

Iran's Ambassador to Doha Ali Salehabadi Says the Cancellation of Entry Visas for Qatari Tourists Came Into Force as of Sunday and It Is an Important Step Towards Developing Cooperation

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian Extended Felicitations to Sri Lanka on the Country's Independence Day and Expressed Hope that Tehran and Colombo Will Expand Ties in Different Areas

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Iran to Hold Joint Naval Drill with Russia, China in Weeks



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Military forces from Iran, Russia and China are going to stage a joint naval war game in the coming weeks, Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani said. Speaking at a naval base in Iran's northern city of Manjil on Monday, Rear Admiral Irani said the joint exercise will be held before the end of the current Iranian year (March 19). The commander noted that a number of other countries have also been invited to attend the joint drill. The war game will be held with the purpose of ensuring regional security and fulfilling common interests, he added. In March 2023, the Iranian, Chinese and Russian naval forces staged the 2023 Marine Security Belt war game in the northern parts of the Indian Ocean. It was the fourth joint exercise among them in recent years.



Leader Urges Elites in Muslim World to Cut Ties With Israel

TEHRAN – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says the elites of the Muslim world shoulder a heavy responsibility vis-à-vis the ongoing developments in Gaza and should create a public demand to cut relations with the Israeli regime. Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks in a meeting with a group of commanders and personnel of the Iranian Air Force and Army's Air Defense Force in Tehran on Monday. The meeting was held on the anniversary of a historic development that came days before the 1979 victory of Iran's Islamic Revolution that overthrew the former US-backed Pahlavi regime. The event saw Homafaran, Pahlavi's air force officers, breaking away from the monarchical regime and pledging allegiance to the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Imam Khomeini. The Leader warned of the enemy's "specific plot" against the Iranian elites inside and outside the country, saying the enemy primarily seeks to prevent the elites' growing role in the country and raise doubts among them. He urged the Iranian elites to thwart the enemy's plots aimed at raising doubts in the country. The Leader asserted that national power boosts national security, saying that the enemy's plots will be neutralized when it witnesses the Iranian people's presence and preparedness as well as the Islamic establishment's power. Ayatollah Khamenei added that the elites can play a major role in high-turnout parliamentary elections on March 1, whose outcomes, he contended, would boost national might. The Leader further said the elites' negligence toward their duties would lead to a devastating blow to the Iranian nation. He also pointed to the significance of elites in acceleration in the society and reiterated that their delay is what the enemies want and plan for it. Elsewhere in his remarks, the Leader noted that before the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the air force's military equipment and heads were under US control. However, after the 1979 victory of the Islamic Revolution, the air force's pious elements managed to change its US-controlled nature into an Iranian force, Ayatollah Khamenei said. He added that although the force's weapons and equipment were US-made in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Iranian commanders and staff were the ones making decisions about the country. He also called on the Iranian nation to gloriously hold the upcoming nationwide 22 Bahman rallies and express their loyalty to Imam Khomeini (RA). He added that the rallies are the sign of the national power and reiterated that this year also the rallies will be glorious.

Iran Constructing Largest Space Launch Base in West Asia



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran's minister of communications and information technology (ICT) said the country is building the largest space launch base in the West Asian region. Issa Zarepour made the remarks, adding that the country will launch another satellite by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (to end March 20, 2024). Important events have taken place in the space industry of the country, the ICT minister said, putting the number of satellite launches in the country since the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi took office in August 2021 at 11. He expressed hope that the country will soon increase the number of space launches. Zarepour pointed to the construction operation of the largest space launch base in the country and in West Asia and noted that the first phase of the base will be completed by the end of the next Iranian calendar year (to start March 21, 2024). Iran once put its satellites into orbit in cooperation with other countries but now, it has attained the most advanced technology in the space industry and can independently send its homegrown satellites into orbit successfully, the ICT minister emphasized. He further said using the high capacities of the private sector companies and knowledge-based companies has been put on the top agenda of the ministry.

Don't Put Wrath of West Asia to Test



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has condemned the recent acts of aggression against the countries in West Asia, warning the United States and Britain not to test the wrath of the regional nations. In a post on his X account on Sunday, Amir-Abdollahian said Iran denounces the latest wave of airstrikes by the United States and Britain on Yemen and the deadly strikes by the US occupation forces against a number of sites in Iraq and Syria. He said that in a meeting with British Foreign Secretary David Cameron, he explicitly announced that the "continuation of war is not a solution," referring to the two sides' talks on the sidelines of the 54th annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in the Swiss city of Davos in January. "Do not test the anger of the region. We consider the security of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank) to be the security of the region," the top Iranian diplomat stated. The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a statement on Friday that its forces had struck more than 85 targets "with numerous aircraft" during overnight raids on localities in Iraq and Syria. The Syrian state media reported that the US aggression targeted positions in the eastern province of Dayr al-Zawr and the city of Bukamal near the Iraqi border, falling short of providing details on the extent of damage and the exact number of casualties. Sixteen people were killed, among them civilians, and 25 injured in the US airstrikes in Iraq, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani's office said.

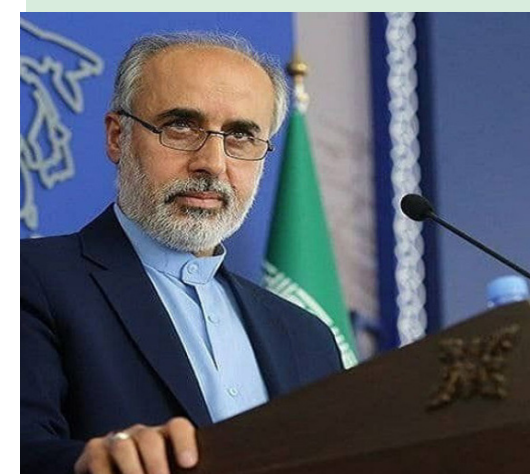
Iran Starts Construction of Fourth Nuclear Reactor in Isfahan

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) has announced that the Islamic Republic has kicked off building the foundation for a home-grown nuclear reactor in the central city of Isfahan. Mohammad Eslami said on Monday that the 10-megawatt research reactor in Isfahan will become Iran's fourth nuclear reactor in the region. Eslami said that the process of designing and constructing reactors requires some detailed studies, preparation, and equipment designs, adding that plans for the new reactor in Isfahan had started last year. He said that the second phase of the project started on Monday with pouring concrete for the foundation of the reactor. According to the AEOI chief, the research reactor is being constructed to create a powerful neutron source with high neutron flux for a variety of applications. Eslami said that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has referred to the nuclear research center in Isfahan as one of the facilities dedicated to training objectives, adding that Iran is using the center to assist Iranian academic centers and to

train human resources. AEOI chief visited Isfahan nuclear site to attend the inauguration ceremony of a unit for the production of Tellurium hexafluoride (TeF6) which is a stable radioisotopes used for medical diagnostic and therapeutic purposes. Eslami opened the project at Isfahan's Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF) site on Monday. His visit to Isfahan took place on the fifth day of the Ten-Day Fajr celebrations, which started on February 1, to mark the 45th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Tellurium hexafluoride, TeF6, is essential for stable radioisotopes used in medical sectors to diagnose and treat diseases. Tellurium powder naturally has eight isotopes each of which has the potential to be enriched and separated. TeF6 would be enriched if tellurium powder was changed into tellurium hexafluoride gas. According to the AEOI chief, the agency has three nuclear reactors in Isfahan and the fourth is under construction. Only a few countries across the world are capable of developing such a technology.



Tehran Blasts U.S.-UK Attack on Yemen



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani has censured the recent US and British aerial aggression against Yemen as an alarming threat to international peace and security. In yet another act of onslaught against Yemeni soil, the United States and Britain carried out late on Saturday dozens of air raids on the Arab country's provinces of Sana'a, Hudaydah and Sa'ada, among several others. The Pentagon claimed that the strikes targeted 13 locations across Yemen and hit weapons storage facilities, missile systems, launchers and other capabilities of the country's Armed Forces and the popular Ansarullah movement used to attack Israeli-tied shipping in the Red Sea in support of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Kanaani condemned the attacks as a repeated violation of Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and said the aggression constitutes a flagrant violation of international law by the United States and Britain. He stressed that the continuation of such arbitrary actions is "open adventurism" and an "alarming threat to international peace and security." "The military adventurism of the United States and the United Kingdom in attacks on the regional countries are the continuation of the policy and the wrong approach of these two countries in using militarism to advance their illegitimate goals in the region, which is in clear conflict with the repeated claims of Washington and London that they do not want to expand the war in the region," the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said. Kanaani underlined that the US and UK, by supporting the Israeli war crimes in Gaza, are "fueling chaos, disorder, insecurity and instability with the aim of creating a breathing space for this criminal regime."

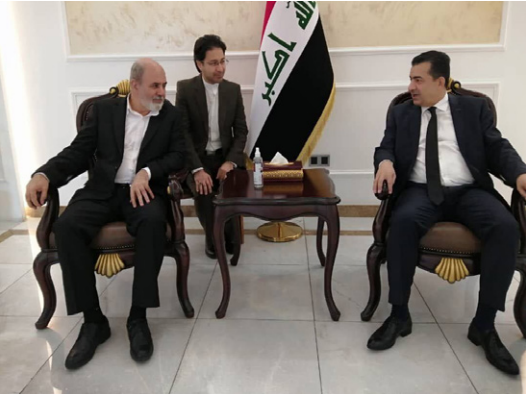
IRAN NEWS



Iran Produces 4mTons of Greenhouse Products Annually

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran's deputy minister of agriculture for horticultural affairs said four million tons of quality greenhouse products are produced in the country annually. Iran is equipped with the most modern greenhouse units that are equal to and in some cases better than modern European ones, Mohammad Mehdi Boroumandi stated. Speaking at the inaugural ceremony of the largest greenhouse unit of the country in Zanjan province, he said that the development of greenhouse units in the country is one of the important programs of the ministry. Effective steps have been taken for commercializing and boosting the quality of greenhouse units in the country, the deputy minister of agriculture added. He drew a comparison between the development of greenhouse units before and after the Islamic Revolution and said greenhouse structures were imported into the country before the revolution but presently, Iran assists other countries in the development of greenhouses, which is a source of pride. He referred to the newly-constructed greenhouse unit in this province, which was inaugurated in the presence of President Ebrahim Raisi during the celebrations marking the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, and noted that the most modern greenhouse unit in Zanjan province is ready to produce 15,000 tons of the greenhouse products annually with the aim of exporting the products abroad.

Iran's Top Security Official in Baghdad to Meet Iraqi Officials



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Akbar Ahmadian has arrived in the Iraqi capital Baghdad for talks with senior officials in the Arab country. Ahmadian arrived at Baghdad's International Airport on Monday morning and was welcomed by Iraqi officials. He is set to meet senior Iraqi officials including Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani and National Security Advisor Qassim al-Araji, according to local media. An informed source told Iraq's 964 Channel that the top Iranian security official, during his daylong trip to Baghdad, would discuss the ongoing developments in Iraq and the region. This is the first trip of Ahmadian to the Arab country since he was appointed secretary of Iran's top security body in June 2023. His visit comes three days after the US struck positions of resistance groups in Iraq and neighboring Syria in retaliation for the death of three American forces in a drone strike in Jordan on January 28. Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus condemned the US strikes as a violation of national sovereignty of Iraq and Syria.



Tehran Ready for Cooperation With Bucharest on Industrial Machinery Industry

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - President of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Samad Hassanzadeh says Iran has been using Romanian machinery for decades and is ready for more increased cooperation with the country on industrial machinery industry. President of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Samad Hassanzadeh says Iran has been using Romanian machinery for decades and is ready for more increased cooperation with the country on industrial machinery industry. Hassanzadeh made the remarks in a meeting in Tehran on Sunday with Romanian Ambassador to Iran Mirela-Carmen Grecu. He put Iran's last year volume of trade with Romania at €250 million which he said is not proportionate with longstanding relations between the two countries. The last session of Iran-Romania Joint Economic Commission dates back to 20 years ago, the Iran Chamber of Commerce president said, adding that Iran expects the

commission to convene in Tehran at the earliest. Noting that the prices of Iranian exports products are very competitive and in cases lower than that of their Chinese equivalents, Hassanzadeh said the ground has to be paved for more Iranian exports to Romania and more imports from the country. The Romanian ambassador said for her part that the private sectors of Iran and Romania would play a major role in expansion of economic cooperation between the two countries. Many businesspeople in Romania are eager to engage in more cooperation with Iran private sector, the ambassador said, adding that the embassy is making every effort on facilitating trade between the two nations. She proposed the formation of an information trade center for Iranian and Romanian businesspeople which she said can expedite trade between the two countries and help the businesspeople on both sides to upgrade their information about the trade potentials.

Iranian, Saudi Officials Stress Expanding Relations



TEHRAN (MNA) – Head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations Kamal Kharrazi and Saudi Ambassador to Tehran Abdullah bin Saud al-Anzi in a meeting stressed the need to expand bilateral relations between Tehran and Riyadh. During the meeting, the two sides also expressed concern over the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip as a result of the ongoing Israeli war. The two Iranian and Saudi officials stressed the need for cessation of hostilities against the oppressed Palestinians, emphasizing the need for the Islamic countries to reach a solution to provide the needs of the people of Gaza. The Israeli regime waged a bloody war against the Gaza Strip on October 7 after the Palestinian Resistance movement Hamas carried out a retaliatory attack, dubbed Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, against the occupying entity for its atrocities against Palestinians.



World's Biggest Ozone Reactor Made in Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iran has manufactured the world's biggest ozone reactor, a machine that generates ozone nanobubbles for the treatment of water, a vice president said. In comments at a meeting of the cabinet on Sunday evening, Iranian Vice-President for Science and Technology Ruhollah Dehghani Firouzabadi said local experts have manufactured the world's biggest ozone reactor in Iran. He said the device, unveiled on February 3, generates nano-ozone bubbles for water treatment. The homegrown ozone reactor removes unpleasant odor and taste from drinking water, the vice president added. According to Dehghani Firouzabadi, the high-tech machine provides service for 320,000 people. Ozone reactor is a general name for all products that mix ozone into water. Since the ozone nanobubbles have a large surface area, the ozone gas is more efficiently dissolved in liquids and improves effectiveness in applications such as water treatment and disinfection.

Cuban Delegation Hails Iran's Advanced Sugarcane Industry

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A delegation of experts from Cuba's sugarcane industry has praised "outstanding" achievements in Iran's production of sugarcane and by-products, calling on Iranian companies to transfer their experience to their Cuban counterparts. The delegation visited two plants located in the southwestern Khuzestan province, the hub of sugarcane production in Iran. The visit took place on Sunday, according to an IRNA report the same day, citing the Sugarcane and Byproducts Development Company, the holding company of the two plants and four others all active in Khuzestan. The Cuban delegation described achievements in Iran's sugarcane industry as significant and outstanding and called for using

the Iranian companies' experience and knowledge in this regard. The delegates also praised the Iranian companies for producing products which they described as an environmental achievement due to their features protecting the environment. The delegates explained that Cuba's sugarcane industry has faced setbacks over the past seven decades partly because of US sanctions against the Latin American country, which have forced the closure of nearly half of Cuban companies. The head of the delegation said that cooperation with Iranian sugarcane production companies will open a new chapter in collaboration between the two countries which are both hit by US sanctions.



171,000 Tons of Alumina Powder Produced in 9 Months



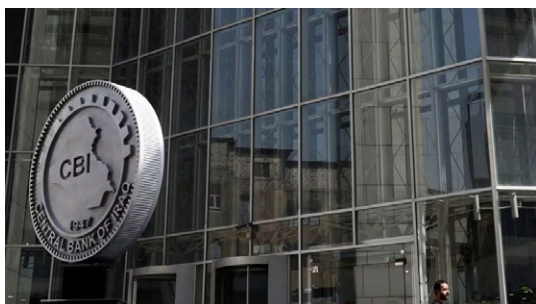
TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Production of alumina powder in Iran stood at 170,952 tons during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21, 2023), according to the data released by Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO). The country produced 225,942 tons of alumina powder in the past Iranian calendar year 1401 (ended on March 20, 2023). As reported, the figure shows a two percent drop as compared to the output in 1400. Aluminum oxide, which is commonly called alumina, is an inert, odorless, white amorphous material often used in industrial ceramics. Alumina is an important ceramic material for industrial applications. The numerous fields of application range from construction materials, to filling materials, as well as abrasives and catalysts. In plants and mechanical engineering, alumina ceramics are mainly used for wear and corrosion protection. The particle size distribution largely determines the application range and the quality of an alumina powder. Reliably identifying the differences in particle size is therefore an essential requirement of the measuring instrument.

Ten Killed in Militant Attack on Pakistan Police Station

PESHAWAR (Dispatches) - Dozens of militants attacked a police station in northern Pakistan early today killing at least 10 officers, a senior commander said. The attack comes just days before Pakistan votes in a general election that has already seen dozens of attacks on candidates and party supporters. "More than 30 terrorists launched an attack from three directions. There was an exchange of fire for over two and a half hours," Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police chief Akhtar Hayat Gandapur told AFP. He said 10 officers were killed and four wounded in the attack on Chaudhwan police station in Dera Ismail Khan district. The border regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province have for years been a hotbed of militancy, with both Pakistan Taliban and Islamic State fighters attacking government and security targets. Gandapur told AFP that the militants briefly seized control of the police station during the Monday morning assault, which started around 1:30am.



Iraq Bans 8 Local Banks From U.S. Dollar Transactions



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq has banned eight local commercial banks from engaging in U.S. dollar transactions, taking action to reduce fraud, money laundering and other illegal uses of U.S. currency days after a visit by a top U.S. Treasury official. The banks are banned from accessing the Iraqi central bank's daily dollar auction, a main source of hard currency in the import-dependent country that has become a focal point of a U.S. crackdown on currency smuggling. A rare ally of both the United States and Iran with more than \$100 billion in reserves held in the U.S., Iraq relies heavily on Washington's goodwill to ensure that its access to oil revenues and finances are not blocked. A central bank document verified by an official at the bank listed the banned banks. They are: Ahsur International Bank for Investment; Investment Bank of Iraq; Union Bank of Iraq; Kurdistan International Islamic Bank for Investment and Development; Al Huda Bank; Al Janoub Islamic Bank for Investment and Finance; Arabia Islamic Bank and Hammurabi Commercial Bank. The head of Iraq's private bank association, which represents the banks involved, and Ashur and Hammurabi did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Reuters is contacting the other banks. A Treasury spokesman said: "We commend the continued steps taken by the Central Bank of Iraq to protect the Iraqi financial system from abuse, which has led to legitimate Iraqi banks achieving international connectivity through correspondent banking relationships." In July 2023, Iraq banned 14 banks from conducting dollar transactions as part of a wider crackdown on dollar smuggling to Iran via the Iraqi banking system. The decision came after a request from Washington, according to Iraqi and U.S. officials. Banks banned from dollar transactions are allowed to continue operating and are allowed to engage in transactions in other currencies, the central bank says. The U.S. Treasury Department's top sanctions official, Brian Nelson, last week met top Iraqi officials in Baghdad, discussing how to protect the Iraqi and international financial systems from criminal, corrupt and terrorist actors.

U.S. Intends Further Strikes on Pro Iran Groups



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States intends to launch further strikes against pro Iran groups in the Middle East, the White House national security adviser said on Sunday, after hitting Tehran-aligned factions in Iraq, Syria and Yemen over the last two days. The United States and Britain unleashed attacks against 36 Houthi targets in Yemen, a day after the U.S. military hit Tehran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria in retaliation for a deadly attack on U.S. troops in Jordan. "We intend to take additional strikes, and additional action, to continue to send a clear message that the United States will respond when our forces are attacked, when our people are killed," White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told NBC's "Meet the Press" program on Sunday. The strikes are the latest blows in a conflict that has spread into the Middle East since Oct. 7, when the Iran-backed Palestinian militant group Hamas stormed Israel from the Gaza Strip, igniting war. The Biden administration's diplomatic efforts to stem the fallout from the war also continued with top diplomat Antony Blinken departing for the region on Sunday afternoon. The groups declaring support for the Palestinians have entered the fray across the region: Hezbollah has fired at Israeli targets at the Lebanese-Israeli border, Iraqi militias have fired on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis have fired on shipping in the Red Sea and at Israel itself. Sullivan declined to be drawn on whether the United States might attack

sites inside Iran, something the U.S. military has been very careful to avoid. Speaking to CBS' "Face the Nation" program moments earlier, he said Friday's strikes were "the beginning, not the end, of our response, and there will be more steps - some seen, some perhaps unseen." "I would not describe it as some open-ended military campaign," he said. Saturday's strikes in Yemen hit buried weapons storage facilities, missile systems, launchers and other capabilities the Houthis have used to attack Red Sea shipping, the Pentagon said, adding it targeted 13 locations. The Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea said the strikes "will not pass without a response and consequences". Another Houthi spokesperson, Mohammed Abdulsalam, indicated the group would not be deterred, saying Yemen's decision to support Gaza would not be affected by any attack. Residents described being shaken by powerful blasts. "The building I live in shook," said Fatimah, a resident of Houthi-controlled Sanaa, adding that it had been years since she had felt such blasts in a country that has suffered years of war. The Houthis did not announce any casualties. Secretary of State Blinken will visit Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Israel in the coming days on his fifth trip to the region since October, which will focus on advancing talks on the return of hostages taken from Israel by Hamas in exchange for a temporary ceasefire in Gaza.

Russia Says Toll in Ukraine Strike on Occupied City Rises to 28



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - The death toll from a Ukrainian strike on a bakery in the occupied eastern city of Lysychansk has climbed to 28 people, including one child, Russia said. Moscow's occupation forces said Ukrainian forces had struck a building that housed a bakery popular with locals on weekends. Kyiv has not yet commented on the strike. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited his embattled country's troops on the southern front, as Moscow's offensive drags on for almost two years. Lysychansk is in the occupied Lugansk region that fell to Russian forces after one of the most brutal battles during Moscow's long offensive in summer 2022. Before the Russian army entered Ukraine, the city had a population of around 110,000 people. "Search operations continue on the site of the collapsed bakery... 28 people, including a child, have died," the Russian emergency situations ministry posted on Telegram. Officials in Lugansk said there were 18 men, nine women and one child among the dead. They did not give the child's age. Russia released images of an almost completely destroyed building, with rescuers combing the rubble in the dark, where they found a corpse and a wounded woman who was evacuated on a stretcher. The one-storey building had a large sign on it that read "Restaurant Adriatic". Russia alleged Saturday that Ukraine had used Western weapons in the strike and said it expected swift and "unconditional condemnation" from the international community. On Saturday, the Ukrainian army's daily report said aviation "struck 12 areas where enemy personnel were concentrated". It also said its forces "struck one area of enemy concentration". Rescuers have so far saved 10 people from the wreckage, according to the Russian emergency ministry. Natalia Pashchenko, said they were brought to medical facilities in the main city of Lugansk. She said four of them are in "the most critical state" while two others are in a "severe state".

U.S. Senators Unveil \$118.3b Funding Bill for Ukraine, Israel and Border



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. senators on Sunday released the text of a much-anticipated deal that would unlock billions in new aid for Ukraine and Israel while tightening U.S. border laws, but the top House Republican quickly vowed to shoot it down. The national security supplemental provides for \$118.3 billion in total funding, including \$60 billion to support war-torn Ukraine, matching the White House's request, and \$14.1 billion in security assistance to Israel, according to a summary released by Senate Appropriations Committee chair Patty Murray. The legislation also includes \$20.2 billion for U.S. border security and a myriad of immigration policy changes agreed to by Democratic and Republican negotiators. Most significantly, it would give President Joe Biden the power to reject asylum seekers if illegal border crossings reached over 5,000 per week - a figure breached multiple times in recent months. "Biden would immediately use this authority - which would mean people coming across the border are generally ineligible for asylum - if crossings were at current levels," a White House official told reporters late Sunday. It is not clear that the 370-page bill has the 60 backers it will need to advance from the first procedural vote in the 100-seat, Democratic-controlled Senate, expected on Wednesday at the latest. Its prospects, or lack thereof, are clearer in the Republican-controlled House, with Speaker Mike Johnson quickly saying it would be "dead on arrival" in its current form. Senators have been negotiating for months on the deal to combat illegal immigration, with Republicans insisting on bolstered border security in return for approving Biden's funding request for Kyiv. Biden said in a statement he strongly supports the deal, which would help Ukraine "defend itself against Russia's aggression" and "includes the toughest and fairest set of border reforms in decades." He urged Republicans - who have been pressured by White House hopeful Donald Trump to oppose the deal - to get behind the bipartisan package. "If you believe, as I do, that we must secure the border now, doing nothing is not an option," he said. Biden ran on restoring "humanity" to

immigration - ending controversial Trump-era policies that led to families being separated at the US-Mexico border. But Republicans dismiss his term as a failure, pointing to statistics showing border agents picking up illegal migrants a record 302,000 times in December. "This bill is even worse than we expected, and won't come close to ending the border catastrophe the President has created," Johnson said Sunday on X, formerly Twitter. For months, polling has shown Americans see the migrant crisis among their top concerns - and mostly blame Democrats for the surge. The immigration reform that ended up in the bill were described by both sides as constituting the strictest border policy changes in recent memory. "This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to close our open border and give future administrations the effective tools they need to stop the border chaos and protect our nation," Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma, the lead Republican negotiator, said in a statement. He said the bill would put "a huge number of new enforcement tools in the hands of a future administration" and change US policy from "catch and release," which allows undocumented migrants to remain at liberty as they await court appearances, to "detain and deport." Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called the legislation "a monumental step," and cautioned Republicans against the knee-jerk reaction of trying to sink it simply because Trump opposes it. "Senators must shut out the noise from those who want this agreement to fail for their own political agendas," Schumer said. Trump - who is close to securing the Republican presidential nomination and is desperate to prevent Biden scoring a legislative win - has spoken out loudly against the bill. "As the leader of our party, there is zero chance I will support this horrible open borders betrayal of America," Trump, said in a recent speech in Las Vegas. If the deal falls short in either chamber Democrats will argue that the Republicans, having spent two years assailing Biden over the surge in migrant crossings, have dropped a major priority simply to pander to Trump's White House ambitions.



South Korea, Saudi Arabia Sign Agreement on Defense Cooperation

SEOUL (Reuters) - South Korea and Saudi Arabia on Sunday signed a memorandum of understanding to expand defense cooperation, Seoul's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) said, as Seoul looks to ink further arms sales in the region. The agreement will see the two establish a joint committee to form a working group for weapons systems research and development as well as production to continue cooperation in defense, DAPA said in a press release on Monday. Defense minister Shin Won-sik, who was visiting Riyadh for the World Defense Show as part of a week-long trip to the Middle East, and his Saudi counterpart Khalid bin Salman Al Saud were present during the signing of the agreement, according to DAPA. DAPA spokesperson did not share further details when asked about the agreement at a media briefing on Monday. South Korea is looking to boost sales to become one of the world's largest suppliers of weapons, despite stiff competition from other global arms exporters. Its arms sales jumped to \$17 billion in 2022 from \$7.25 billion the year before, data from the defense ministry showed. The country's weapons exports to the Middle East grew nearly tenfold between 2013 and 2022, according to the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In recent years, South Korean companies Hanwha, Poongsan and LIG Nex1 concluded deals with Saudi Arabia, collectively worth around \$989 million, for multiple rocket launchers, ammunition and electro-optical systems, and more deals could be in the works, according to a November report by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). "Arab Persian Gulf states are looking to diversify their sources of defense procurement and partnerships beyond their traditional Western suppliers," the report said. "And Seoul can offer increasingly advanced equipment alternatives, often at competitive prices and with shorter lead times."

El Salvador's Bukele Declares Victory in Presidential Poll

SAN SALVADOR (Reuters) - President Nayib Bukele on Sunday declared himself winner of El Salvador's national elections in a landslide, claiming he captured more than 85% of the vote - even though electoral officials have not released any results. Bukele was the heavy favorite to win another five-year term as voters largely cast aside concerns about erosion of democracy to reward him for a fierce gang crackdown that improved security in the Central American country. Bukele, 42, said his New Ideas party also captured at least 58 positions in El Salvador's 60-seat legislative assembly, citing unspecified information that he had access to. "A record in the entire democratic history of the world," Bukele said on X, the social media site. "See you at 9pm in front of the National Palace." Electoral officials have not commented on the results yet. Polls closed at 5 p.m. (2300 GMT), about two hours before Bukele claimed victory. An exit poll by CID Gallup put Bukele's support at 87%. Bukele now appears poised to become the first Salvadoran president in almost a century to be re-elected. If his predictions are accurate, he will wield unprecedented power and be able to overhaul El Salvador's constitution, which his opponents fear will result in scrapping of term limits. Wildly popular, Bukele has campaigned on the success of his security strategy under which authorities suspended civil liberties to arrest more than 75,000 Salvadorans without charges. The detentions led to a sharp decline in nationwide murder rates and transformed a country of 6.3 million people that was once among the world's most dangerous. But some analysts have said the mass incarceration of 1% of the population is not sustainable long-term. Hours earlier, bullish Bukele held a press conference and said his party needed all the support it could muster to maintain its anti-gang fight and continue reshaping El

Salvador. "So, if we have already overcome our cancer, with metastases that were the gangs, now we only have to recover and be the person we always wanted to be," said Bukele. "I believe El Salvador, after half a century of suffering now it is our time to move forward." Few doubted the outcome of the elections. Polls showed most voters appear set to reward Bukele for decimating the crime groups that made life intolerable in El Salvador and fueled waves of migration to the United States. "We have to continue the changes that are happening in our country - positive changes. We have no crime, tourism has sky-rocketed," said construction worker Victor Lopez, 65, who was among the first people to vote at the same center where Bukele cast his ballot. "We cannot let the corrupt people from before have power again," Lopez added. Pre-election polling put support in the single digits for the candidates of FMLN and ARENA, two parties that held power between them until 2019, with voters fed up after decades of traditional politics marked by violence and corruption. A firebrand politician who often spars with foreign leaders and critics on social media, Bukele came to power in 2019 trouncing traditional parties with a vow to eliminate gang violence and rejuvenate a stagnant economy. He has used his New Ideas party's supermajority in the legislative assembly to reshape courts and institutions, solidifying his grip on key parts of the government. He also championed the introduction of Bitcoin as legal tender, drawing criticism from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). El Salvador's Supreme Electoral Tribunal last year permitted him to run for a second term even though the country's constitution prohibits it. Opponents fear Bukele will seek to rule for life, following President Daniel Ortega from next-door Nicaragua.





Alisson Blunder Helps Arsenal Rock Liverpool

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal blew the Premier League title race wide open as Gabriel Martinelli punished a howler from Liverpool keeper Alisson Becker to inspire a crucial 3-1 win over the leaders on Sunday. Martinelli fired home after Alisson completely missed his clearance in the second half to the delight of the Arsenal fans packed into the raucous Emirates Stadium. Mikel Arteta's side had taken an early lead through Bukayo Saka before Gabriel Magalhaes's bizarre own goal gifted Liverpool an equaliser late in the first half. Leandro Trossard bagged Arsenal's third in stoppage-time to clinch the points after Liverpool defender Ibrahima Konate was sent off in the closing stages. Arsenal's vital victory moved them into second, two points behind Liverpool after 23 games each. It was Liverpool's first domestic defeat in all competitions since September, when they lost just across north London at Tottenham in the Premier League. Liverpool's devastating defeat was also a boost to champions Manchester City, who travel to Brentford. City are five points adrift of Liverpool but have two games in hand and will go top if they win both. Liverpool won at the Emirates just a month ago, beating Arsenal 2-0 in the FA Cup third round in part due to a series of key misses by the Gunners. The sides also drew 1-1 in the Premier League at Anfield just before Christmas after Arsenal blew an early lead. Arsenal, who would have been eight points behind the leaders if they had lost, finally got one over Liverpool as they inflicted a first defeat since Klopp announced his long goodbye on January 26. Chasing a first title since 2004 after capitulating late in the race with City last term, Arsenal have issued a significant statement of intent. Without Gabriel Jesus, after the often-injured Brazil striker suffered another knee problem in training this week, Arsenal at last

showed the cutting edge required of champions. Saka sparked pandemonium in the stands when the Arsenal winger struck in the 14th minute. Martin Odegaard's pass to Kai Havertz exposed a gaping hole in the centre of Liverpool's defence and when the German's tentative shot was saved by Alisson Becker, the rebound fell perfectly for Saka to fire home from 10 yards. Arsenal were well on top at that stage as Liverpool laboured to establish any rhythm in the final third. Yet Klopp's men equalised in first half stoppage-time thanks to a farcical goal gift-wrapped by the Arsenal defence. Instead of clearing, William Saliba tried to hold off Luis Diaz as the Arsenal centre-back aimed to let the ball run through to keeper David Raya. But Diaz tenaciously wrestled his way past Saliba and poked the ball into the six-yard box, where it hit Gabriel on the arm before rolling into the net. Liverpool hadn't mustered a shot on target but they were still level. The Reds nearly added to Arteta's angst early in the second half when Alexis Mac Allister fired a long-range drive narrowly wide. Then Curtis Jones' curled just past the far post. After Arsenal's earlier present for Liverpool's equaliser, Klopp's men returned the favour in the 67th minute. Alisson sprinted out of his area to deal with a long pass towards Martinelli and missed. Virgil van Dijk also failed to clear, allowing Martinelli to fire into the empty net as Klopp stood stunned on the touchline. Mac Allister was inches away from a spectacular equaliser when he volleyed wide from the edge of the area. Konate was dismissed in the 88th minute for a second booking after catching Havertz. Trossard smashed a low shot through Alisson's legs via a deflection off Van Dijk in stoppage-time, triggering a jubilant run down the touchline from Arteta as Arsenal dreamed of title glory.

New York, New Jersey to Host 2026 FIFA World Cup Final



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The 2026 World Cup final will be held at MetLife Stadium in New York/New Jersey, organizers FIFA announced on Sunday. The New York bid held off a strong challenge from Dallas to secure the July 19 game, the culmination of the expanded 48-team tournament being co-hosted by the USA, Canada and Mexico. The competition will kick off with the opening game at Mexico City's iconic Azteca Stadium on June 11. Atlanta and Dallas will host the semi-finals while the third-place game will be played in Miami. The quarter-final games will take place in Los Angeles, Kansas City, Miami and Boston. A total of 16 cities across the three countries will host games with the bulk of the matches being held in the USA. The 1994 World Cup was also held in the United States and the final took place at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, near Los Angeles. New York hosted games at that tournament at the old Giants Stadium, which was later demolished to make way for MetLife, which opened in 2010. The decisions were announced on a live television broadcast in North America that featured FIFA president Gianni Infantino alongside comedian and actor Kevin Hart, rapper Drake and celebrity Kim Kardashian. The 82,500-seat MetLife Stadium, across the Hudson River from New York in East Rutherford, New Jersey, is the home of the NFL's New York Giants and New York Jets but has held a number of international football games, including the final of the 2016 Copa America tournament. The New York bid had lobbied hard on the city's experience at hosting major international events and its position as a global city with easy transportation connections for fans. Dallas had hoped that AT&T Stadium, in Arlington, Texas, home to the NFL's Dallas Cowboys, would benefit from having a roof to protect the game from the elements.

Belgium, France Reach Davis Cup Finals

PARIS (Dispatches) - Belgium beat Croatia to book their place in the Davis Cup Finals as Zizou Bergs grabbed the winning point, while France also progressed by completing a straightforward win over Taiwan. Sander Gille and Joran Vliegen put the Belgians ahead with a surprise 2-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) doubles victory over Ivan Dodig and Mate Pavic, after the opening singles matches were shared. Bergs completed the job for the visitors in Varazdin, seeing off Duje Ajdukovic 6-1, 7-5 to back up his opening-day success against former world number three Marin Cilic. Croatia will miss out on the Finals for the first time since the Davis Cup format was changed in 2019. This year's group phase will be played in September, with the knock-out stage in Malaga in November. France, already leading 2-0 from Saturday's singles, secured their passage when Nicolas Mahut and Edouard Roger-Vasselin came back from a set down to beat Hsu Yu-hsiou and Jason Jung 3-6, 6-2, 7-6 (7/1). "We were perhaps a little timid at the start," said Roger-Vasselin. "We stayed calm. We knew our level of play was going to change. We had to keep our nerve." Quentin Halys rounded off the French victory with a 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win over Jason Tseng. The Czech Republic also qualified on Sunday with a 3-0 victory over Israel. The Israeli doubles pairing of Daniel Cukierman and Edan Leshem had to retire from their match against Tomas Machac and Adam Pavlasek. Cukierman pulled up with a hamstring injury in the third game and had to give up a few games later despite trying to continue. "From the beginning, we played really well," said Machac. "I would like to wish Dani a speedy recovery. This kind of ending is not nice." Argentina clung on against underdogs Kazakhstan to win a dramatic tie 3-2. Hosts Argentina took a 2-1 lead with a three-set victory in the doubles before the Kazakhs launched an unlikely comeback, belying massive gaps in the rankings between their players and the South Americans. With Kazakhstan's number one Alexander Bublik winning the ATP event in Montpellier, Timofey Skatov, the world number 278, beat 22nd-ranked Francisco Cerundolo 7-6 (7/1), 6-4. World number 338 Dmitry Popko then battled back from a set down to give Sebastian Baez a scare in the deciding rubber, but missed two match points in the third-set tie-break to slip to an agonising 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (8/6) defeat. Slovakia, Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Brazil, USA and Canada also qualified over the weekend. Serbia, without Novak Djokovic, were stunned by a 4-0 loss to Slovakia. Defending champions Italy and last year's runners-up Australia, as well as Britain and Spain, have advanced automatically to the finals.



Messi, Beckham Boomed After Argentine Star Sits Out Hong Kong Friendly



HONG KONG (Dispatches) - Lionel Messi and Inter-Miami co-owner David Beckham were booed yesterday and angry fans demanded refunds after the Argentina superstar sat out the team's pre-season friendly in Hong Kong. The city government said organizers owed fans an explanation after the match, in which the visitors beat a Hong Kong select XI by four goals to one. The World Cup-winning captain, who has a hamstring strain, stayed rooted to the bench throughout. That brought a show of anger from the near-capacity crowd of 38,323, who had paid upwards of 1,000 Hong Kong dollars (RM608) to see their hero, and in many cases five times that amount. Halfway through the second half, chants of "We want Messi" rose around the Hong Kong Stadium from fans desperate to see the greatest footballer of his generation in the much-hyped exhibition game. The booing became louder during the last 10 minutes when it became clear that the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner would not make even the briefest of cameos. The jeers rose to a crescendo at the final whistle, and Beckham was drowned out by booing as he tried to thank the crowd for "their incredible support" while fans signalled their anger with thumbs-down gestures. "I'm just really disappointed," fan Jonathan Wong told AFP. "Everyone is here to see Messi, so I feel a bit cheated." Without him it's just like another regular Hong Kong Premier League match, where a ticket only costs HK\$80. This time we paid HK\$5,000. Miami coach Gerardo Martino said the club's medical team had taken the decision after an assessment this morning. "We understand the disappointment of the fans for the absence of Leo (Messi)," Martino told reporters. "We understand a lot of fans are very disappointed and we ask for their forgiveness." "We wish we could have sent Leo on for at least a while but the risk was too big." The 36-year-old Messi played just six minutes in Miami's last match, in Saudi Arabia on Thursday, and now faces a race against time to be fit for the new MLS season that starts on February 21. It was a bitter end to days of Hong Kong "Messi mania". Tens of thousands turned up just to watch him train on Saturday, when he did little more than jog and stretch. The team hotel was besieged by hundreds of fans trying to glimpse their hero, and a traditional junk boat was cruising around Victoria harbour with Messi's face plastered across its sails.

Gilgeous-Alexander Leads Thunder Past Raptors in 2 OT

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 23 points and tied a career-high with 14 assists as the Oklahoma City Thunder came back from a 23-point second-half deficit to beat the Toronto Raptors 135-127 in double overtime in Oklahoma City. Toronto swarmed Gilgeous-Alexander, who entered the game with 30 or more points in nine consecutive games, throughout the contest. But in double overtime especially, Gilgeous-Alexander used the added attention to his advantage. Gilgeous-Alexander assisted on three 3-pointers in the second overtime, the biggest when he flipped the ball to Aaron Wiggins for a corner three with 1:39 left to put the Thunder up 130-123. The Thunder hit 23 3-pointers, tying a franchise record. Oklahoma City also hit 23 3-pointers in April 2019 at Milwaukee. Josh Giddey led Oklahoma City with 24 points while Luguentz Dort and Chet Holmgren added 22 each. The win was the third consecutive and eighth in 10 games for the Thunder while Toronto lost for the seventh time in eight games. Oklahoma City got a break with 5.8 seconds left in regulation when RJ Barrett could not keep a handle on the ball, losing it on a drive out of bounds to give the Thunder the ball back with a chance to tie or take the lead. After a timeout, Giddey was left uncovered on the inbounds, and he found Wiggins cutting to the basket for a game-tying layup with 4.7 seconds to play. The Raptors had a chance to win at the buzzer but Barrett's 3-point shot missed the mark to send the game to overtime. Toronto had a similar chance at the end of the first overtime, inbound the ball

with 12.7 seconds left. But the Raptors couldn't find any room to attack the basket and Gilgeous-Alexander swatted away Gary Trent Jr.'s shot at the buzzer to send the game into a second overtime. Oklahoma City didn't get to the free-throw line until just 1:03 remained in the second quarter and had only two in the half. Oklahoma City finished 8-for-8 from the line, a season low for attempts. Barrett led the Raptors with 23 points while Scottie Barnes, Jakob Poeltl and Dennis Schroder added 19 each. The Raptors' lead grew to 23, 76-53, just more than five minutes into the third quarter after Barnes' 3-pointer capped a 12-2 Toronto run. But the Thunder ripped off a 28-11 run the rest of the quarter to get within striking distance entering the fourth. That stretch included a trio of 3-pointers from Wiggins.

