

Rafael Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Announced on Thursday That the Rate of Uranium Production by Iran has Decreased, Claiming Iran Is Still Increasing Its 60 Percent Uranium

# IRAN NEWS

President Ebrahim Raisi in His Public Speech in Minab, on Friday, Stressed That Iran's Military Power Is Not a Threat to Any Country in the Region Yet It Brings About Security for the Regional States So That They All Can Rely On It

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### Cessation of Israeli Crimes in Gaza Sole Way to Halt Regional Crisis



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has underlined the need for stopping Israeli war crimes and genocide of Palestinians as a fundamental step in halting the crisis in the entire region. In a telephone conversation with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell on Thursday night, Amir-Abdollahian pointed to unraveling developments in Gaza, and stressed that an end to Israeli war crimes and genocide of Palestinian people serves as an important step towards settlement of regional crises. "Any coalition and convulsive measures similar to what the US and the UK did by attacking Yemen will not only fail to help restore stability to the region but will also lead to a more complicated situation," the top Iranian diplomat pointed out, according to Iranian Foreign Ministry's press service. "The Islamic Republic of Iran advises all parties to take immediate, effective, and sustainable measures, focusing on the main roots of the crisis, because the root of the crisis lies in the occupation," Amir-Abdollahian added. Referring to the positive role played by Borrell, Amir-Abdollahian welcomed the importance of continuing dialogue in the path of diplomacy and solving crises, emphasizing the existence of a strong and constructive communication channel between the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran. For his part, Borrell voiced his concern over rising tensions in the Red Sea and underscored the role that Iran can play in restoring stability in West Asia. He elaborated on the European Union's decision to form a maritime alliance to allegedly protect commercial vessels in the Red Sea, saying that the maritime coalition is not aimed at any third country.

### Bagheri Raps U.S. for Hypocrisy in Countering Terrorism



TEHRAN (MNA) - The Iranian deputy foreign minister condemned the United States for its unilateralism and exercising double standards in its alleged fight against terrorism. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Bagheri Kani met with the head of the Executive Committee of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure Ruslan Mirzayev in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, a report by the Iranian foreign ministry's website said. During the meeting, they discussed and exchanged views about ways for effective and efficient interaction. Bagheri said Iran's membership in the SCO proves Tehran's determination for a collective cooperation within the framework of multilateralism. He added, "At a time when the U.S. unilateralism has failed to establish peace in the world, the only way for human beings is multilateralism, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has proven effective in confronting terrorism." Bagheri noted that drawing a line between "good and bad terrorism" by the US based on Washington's interests causes insecurity in the world. Meanwhile, Mirzayev described the three ominous phenomena of terrorism, extremism and separatism as 'the biggest threats to the world.' He further said, "The SCO is the only organization that is operationally fighting terrorism." Mirzayev termed Iran's experience in fighting the scourge as valuable and stressed on the importance of exchanging views and cooperation.



### Iran Begins Construction of \$15b Nuclear Plant

TEHRAN - The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) has begun the construction work on a new nuclear power plant in the country's southern coastal province of Hormozgan with an investment of \$15 billion. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi launched the project, called "Iran-Hormoz", through a video call on Thursday, as part of his administration's trip to the southern province. Mohammad Eslami, the head of AEOI, and other officials attended the ceremony at the plant's location in Sirik city. The power plant is a "significant undertaking," serving as a crucial infrastructure for the country's economy and development, Raisi said. Praising the efforts of skilled Iranian experts, he hoped that the project would bring prosperity to the people. He noted that the project was "much bigger" than the nuclear power plant in Bushehr, a 1,000-MW plant built by Russia and handed over in September 2013 after years of delay. Addressing the event, Eslami said the project is part of national plans to develop Iran's nuclear industry in the next two decades. He noted that the Iran-Hormoz Plant is designed to have an electricity generation capacity of 5,000 MW and will be comprised of four 1,250-MW units. He said the major power plant is in line with the implementation of the Makran coast development plan. "By the year 2041, we should reach the generation capacity of 20,000 megawatts of nuclear electricity in the country, and the realization of this goal has been taken into consideration in the Makran coast of Hormozgan Province," Iran's nuclear chief said. "It is hoped that it will be completed as planned and coordinated, and based on scheduled timing." Eslami also praised the Iran-Hormoz Power Plant as a "super project" and said the nuclear power plant will be constructed with an investment of \$15 billion. Over the past years, Iran has recorded many achievements in its peaceful nuclear energy program in defiance of US sanctions as well as hurdles created by the West. The country has also been closely cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Meanwhile, Iran has taken steps to answer its rising needs for energy by tapping renewable sources. Late in December, Raisi ordered the implementation of the largest plan in the West Asia region for the construction of a renewable energy power plant in the country. The 4,000-megawatt renewable energy power plant is expected to be put into operation before summer to redress the imbalance in energy when the electricity consumption rate hits its peak.

### Three Persian Gulf Islands Are Inseparable Part of Iran

BANDAR ABBAS - President Ebrahim Raisi has described the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf as inseparable territory of the country. President Raisi made the remarks on a visit to the southern Hormozgan province on Thursday. He underlined that the definitive and historical documents have always confirmed Iran's sovereignty over the three islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the Persian Gulf. Referring to the constructive role of Iran in the region, President Raisi highlighted that Iran's position in the region has always been one of ensuring sustainable security. Thanking Iran's security forces for creating lasting peace in the region, he added that the presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman ensures security, while the presence of foreigners threatens the regional peace. Iranian officials have repeatedly emphasized that the three Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs are an integral part of the country. The strategically located islands are close to the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important oil chokepoint. The islands have historically been part of Iran, proof of which can be found and corroborated by countless historical, legal, and geographical documents in Iran and other parts of the world. However, the United Arab Emirates has repeatedly laid claim to the islands. Meanwhile said that his administration has helped businesses to recover, adding that as many

as 7,000 factories have resumed operation with his government's support. Raisi made the remarks on a visit to Hormozgan province to mark the second visit of his Popular Administration to the province. "Hormozgan, as mentioned before, has many capabilities and potentials in the maritime economy, tourism, agriculture and industry." Pointing out that good projects have been done in the province so far, the President added, "Considering the needs of the province, we spent the time during the first round of the trip to meeting the needs of the province, and today we see that with the efforts of Governor General, hardworking managers and all dear friends of the province, good steps have been taken, hundreds of projects and plans that were half-finished or people expected have been completed and 105 trillion has been attracted for the completion of these projects and plans." Saying that he will visit some of these projects during his two-day trip, Raisi said, "Hormozgan still has very good fields for production and improving the level of service to the dear people of the province." The President pointed out the completion of many projects that the people of the province expecting them and also the beginning of other needed projects and said, "These projects will also be completed as soon as possible. People have seen that an intensified movement has been formed in the province."



### Intelligence Ministry Conducts Massive Operation Against Mossad



جمهوری اسلامی ایران  
وزارت اطلاعات

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's intelligence ministry has issued a statement over a massive operation carried out against the Israeli regime's spy agency, Mossad. The statement was issued on the verge of the 45th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution. In the largest combined intelligence and counter-intelligence operation against the Israeli regime's Mossad spy agency, a unique and unprecedented collection of information was obtained, the statement said. The statement added that in addition to intelligence and security findings, obtaining special information related to some of the most important secret military facilities, weapons factories, and civilian strategic industries of the usurping Zionist regime was also among the achievements of the series of large and multi-stage operations. According to the ministry, dozens of spies and terrorist elements affiliated with the racist Zionist regime in 28 countries of the world, in the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, were identified during the operation. Saying that the number of spies in Tehran and several provinces of Iran were also identified, the ministry added that several Iranian spies living abroad were identified as well. It added that several Mossad-affiliated criminals involved in some terrorist operations inside Iran were also identified and arrested.

### Iran Chides Kuwait for One-Sided Claims on Arash Field



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Iranian Foreign Ministry reminded Kuwait that one-sided statements on the Arash oil and gas field, which is shared among Iran and its southwestern neighbors, would obstruct the settlement of issues on the basis of mutual interests. In a statement, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani reacted to a joint statement from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait following a visit by the Kuwaiti emir to Riyadh. He reiterated that Iran is ready to continue bilateral negotiations with Kuwait in line with the results of the previous talks over exploiting the joint hydrocarbon resources in the Arash field and demarcation of the maritime borders, the Foreign Ministry's website reported. The spokesman added that the issue was stressed in the last round of negotiations in March 2023 in Tehran. Underscoring the principle of good neighborliness and the importance of the Iranian government's policy of bolstering ties with the neighbors, Kanaani said Iran believes that an agreement on this case can be reached through constructive cooperation and interaction and with due respect for the interests of the two countries. He added that making unilateral claims in various statements and through media outlets does not provide a suitable space for managing and addressing the issue based on mutual interests. The spokesman reaffirmed Iran's readiness to continue technical talks in a friendly atmosphere with the aim of finding a mutually acceptable solution. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia announced in early 2022 that they had reached an agreement to jointly produce 1 billion cubic feet (28.3 million cubic meters) per day of natural gas and 84,000 barrels per day of condensates from Arash field, known as Durra in Kuwait.



# IRAN NEWS



## Petrochemical Industry Promoting Cooperation with Foreigners

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The cooperation between Iran's petrochemical sector and the foreign companies has increased remarkably during the past two years, an official said. CEO of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) of Iran, Morteza Shahmirzaei, said the Iranian petrochemical industry has made great progress despite the cruel sanctions imposed by the US and the Western governments. The petrochemical industry's current production capacity in Iran stands at above 92 million tons, Shahmirzaei added, SHANA reported. He also noted that the administration of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has prepared the ground for closer interaction with the like-minded and neighboring countries. In September 2023, the Iranian Association of Employers of Petrochemical Industry said that \$53 billion worth of non-oil products had been exported in the past Iranian year, \$16 billion of which was the share of the petrochemical companies.

## Sweden Denies Medical Care for Imprisoned Iranian National



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Hamid Nouri, a former Iranian judiciary official who has been illegally incarcerated in Sweden, is denied medical treatment for his broken leg, his family says. "Sweden refrains from providing full medical services to my father, and since we are no longer in contact with him, we do not know why and how this incident happened," Nouri's son, Majid, told Iran's Mizan news agency. He added that after his father broke his leg, only an X-ray was taken, adding that the Swedish detention center has not allowed a specialist to treat his father, leaving him in this condition for a week. Nouri was arrested upon arrival at Stockholm Airport in November 2019 under unfounded allegations of rights abuse and for what was claimed to be his alleged role in the deaths of prisoners in Iran in the 1980s. In December, the Stockholm Court of Appeals upheld a controversial life sentence for 62-year-old Nouri, saying that it "affirmed the judgment... in significant parts" that had been given to the former Iranian official in July 2022 for his alleged role in cases of human rights violations in Iran. Nouri's son further explained that his family members have been recently informed about his accident through the Iranian embassy in Sweden. He complained that his family members had been kept in dark about his father's condition as Nouri was denied contact with them. "Unfortunately, we cannot even have a simple telephone conversation with my father," Majid said, noting that Sweden has cut off contacts with his father for more than three months.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

## Iran, Uzbek Diplomats Review Expansion of Mutual Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Bagheri Kani and Uzbek Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov have conferred on the broadening of bilateral relations. Bagheri Kani met and held talks with Saidov in Uzbekistan on Thursday. During the meeting, the two sides emphasized the determination of the two countries' presidents to develop ties, while reviewing the areas of cooperation, and considered the future of relations as bright and hopeful. Bagheri Kani underlined that the peace and stability of the region depends on cooperation and interaction, and securing lasting peace required consolidation of economic ties. He said regular joint economic commissions and political consultations between the two countries was

necessary to achieve the stated goals set by the president of Iran and Uzbekistan, chief among them boosting the volume of trade to \$1 billion. Saidov, for his part, called cultural and historical commonalities as an important factor in developing ties in various fields between the two countries. He noted that the joint plan of action to achieve the goals of the signed documents between the presidents of the two countries is on their agenda, and foreign ministries will play a pivotal role in the realization of those goals and plans. During the meeting, the two sides discussed the most important regional and international issues as well. The parties also called for a halt to the Israeli killing of the oppressed people of Gaza.

## Iran, Saudi Arabia Discuss Gaza Crisis, Red Sea Incidents



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia weighed plans for closer cooperation between the two Muslim states and discussed the pressing regional issues, including the Israeli atrocities against Palestine and the developments in the Red Sea. In a telephone conversation on Wednesday evening, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan talked about a range of issues on which Tehran and Riyadh can cooperate as well as the latest regional developments. The two diplomats discussed the resumption of the Umrah (minor Hajj) flights and a visit by a Saudi technical delegation to Iran. Amir-Abdollahian underlined the need to expedite the restart of the Umrah. They further expressed satisfaction with the course of bilateral ties, urging that cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia should grow in the areas of mutual interest. Amir-Abdollahian and bin Farhan also voiced concern about the Zionist regime's continued crimes against the oppressed people of Palestine and underscored the need for an end to the Zionist atrocities, the removal of the humanitarian siege of Gaza, and the restoration of peace to the region.

## Goods Transit Via Iran Rises 29% in 10 Months

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Transit of commodities through Iran increased by 29 percent during the first ten months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023-January 20, 2024), as compared to the same period of time in the past year, the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced. Mohammad Rezvani-Far said that 14.2 million tons of goods were exported from the country in the mentioned ten-month period. As stated by Deputy Transport Minister Shahriyar Afandizadeh, the achievements resulting from promoting transit negotiations, and the foundations of the "Iran-Way" initiative has resulted in the growth of transit via the country in this year. The continuous trend of recent transit records via the country and the increasing interest of governments, traders, and those active in transport sectors from neighboring, regional and extra-regional countries in the transit and logistics situation of the Islamic Republic of Iran indicate the fruitfulness of the transformational approach of the 13th government to the strategic issue of

transit, with emphasis on the development of all-round economic relations with neighbors, the official stressed. As stated by Transport and Urban Development Minister Mehرداد Bazrpash, the "Iran Way" initiative made by the current Iranian government, lets the neighboring countries use Iran as a route or a solution that facilitates their access to international waters. Iran Way initiative is the gateway to Iran's land of transit opportunities, the minister has underlined. As previously announced by Afandizadeh, 10.8 million tons of commodities were transited through the country in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20). The official also announced that Iran registered a new record high with the transit of 8.3 million tons of non-oil goods in 1401, adding that 2.5 million tons of oil products were also transited via the country in the previous year. "Considering the transit of 7.5 million tons of non-oil goods in 1400, we have seen a 10.7-percent growth in the transit of this type of goods in 1401 compared to the previous year", he said.



## Establishing Iran-Turkey FTZ Will Prevent Smuggling of Goods



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian Lawmaker Rahim Zare has said that an agreement between Iran and Turkey to establish a free trade zone will help prevent smuggling of goods and boost bilateral trade. Zare, who is a member of the Iranian Parliament's Budget and Planning Committee, was referring to the agreement which Iran and Turkey reached during last week trip of President Ebrahim Raisi to Ankara where he and his Turkish counterpart agreed to expand bilateral cooperation in other fields as well. Zare said that the agreements reached between the two countries' presidents are significant in terms of politics, economy and culture, and could bring considerable benefits for Iran. The development of the tourism industry would bring economic prosperity for the Islamic Republic, the MP said, adding that developing the industry is one of the results of boosting Iran-Turkey economic and cultural ties. He further noted that Turkey needs Iran's energy, gas, and oil resources, and Iran would enjoy economic benefits by exporting gas to its neighbor. Boosting trade ties with Ankara would also help Tehran mitigate effects of the anti-Iran sanctions.



## War Not the Answer to Regional Crises

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Amid expansion of the scope of tensions across West Asia, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says war is not the solution to the region's crises. The top diplomat made the remarks on Thursday, speaking on the phone with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry. "Iran is not after expansion of the war, since we do not consider warfare to be the solution to the region's growing crises," the former said. Amir-Abdollahian rather considered the Israeli regime's ongoing genocidal war against the Gaza Strip as well as Tel Aviv's continued atrocities and occupation of regional territories to be the source of the crises that have afflicted the region. "All countries should focus on immediate cessation of war and atrocities against Gaza, and [implementation of] political solution towards resolution of crisis in Gaza and the [occupied] West Bank," Amir-Abdollahian added. Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian official expressed gratitude towards Cairo for its efforts aimed at transfer of humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. Amir-Abdollahian voiced Iran's readiness to provide the oppressed Palestinian people with necessary relief items in coordination with the Egyptian government and the United Nations. The officials laid emphasis on the need for diplomatic endeavor towards putting up serious and effective opposition to "Zionist projects" aimed at forced displacement of Palestinians to Egypt and Jordan.



### Ecuador Condemned Over Handing Russian Military Hardware to U.S. for Ukraine

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia's foreign ministry on Friday condemned a decision by Ecuador to hand over Russian-made military hardware to the United States for use in Ukraine as a "reckless" breach of contract, the RIA news agency reported. The Ecuadorian government said last month it would take up an offer from Washington to swap what it called "Ukrainian and Russian scrap metal" for advanced U.S. equipment worth \$200 million. The United States has said the arms it gets from Ecuador will be sent to Ukraine to help bolster its forces on the battlefield against Russia. Maria Zakharova, the Russian foreign ministry's spokeswoman, told RIA that Ecuador's decision was made under pressure from external forces. "Such a reckless decision was taken by the Ecuadorian side under serious pressure from outside interested parties," she said. "Our partners are well aware of the provisions of the contracts, which include an obligation to use the supplied equipment for the stated purposes and not to transfer it to a third party without obtaining the relevant agreement of the Russian side."



### Saudi Arabia Pushes for U.S. Defense Pact Ahead of Presidential Election



DUBAI (Reuters) - Saudi Arabia would be willing to accept a political commitment from Israel to create a Palestinian state, rather than anything more binding, in a bid to get a defense pact with Washington approved before the U.S. presidential election, three sources said. Months of U.S.-led diplomacy to get Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel and recognize the country for the first time were shelved by Riyadh in October in the face of mounting Arab anger over the war in Gaza. But Saudi Arabia is increasingly keen to shore up its security and ward off threats from rival Iran so the kingdom can forge ahead with its ambitious plan to transform its economy and attract huge foreign investment, two regional sources said. To create some wiggle room in talks about recognizing Israel and to get the U.S. pact back on track, Saudi officials have told their U.S. counterparts that Riyadh would not insist Israel take concrete steps to create a Palestinian state and would instead accept a political commitment to a two-state solution, two senior regional sources told Reuters. Such a major regional deal, widely seen as a long-shot even before the Israel-Hamas war, would still face numerous political and diplomatic obstacles, not least the uncertainty over how the Gaza conflict will unfold. A pact giving the world's biggest oil exporter U.S. military protection in exchange for normalization with Israel would reshape the Middle East by uniting two long-time foes and binding Riyadh to Washington at a time when China is making inroads in the region. A normalization deal would also bolster Israel's defenses against arch-rival Iran and give U.S. President Joe Biden a diplomatic victory to vault ahead of the Nov. 5 presidential election. The Saudi officials have privately urged Washington to press Israel to end the Gaza war and commit to a "political horizon" for a Palestinian state, saying Riyadh would then normalize relations and help fund Gaza's reconstruction, one of the regional sources said. "The message from the kingdom to America has been: 'Stop the war first, allow humanitarian aid and commit to a just and lasting solution to give the Palestinians a state,'" said Abdelaziz al-Sagher, head of the Gulf Research Center think-tank in Jeddah, who is familiar with the ongoing discussions. "Without it, Saudi Arabia can't do anything."

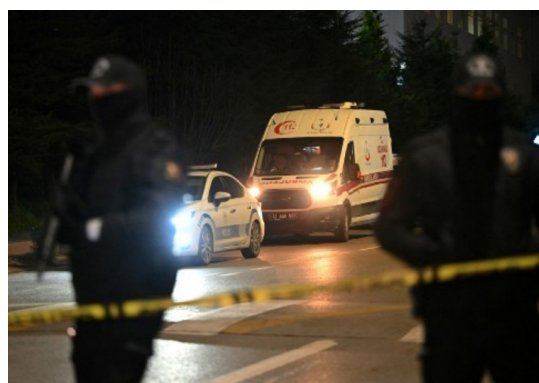
### EU Agrees Massive €50b Ukraine Aid Deal in Message to Putin



BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - European Union leaders overcame months of opposition from Hungarian leader Viktor Orban to agree €50 billion euros of aid for Ukraine, in a move they hailed as a strong message to Russia. The deal to keep funds flowing to Ukraine comes as doubts over support from Kyiv's Western backers have buoyed Russian President Vladimir Putin, nearly two years into his invasion of the neighbouring country. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky thanked the European Union for the funds, which he called "long-awaited". "Today the EU has made a long-awaited decision," Zelensky said in his evening address. "This is a clear signal to Moscow that Europe will withstand and that Europe will not be broken," he continued. "The message is clear," said French President Emmanuel Macron after the Brussels summit wrapped up. "Russia cannot count on any fatigue from Europeans in their support for Ukraine." Macron said the deal likewise sent a message to Washington — where billions of dollars in aid are held up in Congress — "that the European Union is here, committed and delivers". In an abrupt about-face at the start of the gathering, Orban agreed to drop his veto on the four-year package for Kyiv in the face of intense pressure from the EU's other 26 leaders. The Hungarian nationalist appeared to come away largely empty-handed — securing only the promise of a possible review on the spending in two years. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz voiced hope that the EU decision could assist US President Joe Biden in convincing reluctant Republican voters to pass Washington's own US\$60 billion (€75 billion) proposal for support for Ukraine. "I hope that the message that we're sending out today and the discussions we're having today is helping him," Scholz said. The EU money will plug holes in the Ukrainian government's budget to allow it to pay salaries and services, as its outgunned soldiers battle to hold back Moscow's forces. Orban — Russia's closest ally in the EU — had sparked fury from his counterparts in the bloc by thwarting a deal on the aid in December. Thursday's talks were expected again to see hours of protracted political arm-wrestling but a deal was swiftly announced after

Orban met beforehand with the leaders of Germany, France, Italy and the EU institutions. "He gave some ground," said one European diplomat. "He saw that people were growing irritated, that there was a line not to cross." Orban had been accused of holding hostage Ukraine's future in a bid to blackmail Brussels into releasing billions of euros for Hungary that have been frozen pending reforms by Budapest. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said the answer was "a simple no" when asked if Hungary's prime minister had won any promises to get the blocked financing from the EU. "Hungary received no gift," echoed France's Macron. In an apparent face-saving measure, Orban claimed he had instead got a guarantee that "Hungary's money would not end up in Ukraine". Orban's opposition over Ukraine had exasperated EU leaders long frustrated at dealing with his role as a spoiler in the bloc. Warning of growing "Orban fatigue" in Brussels, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said ahead of the summit that it was time for the Hungarian leader "to decide if he is a part of our community". Other leaders insisted that if Orban did not drop his opposition, they would club together as 26 countries to keep aid flowing to Ukraine's government. But with Kyiv facing possible budget shortfalls by spring, that option would have taken more time. The latest EU showdown took place against the backdrop of swelling protests by European farmers, who clogged roads around the summit with 1,300 tractors in a show of strength, lighting fires and pulling down a city statue. Von der Leyen announced that Brussels would put forward plans to ease rules and red tape criticised by farmers protesting across Europe. Once the Ukraine aid was agreed, leaders turned more to the question of the future of EU military support for Kyiv. Accusations have been levelled that key EU nations such as France, Italy and Spain are not pulling their weight on arming Ukraine. Scholz, whose country is the largest European donor to Ukraine, has called for others to lay out their military support and do more to help Kyiv. "In my opinion, not all member states are doing enough," he said.

### Turkey Frees Seven Hostages Taken by Pro-Gaza Gunman



GEZBE (Dispatches) - Turkish police yesterday released seven workers taken hostage by a pro-Palestinian gunman at a plant near Istanbul owned by U.S. consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble in protest at the war in Gaza. Local officials said police staged a raid nearly nine hours into the standoff when the lone gunman took a bathroom break. The man was detained unharmed, local governor Seddar Yavuz told reporters. "The man's aim was to stop Israel's massacre in Gaza and to open the Rafah gate in Egypt" for the delivery of humanitarian aid for trapped civilians, Yavuz said. "When he went out for a bathroom break, our security forces carried out an operation without harming the hostages." Photos and videos of the assailant shared online by one of the hostages and verified by AFP showed a man — his face hidden by a Palestinian scarf — holding a gun with what appeared to be a suicide vest strapped to his chest. He was standing next to a drawing of the Palestinian flag and the words "the door will be opened for Gaza" painted on the wall in red. Yavuz said the man was carrying two guns and appeared to have explosives strapped to his chest, adding that "we had to evaluate every possibility". Distressed relatives of the hostages who had gathered at the cordoned-off facility broke into applause when informed about their loved ones' release by local officials. "We are very happy after the tense long hours of waiting," said Fatma Dursun, whose nephew was taken hostage. "Thank God they are all safe and sound," she told AFP. Relatives of the hostages initially questioned why the assailant would target workers in Turkey — a country strongly supportive of the Palestinian cause — to show his solidarity with the people of Gaza.

### Israel Turns Focus of Gaza Attack to Rafah as Hamas Reportedly Weighs Ceasefire Proposal



DOHA (Dispatches) - Israel prepared to advance its war on Gaza farther south, close to the Egyptian border, after claiming to have dismantled Hamas in Khan Younis, as diplomatic efforts in pursuit of a ceasefire accelerated. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that success in the fight against the Palestinian militants in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis, where Israel launched a major ground attack last week, meant its forces could advance to Rafah on the enclave's southern border. More than half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are sheltering in this area, mainly cold and hungry in makeshift tents and public buildings. "We are achieving our missions in Khan Younis, and we will also reach Rafah and eliminate terror elements that threaten us," Gallant said in a statement. At the same time, Qatari and Egyptian mediators hoped for a positive response from Hamas, which runs Gaza, to the first concrete proposal for an extended halt to fighting, agreed with Israel and the U.S. at talks in Paris last week. A Palestinian official close to the negotiations told Reuters the text envisages a first phase of 40 days, during which fighting would cease while Hamas freed remaining civilians among the more than 100 hostages it still holds. Further phases would see the handover of Israeli soldiers and bodies of dead hostages. A Palestinian official said Hamas was unlikely to reject the proposal outright, but would demand guarantees that fighting would not resume, something Israel has not agreed to. There was brief elation in Gaza on Thursday after remarks by

a Qatari spokesman at Johns Hopkins University in Washington sparked ceasefire hopes - and a drop in the price of crude oil. But Qatari officials in the capital Doha and Taher Al-Nono, media adviser to Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh, said the group had not responded yet. Gaza residents said Israeli forces pounded areas around hospitals in Khan Younis, and stepped up attacks close to Rafah. Combat has also surged in recent days in northern areas around Gaza City that Israel claimed to have subdued weeks ago. Osama Ahmed, 49, a father of five from Gaza City now sheltering in makeshift tents, said there had been fierce resistance in the city, and relentless bombardment from air, ground and sea as Israeli tanks advanced. "All we want is a ceasefire now," he told Reuters by phone. An air strike on a house in Khan Younis wounded 13 people on Thursday, according to hospital officials. Appeals to Israel from its main ally, the United States, show little sign of having succeeded in easing the plight of Gaza's civilians. Washington is stepping up indirect pressure, however. U.S. President Joe Biden issued an executive order that aims to punish Jewish settlers who attack Palestinians in the occupied West Bank in an surge of violence triggered by the war in Gaza. Biden is also under pressure to respond to the killing of three U.S. soldiers by a drone in Jordan last week, the first U.S. deaths in an escalation of violence across the Middle East since Israel's war in Gaza began in October.



### Armenia Can No Longer Rely on Russia for Military and Defense Needs

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Armenia can no longer rely on Russia as its main defense and military partner because Moscow has repeatedly let it down so Yerevan must think about forging closer ties with the United States and France, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said. Armenia, a tiny former Soviet republic bordered by Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey, has long relied on Russia as a big power ally, though Pashinyan has angered the Kremlin by questioning the foundations of the alliance. "We need to understand who we can really maintain military-technical and defense relations with," Pashinyan told Armenian Public Radio when asked about reform of Armenia's armed forces. "Previously, this problem was simple because there was no such question and there was no difficulty in creating a concept. Previously, 95-97% of our defense relations were with the Russian Federation. Now this cannot be for both objective and subjective reasons," he said. Pashinyan said Armenia should think about what security ties it should build with the United States, France, India and Georgia. Since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has faced competition from the United States for dominance of what were once Soviet republics and before that parts of the Russian empire. Pashinyan says Russia failed Armenia when Azerbaijan launched a lightning-fast military operation that took back control over the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, triggering an outflow of ethnic Armenians living there. Russia says that Pashinyan's own failure to navigate the complex rivalries of the South Caucasus was to blame for the 2023 defeat of ethnic Armenian fighters in Karabakh. Azerbaijan has accused France of sowing the seeds of a new war by supplying arms to Armenia, which is also being courted by the United States.

## N.Korea Fires Cruise Missiles Off West Coast

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea fired multiple cruise missiles off its west coast on Friday, South Korea's military said, marking the fourth time in just over a week that Pyongyang has launched such missiles off both coasts. The South's military said the launch took place around 11am (0200 GMT) but did not provide further details. North Korea has said since last week that it had tested "strategic" cruise missiles, implying they may be designed to carry nuclear warheads. Earlier this week, state media reported the country had tested its new submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCM). Leader Kim Jong-un was on site to supervise the launch, which used missiles with the same identifying markings as the land-launched missiles. South Korea's military has said the North appeared to be testing the missiles to upgrade their capabilities. The latest launch comes after the North said early on Friday that Kim had inspected a shipyard in the port city of Nampo on the west coast and stressed the importance of a strong naval force in "war preparations", according to state media. "Strengthening naval force is the most important issue in pushing ahead with war preparations", KCNA cited Kim as saying during his visit to the dockyard, a military shipbuilding base also referred to as Nampo. Kim was briefed on the construction of various warships under a new "huge plan" decided by the North Korean leadership, KCNA said, without elaborating. KCNA said on Monday that Kim had inspected the construction of a nuclear submarine and discussed issues related to the manufacturing of other types of new warships, but gave no details. At a major ruling party meeting in 2021, Kim had laid out a plan to develop and upgrade the country's military capabilities, including the construction of nuclear submarines and underwater drones that can mount nuclear attacks. In recent months, the North has tested an array of weapons including ballistic missile systems that are under development and an underwater drone. North Korea has accused the United States and South Korea of escalating tensions with large-scale military drills, leaving it with no choice but to step up preparations for a nuclear war. On Friday, the US Special Operations Command said it had completed training with South Korea's special operations forces.







## Shorthanded Lakers Stun Celtics, Knicks Stretch NBA Win Streak

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - A Los Angeles Lakers team missing superstars LeBron James and Anthony Davis barreled past the NBA-leading Boston Celtics 114-105 as the New York Knicks pushed their winning streak to nine games with a gutsy win over Indiana. Austin Reaves scored a season-high 32 points to lead six Los Angeles players in double figures, saying afterward he and the rest of the Lakers had taken to heart James' blunt demand after Tuesday's loss to Atlanta that his teammates "just go out and do your job." "It's a great message," Reaves told broadcaster TNT. "And coming from the greatest player ever, in my opinion, that's what we should do." The latest meeting between the storied rivals, who share the record for most NBA titles with 17 apiece, lost some luster when the Lakers ruled out James with a sore left ankle and Davis with hip spasms and an Achilles tendon injury. In addition, the Lakers and Celtics are teams on different trajectories as the All-Star break approaches, with the Eastern Conference-leading Celtics boasting the best record in the league while the Lakers, ninth in the West, have struggled to find consistency and had dropped two straight since a thrilling overtime triumph over the Golden State Warriors last Saturday. So the crowd at Boston's TD Garden were stunned to near silence as the Lakers seized control in the second quarter, when Jayson Tatum's eight points were the only scoring from the Celtics' starters. Boston, down 60-46 at halftime, cut a 16-point deficit to six in the third quarter, with Tatum's pull-up three-pointer making it 77-71. The Lakers had their lead back to seven heading into

the final period. D'Angelo Russell and Jaxson Hayes scored 16 points each for the Lakers, with Russell adding eight rebounds and 14 assists. Reaves made seven of the Lakers' 19 three-pointers. Tatum led the Celtics with 23 points. Kristaps Porzingis and Sam Hauser had 17 points each but Jaylen Brown -- named an All-Star reserve earlier Thursday -- scored just eight. "Just playing the game the right way and competing at 110 percent," Reaves said of the key to handing the Celtics what is only their third home defeat of the season. "When we do that, we've proven that we can beat anybody." "We've just got to eliminate those games where we go out and kind of go through the motions. We've got to go out there and compete 110 percent every game and good things will happen." In New York, Jalen Brunson celebrated his first All-Star selection with 40 points, draining the go-ahead basket with 1:46 to play in the Knicks' 109-105 triumph over the Pacers. Brunson scored 11 points in the fourth quarter as the Knicks rallied from a 15-point first-half deficit. The Knicks were up by six with less than five minutes to play, but the Pacers took a 100-99 lead with two minutes remaining on a dunk by Jalen Smith, who grabbed the loose ball after Brunson collided with Andrew Nembhard. Brunson powered to the basket on the next possession, Donte DiVincenzo and Precious Achiuwa added baskets and the Knicks held on for the win. "That was fun," Brunson told the crowd in an emotional on-court interview. "We kept fighting, man. No matter what we're going to keep fighting. That's what we do."

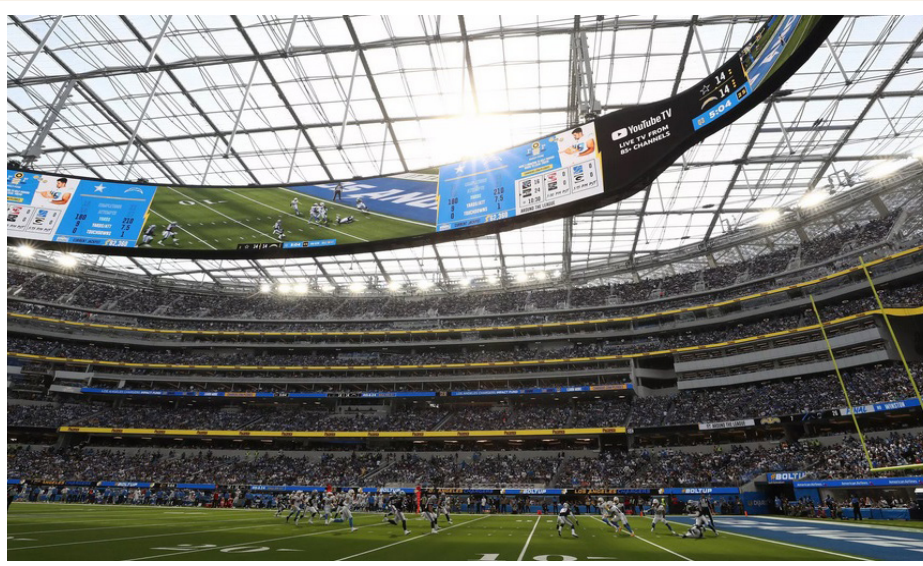
## Al Nassr Thrash Inter Miami as Ronaldo, Messi Watch on



RIYADH (Dispatches) - Al Nassr crushed Inter Miami 6-0 as injury ruled Cristiano Ronaldo out of a much-hyped showdown with Lionel Messi, who was limited to a late substitute appearance in Thursday's friendly in Riyadh. Ronaldo's calf injury prompted Al Nassr to cancel their two-game China tour last week and it denied him what could have potentially been a last match against longtime rival Messi. The pair have won a combined 13 Ballon d'Or awards, with Messi taking home the prize for a record eighth time last year. Their most recent meeting came in January 2023 when Ronaldo played in a Saudi select team beaten 5-4 by Messi's PSG. Instead, Brazilian Talisca upstaged the illustrious duo with a hat-trick as the Saudi Pro League side demolished their Major League Soccer opponents, scoring three times in the first 12 minutes. Otavio drilled in the opener as Miami lost the ball trying to play out from the back, bringing Ronaldo to his feet to applaud from the stands. A sliding Talisca turned in Al Nassr's second as the visitors again paid the price for conceding possession near their own box. Aymeric Laporte scored the goal of the night, catching Miami goalkeeper Drake Callender off his line as he belted in a long-range free-kick from deep inside his own half. Talisca got his second from the penalty spot minutes after half-time and Mohammed Maran looped in a header to compound Miami's misery. The American side were clearly feeling the effects of a globe-trotting pre-season tour, but the gulf in class was also stark, despite the presence of former Barcelona stars Luis Suarez, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba. Talisca completed his treble and performed Ronaldo's signature celebration, before Messi trotted on for the final seven minutes with his team trailing by six goals. Miami continue their preparations for the new MLS season, which starts February 21, by heading to Asia for games in Hong Kong and Japan. They played El Salvador and fellow MLS side FC Dallas before flying to the Middle East.

## FIFA to Reveal World Cup Final Venue

MIAMI (Dispatches) - FIFA will announce which city will host the final of the 2026 World Cup when they unveil schedule details for the first ever 48-team tournament on Sunday. The tournament is being co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico and FIFA will also announce which venue will host the opening game of the tournament. Dallas has been reported to be favorite to clinch the big game, which will be held on July 19 with several media reports suggesting that AT&T Stadium, home of the Dallas Cowboys NFL team is set to win the honor. But MetLife Stadium, home of the NFL's New York Giants and New York Jets has also lobbied hard for the right to hold the game's biggest match in New Jersey. Los Angeles is also in the frame -- the city had the World Cup final the last time that the tournament was held in the USA in 1994 when Brazil beat Italy on penalties after a goalless draw at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. The Rose Bowl is not a host venue for the 2026 tournament with games in Los Angeles scheduled for SoFi Stadium, another NFL stadium, where the Rams and Chargers both play and also a contender for hosting the final. FIFA has had difficult talks with the SoFi Stadium owners about changes they want to see to the venue for 2026 which has raised questions of their chances of holding the final. Both Dallas and Los Angeles can offer stadiums with roofs to protect from any stormy weather but New York/New Jersey organizers have emphasized their city's track record in hosting major international events. New York has also emphasized its easy transportation links within the region and internationally, along with a time-zone which is best suited for European fans. Dallas is only one hour different from New York in time-zone but their bid has also argued that the roof on their 80,000 venue in Arlington can better reduce the impact of the summer heat. While Dallas is seen as less of a glamorous and 'global' city than both L.A. and New York, it's backers have stressed it enjoys close connections to co-hosts Mexico. FIFA has never organized a World Cup final in an 'indoor' venue. While the three US venues have competed for the right to host the final, the recently redeveloped Azteca Stadium in Mexico City has long been viewed as the most likely host for the first game and opening ceremony. The Azteca, the spiritual home of Mexican football, has hosted World Cup finals in 1970 and 1986 and it will become the first stadium to host games in three separate World Cups. The decisions will be announced in a television show broadcast in North America from Miami with FIFA president Gianni Infantino making the announcements. The expansion of the tournament to 48 teams from 32 means there will be an additional 24 matches making up a total of 104 games across the 16 already chosen venues. The tournament will take the format of 12 groups of four teams with the top two going through along with the eight best third-placed teams.



## Curry, Davis Among NBA All-Star Reserves



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Golden State Warriors star Stephen Curry gained a 10th NBA All-Star nod and Lakers star Anthony Davis a ninth as reserves for the mid-season showcase were announced on Thursday. Coaches chose the seven reserves from each conference, with Minnesota's Anthony Edwards and Karl-Anthony Towns both selected in the West. Kawhi Leonard and Paul George of the Los Angeles Clippers and Devin Booker of the Phoenix Suns were also named to the West squad which will be captained by 20-time All-Star LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers. The East reserves include three first-timers in Philadelphia's Tyrese Maxey, Orlando's Paolo Banchero and the New York Knicks' Jalen Brunson. The Knicks' Julius Randle was also named a reserve along with Boston star Jaylen Brown, Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell and Miami's Bam Adebayo. All-Star starters, selected by a combination of fan voting and voting by a media panel and by players, were named last month. Four-time NBA champion James broke the record he had shared with another Lakers legend, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, with his 20th selection. James will captain and join a starting lineup that also includes Phoenix's Kevin Durant and Serbian center Nikola Jokic, a two-time MVP from the defending champion Denver Nuggets. West starting guards included Slovenian Luka Doncic of Dallas and Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander of Canada. Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks was named captain for the East, whose frontcourt starters also include Cameroon's reigning NBA MVP and this season's top scorer Joel Embiid of the Philadelphia 76ers and Boston's Jayson Tatum. East guards included Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton, the NBA assists leader, and Milwaukee's Damian Lillard. NBA commissioner Adam Silver will select the replacement for any player unable to play in the All-Star Game, selecting a substitute from the same conference. It looks as if Silver will have multiple replacements to name. The Knicks said Thursday that Randle will miss two to three weeks with a dislocated shoulder while the 76ers revealed Embiid has a meniscus injury in his left knee with no timetable yet for his return.

## Hamilton Leaving Mercedes for Ferrari in 2025

PARIS (Dispatches) - Seven-time Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton will make a surprise switch to Ferrari next year, after Mercedes announced he would leave the team at the end of the 2024 season. "The time is right for me to take this step and I'm excited to be taking on a new challenge," said Hamilton. Ferrari subsequently confirmed the arrival of the 39-year-old Briton, who is due to partner their current driver Charles Leclerc. "Ferrari is pleased to announce that Lewis Hamilton will be joining the team in 2025, on a multi-year contract," the Italian team said in a statement. Hamilton had previously held discussions with Ferrari in 2019 about joining them. The BBC reported that Mercedes team staff were called to a meeting with boss Toto Wolff at their UK headquarters on Thursday to be told Hamilton will leave at the end of the 2024 season and head to one of Formula One's most storied names. "Lewis has activated a release option in the contract announced last August and this season will therefore be his last driving for the Silver Arrows," Mercedes said in a statement. Hamilton had signed a two-year contract with Mercedes for the 2024 and 2025 seasons, but that deal contained a clause allowing him to leave after one season. "I have had an amazing 11 years with this team and I'm so proud of what we have achieved together," Hamilton said. "Mercedes has been part of my life since I was 13 years old. It's a place where I have grown up, so making the decision to leave was one of the hardest decisions I have ever had to make." Several reports say Hamilton's agreement with Ferrari was put together hastily as the team was in talks with Spanish driver Carlos Sainz, who announced he would be leaving the team before the end of the year. "I and Ferrari will not continue together beyond 2024," said the 29-year-old from Madrid adding he would give

everything for Ferrari this season. Hamilton won the last of his world titles in 2020 but lost the 2021 championship in controversial fashion to Max Verstappen when the race director ignored the safety car rules in Abu Dhabi, effectively blocking the Briton's route to victory in both that grand prix and the championship. The Dutch Red Bull driver, who is 13 years younger than Hamilton, has dominated the F1 scene ever since. Hamilton finished sixth in the drivers' standings in 2022 and third in 2023. "Lewis will always be an important part of Mercedes motorsport history," said Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff. "However, we knew our partnership would come to a natural end at some point, and that day has now come. We accept Lewis's decision to seek a fresh challenge." Hamilton has never hidden his anger at the 2021 incident in Abu Dhabi, believing he was robbed of an eighth title that would have put him ahead of Ferrari legend Michael Schumacher. He has made clear his frustration with the performance of his Mercedes car in the last two years and believes a move to Ferrari will enable him to reignite his challenge for that elusive history-making title. Ferrari have also suffered patchy form in the last few seasons although they seemed to find momentum towards the end of last season. That improvement was not enough to prevent Mercedes beating them to second place behind Red Bull in the constructors' championship. "I will be forever grateful for the incredible support of my Mercedes family, especially Toto for his friendship and leadership and I want to finish on a high together," said Hamilton. "I am 100% committed to delivering the best performance I can this season and making my last year with the Silver Arrows, one to remember."

