

As of Today Thursday, Iranians Will Start Celebrating Ten-Day-Dawn Festivities Marking the Anniversary of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979

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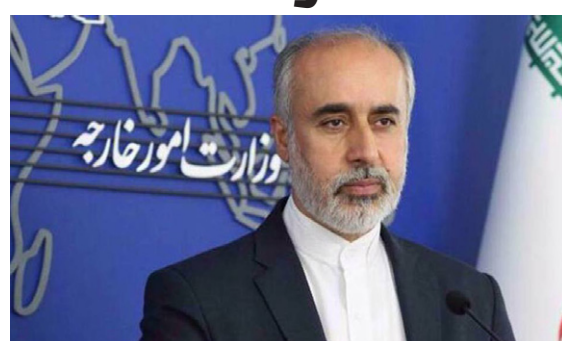
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Iran Warns of Crushing Response to Any Attack on Its Territory, Interests



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations has warned that any act of aggression against Iran and its people will be met with a crushing response. The mission, in a statement on Tuesday, categorically rejected media claims about the exchange of several messages between the United States and Iran amid a surge in regional tensions. "Such messages have not been exchanged at all. Nevertheless, it constitutes a principled policy of the Islamic Republic to respond decisively and forcefully to any hostile move against the country, its interests, and its nationals," it stated. Some media outlets claimed that Washington has sent messages to Tehran over the past two days, via third parties, that it does not want an open war, and warned that escalation would be met with US retaliatory action. The reports further claimed that Tehran rejected Washington's threats and said any attack on its soil would constitute crossing a red line and would be met with an appropriate response. Neither Washington nor Tehran has confirmed the reports that followed a drone attack on a US base in northeast Jordan near the Syrian border. The United States military said three American forces were killed and at least 25 others wounded in the strike, blaming it on "Iranian-backed groups." Iran's ambassador to the United Nations also dismissed the US accusations in a letter to UN Security Council President Nicolas de Riviere on Monday. Amir Saied Iravani asserted unequivocally that "there is no group affiliated with the Islamic Republic of Iran's Armed Forces, whether in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere that operates directly or indirectly under the control of the Islamic Republic of Iran or acts on its behalf."

Sustainable Truce in Israeli War on Gaza Key to Security Conundrum in Region



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations says a sustainable ceasefire in Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip is the key to restoring security and stability in the West Asia region. "A sustainable ceasefire for the war on Gaza serves as the linchpin to unravel the security conundrum in the region, restore tranquility along the Red Sea and the border between Lebanon and occupied Palestine, and halt the pernicious cycle of retaliatory measures," the mission wrote in a social media post on Tuesday. It came after the Palestinian Hamas resistance movement confirmed that it is studying a three-phase proposal for a truce in Gaza. The head of Hamas's political bureau Ismail Haniyeh said on Tuesday that he is studying the proposal, brought forward in Paris over the weekend, to halt the war and enable the exchange of Palestinian detainees and Israeli captives. Haniyeh noted in a statement that Hamas is "open to discussing any serious and practical initiatives or ideas, provided that they lead to a comprehensive cessation of aggression." "US airstrikes on Yemen in response to pro-Palestine operations by the Yemeni army in the Red sea have widened the conflict and caused it to spread to areas beyond Palestine. Yemenis have declared their open support for Palestine's struggle against the Israeli occupation since the regime launched a devastating war on Gaza on October 7 after the territory's Palestinian resistance movements carried out a surprise retaliatory attack, dubbed Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, against the occupying entity."

Leader Pays Tribute to Founder of Islamic Republic



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei visited the mausoleum of Imam Khomeini on Wednesday and paid homage to the memory of the founder of the Islamic Republic and the martyrs of the Revolution ahead of the Ten-Day Fajr (Dawn) events. As the Ten-Day Fajr celebrations marking the 45th anniversary of the glorious victory of the Islamic Revolution will begin tomorrow, Ayatollah Khamenei visited the mausoleum of Imam Khomeini (May God's mercy be upon him) on Wednesday and paid homage to the memory of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ayatollah Khamenei also visited the graves of dignified martyrs of the 7th of Tir (June 28 of 1981) and the martyrs of explosion of the prime minister's office on August 30 of 1981, and asked God Almighty to raise their status. The Leader also paid homage to the grave of martyr Mohammad Amin Samadi, (who was recently martyred in an attack by the Zionist regime on Damascus) and a number of the martyrs of the Holy Defense who devoted their lives to defending Iran in the 1980s as well as the martyrs of Defense of the Holy Shrines. Meanwhile on Wednesday, Ayatollah Khamenei said Tehran has been at the forefront of political struggles against oppression, tyranny, and colonialism for the last 150 years. He made the remarks at a meeting with the organizers of the National Congress for the Commemoration of the 24,000 Martyrs from Tehran, which was held on Tuesday. The transcript of his speech was published at the venue of the congress on Wednesday morning. Hailing Tehran as the symbol of all the prominent characteristics of the Iranian nation, Ayatollah Khamenei said the Iranian capital played an inspiring role in the events that led to the Islamic Revolution and afterward. Being pioneering and revolutionary is the true identity of this great city, he said, calling for efforts to educate the younger generations about the historical events of the city. The Supreme Leader further pointed to the Iranian nation's courage, zeal, and piety, as well as their independence-seeking and enemy-fighting characteristics, saying, "All these features can be found in Tehran." "The people of Tehran have been at the forefront of all political struggles against oppression, tyranny and colonialism for at least a century and a half." He also paid tribute to the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution and their high status. "One of the points that should be paid attention to in the commemoration ceremony of the martyrs is the [high] status of the martyrs of the revolution because these people were martyred on a path that prevented Iran and the Islamic world from being digested in the culture of disbelief and arrogance," he noted. "Commemorating the martyrs guarantees the continuity of their path for new generations," Ayatollah Khamenei asserted. Elsewhere in his speech, the Supreme Leader stressed that the Islamic Republic does not have any instructions for "exporting the revolution" and that the revolution is like "the pleasant spring air and the smell of flowers, which cannot be stopped and spreads naturally."

Palestine Issue First Issue of Islamic World

TEHRAN (MNA) - President Ebrahim Raisi says that the issue of Palestine and the liberation of al-Quds is the first issue of the Islamic world. The Iranian president made the remarks while delivering a speech at the mausoleum of the Founder of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the late Imam Khomeini (RA) on Wednesday. Imam Khomeini had said that the usurping and fake regime of Israel would be destroyed, he said, adding that the world is getting closer to the realization of this saying day by day. Saying that the Islamic Revolution still has its anti-arrogance position, Raisi said that such an attitude has spread all around the world, referring to the global hatred towards the Zionist regime. Elsewhere in his remarks, president Raisi hailed the efforts of the Iranian nation in foiling the enemies' plots against the country. Raisi and the members of the cabinet attended the mausoleum of the Founder of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on Wednesday to renew allegiance to the lofty ideals of the late Imam Khomeini (RA). During the visit President said Imam Khomeini's legacy is increasingly manifested in the world as the youths in the region say they have learned lessons from Imam Khomeini. Raisi who attended Imam Khomeini Mausoleum, Tehran, to renew allegiance with the late Founder of the Islamic Revolution, said that Imam Khomeini's view was anti-oppression, an ideology which the

Islamic Revolution has preserved. To elaborate on the ideology, he highlighted the issue of Palestine among other issues, and said today people across the world, not just Iran, hate the Israeli regime for its crimes against Palestine. Still, he pointed to the collapse of the US hegemony in the world and referred to the CIA's admission that the US is no longer a world power. Iran's President also addressed Iran's advances during the 45 years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and considered it the result of the adherence to the divine principles, self-stem, and belief in people's capabilities, all altogether. President Raisi noted that the enemies of the Iranian nation sought to make them put aside their faith for development but the people did not such a thing happen, and now the youths in the region and the world are preparing the grounds for the emergence of a new civilization. The Islamic Republic of Iran is preparing to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution's victory in 10 days. Expelling the US puppet Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, the so-called Shah, the Iranian nation brought the Islamic Revolution to victory in the 1979 winter under the leadership of Imam Khomeini. The ceremony was held concurrent with the beginning of the 10-Day Fajr celebrations that mark the 45th anniversary of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.



We Neither Seek Nor Fear War



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has said that Iran is not seeking war, but it is not afraid of it either. Addressing the National Congress for the Commemoration of the 24,000 Martyrs from Tehran on Wednesday, Major General Hossein Salami dismissed US threats against Iran amid heightened tensions over the death of three American forces. "We hear threatening words from American officials," he said. "You have tested us and we know each other, we will not leave any threat unanswered." "US military bases in the region have faced more than 160 attacks since the beginning of the Israeli regime's war on the Gaza Strip on October 7 due to Washington's support for the occupying regime's genocidal war. Meanwhile, a drone attack along the Jordan-Syria border on Sunday killed three American forces, marking the first time in the last few months that US forces have been killed. The US has said it would respond appropriately to the "Iran-backed group" responsible for the attack. The hawkish members of the Republican party also appealed for more direct military action against Iran. Iran, for its part, has rejected any link to the attack, saying it would take decisive action in case of any US aggression. "We are not looking for war, but we are not afraid of it either," General Salami asserted, adding, "We are not warmongers, but we defend ourselves and our glory."

Iran's Oil Exports Up 50% in 2023



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A report shows that Iran's oil exports increased by half last year despite sanctions imposed on the country by the United States. The Wednesday report by the Japanese newspaper Nikkei showed that Iranian overseas oil shipments had reached an average of 1.3 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2023, up nearly 50% compared to the previous year and the highest on record over the past five years. The report cited figures by International Energy Agency showing that Iran's total crude oil production had reached 2.99 million bpd last year, up by 0.44 million bpd from 2022. The figures confirm earlier media reports and statements by Iranian government authorities suggesting there was a major surge in Iranian oil production and exports in 2023 despite the fact that the country was still subject to a harsh regime of US sanctions. China has been responsible for a bulk of Iranian overseas oil sales, according to the same reports. Meanwhile the Japanese Nikkei daily newspaper has appreciated the major rise in Iran's oil exports in 2023. Nikkei, which is the world's largest financial newspaper, said in a report that Iran's oil exports have witnessed a 50% growth in 2023 to hit 1.3 million barrels per day (bpd). Iran's oil exports have mostly been destined for China, according to the report. It cited figures by the International Energy Agency (IEA) which put Iran's oil output at 2.99 million bpd in 2023, up 440,000 bpd from figures reported in 2022. China's rapid demand has encouraged Iran to increase production. Data intelligence firm Kpler says a roughly 90% of Iran's oil exports are going to China.

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Iran, Turkey to Exchange Electricity Using Modern Technologies

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of Iran's Iran Grid Management Company has announced the technical platform for electricity trade and exchange between Iran and Turkey using state-of-the-art equipment. Mehdi Moghimi said that the new technology will make it possible for Iran and Turkey to easily export electricity to Europe. "With the signing of the contract for the operation of 400-kilovolt BtB HVDC line between Khoy (Iran) and Van (Turkey), it is possible to exchange electricity between the two countries with modern technologies", he said. He called the electricity trade between the two neighbors a step forward in strengthening cooperation, saying it provides diversification and reducing dependence on other energy sources. Moghimi said that both countries have advantages both in terms of energy production and geographical location, adding that apart from existing electricity exchanges of Iran and Turkey with countries of the Caucasus, Central, South and West Asia, there is possibility of trade or transit of electricity with other countries. The Iran Grid Management Company and the Turkish Electricity Transmission Company (TEIAS) signed an agreement to make operational the Khoy-Van grid line during recent visit by President Ebrahim Raisi to Ankara.

British Ambassador Summoned Over Baseless Accusations



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Foreign Ministry has summoned the British ambassador in Tehran to convey the Islamic Republic's strong protest to "baseless accusations" leveled by the UK against Tehran. Simon Shercliff was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the director general of the Western Europe Department on Tuesday, a day after London imposed sanctions on seven individuals and one organization, claiming that they were targeting "Iranian dissidents" in other countries, following a similar step by the United States. The Iranian official described the sanctions as "illegal" and condemned London's accusations as "baseless." He also noted that London's attempts to tarnish the image of Iran were non-constructive, adding that such "destructive actions" towards the Islamic Republic are doomed to failure. "It is a bitter historical irony that a country which is the founder and supporter of organized terrorist groups, drug trafficking and criminal gangs, seeks to accuse the Islamic Republic of Iran and its loyal and honest forces that are at the forefront of the fight against organized crimes," the Iranian official said. The British ambassador, for his part, said he will convey Iran's protest to his respective country. On Monday, the US and the UK imposed sanctions on a network of people who they claimed targeted what they called Iranian opposition activists under Iran's orders. The UK Foreign Office said it would "sanction seven individuals and one organization, including senior Iranian officials" who were involved in threats to kill journalists on British soil and others it said were part of "international criminal gangs" linked to Tehran. The sanctions come amid soaring tensions in the region. Earlier in the day, US President Joe Biden and UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron claimed that "Iranian-backed groups", mainly based in Iraq, were responsible for a drone attack on the border of Jordan and Syria on Sunday, which killed at least three US soldiers and wounded 34 others.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Iran Economy Registers 5.4% Growth in 2023

TEHRAN - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its latest report put Iran's economic growth last year at 5.4%. In a report on the World Economic Outlook, which is published once every three months, the international monetary body said that Iran registered a 5.4% economic growth in 2023, showing a considerable increase compared to a year earlier. The IMF had put Iran's economic growth in 2022 at 3.8 percent. It predicted that Iran's economy will increase by 3.7 percent in 2024. In its report in October 2023, the International Monetary Fund had predicted that Iran's economy will grow by 2.5 percent in 2024. The 5.4-percent growth of Iran's economy in 2023 came as the world's economic growth hit 3.1 percent, showing a slump compared to a year before. The average economic growth of the developed countries in 2023 stood at only 1.6% while their average economic growth was 2.6 percent in 2022. In the reported fiscal year, the average economic growth of the developing countries was 4.1 percent. The report added that the economies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) grew by 2% on average, with Saudi Arabia registering a -1.1 percent economic growth in 2023. The

increase in Iran's economic growth happens at a time when global growth has slowed to 3.1 percent. The average economic growth of the developed economies has been reported to be 1.6 percent in 2023 while the figure stood at 2.6 percent in 2022. Developing countries have also had an average growth of 4.1 percent in 2023, indicating that Iran's economy increased more than the average of its equivalents. The economic growth of some other countries in 2023 was as follows: the U.S. 2.5 percent, Germany negative 0.3 percent, France 0.8 percent, UK 0.5 percent, China 5.2 percent, Russia 3.0 percent, Brazil 3.1 percent, Turkey 4.0 percent and Pakistan - 0.2 percent. As announced by the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), the country's gross domestic product (GDP) including oil grew 4.7 percent in the first half of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21 - September 22, 2023) compared to the same period last year. Based on the CBI data, the figure was 3.6 percent excluding oil. The World Bank in a recent report on Iran's economy dubbed "Iran Economic Monitor" said the Islamic Republic's economy has been expanding despite the sanctions and global economic conditions.

Knowledge-Based Companies, NIGC Sign €500m Contract



TEHRAN (Shana) - Iran's Vice President for Science, Technology and Knowledge-Based Economy Rouhollah Dehqani Firouzabadi on Monday said a 500-million-euro contract has been signed with the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC). Speaking in a special TV program on the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network (IRINN) titled "Knowledge-Based Companies' Capability for Meeting Industries' Needs", the VP added 12 groups of strategic products, based on the contract, will be made within four years. Last year, he continued, the Presidential Department of Science, Technology and Knowledge-Based Economy and the oil sector signed a five-year contract worth around \$2 billion on manufacturing seven groups of products. This year's homegrown products exhibition was held through the efforts made by the economic group of the Leader's Office, mentioned the official, adding its approach was completely different from the last edition as achievements were displayed in an organizational category last year but this year's exhibition showcased achievements in different fields of economy including energy, water and the environment, health and medical equipment, and the like.

Iran, Uzbekistan Hold Political Talks in Tashkent

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Ranking diplomats from Iran and Uzbekistan convened in Tashkent for the seventh round of political consultations between the two Asian states. The meeting was co-chaired by Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Baqeri and First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Bakhromjon Aloyev. They discussed the latest situation and prospects of cooperation between the two countries in the political, security, economic, and cultural fields in regional and international arenas. Highlighting the growing relations between Iran and Uzbekistan, the two sides called for regular political consultations with the aim of accelerating cooperation in various

fields. "Considering the existing capacities, we should pay more attention to developing relations between us in different dimensions and fields," Baqeri said, noting that there are no restrictions to closer cooperation. For his part, Aloyev stressed the importance and position of Iran in the region, and hailed its growth in various fields of science and technology under the pressure of sanctions. He further expressed Uzbekistan's readiness to cooperate with Iran within the framework of regional and international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, ECO, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations.



Iranian Automakers Manufacture over 1.1m Cars in 10-Month Period



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The director general of the industries office of Iran's Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade said the production of cars by the domestic auto manufacturing companies exceeded 1.1 million in the first 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2023). Mehرداد Khosravi said about 1.107 million cars were produced in the country from March 21, 2023, to January 22, 2024, showing a considerable hike compared to the same period last year. Iran has moved towards making the car market of the country competitive by importing cars, he emphasized. Khosravi put the number of passenger cars produced in the current year at about 937,000, showing a nine percent rise compared to a year earlier. The domestic auto manufacturers had produced 863,000 passenger cars last year, he continued. He went on to say that 135,000 pickups were manufactured in the country from March 21, 2023, to January 22, 2024, registering a 34% hike compared to last year's corresponding period, IRNA reported. In addition, more than 250,000 vehicles were produced by the private sector of the country in the first 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year, showing about 66 percent growth compared to the same period last year.

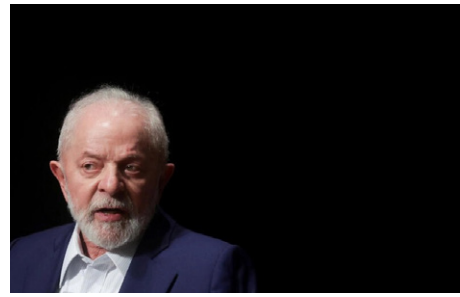


Iran Says Receiving Perfect Signals From Newly-Launched Mahda Satellite

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian deputy minister of communications technology says the Mahda satellite, successfully launched into orbit on Sunday, is in "perfect health" and the link is not disrupted. Hassan Salarieh, the head of the Iranian Space Organization (ISO), in a phone conversation with Iran's state television on Wednesday, said the satellite, launched along with Keyhan 2 and Hatf 1 nano-satellites, is fulfilling the country's research objectives. He said, "Mahda is a telecommunications satellite that has power supply and distribution subsystems. This satellite receives its power from the solar energy." Simultaneously sending the three indigenous satellites into outer space on Simorgh-1 satellite carrier for the first time marked a big stride for Iran. The Iranian space organization head said Iran currently has eight operational and telecommunications satellites in space, adding some of them are reaching the end of their life span. Iran has put the space sector atop its agenda by developing and launching numerous satellites during the past decades.

Lula Fires Brazil's Intel Agency No.2

BRASILIA (Dispatches) - President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has sacked Brazil's deputy intelligence director amid an investigation into alleged illegal espionage also involving one of predecessor Jair Bolsonaro's sons, according to an official bulletin published Tuesday. Number two intelligence official Alessandro Moretti is a target in a federal police probe investigating a clandestine government network that allegedly used Israeli spyware FirstMile to illegally eavesdrop on hundreds of politicians and public figures during the Bolsonaro presidency (2019-2022). Investigators say a group within the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (Abin) spied on perceived Bolsonaro opponents, including supreme court justices and the former lower-house speaker. Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who authorised Monday's raids -- and was himself an alleged target of the espionage -- said police had identified Jair Bolsonaro's son Carlos as part of the "political nucleus" suspected of ordering the illegal spying.



Spanish Farmers Plan February Protests as Anger Spreads Across Europe



MADRID (Dispatches) - Spanish farmers' associations said they were planning to take to the streets in February in protest against strict European regulations and lack of government support as unrest continues to spread across Europe. Protests in France have intensified this week, with farmers using their tractors to block major motorways into Paris as they seek to highlight a range of grievances, including cheap imports and excessive European Union environmental regulation. In Belgium, farmers plan to block access roads to the Zeebrugge container port in Belgium from Tuesday. In recent weeks, farmers across Europe including in Germany, Poland and Romania have also held demonstrations. "Mobilizations will take place as soon as possible," Pedro Barato, president of Asaja, a Spanish association representing around 200,000 farmers and cattle breeders, said in a radio interview. "The actions will not be very different from what is happening in other EU countries." The protests are set to take place in the coming weeks, the organisations said in a joint statement. Asaja members are due to meet on Feb. 1 to make preparations. Drought in southern Spain has hit farmers, with production of several crops such as rice and olives dropping over the past two years. The largest farmers' groups in Spain - Asaja, COAG and UPA - also share the same as grievances as their peers in other European countries, claiming environmental regulations imposed by Brussels are undermining the profitability of crops and increasing food prices. Spanish farmers said they were also struggling to compete with products imported from outside the EU at lower prices. As the French protests have intensified, some 20,000 Spanish trucks that cross the border every day have struggled to transport fruit, vegetables and other goods. Spanish transport association, Fenadismer, estimates the blockades cause daily losses of €10 million (\$10.84 million) for Spanish companies.

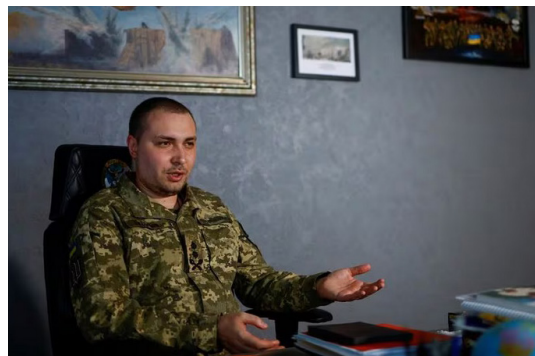
Palestinian Aid Agency Can't Be Replaced, UN Warns of Collapse



UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) - Nothing can "replace or substitute" the UN Palestinian refugee agency, whose staff were implicated in the Hamas attacks on Israel, the UN's coordinator for Gaza aid said Tuesday even as Israel made new claims against it. Several countries, including the United States, Britain, Germany and Japan, have suspended funding to the UNRWA agency, and the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was holding crunch talks with donor countries. Agency chiefs in the UN's highest-level humanitarian coordination forum, including the heads of the WHO, the UN rights office, UNICEF and the World Food Programme, warned defunding UNRWA risked a "catastrophic" humanitarian collapse in Gaza. "Withdrawing funds from UNRWA is perilous and would result in the collapse of the humanitarian system in Gaza, with far-reaching humanitarian and human rights consequences in the occupied Palestinian territory and across the region," said the statement from heads of organizations that form the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The dispute intensified Tuesday after Israel accused the UNRWA of allowing Hamas to use agency infrastructure in Gaza for military activity. UNRWA said it has acted promptly over allegations by Israel that 12 of its staff were involved in the Hamas attacks, adding that cuts in funding will affect ordinary Palestinians. The UN agency has long been under scrutiny by Israel, which accuses it of systematically going against the country's interests. Israel has vowed to stop the agency's work in Gaza after the war and doubled down on Tuesday when government spokesman Eylon Levy said UNRWA "has been fundamentally compromised." He accused it of "hiring terrorists on a massive scale, letting its infrastructure be used for Hamas military activity and relying on Hamas for aid distribution in the Gaza Strip." UN Gaza aid coordinator Sigrid Kaag said earlier Tuesday "there is no way that any organization can replace or substitute (the) tremendous capacity, the fabric of UNRWA -- (their) ability and their knowledge of the population in Gaza." Washington, which said it was the largest donor to the agency having given \$131 million to UNRWA since October, said it "very much supported" its work. "There is no other humanitarian player in Gaza who can provide food and water and medicine at the scale that UNRWA does," said State Department spokesman Matthew

Miller. "We want to see that work continued, which is why it is so important that the United Nations take this matter seriously, that they investigate, that there is accountability for anyone who is found to have engaged in wrongdoing." Militants also seized 250 hostages, of whom Israel says around 132 remain in Gaza, including the bodies of at least 28. Israel responded with a relentless military offensive that has killed at least 26,751 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory. Meanwhile the Israeli army said Tuesday it is channeling water into Gaza's tunnels in a bid to destroy the sprawling underground network used by Hamas militants to launch attacks on Israel. "It is part of a range of tools deployed by the IDF (Israeli army) to neutralise the threat of Hamas's subterranean network of tunnels," the military said in a statement, confirming media reports. Dubbed "the Gaza metro" by the Israeli army, there were 1,300 tunnels over 500 kilometres (310 miles) in Gaza at the start of the war in October, according to a study from US military academy West Point. The military vowed to destroy them in the wake of Hamas's October 7 attack in southern Israel that resulted in the deaths of around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures. Some 250 hostages were also dragged to Gaza during the October 7 attack, of which around 132 are still held captive, including bodies of at least 28 people believed to have been killed. Since the Hamas attack, Israel has launched a withering air, land and sea offensive in Gaza that has killed at least 26,751 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory. The Israeli army says that many hostages taken by Hamas have been or continue to be held in the vast network of tunnels. In December some Israeli media reported the military was leaning towards flooding the tunnels with seawater pumped from the Mediterranean. But experts had warned the option was dangerous and poses huge risks to Gaza's besieged civilians. "It will cause severe damage to the already fragile water and sewage infrastructure that's in Gaza," the then UN humanitarian coordinator for Palestinian territories, Lynn Hastings, had warned in December. "There's even a risk to buildings and roads collapsing because of the increased pressure and infiltration of sea water into Gaza."

Ukraine's Military Spy Chief Expects Russia's Offensive to Fizzle by Spring



KYIV (Dispatches) - The head of Ukrainian military intelligence said he expected Russia's offensive on the eastern front line to fizzle out by early spring. Moscow stepped up its attacks in the northeastern section of the front line last autumn, seeking to encircle bastions such as the town of Avdiivka. The Ukrainian military said it was in "active defence" while carrying out counterattacks. "Russia's offensive is still ongoing. Somewhere in early spring, it will be exhausted completely," Kyrylo Budanov, head of Ukraine's military intelligence agency GUR, said on national TV. Budanov played down the Russian forces' gains, saying they had only achieved "a few advances across some fields" and near the embattled town of Avdiivka. "Now it's the enemy's move. It will end, and I think ours will start," he added. Ukraine's own counteroffensive, launched in June 2023, has not produced any major breakthrough. Ukrainian officials have blamed extensive Russian minefields and defensive lines, and delays in supplies of weapons from the West. Ukrainian military officials have spoken recently of increased Russian military activity on long stretches of the 1,000-km-long (600-mile) front line through eastern and southern Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said his forces will achieve all their aims in what Moscow calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine, now in its 24th month. Putin says he sent troops into Ukraine to buttress Russia's own security against what he casts as a hostile and aggressive West. Kyiv and its Western allies say this is nonsense and that Moscow is engaged in an unprovoked war of aggression and an imperial-style land grab.

China's Factory Activity Shrinks Again, Weak Demand Hobbles Economy



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's manufacturing activity contracted for the fourth straight month in January, an official factory survey showed on Wednesday, suggesting the sprawling sector and the broader economy were struggling to regain momentum at the start of 2024. The official purchasing managers' index (PMI) rose to 49.2 in January from 49.0 in December, driven by a rise in output but still below the 50-mark separating growth from contraction. It was in line with a median forecast of 49.2 in a Reuters poll. The data provides the first official snapshot of how the world's No.2 economy has started off the new year after a shakier-than-expected post-COVID recovery. The latest figure is also affected by the Lunar New Year which will fall on Feb. 10 this year, as factories may shut earlier and send workers back home ahead of the holiday. "Economic momentum remained muted as the deflationary pressure persists," said Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, and expects China's central bank to cut rates in the first half of the year to boost domestic demand. January's new orders sub-index was at 49.0, contracting for the fourth month, according to the NBS survey. Weak external demand also dragged on manufacturing activity, with the new export orders index registering at 47.2, contracting for the 10th straight month. To spur growth, China's central bank governor Pan Gongsheng unexpectedly announced a cut to banks' reserve requirement ratio at a press conference last week. Authorities face a

daunting task as they try to revitalise the economy in the face of a property downturn, local government debt risks, deflationary pressures and weak global demand. The official non-manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI), which includes services and construction, rose to 50.7 from 50.4 in December, the highest since September last year, according to the NBS. The sub-index of services PMI returned to growth following two months of contraction, but construction PMI grew at a significantly slower pace. The composite PMI, which includes manufacturing and services, was at a four-month high of 50.9 in January compared with 50.3 the previous month. "It is not clear if the latest rise in the PMIs reflects a further improvement in January or simply the easing of sentiment effects that have been weighing on the surveys," said Julian Evans-Pritchard, head of China economics at Capital Economics. "Either way, it adds to evidence that growth momentum in China is in the midst of a renewed recovery, albeit one that remains on shaky foundations and is unlikely to be sustained once current policy support is pared back." The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday lifted China's growth forecast this year to 4.6% from 4.2% in October, thanks to the significant fiscal support from the authorities and a less-severe-than-expected slowdown in the property sector. China won't release its 2024 growth target till March, but policy insiders expect Beijing to maintain a similar growth target to last year of around 5%.



South Korean President Warns North Korea May Try to Disrupt April Poll

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol warned on Wednesday that North Korea could stage provocations such as armed actions near the shared border, drone intrusions, cyber attacks or spreading fake news in a bid to interfere in an election in April. Yoon made the remarks as he convened an annual meeting of the central integrated defence council that brings together the military, government and civil defence entities. In recent weeks, Pyongyang has ramped up tensions on the Korean peninsula with missile tests and verbal threats against Seoul and Washington, while scrapping its decades-long goal of a peaceful reunification and redefining the South as a separate, enemy state. Yoon warned that North Korea could stage "numerous provocations" to intervene in the upcoming election and called for a tighter security posture. South Korea is set to elect new members of parliament on April 10, with 300 seats up for grab. "The North Korean regime is going through fire and water solely for the sake of maintaining its hereditary totalitarian regime, while blatantly ignoring international law and U.N. Security Council resolutions by trading arms with Russia," Yoon told the meeting. Russia and North Korea have overseen a series of high-level exchanges since last year amid growing criticism of Pyongyang's role in the Ukraine war by allegedly shipping artillery and missiles to Russia. Both North Korea and Russia deny the accusation and also the charge that Pyongyang has been receiving advanced technology for developing strategic military capability from Moscow in return. Yoon called for greater cooperation between his country's military, government, police and private actors, as well as additional measures to prevent possible cyber attacks on national infrastructure, and attempts to disseminate false propaganda.

Sultan Ibrahim Sworn In as Malaysia's 17th King

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - The billionaire sultan who rules Malaysia's Johor state was sworn in as the nation's new king Wednesday under a unique rotating monarchy system. Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar, 65, took his oath of office at the palace and signed the instrument of the proclamation of office in a ceremony witnessed by other royal families, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Cabinet members. A coronation ceremony will be held later. One of the richest men in the country, Sultan Ibrahim has an extensive business empire ranging from real estate to telecoms and power plants. The candid monarch has close ties with Anwar and his rule could bolster Anwar's unity government, which faces a strong Islamic opposition. Nine ethnic Malay state rulers have taken turns as king for five-year terms under the world's only such system since Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957. Malaysia has 13 states but only nine have royal families, some that trace their roots to centuries-old Malay kingdoms that were independent states until they were brought together by the British. Sultan Ibrahim's election to the national throne by his fellow rulers in October was widely expected based on an established rotation order. Sultan Nazrin Shah, the ruler of Perak state and next in line to the throne, was reelected as deputy king. Known as the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, or He Who is Made Lord, the king plays a largely ceremonial role, as administrative power is vested in the prime minister and Parliament. The monarch is the nominal head of the government and armed forces, and is highly regarded as the protector of Islam and Malay tradition. All laws, Cabinet appointments and the dissolution of Parliament for general elections require his assent. The king has the power to proclaim an emergency and pardon criminals. Sultan Ibrahim succeeded Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah of Pahang state, who presided over a tumultuous period that included COVID-19 lockdowns and political instability. The political

influence of the king has grown in recent years. Sultan Abdullah intervened in the past to decide who became prime minister, including naming Anwar as prime minister after 2022 general elections led to a hung parliament. Sultan Ibrahim has indicated he will maintain a hands-on approach. He said in an interview with the Singapore Straits Times published last month that he would not want to waste five years on the throne as a "puppet king" but will focus on fighting graft and deepening unity in the country. The sultan and other rulers have also warned against attempts by the opposition to oust Anwar's government, calling instead for political stability. Sultan Ibrahim, whose mother is English, is also vocal about welfare issues and takes annual road trips on his motorbike to meet the people in his state. He has also made no secret of his wealth. Earlier Wednesday, the sultan flew from Johor to Kuala Lumpur on his private jet, a gold-and-blue Boeing 737. Apart from a fleet of jets, he has an extensive collection of cars and motorcycles, as well as properties abroad. Sultan Ibrahim is also the only ruler with a private army -- a condition agreed upon for the state to join modern-day Malaysia. Sultan Ibrahim's high corporate profile -- including a stake in the multibillion-dollar Forest City development project in Johor with China's beleaguered developer Country Garden -- has raised eyebrows amid concerns of a possible conflict of interest. He told the Singapore Straits Times that he plans to revive a high-speed rail link project with Singapore and bolster the troubled Forest City project. But the sultan has defended his business dealings. In 2015, he quipped that he has to "earn a living, like ordinary Malaysians" as he cannot rely on his 27,000 ringgit (\$5,700) monthly state allowance. His wife Raja Zarith Sofiah, who is from another royal family, is an Oxford graduate and a prolific writer who has authored several children's books. They have five sons and a daughter.



Celtics Hold Off Pacers Rally, Lakers Slump Again



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The Boston Celtics held off a ferocious second half rally to defeat the Indiana Pacers 129-124 on Tuesday as the Los Angeles Lakers crashed to another heavy defeat. The NBA Eastern Conference-leading Celtics cruised into a 20-point first half lead at the TD Garden against a Pacers lineup bolstered by the return of Tyrese Haliburton. But Indiana came to life in the third quarter, outscoring Boston 37-25 to briefly edge into the lead before the Celtics regained control of the contest and closed out victory in the fourth. "Credit to Indiana, they played really, really fast. They tried to wear us out but we found a way to win," said Celtics star Jaylen Brown, who finished with 25 points, six rebounds and four assists. Jayson Tatum led the Boston scoring with 30 points but it was the power forward's defensive prowess that helped seal the team's league-best 37th win of the season. Tatum came up with two big blocks to deny Indiana down the stretch just when the Pacers were threatening to tie it up. "Each and every night, we try to keep our standard, and defense is a part of that," Brown said of Boston's defensive display. All five Boston starters finished in double figures, with Derrick White scoring 24 points while Kristaps Porzingis and Jrue Holiday added 17 points apiece. Aaron Nesmith led Indiana's scoring with 26 points while Pascal Siakam chipped in with 23. Haliburton returned to the line-up to score 13 points with 10 assists and three rebounds. Elsewhere on Tuesday, the Los Angeles Lakers slumped to an emphatic loss, going down 138-122 on the road in Atlanta. The Lakers, beaten 135-119 in Houston on Monday, were given a torrid working over for a second straight night by the Hawks' potent offense. Trae Young finished with 26 points, including six three-pointers, while Dejounte Murray scored 24. Bogdan Bogdanovic provided a shooting clinic from the bench with 18 points,

including 4-of-9 from three-point range. Austin Reaves led the Lakers with 28 points while LeBron James scored 20 points. The Lakers, missing the injured Anthony Davis, dropped to 24-25 after the loss and are ninth in the Western Conference table. Lakers star James could not hide his frustration after his team's latest blowout defeat. "We can on any given night beat any team in the NBA -- and then on any given night we can get our ass kicked by any team in the NBA," James said. "That's where we are." In other games on Tuesday, the New York Knicks extended their recent winning streak to eight games with a 118-103 victory over the Utah Jazz, on the back of 33 points from Donte DiVincenzo, who made nine three-pointers. In Chicago, the Toronto Raptors recovered from a 16-point first-half deficit to defeat the Bulls 118-107. Meanwhile top NBA Draft pick Victor Wembanyama and 2023 NBA Rookie of the Year Paolo Banchero are among the players named Tuesday to compete in next month's NBA Rising Stars tournament. The event, featuring four seven-player teams, will be staged on February 16, two days before the NBA All-Star Game at Indianapolis. French 7-foot-4 (2.24m) center Wembanyama, averaging 20.6 points and 10.1 rebounds a game this season for the San Antonio Spurs, is among 11 rookies who were selected by NBA assistant coaches. They will join 10 second-year NBA players, Orlando star Banchero among them, in a talent pool from which three teams will be picked in a draft next Tuesday. Those lineups and a seven-player squad from the developmental G-League picked by NBA officials will compete in a four-team event. Honorary head coaches for the Rising Stars NBA squads will include former NBA players Pau Gasol, the Spaniard whose team who last year, and former Indiana Pacers standout Jalen Rose plus Women's NBA Indiana Fever star Tamika Catchings.

South Africa Shock Morocco After Hakimi Penalty Miss



KORHOGO (Dispatches) - Morocco became the latest giants to be toppled at a shock-filled Africa Cup of Nations when they fell 2-0 to South Africa on Tuesday, while Mali also booked a quarter-finals place. Evidence Makgopa and Tebogo Mokoena scored in the second half for Bafana Bafana, who once again proved a bogey team for the Atlas Lions, whose Achraf Hakimi missed a penalty. Since becoming the first African side to reach the World Cup semi-finals in Qatar two years ago, Morocco have lost two of 13 matches, and both defeats were inflicted by South Africa. The shock last 16 result in the muggy Ivory Coast coastal city of San-Pedro came after Mali overcame Burkina Faso 2-1 in Korhogo with Lassine Sinayoko scoring what proved the key goal. Morocco join defending champions Senegal, Tunisia, Algeria, Cameroon and Burkina Faso as teams ranked among the top 10 in Africa heading home early. On Saturday, South Africa will face Cape Verde in Yamoussoukro after hosts Ivory Coast and Mali clash in Bouake. In the other quarter-finals, Victor Osimhen-inspired Nigeria face Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo meet Guinea on Friday. South Africa, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and DR Congo are former champions while the other four title contenders are hoping to conquer Africa for the first time. While Morocco, thanks to their World Cup heroics, were favoured to eliminate South Africa, two factors suggested there was a chance of a shock. South Africa had won two and drawn two of five previous Cup of Nations meetings with Morocco from 1998. And despite being an African powerhouse for decades, Morocco have consistently flopped at the Cup of Nations since their lone triumph 48 years ago. Coach Walid Regragui called the repeated failures an "African curse" and the former national team full-back saw clinical South Africa pull off a deserved victory. Makgopa stayed just inside to fire Bafana in front on 57 minutes and Morocco squandered a great late chance to equalise when Hakimi fired a penalty against the crossbar and over. A foul on Mokoena by Manchester United midfielder Sofyan Amrabat led to a VAR review that ended with a straight red card as he was the last defender. Set-piece specialist Mokoena fired the free-kick past Yassine Bounou and high into the net at the near post. Sinayoko scored his third goal at the Cup of Nations as Mali reached the quarter-finals for the first time since 2013 by defeating Burkina Faso 2-1 in Korhogo earlier on Tuesday.

Arsenal Up to Second in Premier League

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal climbed up to second in the Premier League with a 2-1 win at Nottingham Forest as Aston Villa's unbeaten home record was ended by a 3-1 defeat to Newcastle. Goals from Gabriel Jesus and Bukayo Saka maintained the Gunners' title push at the City Ground ahead of their clash at home to leaders Liverpool on Sunday. Arsenal's first away win since early December takes Mikel Arteta's men within two points of Liverpool, who are in action on Wednesday at home to Chelsea. The visitors struggled to make their dominance of possession count until 25 minutes from time when Jesus' effort from a narrow angle sneaked between the legs of former Arsenal goalkeeper Matt Turner. Saka then fired home his 10th goal of the season from Jesus' cross. "Against this team at home I have seen a lot of teams that have suffered," said Arteta. "I am pleased with the performance and winning the game." Substitute Taiwo Awoniyi set up a grandstand finish when he outmuscled William Saliba to slot home on 89 minutes. But it was too little, too late for Forest who slip to within two points of the relegation zone and with the threat of a points deduction hanging over the club for breaching the Premier League's financial rules. Villa failed to join Arsenal on 46 points after losing at home in the league for the first time since February last year. Unai Emery's men had won 16 of their 17 Premier League games at Villa Park since, but gave themselves a mountain to climb as Newcastle centre-back Fabian Schuster scored twice from corners in the first half. Newcastle had the second worst away record in the league before kick-off, but were cruising towards their first victory on the road since September when Alex Moreno turned into his own net under pressure from Jacob Murphy. "It was mixed emotions for me because that team is an elite team. The mixed part is that we haven't seen that for a number of weeks," said Newcastle boss Eddie Howe, whose squad has been ravaged by injuries this season. "We looked much like ourselves and we have players coming back." Ollie Watkins reduced the arrears with his first goal for seven games and then had a second ruled out for offside. But Villa are now looking over their shoulders in the race for a place in next season's Champions League as Tottenham can leapfrog them into fourth with victory over Brentford on Wednesday. Newcastle climb up to seventh and within 11 points of Villa. Luton climbed out of the bottom three thanks to a stunning 4-0 win over Brighton as Elijah Adebayo scored a hat-trick. Adebayo nodded in the opener after just 18 seconds and the Hatters were 2-0 up inside three minutes when Chiedozie Ogbene beat Jason Steele to a long pass over the top to walk the ball into an empty net. Adebayo calmly slotted in at Steele's near post to make it 3-0 before the break and completed his hat-trick 11 minutes into the second half. Everton drop into the relegation zone after failing to

take their chances in a 0-0 draw at Fulham. Crystal Palace eased fears they could be dragged into a battle for survival by twice coming from behind to beat bottom-of-the-table Sheffield United 3-2. Eberechi Eze and Michael Olise were unsurprisingly the star men as the Eagles secured just a second win in 13 games. Twice Olise teed up Eze for stunning finishes in the first half before Olise scored the winner after the break to life Palace up to 14th. Ben Brereton Diaz and James McAtee were on target for the Blades, but they are now nine points adrift of safety.



South Korea Beat Saudi Arabia on Penalties to Reach Asian Cup Quarters



AL RAYYAN (Dispatches) - South Korea beat Saudi Arabia 4-2 in a penalty shootout to advance to the Asian Cup quarter-finals after a thrilling last-16 tie ended 1-1 after extra time at Education City Stadium on Tuesday. After South Korea's Cho Gue-sung equalized in second-half added time to cancel out Abdullah Radif's opener, Sami Al-Najei and Abdulrahman Ghareeb had their penalties saved by Jo Hyeon-woo to send South Korea through. "I had confidence that I could make some saves for my team. I'm happy I could take my team through to the next round." Jo told reporters. South Korea converted all their spot kicks to advance but they will have only two days to recover after playing 120 minutes, with their quarter-final clash against 2015 champions Australia taking place on Friday. "That's the reason why I badly wanted to win our group. Some people said I was happy not to top the group and avoid Japan. We didn't win the group and we've paid the price," South Korea coach Juergen Klinsmann said. "But this win has given this team more spirit. I enjoy coaching this group and they badly want to do well for their country. We wanted to win before penalties, we didn't count on a shootout. We will recover because we have a good atmosphere. We're looking forward to Australia, they won 4-0 (against Indonesia). This win tonight gives us a lot of optimism, belief and energy - which we will need to beat Australia." "Asia is Green" read a banner alongside one with a player in a Saudi kit crouching with one hand on the Asian Cup trophy, as the vocal fans bouncing in the stands created an atmosphere that felt like a home game for Roberto Mancini's side. Yet it was the South Korean team playing in bright orange that prevailed after the Persian Gulf nation and three-times champions ran out of gas in the dying stages of the match and crumbled under the pressure. Saudi fans began leaving in droves while Mancini also walked straight down the tunnel before Hwang Hee-chan stepped up and scored the decisive spot kick. "I apologise for this, I thought the shootout was over," said Mancini, who also brushed aside questions about his future as Saudi Arabia's coach. "I don't think you understand the level of Korea, it's too high. They have incredible players. I'm very sad after conceding a goal in the last minute and losing a penalty shootout. I don't understand why 10 minutes of extra time was added. As a team it's clear we have to improve more at this level, we have to work."

Record \$9.63b Spent on 2023 Transfers

PARIS (Dispatches) - Football clubs worldwide spent a record \$9.63 billion (8.88 billion euros) on international transfers last year, surpassing the previous record set in 2019 by more than \$2 billion, according to a FIFA report published Tuesday. The latest figures represent a 48.1 percent increase compared to 2022 when transfer spending began to climb again after two years of belt-tightening due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The top 10 player transfers in 2023 accounted for over 10% of the entire outlay. Those deals included Jude Bellingham's move to Real Madrid, Enzo Fernandez joining Chelsea and Harry Kane signing for Bayern Munich. English clubs, led by Chelsea, again topped the list by splashing out a combined \$2.96 billion -- three times as much as those in France, which placed second on the list. Clubs from Saudi Arabia broke into the top five spenders for the first time with a combined outlay of \$970 million following the notable purchases of Neymar, Sadio Mane and Riyad Mahrez. Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema also moved to the Gulf kingdom, but on free transfers. Chelsea were followed by Paris Saint-Germain, Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich as the top five biggest-spending teams in 2023. In contrast, German sides received the most in transfer fees at almost \$1.21 billion -- boosted by the sales of Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund) and Randal Kolo Muani, who left Eintracht Frankfurt for PSG. Portuguese clubs brought in the greatest numbers of players from abroad with 1,017 incoming transfers, while Brazil exported the most with a total of 1,217. The FIFA report also highlighted the "impressive growth" of the transfer market in women's football. In 2023, a total of 623 women's clubs were involved in international transfers, up from 507 the year prior. Some 1,888 players moved from one country to another as well, surpassing the 1,571 in 2022, and generating record annual spending of \$6.1 million -- up 84.2 percent from 2022.

