stockholm, was transferred to the Swedish side, emphasizing the need to identify and punish the perpetrators", Ahmadi told Amir-Abdollahian on the phone. Further, Swedish officials in meetings and phone calls, including with the head of the department (deputy) of international affairs apologized for the incident and emphasized Sweden's commitment to maintaining and ensuring the security of the embassy and its employees in accordance with the Vienna Convention. Officials also informed the Iranian embassy that Swedish police have detained 5 people in connection with the attack and that they will continue to pursue the issue until the perpetrators are convicted. In the phone call, Amir-Abdollahian also talked to the embassy employee who was injured during the attack and wished him a speedy recovery.

Iraqi Resistance Targets Six U.S. Bases in Syria, Iraq



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraqi resistance forces have targeted six US-occupied military bases in Syria and neighboring Iraq in retaliation for Washington's support for the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip and in a show of strong solidarity with Palestinians. Sabereen News, a Telegram news channel associated with Iraqi anti-terror Popular Mobilization Units, reported that the al-Tanf base in southeastern Syria near the border with Jordan and Iraq had come under attack by armed unmanned aerial vehicles. Separately, an explosive-laden drone had struck the US-run facility in al-Shaddadi town, situated about 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of Syria's northeastern city of Hasakah, on Sunday morning. There were no immediate reports about the extent of damage at the sites, and possible casualties. Earlier, combat drones had targeted the US-occupied bases in Khirbat 'Adnan village in Hasakah province, and at the Rukban district in southeastern Syria near the Jordanian border. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of anti-terror fighters, in a statement published on its Telegram channel on Saturday evening, claimed responsibility for the drone strike on the US-run Ain al-Asad Air Base in Iraq's western province of Anbar. In a separate statement, the group announced that a salvo of rockets had slammed into a military base housing US occupation forces at Conoco gas field in Syria's eastern province of Dayr al-Zawr. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq noted that the operations came in condemnation of the presence of American occupation forces in Iraq and elsewhere in the West Asia region and in retaliation for Israel's atrocities in the Gaza Strip. Iraqi resistance forces have conducted dozens of strikes on the US-run military installations in both Iraq and Syria amid growing anti-US sentiments in the region over Washington's support for the Israeli genocidal campaign in Gaza. Israel launched hostilities in Gaza following a historic operation by the Gaza-based Hamas resistance group against the occupying entity in retaliation for its intensified atrocities against the Palestinian people. More than 110 days into the campaign, the regime has achieved no objectives despite killing at least 26,083 people in Gaza, around 70 percent of them women and children. Another 64,487 individuals have been wounded as well.

Iran Successfully Launches 3 Satellites Into Orbit



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran has successfully put three homegrown satellites into orbit with a minimum altitude of 450 kilometers and a maximum of 1,100 kilometers above the Earth's surface. Mahda, Keyhan-2 and Hatef-1 satellites were launched from Imam Khomeini Space Launch Terminal in Semnan Province on Sunday by the Simorgh (Phoenix) satellite launch vehicle, which is manufactured by the Iranian Defense Ministry. Mahda is a research satellite designed, manufactured, assembled and tested at the Iranian Space Research Center. Weighing 32 kilograms, it is a lightweight satellite developed to test advanced satellite subsystems. Mahda's main task is to assess the performance of the Simorgh launcher in multiple injections of space cargo in low altitudes, as well as evaluate new designs and the reliability of indigenous technologies in space. Keyhan-2 and Hatef-1 nanosatellites were also designed and developed for launch by Iran Electronics Industries, a state-owned subsidiary of the Defense Ministry. Both are cubic nanosatellites weighing less than 10 kilograms. Keyhan-2 is developed for space-based positioning. It has status determination and control subsystems to aim stably and precisely towards the Earth. Hatef-1 seeks proving the use of narrowband communication technology in the internet of things (IoT). Despite sanctions imposed by Western countries in recent years, Iran has managed to take giant strides in the civilian space program. It is among the world's top 10 countries capable of developing and launching satellites. Meanwhile Iran's telecoms minister says that the country has received first signals from the Mahda satellite hours after it was successfully launched into orbit. Issa Zarepour wrote on his social media account on Sunday that signals had been received from Mahda, one of three domestically-developed satellites successfully placed into orbit by the Simorgh satellite carrier earlier in the day. Last week, the Aerospace Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) launched Soraya satellite into orbit using Qaem 100 satellite carrier. Zarepour said that for the first time, Simorgh simultaneously put Mahda satellite and two other research payloads into orbit, adding that Mahda's signal was received. "I congratulate this important achievement to the beloved people and space experts, especially my colleagues at the Iranian Space Research Center and the Defense Ministry," he noted.

Multilateralism, Mechanism to Solve Global Problems

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Foreign Minister says that multilateralism is a mechanism to solve international problems and dilemmas. Hossein Amir Abdollahian, addressing the 7th Conference on Multilateralism in the History of Iran's Relations, said: "Today, the world community is facing a fundamental crisis. A crisis that is the benchmark of the humanitarian slogans of the last century, and it should be seen how the world community will come out of this test eventually." He added: "For about four months, a massive war crime has been going on against the people of Gaza by the anti-human Zionist regime, and a horrible series of murders, sieges, forced displacement, and genocide has been exposed to the eyes of the world." In this case, a question is raised whether multilateralism, global sharing of opinion and action helped mankind. Certainly, the wave of popular protests against the crimes of the Zionists all over the world is a sign that free people have raised the same question and thus have provided the answer with continuous protests. Amir-Abdollahian added: "The West's unilateralism in blind supporting of an illegitimate and criminal regime has regressed all human achievements in the field of multilateralism and international law. He noted: "Multilateralism is an opportunity, and if it is looked upon from the point of view of fairness, its mechanisms have helped humanity in some cases and prevented murder and harm." Amir-Abdollahian

emphasized that today, we are in great need of critical reflection on the roots and approaches of multilateralism, and without doubt, historical reflection will help us in this direction. Denouncing the hostile plots to harm Iran's neighborly foreign relations by taking advantage of terrorist groups, he stressed the need for political solutions to the common security concerns with Pakistan and Iraq. Amir-Abdollahian further said the enemies have employed terrorism and terrorist groups to harm Iran's neighborliness policy. Iran believes that security is imbedded in the policy of neighborliness, he added, stressing that Tehran will never allow the enemies to target friendship, peace and security in the region. Pointing to the recent terrorist activities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and in the Balochistan province of Pakistan and Iran's pre-emptive attacks on the terrorists, Amir-Abdollahian said Iran always protects the common borders and the security of its neighbors against terrorism. The foreign minister stated that Iran has held positive and constructive talks with the officials of the Kurdistan Region and Pakistan with an emphasis on mutual understanding and political solutions to the recent incidents. Amir-Abdollahian also noted that he is going to pay a visit to Pakistan, while Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Akbar Ahmadian will be visiting Iraq, for negotiations on ensuring regional security.



No Credibility Left for West's So-Called Human Rights Watch Bodies



TEHRAN - In response to the Israeli regime's crimes against the people of Gaza, the spokesperson of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that there is no credibility left for Western human rights slogans and institutions in the Gaza test. Nasser Kanaani in response to the crimes of the Israeli regime against the oppressed people of Gaza, wrote in his official account on Program X: "In the Gaza test, there is no credit left for Western human rights slogans and institutions. The mask of the false face of Western human rights claimants, including the US government, has been removed from the public opinion of the world." Iran's top diplomat added: "While more than 1,900,000 people out of the 2,200,000 population of the Gaza Strip have been displaced and made homeless, and more than 26,000 of them, including about 18,000 children and women, have been killed, the supporters of the Zionist regime should be ashamed of the peak of their moral degradation towards the fate of the residents of Gaza." On the 114th day of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation, the Israeli regime continues to commit crimes against the people of the Gaza Strip, where children and women are still the victims of the atrocities. The non-stop aggression of the Israeli army in different areas of the Gaza Strip has entered its 114th consecutive day. In the early hours of Sunday morning, the northern areas of the Gaza Strip were targeted by air and artillery attacks by the invading Israeli army.

Iranian Navy to Furnish Indigenous Hovercraft With Long-Range Missiles



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy says the force is going to equip new domestically-designed and manufactured hovercraft with long-range naval missiles in the near future. Rear Admiral Shahram Irani stated on Saturday that the primary mission of the Iranian Navy is to guard and secure the country's maritime borders, emphasizing that the naval forces' fleets of vessels, submarines and aircraft have been overhauled and renovated by Iranian military experts and specialists. He went on to describe the Navy's 86th flotilla, which comprised domestically-manufactured Dena destroyer and Makran forward base ship, and arrived home on May 18 last year after completing an overseas mission and sailing around the world, as an outward manifestation of the Iranian nation and government's authority. The high-ranking Iranian commander noted that a series of new indigenous hovercraft will join the Navy soon, which are armed with long-range missiles. The Navy's Caspian Sea fleet has been furnished with sophisticated Deylaman destroyer which enjoys outstanding capabilities, while the missile prowess of the southern fleet has been enhanced both in terms of quantity and range, and the missiles can now strike and destroy targets at a distance of 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) away, Irani pointed out. He also praised the development of dual-purpose torpedoes, stating that major achievements in the production of such munitions will be soon put on display.

IRAN NEWS



Over 850 mcm Gas Injection Into National Grid a New Daily Record

TEHRAN (Shana) - Oil Minister Javad Owji said record 851 million cubic meters (mcm) of gas were injected into the national network. He made the announcement during his visit to the Dispatching Department of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) in Tehran. Gas has been continuously supplied in the four corners of the country although some provinces, according to the reports, have received 1.5-2 meters of snow, the minister pointed out and assured gas needs across the country will be met thanks to necessary measures taken earlier despite drop in temperature expected in the next two or three weeks. Elaborating on the implemented measures, Owji said the country's gas output has witnessed a 30 mcm/d increase when compared to the volume produced a year earlier, adding the increase was achieved as the South Pars phases and gas fields of the Iranian Central Oil Fields Company (ICOFC) boosted their production and collected flare gases were added to the national output. The storage of around 3.2 billion cubic meters (bcm) in facilities has also helped meet domestic needs, said the minister.

Qatar Finalizing Iran's Access to Bank Funds



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The foreign minister of Qatar assured Iran of his country and the U.S.' commitment to an agreement that allows Tehran's access to its funds in Qatari banks, saying the pertinent processes are going on. In a telephone conversation on Saturday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Qatari counterpart Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani exchanged views about the bilateral relations as well as the latest developments in Gaza and the wider region. The Qatari foreign minister described the expanding ties between Tehran and Doha as positive. He also spoke about the way Iran can use its assets in Qatar. Al Thani said his country and the US are committed to the current deal and in line with an agreement between the Central Banks of Iran and Qatar, the agreement is being implemented. The two sides further discussed the latest developments in Palestine, the Foreign Ministry's website reported. The two top diplomats also noted that now most actors want an end to the war on Gaza and serious concentration on finding a political solution.



Loading, Unloading of Goods in Ports up 8%

TEHRAN - The loading and unloading of goods in the ports of Iran increased by eight percent in the first ten months of the present Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023-January 20, 2024), as compared to the same period in the past year, the country's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) announced. As the PMO reported, 194,078,457 tons of commodities were loaded and unloaded in the ports during the ten-month period. During the mentioned period, loading and unloading operations in the container sector also rose six percent year on year. Based on the data previously released by the Transport and Urban Development Ministry, the loading and unloading of goods in the ports of Iran rose 17 percent during the previous Iranian calendar year 1400 (ended on March 20, 2023), as compared to the preceding year. The ministry's data show that the loading and unloading of goods in the country's ports reached 152.91 million tons in the previous Iranian calendar year, while the figure stood at 130.69 million tons in the preceding year. During the

mentioned year, loading and unloading operations in the container sector reached 2.1 million TEUs with a weight of 24.57 million tons, which was 13.5 percent more than the 1.85 million TEUs in the Iranian calendar year 1399, the report said. The loading and unloading of goods during the previous year also grew by 12.8 percent in the dry bulk sector, while in the liquid bulk sector, the figure increased by 12.6 percent, in the general cargo sector rose by 13.1 percent, and in the oil sector grew by 22.5 percent. While Iran is combating the U.S. unilateral sanctions on its economy, the country's ports as the major gates of exports and imports play a significant role in this battle. This role makes all-out support to ports and more development of them serious and vital. Such necessity has led the government to define projects for more development of the ports and also take some measures to encourage investment making in ports, in addition to facilitating the loading and unloading of goods, especially basic commodities, there.

Cement Exports Hit 10.5m mt in March-Nov.



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran exported 10.5 million metric tons (mt) of cement to 25 countries, including Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, over the nine months to November 21, 2023, an industry source has said. Secretary of Iran's Cement Industry Producers Association Ali Akbar Alvandian said on Saturday at a ceremony commemorating the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the cement industry in the country that cement exports from Iran had reached 13 million mt in the calendar year to March 20, 2023, adding that some 60 million mt of cement had been consumed inside the country over the same period. Alvandian said cement production in Iran rose in the nine months to late November thanks to better supply of electricity and fuels to manufacturers, adding that the situation could further improve in the coming year. He further noted that Iran was the fourth largest cement producer in world some two decades ago when investment in the industry was at its highest, adding that the country has moved down to fourth in the global ranking of cement producers. Iran produces some 90 million mt of cement per year, Alvandian said, adding that production capacity is expected to increase by 8.8 million mt in the coming years with the launch of 13 ongoing projects.



Iran, Saudi Arabia to Launch Direct Shipping Line

BUSHEHR (IRNA) - Iran and Saudi Arabia plan to set up a direct shipping line between Kangan, in southern Iranian province of Bushehr, and Dammam, in Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, in a bid to boost trade between the two countries. Governor of Bushehr Ahmad Mohammadzadeh said late on Saturday that the launch of the shipping line between Iran and Saudi Arabia was decided in a recent visit by Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari to the province as part of efforts to increase Iran's trade volume with countries in the Persian Gulf. Mohammadzadeh also said that development projects introduced in Kangan are close to be finished, adding that large vessels can dock in the port in the near future. Local officials give importance to the development of the maritime economy in Kangan, he said, adding that authorities plan to set up an industrial zone for knowledge-based companies in the region to serve the needs of the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries that exist in the port.

Iran, Armenia to Develop Veterinary Cooperation

TEHRAN - Iran and Armenia are going to develop bilateral cooperation in the field of animal health and veterinary medicine. It was discussed in the meeting that the authorities of the two countries should follow up on bilateral cooperation regarding the import of livestock to supply the country's needs, preventing the entry of cross-border livestock diseases, and exporting milk and dairy products. Armenia's ambassador for his part announced Iran and Armenia's cooperation in launching joint projects for the production of livestock vaccines and the transferring of Iran's experiences. He said that the abundant capacities and the cooperation between the veterinary medicine of the two countries are good grounds for cooperation that Armenian officials are

aware of. In late October, 2023, Iranian Transport and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash traveled to Armenia to meet the country's senior officials and discuss ways of expanding trade and transit ties between the two countries. Speaking to the press prior to the visit, Bazrpash emphasized Iran's readiness to export technical-engineering services to Armenia, announcing the plan of the two countries to strengthen the level of trade and transit, and remove cumbersome regulations in the way of trade development. Iran and Armenia have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to cooperate in the fields of labor exchange, technical and professional training, as well as, welfare and empowerment of the disabled.



Weekly Trade on IME Exceeds 3.1m Tons



TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 3,177,395 ton of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$696m on its physical market. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,692,324 tons of commodities valued at more than \$461m. On this floor the IME sold 1,223,092 tons of cement, 902,500 tons of iron ore, 414,857 tons of steel, 114,000 tons of sponge iron, 15,000 tons of cast iron, 11,589 tons of copper, 9,200 tons of aluminum, 1,865 tons of zinc, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 21 tons of precious metals concentrate. Based on this report, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 466,163 tons of commodities worth nearly \$226m. Commodities traded on this floor included 162,325 tons of bitumen, 115,067 tons of polymeric products, 104,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 33,087 tons of chemicals, 20,000 tons of sulfur, 18,000 tons of lube cut, 4,865 tons of oil and 350 tons of feedstocks. The IME also traded within the same week 18,908 tons of goods on its side market.

Putin Derides Russophobia in Europe at World War II Memorial

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin castigated Europe for "Russophobia" and criticized the Baltic States over human rights at the unveiling of a World War Two memorial. Since he sent Russian troops into Ukraine nearly two years ago, Putin has been making comparisons with the fight against the Nazis in order to rally his nation. "The regime in Kyiv exalts Hitler's accomplices, the SS men ... In a number of European countries, Russophobia is promoted as state policy," Putin said in the Leningrad region for the 80th anniversary of the end of the Nazi siege. The Germans' aims then were to steal the Soviet Union's resources and eliminate its people, he said. In his speech, Putin also lambasted the Baltic States over human rights. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - ruled from Moscow during the Cold War but now members of the European Union and NATO military alliance - have been among the strongest critics of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "In the Baltic states, tens of thousands of people are declared subhuman, deprived of their most basic rights, and subjected to persecution," Putin said, referring to migration crackdowns. Moscow has repeatedly accused the Baltic nations of xenophobia and treating Russian minorities as "second-class".



North Korea Fired Multiple Cruise Missiles off East Coast



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea fired multiple cruise missiles off its east coast on Sunday, its second such launch in less than a week, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said. The missiles were launched at around 8 a.m. (2300 GMT on Saturday) and were being analysed by South Korean and U.S. intelligence authorities, the JCS said, without specifying how many missiles were fired. "While strengthening surveillance and vigilance, our military is cooperating closely with the United States and monitoring additional signs and activities from North Korea," it said in a statement. The latest launches came days after North Korea fired what it called a new strategic cruise missile called "Pulhwasal-3-31", suggesting it is nuclear capable. North Korea is stepping up confrontation with the United States and its allies, but officials in Washington and Seoul say they have spotted no signs Pyongyang intends to take imminent military action. Kim Jong Un's government is likely to continue or even increase provocative steps, officials and analysts say, after it made strides in ballistic missile development, bolstered cooperation with Russia and scrapped its decades-long goal of peacefully reuniting with South Korea. Earlier on Sunday, North Korea's state media KCNA denounced a series of military drills conducted in recent weeks by U.S. and South Korean troops, warning of "merciless" consequences. "The reality that nuclear war exercises against our republic have been going on like crazy since the beginning of the New Year demands that we be fully prepared for a deadly war," the dispatch said. North Korea carried out its first test of a cruise missile with possible nuclear strike capabilities in September 2021.

More Countries Pause Funds for UN Palestinian Agency



LONDON (Dispatches) - Six European countries paused funding for the U.N. refugee agency for Palestinians (UNRWA), following allegations that some of its staff were involved in the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Finland on Saturday joined the United States, Australia and Canada in pausing funding to the aid agency, a critical source of support for people in Gaza, after the allegations by Israel. "Palestinians in Gaza did not need this additional collective punishment," Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA commissioner-general, said on X. "This stains all of us." The agency said on Friday it had opened an investigation into several employees and severed ties with those people. Encouraging more donor suspensions, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said UNRWA should be replaced once fighting in the enclave dies down and accused it of ties to Islamist militants in Gaza. "In Gaza's rebuilding, UNRWA must be replaced with agencies dedicated to genuine peace and development," he added on X. Deputy U.N. spokesperson Farhan Haq, asked about Katz's remarks, said: "We are not responding to rhetoric. UNRWA overall had had a strong record, which we have repeatedly underscored." Lazzarini said the decision by the nine countries threatened its humanitarian work across the region, especially in Gaza. "It is shocking to see a suspension of funds to the Agency in reaction to allegations against a small group of staff, especially given the immediate action that UNRWA took by terminating their contracts and asking for a transparent independent investigation," he said in a statement. The Palestinian foreign ministry criticized what it described as an Israeli campaign against UNRWA, and Hamas condemned the

termination of employee contracts "based on information derived from the Zionist enemy". UNRWA was set up to help refugees of the 1948 war at Israel's founding and provides education, health and aid services to Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. It helps about two thirds of Gaza's 2.3 million population and has played a pivotal aid role during the war that Israel launched to eliminate Hamas after the Oct. 7 attacks. Announcing the investigation, Lazzarini said on Friday that he had decided to terminate the contracts of some staff members to protect the agency's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance. Lazzarini did not disclose the number of employees allegedly involved in the attacks, nor the nature of their alleged involvement. He said, however, that "any UNRWA employee who was involved in acts of terror" would be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution. During weeks of Israeli bombardment of the Palestinian enclave, UNRWA has repeatedly said its capacity to render humanitarian assistance to people in Gaza is on the verge of collapse. Hussein al-Sheikh, head of the Palestinians' umbrella political body the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), said cutting support to the agency brought major political and relief risks. "We call on countries that announced the cessation of their support for UNRWA to immediately reverse their decision," he said on X. The Foreign Ministry in Germany, a major donor to UNRWA, welcomed UNRWA's investigation, saying it was deeply concerned about the allegations raised against agency employees. "We expect Lazzarini to make it clear within UNRWA's workforce that all forms of hatred and violence are totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated," it said on X.

Ukraine Uncovers Mass Fraud in Weapons Procurement



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine's SBU security service said it had uncovered a corruption scheme in the purchase of arms by the country's military totaling the equivalent of about \$40 million. The announcement of mass procurement fraud, confirmed by Ukraine's Defense Ministry, will have a huge resonance in a country beleaguered by Russia's nearly two-year-old invasion. The fight to root out endemic corruption remains a major issue as Ukraine presses its bid to secure membership in the European Union. The SBU said an investigation had "exposed officials of the Ministry of Defense and managers of arms supplier Lviv Arsenal, who stole nearly 1.5 billion hryvnias in the purchase of shells." According to the investigation, former and current high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Defense and heads of affiliated companies are involved in the embezzlement. "The embezzlement, it said, involved the purchase of 100,000 mortar shells for the military. The SBU said a contract for the shells was clinched with Lviv Arsenal in August 2022 - six months into the war - and payment was made in advance, with some funds transferred abroad. But no arms were ever provided, the statement said, with some funds then moved to other foreign accounts. The statement said five individuals had been served "notices of suspicion" - the first stage in Ukrainian legal proceedings - both in the ministry and the arms supplier. One suspect, it said, was detained while trying to cross the Ukrainian border. Corruption within the military has been a particularly sensitive issue in Ukraine as it tries to maintain wartime public morale and present its case to join the 27-nation EU. Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov was dismissed last September over various corruption cases despite enjoying a solid reputation in representing Ukraine in its discussions with Western allies. Although he was not alleged to have engaged personally in corruption, several cases hit the military under his stewardship, one for supplying troops with food, another over procuring suitable clothing for servicemen.

Washington, Baghdad Open Talks on Foreign Troops in Iraq



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq and the United States on Saturday held a first round of talks on the future of American and other foreign troops in the country, with Baghdad expecting discussions to lead to a timeline for reducing their presence. Roughly 2,500 U.S. troops are still deployed in Iraq as part of the anti-Islamic State group international coalition formed in 2014 - the year the jihadist group overran swathes of Iraq and neighboring Syria. But after the Israel-Hamas war began in October, U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq and Syria have faced frequent attacks by some groups, leading to U.S. retaliatory strikes and Iraqi complaints of American "aggression" against its territory. The volatile situation has pushed Iraq's prime minister - whose government relies on the support of some parties - to call for the coalition to leave, although talks had been planned since an initial meeting in Washington in August. On Saturday a "one-way drone attack" targeted the Ain al-Assad base, where coalition troops are stationed in Iraq's western Anbar province, a U.S. military official told AFP. An Iraqi security official confirmed the drone attack, with the U.S. official saying it was not immediately clear whether it had led to any casualties or damage. Earlier the office of Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani issued a photograph of him with top-ranking officials from both the Iraqi armed forces and the U.S.-led coalition. Their joint commission "started its work today, in Baghdad, to review the mission of the Global Coalition against Daesh," Sudan's office said in a statement, using an Arabic acronym for IS. "Military experts will oversee ending the military mission of the Global Coalition against Daesh, a decade after its initiation and after its successful achievement of its mission in partnership with Iraqi security and military forces," Sudan's foreign affairs adviser, Farhad Alaaldin, told AFP

that the talks "and whatever progress made will determine the length of these negotiations." Iraq is engaging the other countries taking part in the international coalition for bilateral agreements that serves the best interest of Iraq and these countries," Alaaldin said. The U.S.-led coalition said in a statement that Saturday's meeting was part of the process to "assess progress in the coalition's primary Defeat-Daesh mission, as well as discuss future adjustments to the coalition's mission and presence in Iraq". The joint military commission "will work to set the conditions to transition the mission in Iraq", it added. On Thursday, Washington had said it agreed with Baghdad on the launch of "expert working groups of military and defense professionals" as part of the joint commission set up in agreement with Baghdad. The three working groups would examine "the level of threat posed by ISIS, operational and environmental requirements, and strengthening the growing capabilities of the Iraqi security forces," Sudan's office said. U.S. Pentagon deputy press secretary Sabrina Singh had acknowledged that the U.S. military footprint in Iraq "will certainly be part of the conversations as it goes forward". Iraq's foreign ministry sees the eventual formulation of "a specific and clear timeline... and to begin the gradual reduction of its (the coalition's) advisers on Iraqi soil". There have been more than 150 attacks targeting coalition troops since mid-October, many of them claimed by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a loose alliance of Iran-linked groups that oppose U.S. support for Israel in its war with Hamas in Gaza. In 2014 IS declared a "caliphate" which they ruled with brutality before their defeat in Iraq in late 2017 by Iraqi forces backed by the U.S.-led coalition. However, jihadist cells still stage sporadic attacks on the army and police.



India, France Agree on Joint Defense Production

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India and France have agreed to work together on the joint production of defense equipment including helicopters and submarines for the Indian armed forces and production for friendly countries, New Delhi said. The deal was reached during a visit by French President Emmanuel Macron, who met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and attended a state banquet hosted by President Draupadi Murmu, the government said in a statement. Macron and Modi agreed to expand bilateral ties in defense production, nuclear energy, space research and the use of artificial intelligence for public services like climate change, health and agriculture, the statement said. It did not specify the value of any deals. After Russia, France is the largest arms supplier to India, which has relied on its fighter jets for four decades. The leaders welcomed the setting up of maintenance, repair and overhaul services by France's Safran, for leading-edge aviation propulsion (LEAP) engines in India and adding such services for Rafale engines, and a helicopter partnership. The bilateral summit during Macron's 40-hour visit, was the fifth Macron-Modi meeting since May. India's Tata Group and France's Airbus have signed an agreement to manufacture civilian helicopters together, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra said. French jet engine maker CFM International also announced an agreement with India's Akasa Air to buy more than 300 of its LEAP-1B engines to power 150 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft. Akasa Air previously ordered 76 aircraft powered by the engine, of which 22 are in use. India and France agreed to intensify cooperation in the southwest Indian Ocean, building on joint surveillance missions carried out from the French island territory of La Reunion in 2020 and 2022, the government statement said. Macron also said France would create conditions to attract up to 30,000 Indian students a year for higher education.

U.S., China Say Top Officials Had Candid Talks in Bangkok

BANGKOK (Dispatches) - China and the United States said Saturday that top diplomat Wang Yi and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan held "candid, substantive" talks in Thailand's capital Bangkok, with the issue of Taiwan central after recent elections there. Beijing and Washington have clashed in recent years on flashpoint issues from technology and trade to human rights, as well as over the self-ruled island and competing claims in the South China Sea. Relations have somewhat stabilized since U.S. President Joe Biden met Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in San Francisco in November for talks that both sides described as a qualified success. Wang and Sullivan "had candid, substantive and fruitful strategic communication on implementing the consensus reached at the San Francisco meeting... and on properly handling important and sensitive issues in China-U.S. relations", a statement on China's foreign ministry website released Saturday evening said. The two sides will work to set up a call between Xi and Biden, the White House said in a statement released Saturday, as part of efforts to pursue "high-level diplomacy". Echoing the Chinese side's description of the talks, the White House added that the meeting was "part of the effort to maintain open lines of communication and responsibly manage competition in the relationship" between the two countries. The two powers have recently butted heads again over self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as its territory, and where elections were held this month. The Democratic Progressive Party, which rejects China's

claim to the island, secured a third term. In the run-up to the poll, Chinese officials slammed president-elect Lai Ching-te as a dangerous separatist who would take Taiwan down the "evil path" of independence. This week two U.S. lawmakers met Lai to reaffirm Washington's support for Taiwan. They are the second U.S. group to arrive since the election - the first was an unofficial delegation sent by Biden to congratulate Lai two days after the vote. During the latest talks, Wang stressed that Taiwan was "China's internal affair, and the regional election in Taiwan cannot change the basic reality that Taiwan is part of China", according to the foreign ministry. "The biggest risk to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is the so-called 'Taiwan independence' movement. The biggest challenge to China-US relations is also the 'Taiwan independence' movement," it added. Sullivan "underscored the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait", according to the White House, which did not elaborate further on the issue. The two-day talks also addressed the topics of the Middle East, Ukraine, North Korea, the South China Sea and other international issues, both sides said. They agreed to launch a joint working group on anti-drug cooperation, as well as set up an intergovernmental dialogue on artificial intelligence in the spring. The two men "recognized recent progress in resuming military-to-military communication and noted the importance of maintaining these channels", the White House said.





Xavi to Quit Barca After Villarreal Defeat

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez said he will quit his role at the end of the season after the team's title defense was derailed in a remarkable 5-3 defeat by Villarreal in La Liga. After Real Madrid moved two points clear of Girona at the top of the league with a late 2-1 win at Las Palmas, the pressure was firmly on Xavi's defending champions in third. In a see-saw match Gerard Moreno and Ilias Akhmedov put Villarreal two goals ahead before Barcelona battled back. Ilkay Gundogan and Pedri struck before Eric Bailly headed into his own net to give the hosts the lead. However Goncalo Guedes fired home in the 84th minute before stoppage-time strikes from Alexander Sorloth and Jose Luis Morales left Barcelona 10 points adrift of rivals Madrid. "From June 30 I will not continue as Barca coach ... as a Barca fan, I think the club needs a change of dynamic," Xavi told reporters. "Thinking as a club man, I think the best thing is for me to go ... I will give my all in the four months that are left, I think we can have a good season and I hope the dynamic changes." Alex Baena and Moreno had goals disallowed for Villarreal before the latter broke the deadlock, finishing well from Sorloth's cut-back. As the players trudged in for half-time Barcelona were whistled by disgruntled supporters at their temporary home at the Olympic Stadium. Barca conceded a foolish second goal after a bad Cancelo mistake allowed Akhmedov to gallop in,

round Inaki Pena and fire home. Then the Catalans fought back. Gundogan finished superbly from the edge of the box after an hour, Pedri drove home eight minutes later to level and Bailly headed Gundogan's free kick into his own net. However Barcelona's defence, a far cry from the watertight back-line which led them to the title last season, was pulled apart again. Sorloth fed winger Guedes, who flashed a strike past Pena and into the far corner. Barcelona were awarded a penalty in the 90th minute when Santi Comesaña blocked Gundogan's cross with his elbow but the referee cancelled it after a VAR review, leaving the hosts furious. Xavi yelled into a television camera that the decision to revoke the penalty was "a disgrace". Worse was to come, with Sorloth finishing from close range to put Villarreal ahead and Morales rubbed salt in the wound with a late fifth, with Barcelona in total disarray. It was Villarreal's first win in five games in all competitions and their coach Marcelino's first ever against Barcelona in 21 matches. "It's turning out to be a tough season and the fans deserved something like this," said Moreno. Earlier Aurelien Tchouameni's towering header earned Real Madrid a late victory at Las Palmas to send them top. Las Palmas took the lead through Javier Munoz early in the second half but Madrid came back with Vinicius Junior levelling before substitute Tchouameni's winner, on his 24th birthday.

Bopanna, Ebden Crowned Australian Open Men's Doubles Champions



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - India's Rohan Bopanna celebrated becoming the oldest number one in men's doubles history by winning the Australian Open with his partner Matthew Ebden on Saturday. The second seeds claimed a 7-6 (7/0), 7-5 victory over unseeded Italian pair Simone Bolelli and Andrea Vavassori on Rod Laver Arena. It was their maiden title as a team and Bopanna's first in men's doubles after 60 previous Grand Slams — a record for most attempts before winning. The 43-year-old will become the oldest number one in men's doubles history when the new rankings are released next week. Bopanna's only previous Grand Slam win was at the 2017 French Open in mixed doubles, with Canada's Gabriela Dabrowski. It was Ebden's second men's doubles title after winning Wimbledon in 2022 with fellow Australian Max Purcell.

Sabalenka Crushes Zheng to Defend Australian Open Title

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - An authoritative Aryna Sabalenka blew China's Zheng Qinwen off court today to successfully defend her Australian Open title — the first woman to do so in more than a decade. The Belarusian world number two proved too powerful for the 12th seed with a 6-3, 6-2 drubbing in 76 minutes to claim her second Grand Slam crown on Rod Laver Arena. It capped an incredible display of power and poise from Sabalenka over the past fortnight, with the 25-year-old surging to the title without losing a set through her seven matches. The last time the tournament witnessed a successful women's title defence was in 2013, when fellow Belarusian Victoria Azarenka achieved the feat. With her latest exploits, Sabalenka cemented her reputation as one of the game's most consistent contenders at Grand Slams, reaching at least the semi-finals in her past six majors, making three finals and winning twice. In vivid red, she overwhelmed Zheng with her crushing groundstrokes deep into both corners and a consistently reliable serve. Zheng had reached her first Grand Slam final without meeting a seed after a host of players crashed out early on her side of the draw, and the gulf in class was quickly exposed. The Belarusian opened with a comfortable serve then got a look at two break points at 15-40 in Zheng's opening service game when the Chinese star sprayed a backhand wide. She seized the chance, attacking her opponent's second serve for the break. Sabalenka consolidated on serve for 3-0, but only after saving three break points as Zheng's nerves settled and she worked to get into the contest. The Chinese star finally got on the board as her serve hit its mark in game four, with two big unreturnable aces and a forehand winner giving her confidence. But she had few answers to the booming Sabalenka serve, struggling to get the ball back over the net and into any rallies. Zheng saved three set points with a pair of aces and a winner to hold for 3-5, but it was delaying the inevitable as Sabalenka closed out the set on serve in 33 minutes. Three double faults, including on break point, immediately put Zheng on the back foot on the second set as the pressure took its toll. And there was no way back as she conceded another break to slump 4-1 behind when Sabalenka perfectly played a drop shot. Fighting until the end, Zheng saved four championship points before the second seed closed out the match to bank her 14th career title. Despite the loss, it has been a breakthrough tournament for Zheng, who will move into the world's top 10 when the new rankings are released next week. Sabalenka will remain at number two behind Iga Swiatek, who crashed out in the third round.



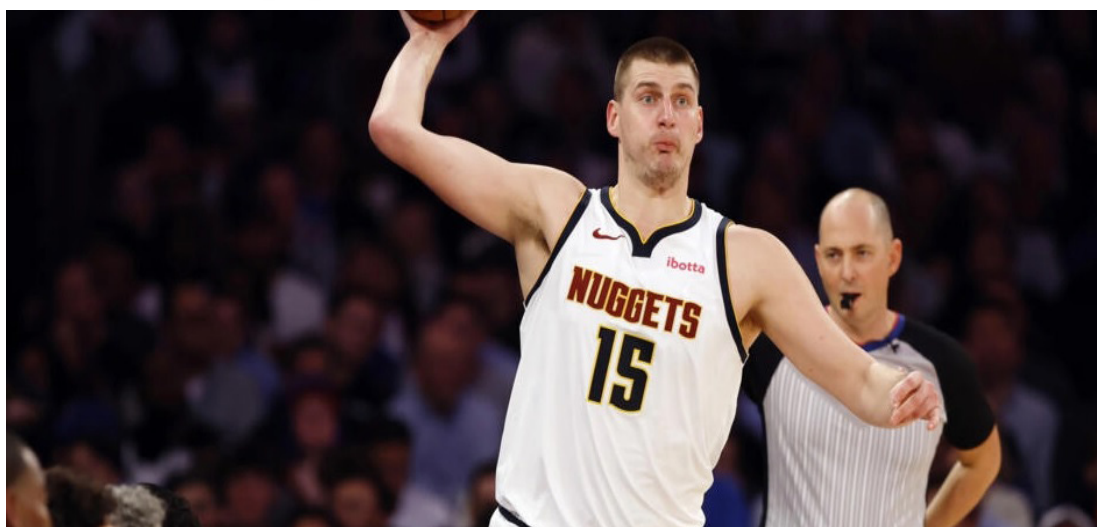
Mowinckel Wins World Cup Downhill at Cortina



ROME (Dispatches) - Ragnhild Mowinckel won Saturday's alpine skiing World Cup downhill at Cortina d'Ampezzo, claiming the honors in a race blighted by interruptions for crashes and driving winds. Norwegian Mowinckel claimed her first ever World Cup downhill win with a time of one minute and 33.5 seconds, beating American Jacqueline Wiles by 0.35sec. "I'm extremely happy with how I skied and how it went, today is one of those days I felt really proud of myself," said Mowinckel. "I hit the right spots today, and also it was a huge difference coming down (the bottom) here today, because yesterday I was really bad here, so I fixed something and apparently that worked." Reigning downhill champion Sofia Goggia, who finished 0.44sec off the pace in third, had been leading when the race was interrupted for over half an hour due to winds judged dangerous for competitors just 17 runs into the event. Goggia is still on course for a fourth straight World Cup title in the discipline as she leads the standings by 89 points from Friday's downhill winner Stephanie Venier. Mowinckel trails Goggia by 208 points in the downhill standings and is 11th in the overall race for the crystal globe. "It wasn't the best descent, technically speaking, but there was character and grit. I got hit with a lot of wind... I made some mistakes because it moved me around," Goggia told RAL. "I had to deal with a lot of wind... having to wait for so many minutes and the conditions changing made a big difference to the final result," she added later after being knocked off top spot. The long stoppage was one of several on a difficult day in Cortina, with Isabella Wright having to be taken away by helicopter early on after losing control at the difficult Delta jump and slamming into the safety netting. The American was spared any serious injuries and was later seen chatting with fellow skiers around the finish area. Mowinckel won a race missing American skiing icon Mikaela Shiffrin and reigning downhill Olympic champion Corinne Suter after both suffered painful crashes on Friday. Suter was ruled out of the rest of the season after suffering serious ligament damage to her left knee during the first of two downhill races in Cortina. Shiffrin meanwhile will take part neither in Sunday's super-G, again at Cortina, nor the giant slalom at Kronplatz on Tuesday. However Shiffrin remains top of the overall standings on 1,209 points, 295 ahead of Lara Gut-Behrami, who finished joint fifth on Saturday alongside Austria's Venier.

Jokic and Nuggets Hold Off Embiid-Less 76ers

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Nikola Jokic and the defending NBA champion Denver Nuggets held off a Philadelphia 76ers team without star center Joel Embiid, earning a 111-105 win. Embiid, the league's reigning Most Valuable Player, was a late scratch for the visiting 76ers with left knee soreness, sitting out after going through his pre-game workout. It is the fourth straight season that Embiid has missed a chance to go face-to-face with two-time MVP Jokic in Denver. Philadelphia, who beat Denver at home earlier this month, were also without injured pair Tyrese Maxey and Tobias Harris but pushed the Nuggets all the way in a close affair. Jokic put up 26 points and 16 rebounds while Jamal Murray scored 23 points and Michael Porter Jr scored 20 for Denver, who led 64-62 at the half. Paul Reed made an alley oop layup to make it a four point game with 24 seconds remaining but after Kentavious Caldwell-Pope drained two free throws, Murray blocked Marcus Morris's three-point attempt. Reed led the Sixers with 30 points and added 13 rebounds while Kelly Oubre had 25 points. Jokic said he wasn't surprised that a depleted Philadelphia put up such a good fight. "They have a really professional bench, pros that are playing in the league for such a long time and a couple of rookies or players who don't play that much and wanted to show that they can play,



they fight. "It was the first game after a long road trip, a tough one but in the end, the second half was amazing for us," he added. Embiid came on court at the end of the game and chatted with Jokic who was quick to praise his rival. "Whether you are a basketball fan, a soccer fan or an NFL fan, I think you need to appreciate what he is doing right now, it's historic. He's making history right now," said the Serb. The Miami Heat suffered a sixth straight loss with 125-109 defeat to the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden with Jalen Brunson starring with 31 points and

eight assists. It is the first time Miami have lost six in a row since March, 2021 but also highlighted the Knicks' improvement since trading for OG Anunoby in December. New York are 12-2 since adding Anunoby from Toronto and he played a key role in the win with 19 points, nine rebounds and three assists. Miami, beaten finalists last year, are seventh in the East with a 24-22 record and coach Erik Spoelstra said his team needed to stick together. "Right now we're going to rally around each other, rally around our identity. It's a tough time right now," he said. Media reports said the Knicks two-time All-Star Julius Randle, who went out injured in the fourth quarter, dislocated a right shoulder. Randle, who has played in all 46 games for the Knicks this season and had 19 points against Miami, is scheduled to undergo an MRI on Sunday. The forward suffered a hard fall as he attempted a lay-up and head coach Tom Thibodeau said he was very concerned about the injury. "He's a guy that plays through things and that's what you love about him," said the coach. "He's a warrior (but) anytime someone walks back (to the locker room), you know it's something," he said. Washington Wizards interim head coach Brian Keefe earned his first win since taking over from the fired Wes Unseld Jr with a 118-104 win over the Detroit Pistons. Kyle Kuzma top scored for the Wizards with 30 points in the meeting of the two worst teams in the NBA and Keefe's second game following defeat to the Utah Jazz on Thursday.