

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev Met With Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Akbar Ahmadian in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to Discuss Security in the Middle East and Central Asia

IRAN NEWS

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan Has Congratulated the 45th Anniversary of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Saying That He Is Confident That the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey Will Further Develop Bilateral Relations

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Iran Calls for Emergency OIC Meeting on Israeli Aggression in Rafah



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has called for an emergency meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) amid the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, especially Rafah which faces an imminent Israeli invasion. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made the plea on Thursday during phone talks with OIC Secretary-General Houssein Ibrahim Taha, demanding that Muslim countries "take decisive measures against the recent aggression of the Zionist regime". Israel is preparing a ground invasion of Gaza's southern city Rafah where more than a million Palestinians have fled since the start of the war on Gaza, with a top UN official warning that it could lead to a "slaughter". Amir-Abdollahian expressed deep regret over the situation and condemned the recent Israeli aggression against Rafah, "which has so far led to the martyrdom of a large number of innocent Palestinian women and children". He said "further activity and mobility of the international community, especially the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, is important and urgently needed in order to stop these attacks". The minister also touched on the dire humanitarian situation in northern Gaza and the severe shortage of basic necessities of life for the residents.

Dialogue, Not Unilateral Claims, Key to Settlement of Arash Gas Field Row



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has once again reiterated the need to avoid unilateral claims and to resort to dialogue to settle a territorial dispute over the Persian Gulf Arash natural gas field shared with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In a statement, Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said Tehran has always emphasized that the Arash field row should be resolved through dialogue based on the previous negotiations of experts. He added that Iran "believes that an agreement on this issue can be reached in an atmosphere of cooperation and respect for common interests." Kanaani was responding to a joint statement issued on Tuesday by Kuwaiti Amir Sheikh Mishal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah and Bahrain's King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa claiming that the gas field is located entirely within the maritime borders of Kuwait and that its natural resources are shared between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Iranian spokesperson warned that "unilateral claims in different statements and media" are not considered a step forward to solve the case. Kanaani reaffirmed Iran's good neighborliness policy and promotion of ties with the neighboring countries, and said Tehran is ready to continue negotiations in a friendly and functional atmosphere with the purpose of reaching an agreed-upon solution.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

Iran among Top Missile, Drone Powers in World

TEHRAN - The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force underlined Iran's progress in defense fields, saying the country is among the top defense powers in the world. Speaking at an exhibition showcasing the achievements of the IRGC Aerospace Force, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh said Iran's defense power today is beyond imagination compared to the era of the Sacred Defense (the Iraqi-imposed war on Iran in the 1980s). He said that there was a time during the war with the Ba'athist regime of Iraq in the 1980s when Iran's mortars could only hit targets within a 27-kilometer radius but now Iran has reached a point in its defense capabilities that the US army commanders acknowledge clearly that they do not seek a conflict with the Islamic Republic. It is because they know they are incapable of confronting Iran's defense power, he stated. General Hajizadeh added that today Iran is among the top powers in the world in the defense, missile and drone fields. "Currently we can hit moving floating targets or carry out reconnaissance missions anywhere using advanced undetectable drones," he went on to say. Iranian military experts and technicians have in recent years made great headways in manufacturing a broad range of indigenous equipment, making the armed forces self-sufficient in the arms sphere. Iranian officials have repeatedly underscored that the country will not hesitate to strengthen its military capabilities, including its

missile power, which are entirely meant for defense, and that Iran's defense capabilities will be never subject to negotiations. Meanwhile the chief commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has underscored the elite force's sophisticated capabilities in maritime wars and says the IRGC never leaves unanswered any aggression on Iranian soil. Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks in a ceremony showcasing the IRGC's speedboats and naval technologies in the southern port city of Bushehr on Wednesday. Salami pointed to Iran's high-tech maritime capabilities and said building a navy capable of neutralizing the enemy's threats is the "most important component" of a country's deterrence power, stressing that a strong naval power must "have something to say" in the face of the world's naval powers. Expressing the IRGC's full preparedness for maritime wars, the top commander said, "We are 100% ready and have achieved capabilities to 'fight wars from afar.'" Salami said the IRGC has made remarkable headway in maritime war technologies and naval navigation, adding that no aggression will be left unanswered. "Naval navigation in naval warfare must be completely strong and distinct. In naval warfare, it is a battle of technologies; where we are attacked, we have not left any aggression without a response and, henceforth, we will not leave any unanswered."

Iran, Armenia Eye \$3b Trade Volume

TEHRAN - Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia Mher Grigoryan says Iran and Armenia are able to increase the volume of trade to \$3 billion. Grigoryan made the remarks in the 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Commission, calling Iran "a very important partner". The president of the Islamic Republic and the Prime Minister of Armenia agreed in 2022 that the volume of trade between the two countries would increase to 1 billion in the first and 3 billion in the next step. The two countries' joint economic commission is a good ground to help realize the objective, he added. The 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Commission was held on February 14-15 in Tehran to further foster economic ties between the two countries. The Islamic Republic, in the 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Commission, has expressed readiness to export Iran-made pharmaceutical products to Armenia. During the 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Commission held on February 14, both sides exchanged views to further expand economic cooperation. Head of Iran's Food and Drug Administration (IFDA) Heidar Mohammadi voiced the country's readiness to export domestically produced drugs to Armenia. Iran enjoys self-sufficiency in the production of drugs and pharmaceutical equipment, he underlined. For her part, Deputy Minister of Healthcare of Armenia Lena Nanushyan said that Iran has made significant progress in the production of medicines and medical equipment. Armenia welcomes cooperation with Iran in the field of health tourism, pharmaceutical insurance, and healthcare, the official added. In a related development, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari held talks with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan. During the meeting, Kostanyan welcomed the presence of Iranian companies in the road construction projects of Armenia. Meanwhile, the two countries on Thursday signed documents to expand mutual cooperation in 19 fields, on the sidelines of the 18th meeting of their Joint Economic Commission that concluded the same day. The two sides also agreed to increase their bilateral trade to \$3 billion per year, according to Head of Iran's Plan and Budget Organization Davoud Manzour. Meanwhile President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi welcomed peace negotiations between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, expressing Tehran's readiness to guarantee strategic security in the Caucasus region. In a meeting with Grigoryan, held in Tehran on Thursday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi hailed the historic, friendly and constructive relations between Iran and Armenia. Referring to the issues of the Caucasus, he stressed Iran's efforts to maintain the stability and security of this region, the president's official website reported. Raisi further welcomed and announced his support for the peace talks between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, highlighting Iran's will and readiness to guarantee the strategic security of the Caucasus region. "We do not agree with the presence of outsiders in the region under the pretext of solving problems, and we believe that their presence will not only not solve the problem, but will become a bigger problem for the nations and governments of the region," he said.



UNODC Helps Strengthen IRFIU's Infrastructure



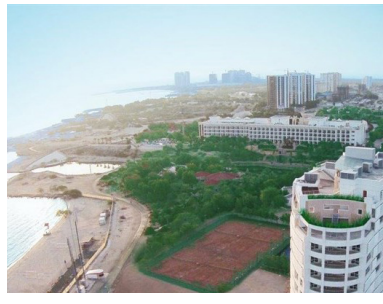
TEHRAN (Dispatches) - In an effort to boost the Iranian Financial Intelligence Unit (IRFIU) infrastructure in the fight against transnational organized crime, money laundering, and the financing of terrorism, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Iran has procured 15 desktop computers to IRFIU. The provision of these computers aligns with the UNODC Country Partnership Program in the Islamic Republic of Iran for the period of 2023-2026, with the goal to enhance institutional knowledge and capacities in countering various forms of illicit activities related to money laundering, organized crime, and financing terrorism, the UN website announced in a press release on February 13. The procurement was made possible through the funding received from the Russian Federation. The procurement of 15 desktop computers marks a significant milestone in strengthening IRFIU's infrastructure. The computers have been specifically procured for the newly established Anti-Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism Computer-Based Training Laboratory, which serves as a crucial hub for conducting training sessions. These computers will facilitate both online and offline training programs on the aforementioned subjects, adhering to UN standards and international best practices. The inauguration ceremony of the training laboratory, equipped with the newly procured computers, was attended by representatives from UNODC and IRFIU, Alexander Fedulov - UNODC Iran Country Representative, and Hadi Khani - Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance and the Head of IRFIU, signifying the collaborative efforts to combat financial crimes. The ceremony highlighted the importance of such technological advancements in promoting effective training and capacity-building initiatives.

Iran to Take Reciprocal Action If Its Ships Are Seized



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Vice President for Legal Affairs Mohammad Dehqan says the country will reciprocate if its ships are seized illegally, as the United States acknowledges the confiscation of Iranian oil. Speaking to the ISNA news agency on Thursday, Dehqan said, "The legal path is not closed" regarding measures vis-à-vis Washington's confiscation of Iranian crude. "If an Iranian ship is seized, we will take reciprocal action," he warned American officials. On February 2, the US Department of Justice announced that it had seized more than 520,000 barrels of Iran's oil aboard the crude tanker Abyss, which had been anchored in the Yellow Sea en route to China. It claimed the seizure was linked to sanctions-evasion charges and an oil trafficking network that allegedly finances Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). Dehqan noted that he was not able to confirm whether US authorities had seized an Iranian vessel, adding that the Oil Ministry and related companies should comment on the news. "This is because sometimes they (the Americans) seize a ship and mistakenly regard it as ours," he said. Under the guise of "sanctions-enforcement operations," the United States has in recent years seized foreign vessels carrying Iranian oil across the world. However, Iranian exports of crude oil grew by roughly 50 percent in 2023 to a five-year high of about 1.29 million barrels per day.

IRAN NEWS



Bids for Investment in Iran's FTZs Hit €3.1b

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The total value of bids for investment, by domestic and foreign investors, in the free trade zones of Iran has surpassed €3.1 billion in the current Iranian year, an official said. In comments on Thursday, the secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones described the free trade zones as the driving force of Iran's economic growth over the past months. Hojratollah Abdolmaleki noted that the free trade and special economic zones have considerable tourist attractions and present great investment opportunities. He said more than 1,000 investment packages, valued at €20 billion, have been defined in the current year, noting that the plans have been presented at 12 prestigious domestic and foreign events. Free zones, known as the paradise of investment, have been introduced to the investors, he said, adding that the total value of requests for investment in the free trade zone, mainly submitted by the domestic investors, has reached €3.1 billion. Abdolmaleki also noted that 100 investment packages for the tourism industry have been compiled so far, putting the value of packages at more than €1 billion. Pointing to the Qeshm and Kish free trade zones as examples of the zones with excellent investment opportunities, he said the two Persian Gulf islands attract hundreds of thousands of domestic and foreign tourists every year, IRIB news reported.

Gaza Situation Symbolic of Unjust World Structure



TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Ebrahim Raisi has considered the ongoing situation in the Gaza Strip, which is enduring a genocidal Israeli war, to be symbolic of the unjustness of the governing global structure. The chief executive made the remarks in Tehran, meeting with the visiting head of the Russian Federation's Republic of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov. "The genocide and crime against humanity that is taking place in Gaza has necessitated replacement of the current unjust [global] structure with a just order more than ever," Raisi said. Nearly 28,600 Palestinians, mostly women and children, have been killed since the Israeli regime launched its onslaught on Gaza in early October in response to an operation staged by the coastal sliver's resistance movements against the occupied territories. The Iranian president's comments came while the regime is intensifying its strikes against the southern Gaza city of Rafah. Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian president expressed readiness on the part of the Islamic Republic for expansion of economic ties with all of the Russian Federation's republics, including Tatarstan. Raisi considered Iran and Moscow's strategic relations and their common attitude across the bilateral, regional, and international areas to be among the favorable grounds for expansion of ties between the countries and with the Republic of Tatarstan.



Security of Iran, Iraq Closely Intertwined

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iraqi National Security Advisor Qasim al-Araji says security of Iran and his country is closely intertwined.

In a meeting with Iran's Judiciary Chief Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei in Baghdad on Thursday, Araji said the two neighboring countries should improve cooperation and take joint action to promote security and stability in the region.

He expressed his country's keenness to implement a high-profile security pact signed between Tehran and Baghdad in March 2023.

The top Iraqi security official emphasized that his country would never allow anyone to use its territory to attack the neighbors or other countries.

Iran and Iraq signed the pact to ensure that terrorists opposed to Iran would not be able to operate in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region.

As part of the treaty, Iraq's central government deployed troops to the border regions between Kurdistan and Iran.

Iranian authorities have expressed satisfaction with Iraq's efforts carried out under the security pact, but they insist more has to be done.

For his part, the Iranian Judiciary chief said Tehran and Baghdad should enhance convergence and make their utmost efforts to establish sustainable security in line with ensuring the common interests of regional and world countries.

Mohseni-Ejei warned of plots by enemies and ill-wishers to prevent the implementation of the Iran-Iraq security pact.

Iran Determined to Use BRICS Capacities



TEHRAN - Finance Minister, Ehsan Khandouzi in a meeting with Rustam Minnikhanov, the visiting president of Russia's autonomous republic of Tatarstan said the Islamic Republic has started the process of joining the BRICS bloc and serious measures are being taken by the ministry to use this new capacities. Khandouzi made the remarks in reference to the upcoming BRICS summit in Kazan which is the capital of Tatarstan. He also highlighted the growing cooperation between the Republic of Tatarstan and Iranian provinces. "In implementing the main policy of the Iranian president, which is to expand substantive relations with neighboring Russia, we follow this policy in a more special way regarding the Republic of Tatarstan", Khandouzi on Wednesday. The minister also told Minnikhanov that another aspect of the importance of the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Tatarstan is related to the role he would play during the BRICS summit in Kazan. "As you know, Iran has recently started the process of joining this economic bloc, and in the Finance Ministry, we have started serious programs and measures to use the new capacities", he underlined in reference to the country officially joining BRICS in January. Khandouzi

also stressed the need for long-term and stable institution-building in order to make the most of this two-way capacity and hailed Minnikhanov for providing good help in this regard, especially for the opening of 'Mir Business Trade Center' and allowing Iranian companies in Tatarstan that he said would help boost bilateral relations. Minnikhanov, for his part, appreciated the hospitality of the government and the people of Iran showed to him and his accompanying delegation. "The new situation in international relations makes us more in touch with each other," he pointed. Referring to the cultural and religious commonalities between Iran and Tatarstan, he said that there are many areas for the growth of economic and cultural relations and that the two sides need to take necessary measures to use these capacities. Meanwhile on Thursday Minnikhanov said that the relations between Iran and Tatarstan are growing. Tatarstan's delegation is in Iran to further boost ties with the Islamic Republic, Minnikhanov said in a conference on exploring business and investment opportunities in Isfahan and Tatarstan which was convened on Thursday in Iran's central city of Isfahan.

Report Highlights Significance of Iran's Chabahar Port for Indonesia

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Exempt from U.S. sanctions, Chabahar Port in southeast Iran can serve as a gateway for Indonesia to access Central Asian and Russian markets, according to a recent report by the Iran Chamber of Commerce's Research Center. The report titled "Indonesia's Economic Diplomacy," tries to shed light on Indonesia's economic goals, global trade position, and its trade ties with Iran. It not only provides insights into Indonesia's flourishing \$1.1 trillion economy, ranking 16th globally, but also addresses the challenges it faces, such as income inequality, infrastructure gaps, and legal complexities. Key findings from the report include: 1. Indonesia's Economic Strengths: As the world's largest archipelago, Indonesia boasts a diverse and robust economy, characterized by sustainable growth, a sizable consumer market, and a competitive workforce. Despite these strengths, challenges such as income inequality and infrastructure gaps persist. 2. Economic Diplomacy as a Strategic Tool: Indonesia actively employs economic diplomacy to tackle challenges and achieve its economic objectives. Strategies include membership in international organizations, signing free trade agreements, infrastructure development, investment incentives, export diversification, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises. 3. Free Trade Agreements and Global Influence: Indonesia's economic diplomacy relies on an intricate network of free trade agreements, positioning the country strategically in global trade. Noteworthy agreements include those with ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and the

European Union, fostering market access, technology transfer, and foreign investment. 4. Foreign Investment Magnet: Through a combination of active economic diplomacy and diverse strategies, Indonesia has emerged as an attractive destination for foreign investment. A youthful population, strong domestic demand, political stability, abundant natural resources, and effective macroeconomic policies contribute to its appeal among international investors. 5. Challenges in Iran-Indonesia Economic Relations: Despite Indonesia's economic potential, its trade relations with Iran are underwhelming, with Iran's share in Indonesia's foreign trade remaining below one percent. The presence of sanctions hampers Iran's ability to compete with regional rivals such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, thereby restricting its access to the Indonesian market. 6. Opportunity in Chabahar Port: To bolster trade ties, a potential avenue for collaboration is Chabahar Port. Exempt from U.S. sanctions, this port can serve as a gateway for Indonesia to access Central Asian and Russian markets. Considering joint investment in Chabahar Port could be a strategic move for both countries, providing a sanctioned-free channel for economic collaboration and facilitating the rapid development of trade relations. In conclusion, exploring joint investment opportunities in Chabahar Port presents a promising avenue for Iran and Indonesia to strengthen their economic ties, overcoming the challenges posed by existing sanctions and fostering mutually beneficial cooperation in the global trade landscape.



Iran, Algeria Coordinate Efforts to End Gaza War



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The foreign ministers of Iran and Algeria condemned the Israeli regime's relentless strikes on Gaza, calling for immediate action by the international community to stop the massacre of civilians and provide relief aid to Palestinians in northern Gaza and Rafah. In a telephone conversation on Thursday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Algerian counterpart Ahmed Attaf discussed the latest developments in Palestine and the region. They strongly condemned the ongoing crimes the Zionist regime commits against the defenseless people of Gaza and the dire humanitarian situation in the region. The two ministers also emphasized the need for immediate and effective action by the international community to halt the killing of Palestinian civilians, especially women and children. They also stressed the need to provide immediate aid to the Palestinian people, particularly in northern Gaza and Rafah, and prevent the military offensive of the Zionist army in Rafah with the aim of forced displacement of Gaza residents. Algeria's foreign minister then conveyed greetings from President Abdelmadjid Tabboune to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. He also highlighted the significance of the Iranian president's participation in the upcoming meeting of the heads of the Assembly of Gas Exporting Countries in Algeria. Attaf further underlined Algeria's determination to develop relations with Iran, and provided a report on his country's measures as a UN Security Council's non-permanent member to stop the war on Gaza. Amir-Abdollahian, for his part, presented a report on his recent regional trip to Lebanon, Syria, and Qatar, and his negotiations with the officials of those countries and the leaders of resistance groups. He emphasized the need for joint action by the Islamic countries to support the oppressed people of Palestine.

Iran, India Hold First Joint Committee on Agriculture



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran and India have kicked off a joint agricultural committee to facilitate exports of agricultural products and address issues such as quarantine requirements and customs barriers.

Agriculture and trade officials from the two countries took part in the first joint agricultural committee in New Delhi, months after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the sidelines of a BRICS summit, called for closer economic and trade ties in non-sanctioned sectors.

Discussions centered around ways to promote agricultural cooperation between Iran and India and the necessity of conducting research on related topics such as herbal medicine, tropical fruits, greenhouse products, pesticides and disease control as well as tariffs and customs barriers.

During the meeting, the two sides put forth their proposals on how to develop relations in the agriculture sector and food industry.

The preliminary agreement on the joint committee was worked out in September, when Alireza Peyman-Pak, Iran's deputy Agriculture Minister in charge of trade and market regulation, visited New Delhi to discuss cooperation in the agriculture sector with Indian officials.

Kansas City Police Link Super Bowl Rally Shooting to Dispute

KANSAS CITY (Dispatches) - A quarrel among several people sparked the shooting spree in Kansas City, Missouri, that killed a woman and wounded 22 people after a celebration of the city's NFL Super Bowl victory, police said on Thursday, ruling out any apparent link to extremism. Three people, including two minors, were detained as "subjects" in the investigation, Police Chief Stacey Graves said at a press conference, the day after gunfire erupted in the vicinity of the city's historic downtown rail station. The third detainee, also a juvenile who was determined not to be involved, was later released, according to police spokesperson Alayna Gonzalez. Police were working with juvenile prosecutors to review evidence and "determine applicable charges" against the two minors, both teenagers, still held in custody, she said. The police chief told reporters several firearms had been recovered from the shooting scene.



Brazil's Lula Slams Israel on Gaza War, Says UN Failed



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said that the United Nations has failed to resolve international conflicts and harshly criticized Israeli actions in Gaza.

"Israel's behavior has no explanation: with the pretext of fighting Hamas, it is killing women and children," he said after a meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Speaking later to the Arab League, Lula said Brazil had condemned the Hamas attack on Israeli civilians on Oct. 7, but he added that the Israel's response was "disproportional and indiscriminate" and unacceptable.

Lula said there would not be peace without the establishment of a Palestinian state and called for an immediate ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza.

"The killing must be stopped," he said.

The Brazilian leader said Palestine should be recognized as a sovereign state and admitted to the United Nations as a full member, and he called for reform of the U.N. Security Council.

"The multilateral institutions that were created to help solve these problems do not work, which is why Brazil is committed to making the necessary changes in global governance bodies, and we hope to count on Egypt's support," he said to reporters alongside Sisi.

Lula said the permanent Security Council should be expanded and its veto powers abolished. "It is the permanent members of the Security Council that foment wars," he said.

Brazil has supported South Africa's case brought before the International Court of Justice against the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, he added.

The leftist president, who's on his third non-consecutive term, also announced his government will make a new contribution to the U.N. Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA), which is facing a cash crunch after Israel alleged that 12 of its 13,000 staff in Gaza were involved in the Oct. 7 attack.

West African Bloc Lifts Sanctions on Junta-Led Niger



ABUJA (Dispatches) - The West African regional bloc said it would lift strict sanctions on Niger as it seeks a new strategy to dissuade three junta-led states from withdrawing from the political and economic union - a move that threatens regional integration. Leaders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met to address a political crisis in the coup-hit region that deepened in January with military-ruled Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali's decision to exit the 15-member bloc. After closed-door talks, ECOWAS said it had decided to lift Niger sanctions including border closures, the freezing of central bank and state assets, and the suspension of commercial transactions with immediate effect. In a communique it said this was done for humanitarian reasons, but the move will be seen as a gesture of appeasement as ECOWAS tries to persuade the three junta states to remain in the nearly 50-year-old alliance. Their planned exit would bring a messy disentanglement from the bloc's trade and services flows, worth nearly \$150 billion a year. The bloc "further urges the countries to reconsider the decision in view of the benefits that the ECOWAS member states and their citizens enjoy in the community," it said. It also said it had lifted certain sanctions on junta-led Guinea, which has not said it wants to leave ECOWAS but like other junta states has not committed to a timeline to return to democratic rule. ECOWAS Commission President Omar Touray said some targeted sanctions and political sanctions remained place for Niger, without giving details. Earlier, ECOWAS chairman Bola Tinubu said the bloc had to rethink its strategy in its bid to get countries to restore constitutional order and urged Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea "not to perceive our organisation as the enemy".



Israel Raids Main Gaza Hospital as Rafah Concerns Grow

DOHA (Dispatches) - Israeli forces said they had raided the biggest functioning hospital in Gaza as footage showed chaos, shouting and gunfire in dark corridors filled with dust and smoke. Israel's military called the raid on Nasser Hospital "precise and limited" and said it was based on information that Hamas militants were hiding and had kept hostages in the facility, with some bodies of captives possibly there. Health authorities in the Hamas-run Palestinian enclave said Israel had forced out dozens of staff, patients, displaced people and families of medical staff sheltering in the hospital. Some 2,000 Palestinians arrived in the southern border city of Rafah overnight while others pushed north to Deir Al-Balah in central Gaza, they said. The war began on Oct. 7 when Hamas sent fighters into Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and seizing 253 hostages according to Israeli tallies. Israel's air and ground offensive has since devastated tiny, crowded Gaza, killing 28,663 people, also mostly civilian, according to health authorities, and forcing nearly all its more than 2 million inhabitants from their homes. In a new operation, the Israeli military said it carried out an air strike that killed a Hamas commander who had participated in the Oct. 7 attack. He had also held captive a female Israeli soldier who was executed by Hamas, the military said. Separately, medical officials said an Israeli strike killed three Palestinians in a car in Gaza City. Their identities were not immediately clear. The Israeli military said a soldier was killed in fighting in southern Gaza, bring its total losses since ground incursions began on Oct. 20 to 235. The medical charity Medicins San Frontieres said Israel shelled Nasser Hospital in the early hours, despite having told medical staff and patients they could remain. "Our medical staff have had to flee the hospital, leaving patients behind," it said

on social media platform X, adding a member of its staff was detained at an Israeli checkpoint set up to screen those leaving the compound. Fighting at the hospital comes as Israel faces growing international pressure to show restraint, after vowing to press its offensive into Rafah, the last relatively safe place in Gaza. Attacks that have destroyed the majority of Gaza's medical facilities have caused particular concern, including Israeli raids on hospitals in other cities, shelling in the vicinity of hospitals and the targeting of ambulances. As massive bombardment destroyed swathes of residential districts and forced most people from their homes, hospitals quickly became the focus for displaced people seeking shelter around buildings they thought more likely to be safe. Senior Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri said Israel was lying about Nasser as it had about other hospitals. Speaking about the hospital raid, Israeli military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said "this sensitive operation was prepared with precision and is being conducted by IDF special forces who underwent specified training". One objective of the operation was to ensure the hospital could continue treating Gazan patients and "we communicated this in a number of conversations we had with the hospital staff," he said, adding there was no obligation to evacuate. Gaza health ministry spokesperson Ashraf al-Qidra said the hospital would run out of fuel within the next 24 hours, threatening the lives of patients, including six in intensive care and three infants in the neonatal ward. Hagari said Israel had arranged the transfer of medical supplies and fuel to the hospital in coordination with international organizations. Videos that Reuters verified on Thursday as having been filmed inside Nasser Hospital - though it could not check when - showed chaos and terror.



Kremlin Dismisses U.S. Warning About Russian Nuclear Capability in Space

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - The Kremlin dismissed a warning by the United States about Moscow's new nuclear capabilities in space, calling it a "malicious fabrication" and a trick by the White House aimed at getting U.S. lawmakers to approve more money to counter Russia. The United States has told Congress and allies in Europe about new intelligence related to Russian nuclear capabilities that could pose an international threat. U.S. officials said the issue was a Russian anti-satellite weapon that was in development, not an immediate threat. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he would not comment on the substance of the reports until the details were unveiled by the White House. But he said Washington's warning was clearly an attempt to get Congress to approve more money. "It is obvious that the White House is trying, by hook or by crook, to encourage Congress to vote on a bill to allocate money; this is obvious," he told reporters. "We'll see what tricks the White House will use." Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, Moscow's point man on arms control, accused the United States of "malicious fabrication", TASS reported. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters during a visit to Tirana, Albania, on Thursday that Washington was talking with allies and partners about the issue. "This is not an active capability, but it is a potential

one that we're taking very, very seriously. And I would expect that we'll have more to say soon, in fact very soon, so stay tuned for that," he said. Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has triggered the biggest confrontation between the West and Russia since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Both Moscow and Washington have warned of the risk of a conflict between NATO and Russia. Russia and the United States are the biggest nuclear powers, together holding about 90% of the world's nuclear weapons. They also both have advanced military satellites orbiting the Earth. White House national security spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that Russia is developing a space-based, anti-satellite capability that has not yet been deployed. He said U.S. President Joe Biden has requested direct diplomatic engagement with Moscow about it. The nuclear component of what was being developed was not explained, but analysts said that it is more likely to be a nuclear-powered device to blind, jam or fry the electronics inside satellites than an explosive nuclear warhead. Threatening satellites could cause all sorts of mischief: undermining communications, surveillance, intelligence and command and control around the world, including in the nuclear sphere. Experts said the United States does not have the capability to counter such a weapon.

Young Indian Protesters Determined to Secure Airman

Ukraine Needs \$486b to Recover, Rebuild After Nearly Two Years of War

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Rebuilding Ukraine's economy after Russia's invasion nearly two years ago is expected to cost \$486 billion, 2.8 times its 2023 expected economic output, a new study by the World Bank, United Nations, European Commission and the Ukrainian government found. The estimate released Thursday covers the period from Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, 2022, through Dec. 31, 2023, and quantifies the direct physical damage to buildings and other infrastructure, the impact on people's lives and livelihoods and the cost to "build back better," the World Bank said. That 10-year cost estimate is up from \$411 billion last March, with housing needs topping the list at \$80 billion or 17%, followed by transport needs of \$74 billion or 15%, and commerce and industry at \$67.5 billion, or 14%. "The \$486 billion is an unfathomably large amount, and, of course, it reflects real needs," said Arup Banerji, World Bank regional country director for Eastern Europe, although he noted that the high rate of damages seen in the first months of the war had slowed sharply. The report said direct damages from the war had reached almost \$152 billion, with losses concentrated in regions such as Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and Kyiv. Disruptions to economic output and trade, as well as other war-related costs, such as removing debris, would likely add another \$499 billion, it said. The new estimate excludes reconstruction needs already met through the Ukraine state budget or through partners and international support. The losses it maps out are staggering, with about 2 million housing units - about 10% of the total housing stock of Ukraine - either damaged or destroyed, as well as 8,400 km (5,220 miles) of motorways, highways, and other national roads, and nearly 300 bridges. The report said Ukraine needed some \$15 billion to cover the most urgent repair, recovery and reconstruction priorities in 2024, of which about \$5.5 billion had already been met through the state budget and donor support.

Indonesia President Congratulates Poll Winner Prabowo

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia's President Joko Widodo said he had congratulated Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto after unofficial counts showed the ex-special forces commander winning this week's presidential election in a single round of voting. "I have, in person last night," the president, popularly known as Jokowi, told reporters when asked if he had congratulated Prabowo and his running mate. Prabowo's running mate is Jokowi's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, who is set to be the youngest vice president in Indonesia's history. Prabowo, 72, declared a "victory for all Indonesians" before jubilant supporters late on Wednesday, after so-called quick ballot counts by independent pollsters - accurate in past elections - showed he had won nearly 60% of votes. Indonesian markets cheered the clear-cut count and rallied on Prabowo's promise to follow Widodo's policies in Southeast Asia's largest economy. The country's stock market rose as much as 2.2%, while the rupiah strengthened 0.3% to its strongest in a month before paring back gains. Spokespersons for Prabowo's rivals, ex-governors Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo, who trailed at least 33 points behind in quick counts, have said they would probe allegations of "systematic and massive fraud", but have not provided evidence. Second-place rival Anies, who got 25% of the vote, has said his team would wait for the official results and respect the people's decision. Independent analysts have said there were no signs of systematic electoral fraud. The U.S. State Department said the election was "a testament to the durability and strength of the Indonesian people's commitment to the democratic process and electoral institutions". A preliminary tally by the General Election Commission with about 40% of votes counted put Prabowo in the lead with around 56%.

It is expected to announce official results by March 20 and, if confirmed, the new president and vice president will take office in October. Jokowi did not explicitly endorse any candidate, but the days leading up to the vote were marred by protests against him. He was criticized for alleged political interference after making highly publicised appearances with Prabowo, and after a last-minute court ruling tweaked eligibility criteria, enabling his son to join the leading ticket. Jokowi and his allies have denied he meddled. Prabowo has pledged to continue Jokowi's efforts to position the resource-rich G20 economy as an electric-vehicle hub, extend a massive infrastructure and social assistance push, and create millions of jobs. Prabowo has long been dogged by accusations of past misdeeds including involvement in the kidnapping of student activists in 1998 and human rights abuses in Papua and East Timor. The allegations are unproven, and he has always denied any responsibility. During his campaign, he transformed his image from a hot-tempered nationalist and military hardliner to a cuddly, cat-loving grandfatherly figure, attracting a huge youth following on social media in a country where more than half of the nearly 205 million electorate are under 40. Still, while his supporters celebrated Prabowo's apparent sweeping victory on his third attempt, the reaction of others in Indonesia ranged from caution to dismay. In an opinion piece entitled "Finally a Win", the Jakarta Post noted Prabowo's expected victory had come following a public outcry over alleged improper conduct by Jokowi in the election. "The next step for Prabowo... will be to prove his critics wrong, that instead of an anti-democratic politician, he can be a consensus builder and a compassionate leader with a stable character," the newspaper said.





Lukaku Stays Hot in Europa League to Earn Roma a Draw

PARIS (Dispatches) - Romelu Lukaku shouldered in the equaliser to earn Roma a 1-1 draw away to Feyenoord in the first leg of their Europa League playoff on Thursday. Elsewhere, a pair of Argentine veterans struck late to give their teams victories. Mauro Icardi fired home a shot from the edge of the penalty area in added time to earn Galatasaray a 3-2 home win over Sparta Prague after the Czechs had twice fought back from a goal down. In Lisbon, Angel di Maria, converted his second penalty of the game seven minutes into added time to give Benfica a 2-1 victory over Toulouse. AC Milan beat Rennes 3-0 with England midfielder Ruben Loftus-Cheek scoring two headed goals and Rafael Leao rounding off a dominant home display after a neat exchange with Theo Hernandez. "I've been working on this, getting to the right position to score and it's going well now," said Loftus-Cheek. "Tonight was incredible at home." In Hamburg, Iliman Ndiaye thought he had bagged a last minute winner for Marseille but Eguinaldo's injury-time strike rescued a point for Ukrainian exiles Shakhtar Donetsk in a 2-2 draw. In Rotterdam, Igor Paixao headed hosts Feyenoord in front in added time at the end of the first half. But in the 67th minute, Lukaku met a cross with his shoulder to send the ball looping into the net. "The defender was trying to hold me off but I knew I was much stronger than him so I got to the ball," Lukaku told UEFA.com. "When the chance comes, you have to score - and that's what we did." It was his 21st goal in his last 18 Europa League appearances. "Both teams

created a lot of chances and had a lot of shots," said Feyenoord coach Arne Slot. "Sometimes we were better, sometimes they were." Marseille, whose only victory this year was against fifth-tier Thionville in the French Cup, twice seemed briefly poised to break that barren streak. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang put the visitors ahead after 64 minutes with a first-time half volley, but four minutes later Mykola Matviyenko fired home after Marseille failed to clear a free kick. Aubameyang then crossed for Ndiaye to restore the lead with time running out. This time it lasted three minutes before Eguinaldo headed powerfully home. "We are disappointed as we led twice, but allowed victory to slip away," said Marseille defender Samuel Gigot. "We are unhappy with the result as we wanted to win. I think we deserved to win with our display," said Shakhtar defender Yukhym Konopliya. The 16 teams in action in the playoffs are battling for the right to join the eight seeds who have already qualified for the last 16. In the Conference League, four-time European champions Ajax scored twice in added time to escape a humiliating home defeat to Bodo/Glimt. The Norwegian club seemed poised to add to their growing list of famous scalps when Albert Groenbaek scored his second of the game after 64 minutes. In the 90th minute, Odin Bjoertuft fouled Brian Brobbey in the box, was sent off and conceded a penalty. Branco van den Boomen smashed home the spot kick. From a 98th minute Jordan Henderson corner, the ball fell to Steven Berghuis who fired home the equaliser with the last kick of the match.

Man Utd's 2022-2023 Squad the Most Expensive Ever in Europe

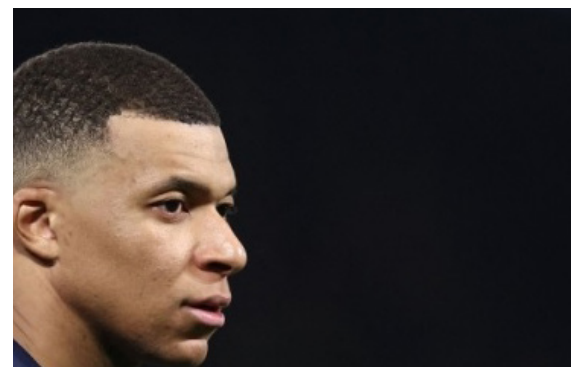


LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United's squad for the 2022-23 season was the most expensive ever assembled in Europe, according to a report released by governing body UEFA. The "European Club Finance and Investment Landscape" report said United spent just over €1.42 billion on the squad which played that season, surpassing the previous mark of €1.33 billion spent by Real Madrid's in 2020. Erik ten Hag's squad at the end of the 2022-23 season included big-money transfers Antony, Harry Maguire, Jadon Sancho and Casemiro. United's rivals Manchester City were second for that season with a squad value of €1.286 billion. The report, released on Wednesday, added that Real Madrid (€841 million), Manchester City (€836 million), Barcelona (€815 million) and Paris St Germain (€807 million) had the highest revenues in 2022. The Premier League had nine teams in the top-20 earning clubs, with an average revenue of €323 million. Spain's La Liga was second with revenues of €3.3 billion, with Germany's Bundesliga (€3.2 billion), Italy's Serie A (€2.4 billion) and France's Ligue 1 (€2 billion) rounding out the top five. "In 2022, the revenue of England's 20 top-tier clubs was almost as high as the combined revenue of all 642 clubs in the bottom 50 countries," the report said. English clubs also made up €764 million of the combined €3.2 billion of pre-tax losses recorded by clubs in 2022. UEFA said the figures for pre-tax losses were positive "amid slowing wage inflation and renewed buoyancy in the transfer market".

Alcaraz Downs Former Pirate in Buenos Aires Opener

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz reached the quarter-finals of the Buenos Aires ATP tournament on Thursday, defeating a player who once worked as an entertainment park pirate. World number two and defending champion Alcaraz beat 134th-ranked Camilo Ugo Carabelli 6-2, 7-5 in his first match since a shock quarter-final exit at the Australian Open. Carabelli, who lives just a handful of blocks away from the Buenos Aires Lawn Tennis Club, came through qualifying to reach the main draw of the clay-court event. The 24-year-old was a late convert to tennis after spending his teenage summers playing the role of a pirate for his grandfather's tourist company in Brazil. After Alcaraz swept through the opening set, the Argentine outsider steadied the ship, carving out a break of serve for an early lead in the second. Spanish star Alcaraz retrieved the break immediately and served for the match at 5-3. However, Carabelli broke back, saved a match point and then another to level the set at 5-5. Alcaraz held for 6-5 before his opponent finally cracked in the 12th game of a nervy tie which featured a total of 11 service breaks. "It was a really tough match. He's a really good fighter, a really good player with good rhythm. He was really tough to beat," said Alcaraz. "I started really nervous, I'm not going to lie, with the crowd behind him, supporting him. I think it's normal, obviously, but really happy with my first match on clay since the French Open. Hopefully I can keep going better and better." Two-time Grand Slam title winner Alcaraz will face another qualifier, Italy's 152nd-ranked Andrea Vavassori for a spot in the semi-finals. Second seed Cameron Norrie, who was the runner-up to Alcaraz at the tournament in 2023, was knocked out by Argentina's Federico Coria 4-6, 6-4, 6-3. Meanwhile Naomi Osaka's hopes of clinching the Qatar Open ended in a straight-sets quarter-final loss to fellow former world number one Karolina Pliskova on Thursday. Four-time Grand Slam title winner Osaka, who is rebuilding her career after maternity leave, went down 7-6 (8/6), 7-6 (7/5) after saving three match points. It was the 26-year-old Japanese star's second defeat to Pliskova this year after losing in three sets in her comeback tournament in Brisbane last

month. Pliskova, ranked at 59, will face world number one Iga Swiatek for a place in Saturday's final. The Czech's win over Osaka, clinched in one hour and 43 minutes, was her ninth in the last 10 days, a run which included the Transylvania Open title on Sunday. Defending champion Swiatek moved closer to a third successive Qatar title when she brushed aside Victoria Azarenka 6-4, 6-0 in 74 minutes in her quarter-final. Polish 22-year-old Swiatek is 12-1 at the Gulf tournament with her only defeat coming in the 2020 second round to Svetlana Kuznetsova. "I felt like I started a little bit playing too aggressively maybe, but then I found my rhythm and the proper way to play," said Swiatek. "I kept it till the end of the match. I'm happy that I could analyse during the match and then take a lesson from that." Former world number one Azarenka, the 2012 and 2013 champion in Doha, double-faulted in the ninth game to hand Swiatek the first break. The top seed served it out before racing through the second set without facing a break point.



PARIS (Dispatches) - France captain Kylian Mbappe has told officials at Paris Saint-Germain that he intends to leave when his contract expires at the end of the season, a source close to the Ligue 1 champions said. The 25-year-old, who arrived in Paris from Monaco in 2017, had extended his contract in 2022 until 2024 but last summer declined to activate a clause allowing him to stay another year at PSG. Mbappe has been widely tipped to move to Real Madrid and, according to a source close to the matter, has already entered negotiations with the Spanish giants. "The terms of the departure have yet to be fully agreed," the source said, adding that the club and Mbappe will make an official statement "when everything is finalised in the next few months". PSG declined to comment when contacted by AFP but it is understood that Mbappe's departure will be formally announced in a few months' time. "PSG are focused on the future," said the source. Mbappe will leave PSG on a free transfer but the blow to the club will be softened by an agreement they reached last summer which will see the player waive bonuses amounting to around €60 to 70 million (US\$65.6 million to US\$76.6 million). After seven seasons at PSG, Mbappe, the club's all-time top scorer with 274 goals, looks set to seal a move to Real Madrid, the club that the player has dreamt of since he was a child. Real have made no secret of their desire to bring him to the Santiago Bernabeu. In 2019, 2021 and 2022, club president Florentino Perez considered signing him, only to be rebuffed each time. For PSG, the departure of their main star, a year after the exits of Neymar and Lionel Messi, marks the beginning of a new era of uncertainty. Coach Luis Enrique is expected to be given the powers to shape a new, young and coherent team. At the highest levels of the club, it has been hammered home in recent months that the priority must be the "recruitment of several players when Mbappe leaves". PSG will, said a source close to the club, continue its transformation "towards the collective and youth". However, Mbappe has been a prolific striker, who has scored far more than any other player this season. He broke the deadlock again on Wednesday in a 2-0 win over Real Sociedad in the last 16 of the Champions League. Mbappe also has more than 111 million subscribers on Instagram, giving PSG a wide international profile.

Djokovic Best Player in History

MADRID (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal hailed longtime rival Novak Djokovic as the best player in the history of the sport. "The numbers say yes, for me yes (he is the best in history)," Nadal said in an interview with El Objetivo de La Sexta when asked "who is the best?" Djokovic has 24 Grand Slam titles having surpassed Nadal's 22 when he captured last year's French Open. Despite that success, the controversial world number one from Serbia still struggles to translate his on-court triumphs into off-court popularity. "The image he projects is worse than he really is; I think he's a good person," added Nadal. "There are moments of frustration. Novak breaks his racquet, but the next point he is ready to play at 100% again and it is the best I have ever seen." Nadal, 37, has been battling injury and missed virtually all of 2023. He was hurt again last month before sitting out the Australian Open. With his career winding down, Nadal hailed compatriot and heir Carlos Alcaraz who is already a two-time major winner at the age of 20. "Carlos has an incredible level of tennis, he is a super complete player in every sense," said Nadal. "I don't see weaknesses in him like the ones I had at his age. He has all the ingredients to have an incredible career." Meanwhile Nadal was forced to shelve his plans to

return to action at next week's Qatar Open, admitting he is "not ready to compete". The 37-year-old missed most of last year with a hip injury sustained at the Australian Open before making his comeback at last month's Brisbane International. However, a small muscle tear then forced the 37-year-old to pull out of this season's first Grand Slam in Melbourne. The 22-time Grand Slam title winner now hopes to return to the tour at the Indian Wells Masters in California from March 6-17. "I would have loved to play in Doha, where the tournament team, as well as the amazing Qatar fans have always supported me greatly," Nadal said in a statement on X. "Unfortunately I am not ready to compete and I won't be able to come to Doha where I really wanted to be and play again. "I will focus on keep working to be ready for the amazing Indian Wells tournament." Nadal was named on the entry list last month for the Qatar Open, to be held February 19-24, and where he was champion in 2014.

