

Iran Will Host Economy Ministers From More Than 40 African Countries During the Second Iran-Africa International Summit Set to Be Held in April, an Official at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) Announced on Saturday

# IRAN NEWS

Iran's Parliament Opposed the Economic Commission's Proposal to Amend the Laws of Trade Unions and Form a New Syndicate Bank Because It Believes It Will Be the Cause of Inflation and an Increase in Liquidity

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### PRESIDENT SAYS IKRF IS TRUSTED BY IRANIAN NATION



TEHRAN - President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi, addressing the aid seekers of Imam Khomeini (RA) Relief Foundation, stated that Imam Khomeini (RA) Relief Foundation is trusted by every Iranian today. Raisi said at the national celebration of the empowerment of 100,000 aid seekers of the Imam Khomeini (RA) Relief Foundation: "In 1978 after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini (RA) Relief Foundation was one of the first institutions ordered by Late Imam Khomeini. The relief committee has had many blessings in paying attention to the deprived and the needy. There were great people in this group whose good memory is retold. He continued: "We have many charitable men and women in the country, and this help is not even related to people with wealth and facilities, there are people who are in need in some way, but they also meet the needs of others." President Raisi further stated that "altruism in the light of God's love is a manifestation of people's religious life" adding: "In the issue of Coronavirus pandemic, stores were looted in Western and European countries and there was no mercy, but none of these things happened in our country nor reported because the Leader of the Islamic Revolution proposed religious help and this religious help prevented us from witnessing these incidents in the country." The president stated that the relief committee is trusted by everyone today and pointed out that everyone trusts this committee and this trust has attracted people's attention. The focus of the relief committee is empowerment. Emphasizing that creating new jobs is a central issue for the current administration, he said: "The best news for the government is that the production line has started working and some people have got jobs."

### HEZBOLLAH TARGETS ISRAELI POSITIONS WITH SEVERAL ROCKETS, DRONES



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - The Hezbollah resistance movement launched rocket and drone attacks on positions in the Israeli-occupied territories in retaliation for a deadly attack by the regime's military on southern Lebanon carried out early on Sunday. In a statement released on Sunday, Hezbollah said that its fighters had targeted the Meron settlement in the occupied territories with Katyusha rockets. The group also launched a drone attack on Israeli artillery launchers in the Arar barracks and fired rockets at a gathering of the regime's soldiers east of the Birkat Risha outpost. The operation came "in response to the enemy's attacks on the steadfast southern villages and civilian homes, the most recent of which was the attack on ... Khirbet Selm and the martyrdom" of five people, it said. A family of four, including a father, his pregnant wife and their two sons, and another individual, were killed in the Israeli strike on a house in the Khirbet Selm village in southern Lebanon on Sunday, Lebanon's official National News Agency reported. The air raid also wounded at least nine others who lived nearby. Al Mayadeen's correspondent in the South of Lebanon reported an Israeli raid on the village of Khirbet Selm, killing several civilians and injuring others. Also in its statement, Hezbollah said that it had conducted the operation in solidarity with the "steadfast Palestinian people" in the Gaza Strip and their "brave and honorable resistance" against a genocidal Israeli war. The Israeli military said some 37 rockets were fired in two volleys from Lebanon at Meron, claiming that its so-called Iron Dome system had intercepted seven of the rockets.



### Annual Foreign Investment in Iran Tops \$4b

TEHRAN - The value of foreign investment in Iran within the framework of Direct Foreign Investment (FDI) has reached more than \$4 billion, the head of the Organization of Investment, Economic and Technical Assistant of Iran (OIETAI) announced. Ali Fekri, also Iran's deputy minister of economy, stated that over \$4 billion of foreign investment was attracted in each year of the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi, who assumed office in August 2021. Turning to Iran's accession to several major international and regional organizations, he said that Iran's relations were revitalized with international banks and regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS group of emerging economies to a great extent in the current administration. He went on to say that Iran's economic relations with most countries are on a growth trajectory in spite of the sanctions imposed against the country. Earlier, the organization announced that Iran's Foreign Investment Board in its latest session approved \$1.2 billion worth of projects within the framework of the FDI in various economic sectors. Last week the Taliban administration in Afghanistan committed to a \$35 million investment in Iran's Chabahar port, a strategic move that includes the development of commercial, residential, and administrative projects. This investment, announced by the Iranian Special Envoy to Kabul, Hassan Kazemi Qomi,

marks a significant step by the Afghan government to diversify its trade and economic partnerships beyond its traditional ties with neighboring countries. The investment was made public following a visit by an Afghan delegation to Iran, highlighting the deepening economic cooperation between the two nations. A notable aspect of this investment is its focus on the Fakher construction project within the Chabahar Special Economic Zone, which involves the development of a 25-story high-rise residential complex. This initiative is seen as a pivotal move for Afghanistan, aiming to improve its access to international waters and enhance its trade capabilities. Meanwhile, earlier Iranian Finance and Economic Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi said that Iran joining BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is hoped to bring noticeable achievements for the country in terms of attracting foreign investment. "In terms of attracting foreign investments, which is affected by Iran's joining the SCO and BRICS agreements, the legal preparations for joining these two agreements are underway, so, we are very hopeful that in 1403 [the next Iranian calendar year, which begins on March 20] we will witness much higher practical achievements than the current situation", the official noted. Iran officially became a member of the BRICS economic organization in January, as it seeks to overcome the impact of the U.S. sanctions.

### Iran-Armenia Ties Benefit Regional Security: Amirabdollahian

TEHRAN - The foreign minister of Iran called for the expansion of relations with Armenia, saying closer cooperation between the two neighbors will be to the benefit of regional peace, stability and security. In a meeting in Tehran, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan weighed plans for the expansion of relations between the two states in various fields. Referring to his visit to Yerevan in December and his positive negotiations with the Armenian prime minister and foreign minister, Amir-Abdollahian highlighted the importance of joint efforts to strengthen and promote cooperation in the political, economic, commercial, scientific and cultural fields. He noted that the expansion of neighborly relations with Armenia in all fields will serve the interests of the two countries and benefit peace, stability and sustainable security in the region without foreign interference. For his part, Kostanyan extended greetings from Armenia's foreign minister to the top Iranian diplomat. He noted that Armenia considers the expansion of relations with Iran as very important and beneficial to the stability and security of the region. The Armenian deputy foreign minister also presented a report on his talks with his Iranian counterpart as part of the new round of political consultations between the two countries and described the results as fruitful. Earlier Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for political affairs Ali Bagheri Kani had hosted Kostanyan for a new round of political negotiations between the two neighbors. Bagheri Kani and Kostanyan held their talks on Saturday, discussing key issues in Tehran-Yerevan relations as well as regional and international developments. The Iranian diplomat said that the bilateral relations are expanding, and continuous negotiations between officials of the two countries play a key role in the further promotion of the mutual cooperation. He referred to the importance of sustainable peace and stability in the region, and emphasized the need for a speedy implementation of a peace agreement between Armenia and the Azerbaijan Republic. Bagheri Kani also stressed the importance of resolving regional issues by the countries inside the region, saying that the inference by extra-regional countries is harmful and complicates conditions. The Iranian diplomat meanwhile referred to the Gaza war as well, and said that all governments should make efforts to bring an end to the ongoing humanitarian disaster and genocide in the Palestinian territory as soon as possible. The Armenian diplomat, on his part, said that Yerevan intends to develop its ties with Tehran within Armenia's policy of diversifying its foreign relations. He also thanked Iran for its stance that voices support for protecting territorial integrity and sovereignty of countries and preserving the status of internationally recognized borders. Kostanyan also welcomed the presence of Iranian companies in projects to develop Armenia's infrastructures, and emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation on transport projects.



### TOP OFFICIALS STRESS AIDING FLOOD-HIT SISTAN AND BALUCHESTAN



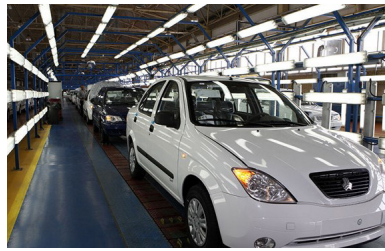
TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's President, Parliament Speaker, and Judiciary Chief stressed the need for the acceleration of sending aid to the flood-hit Sistan and Baluchestan province. Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi, Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and Judiciary Chief Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei held a meeting on Saturday to discuss issues related to the country. They stressed the need to accelerate the dispatch of aid and relief to the Sistan and Baluchestan province in the southeastern country that has been hit by a massive flood. They also thanked the Iranian nation's turnout in the recent nationwide elections for electing the new members of the parliament and the Assembly of Experts. President Raisi visited flood-hit areas in Sistan and Baluchestan Province last week to see the situation of the relevant government bodies' assistance to flood victims and efforts to rebuild damaged infrastructure. He talked to local officials and rescue teams and instructed the government-run bodies to intensify efforts in their humanitarian aid missions. "I came in person here to Sistan and Baluchistan to hold meetings to discuss the possibility of other floods in the future and to learn about the situation of the flood victims," the president said Tuesday afternoon in Negur District. At least 200 relief teams were dispatched to flood-hit areas of Sistan and Baluchestan to provide services to the victims.

### ISRAEL MAY RESORT TO CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN GAZA



GAZA (Dispatches) - Algeria has alerted the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that Israel may resort to using chemical weapons against Gaza given its insistence on violating international law. Salima Abdelhak, Algeria's permanent representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, issued the warning on Saturday at the 105th session of the Executive Council held in The Hague. This came after Algeria was chosen as the African region ambassador to assume the position of vice president of the Organization's Executive Council for a one-year term starting on May 12, 2024. Abdelhak said Algeria is concerned about the Palestinian tragedy and condemns Israeli atrocities against the Palestinian people in blatant violation of international law. She also warned of the potential resurgence of chemical weapons and the risk of their deployment by non-state entities, particularly amidst ongoing armed conflicts across the globe. There is a risk that the occupying power "may resort to the use of chemical weapons in its war against the Palestinians, given that the Zionist occupation is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and is not bound by its provisions," the ambassador added. Abdelhak went on to say that the "tragic and catastrophic" situation in Gaza underscores the importance of the OPCW persisting in its mission to uphold the Chemical Weapons Convention and ensure all countries adhere to its regulations. She said Algeria supports the request for assistance submitted by the State of Palestine to the Technical Secretariat related to opening an investigation into the use of this type of weapon in Palestine, calling on the Technical Secretariat to provide member states with regular updates about the outcomes of these investigations. She further noted that the increasing threat of chemical terrorism is becoming more concerning as tensions escalate in various regions, providing opportunities for terrorist organizations to engage.

# IRAN NEWS



## SAIPA REMOVES CEO AMID WEAK OUTPUT DATA

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Mohammad Ali Teymouri has been dismissed from his position as the CEO of Iran's second largest carmaker, Saipa, after the company posted a decline in production and failed to meet its targets. Official statistics show a 6% decrease in Saipa's automotive output in the first 11 months of this calendar year starting March 21. The company reported a 6-percent decline in the number of sedans it has produced in the eleven months to February 19. During this period, Saipa produced a total of 265,000 various types of vehicles, compared to 282,000 produced in the same period last year, indicating a significant decline in the company's production output. Upon a decision by Saipa's management board, Teymouri has been replaced with Javad Tavassoli Mehr, who had previously served as the CEO of Iran Khodro Diesel Company. Teymouri had promised that Saipa would reach a record production of 800,000 cars this year.

## TRADE BETWEEN IRAN, RUSSIA'S ASTRAKHAN UP 15%



MOSCOW (IRNA) - The minister of external relations of Russia's Astrakhan region has said that trade exchanges between the southern region and Iran grew by 15 percent in 2023. Vladimir Golovkov made the remark in an interview on Russian Channel 24 on Saturday night. He said that Russia's exports to Iran via Astrakhan grew by 10 percent in 2023, while imports from the Islamic Republic rose 38%. The Russian official also said that Iran's exports of citrus fruits were previously carried out by rail and road. But now, he added, such exports are also carried out using sea transport following an agreement between the Astrakhan region and the Iranian northern provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran. The Astrakhan Region is located in the southeast of the European part of Russia in the Caspian Lowland. Its administrative center is the city of Astrakhan.

## Iran Self-Sufficient in Repairing Plane Engines



TEHRAN - Iran has become self-sufficient in repairing plane engines and parts as the country faces restrictions to buy new aircraft and repair their parts due to Western sanctions. The achievement was made by scientists and experts at MAPNA Group, a leading holding company active in various areas of business from rail transportation and power plant projects to the aviation industry. Mehdi Akbarifard, a MAPNA expert, said that he and his colleagues have managed to repair both the engines and their parts of the airplanes of the country's air fleet, especially on CFM56 engines which are installed on Airbus A320 and Boeing 737 airliners. He told reporters on the sidelines of the Payam Aviation Industry Exhibition, held in Alborz Province, that their company also plans to produce engine parts for airplanes. According to Akbarifard, their first and foremost mission is to increase the durability of the country's air passenger fleet through renovating engine parts which he said will undergo various tests to examine their safety and flight performance based on international standards. He also said that the Iranian experts have made the achievement amid

restrictions to repair plane parts and engines due to Western sanctions. Earlier on Saturday, Deputy of the scientific department of knowledge-based economy development Javad Mashayekh said that regarding commercial and passenger airplanes, Iran used to be highly dependent on the purchase of airplane parts from foreigners and the sanctions imposed on the country caused a challenge in this regard. After the imposition of sanctions against Iran, some of the Iranian knowledge-based companies tried to produce homegrown car spare parts and repair and maintain aircraft engines. Saying that there is no longer a need to not send planes to foreign countries for repairs and maintenance, he added that even some countries, which were also sanctioned for various reasons and are unable to supply spare parts and maintenance services, come to Iran and seek help from Iranian specialists. For example, Russia has faced many sanctions in the aviation sector due to the crisis in Ukraine, and for this reason, it has concluded favorable contracts for maintenance services with Iranian knowledge-based companies, Mashayekh stressed.

## IRAN IS DEVELOPING MEGA SCIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The vice chairman of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Javad Karimi-Sabet, has said that the Islamic Republic is developing infrastructure for mega science projects as part of its policies to attain advanced technology and achieve sustainable development. The Iranian official made the announcement during his address to the second specialized meeting held on the sidelines of the World Youth Festival 2024 that took place on March 1-7 in the Russian resort city of Sochi, said Karimi-Sabet explained that Iran is working on mega science projects with the final aim of achieving sustainable development, as such projects leave great impact on different aspects of national economy while helping boost international cooperation, among other issues. In line with this policy, he said, Iran is cooperating in the project to develop Russia's PIK research reactor, adding that the project can also serve as a starting point for Tehran-Moscow cooperation on mega science, considering Iran's long-running activity in nuclear medicine as well as the country's comprehensive plan for using nuclear technology in health, food security, energy and the environment, as well as the capabilities at the PIK complex.

## BRICS Sets Up Anti-Money Laundering Working Group

TEHRAN (IRNA) - An Iranian official with the Ministry of Economy has confirmed that the BRICS group of emerging economies set up an anti-money laundering council nearly three months ago. Hadi Khani, head of the financial information center of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, said that the council is composed of chairpersons of departments for money laundering or chiefs of financial information centers of the member states. The Council for Combating Money Laundering has convened three times up to now, he said, noting that the members discussed its secretariat as well

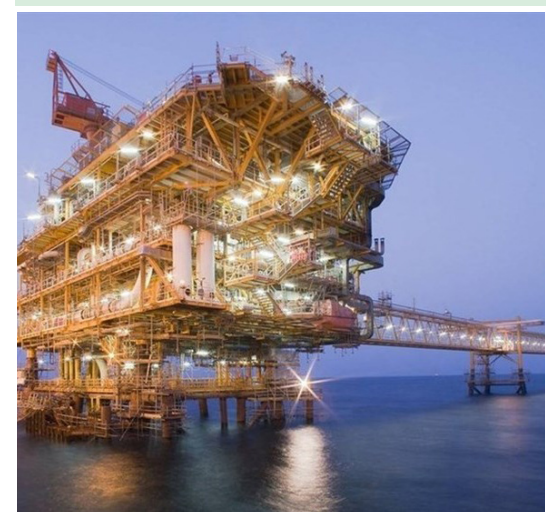
as interaction and cooperation to reach objectives regarding the campaign against money laundering and terrorism financing. The Islamic Republic of Iran is an active member of the council as a result of efforts made by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, and the Anti-Money Laundering High Council, he said. The council is operational now and its next meeting is scheduled to be held in Russia in April, Khani said, underlining that the member states try to turn the council into a mechanism that will actively secure the interests of the members.



## AFGHANISTAN TO BOOST TRADE THROUGH IRANIAN PORTS

KABUL (IRNA) - Afghanistan is seeking to expand trade with various states through the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, an Afghanistan official says. Abdul Salam Javad Akhundzadeh, the spokesman of the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the caretaker government of Afghanistan, made the remarks in an interview with IRNA published on Sunday. Last year, Afghanistan's trade with Iran exceeded \$1.73 billion, he said. Afghanistan imported goods from Iran last year valued at over \$1.7 billion, he noted. The exports of commodities from Afghanistan to the Islamic Republic in the said period accounted for \$29 million, Akhundzadeh further noted. Afghanistan is planning to increase most of its trade activities through Bandar Abbas, the capital of Hormuzgan province in southern Iran, and the country's southeastern port of Chabahar with other countries, he said.

## IRAN TO EARN \$900B BY IMPLEMENTING GAS PRESSURE-BOOSTING PROJECT



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iran will earn more than \$900 billion in revenues with the implementation of the gas pressure-boosting project in the South Pars (SP) Gas Field. Contracts for the project were concluded in a ceremony attended by competent Iranian companies and contractors with an investment of \$20 billion, the chief executive of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) stated. Mohsen Khojastehmehr said the project is an important one in ensuring sustainable energy security. The deputy oil minister went on to say that pressure boosting plays an important role in producing gas and gas condensates. Khojastehmehr put the value of investment made for launching this project at about \$20 billion, the implementation of which will bring more than \$900 billion in revenues to the country. Earlier, the NIOC chief had announced that \$14 billion of contracts will be signed for developing oil and gas fields and a project to boost pressure in the South Pars gas field. Several private-sector contractors will help carry out the gas pressure-boosting project in the joint South Pars field, he added.

## THOUSANDS MARCH IN MADRID TO PROTEST AGAINST CATALAN AMNESTY LAW

MADRID (Dispatches) - Thousands of Spaniards marched through the centre of Madrid to protest against an amnesty bill for Catalan separatists involved in a failed 2017 independence bid. Spain's ruling Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) reached a deal with two Catalan nationalist parties on Thursday, meaning the draft law should be passed in parliament later this month. The amnesty bill has prompted a series of large demonstrations as the conservative People's Party (PP), the far-right Vox and some sectors of the Socialist party oppose it. "As far as Vox is concerned, there will not be any truce or peace for this government," Santiago Abascal, leader of Vox, told reporters in Madrid during today's demonstration, where protesters waved the national flag and sang patriotic songs. The Socialists put forward the amnesty in exchange for support for Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's new term in office from the two Catalan separatist parties that agreed Thursday's deal. The amnesty would cover all events related to the Catalan independence drive from 2011, including a symbolic vote held in 2014 and an independence referendum in 2017, which courts declared as illegal.



## ISRAELIS RALLY FOR HOSTAGE RELEASE, NETANYAHU OUSTER



TEL AVIV (Dispatches) - Shouting "Elections now!" and "Bring back the hostages now!" thousands of Israeli demonstrators gathered in Tel Aviv Saturday to demand the departure of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after five months of war in Gaza. With t-shirts and banners featuring the names and pictures of hostages seized during Hamas's October 7 attack, the crowd demanded swift action to rescue the remaining captives. The attack on southern Israel that triggered the war resulted in the deaths of about 1,160 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli figures. Israel's retaliatory campaign to destroy Hamas has killed 30,960 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the Hamas-ruled territory's health ministry. Around 100 hostages remain in Gaza alive and 31 are presumed dead, Israel has said, a key source of demonstrators' despair. "We are a broken country," said Ora, a psychologist in her 60s who did not want to give her full name. Some protesters called for an immediate ceasefire, a position Netanyahu's government has so far rejected, arguing it would amount to a victory for Hamas. "Ceasefire? yes, we don't have any choice," said Israel Alva, a former soldier who now sells medical equipment, adding that there was no "political plan" for after the war. Mediators have been pushing for a new truce deal before the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, set to begin in the coming days. But US President Joe Biden said on Friday that a breakthrough was "looking tough." Shai Gill, a 50-year-old airline pilot who joined the Tel Aviv rally, said Netanyahu's government - already hit by a massive protest wave before the war - "cannot stay in power" after the October 7 attack. "They don't have the trust of the people and we have to go for an election," Gill said. He accused the government of being "driven by the motivation to stay in power, and not by what is good for the country. They just are clinging to their seats." Saturday's gathering bore some resemblance to mass protests against Netanyahu's controversial legal overhaul before the war in Gaza - "a century ago", as one protester put it with a sigh. Israel's top court in January ruled against a key component of the changes, which have largely been shelved.

## Ireland PM Concedes Defeat in Constitutional Referendum to Redefine Family



DUBLIN (Dispatches) - A dual referendum in Ireland on redefining family and women's roles in the constitution has been defeated, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said on Saturday. The government had supported the proposed changes, which would have widened the definition of the family and clarified the duties of women in society. "I think it's clear at this stage, that the family amendment and the care amendment referendums have been defeated," Varadkar said at a press conference in Dublin. The votes are the latest attempt to reflect the changing face of European Union member Ireland, and the waning influence of the once-dominant Catholic Church. But by 1200 GMT it was clear that counting was showing a trend towards a "No" on the two questions about care and family. Varadkar said the referendums had been "defeated comprehensively on a respectable turnout". "It was our responsibility to convince a majority of people to vote yes," he said. "I think we struggled to convince people of the necessity or need for the referendum at all, let alone detail the wording. That's obviously something we're going to have to reflect on into the weeks and months ahead." The two proposals - called the family amendment and the care amendment - aimed to change the text of Article 41 in the Irish constitution, written in 1937. The first asked citizens to expand the definition of family from those founded on marriage to also include "durable relationships" such as cohabiting couples and their children. The second proposed replacing old-fashioned language around a mother's "duties in the home" with a clause recognising care provided by family members to one another. The constitution, the core legal text of the nation, can only be modified through a national referendum. The country of 5.3 million opted to end constitutional limits on same-sex marriage in 2015 and abortion in 2018. All the major political parties had supported a "Yes-Yes" vote and until recently polls predicted a smooth passage for both on International Women's Day.



## UNRWA Chief Cautiously Optimistic Some Donors Will Resume Funding Soon

GENEVA (Dispatches) - The head of the UN Palestinian refugee agency said he was cautiously optimistic some donors would start funding it again within weeks, warning it was "at risk of death" after Israel alleged some of its staff took part in the October 7 Hamas attack. An independent review of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been launched under French former foreign minister Catherine Colonna, and the final report is expected to be published next month. "I am cautiously optimistic that within the next few weeks, and also following the publication of Catherine Colonna's report, a number of donors will return," UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said in an interview with Swiss broadcaster RTS that was aired today. Lazzarini told RTS that UNRWA was at "risk of death, at risk of dismantlement." Colonna, whose work on the review began in mid-February, said today she would visit Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Ramallah and Amman next week. UNRWA, which provides aid and essential services to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the Israeli-occupied West Bank and across the region, has been in crisis since Israel accused 12 of its 13,000 staff in Gaza of involvement in the October 7 attack on Israel that triggered the war in the Palestinian enclave. The allegations prompted several countries, including the United States, to pause funding. When the allegations emerged, UNRWA fired some staff members, saying it acted to protect the agency's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance, and an independent internal UN investigation was launched.

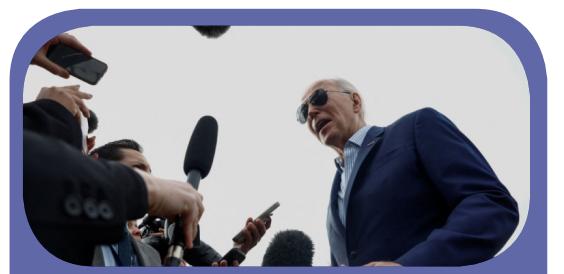
UNRWA said some employees released into Gaza from Israeli detention reported having been pressured by Israeli authorities into falsely stating that staff took part in the October 7 attack, according to a report by the agency dated February. "What is at stake is the fate of the Palestinians today in Gaza in the short term who are going through an absolutely unprecedented humanitarian crisis," Lazzarini told RTS. UNRWA runs schools, healthcare clinics and other social services in Gaza, and distributes humanitarian aid. The UN has said some 3,000 members of staff are still working to deliver aid in the enclave, where it says 576,000 people - one quarter of the population - are a step away from famine. "The agency I currently manage is the only agency that delivers public services to Palestinian refugees," Lazzarini said. "We are the quasi-ministry of education, of primary health. If we were to get rid of such a body, who would bring back the million of girls and boys who are traumatised in the Gaza Strip today back to a learning environment?" Meanwhile efforts to secure a deal on a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza are ongoing, Israel's intelligence agency Mossad said, despite dimming hopes for a truce during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Mossad chief David Barnea met on Friday with his US counterpart, CIA Director William Burns, to promote a deal that would see hostages released, Mossad said in a statement. US President Joe Biden said on Saturday that Burns remained in the region.

## Pope Says Ukraine Should Have Courage of the White Flag of Negotiations



ROME (Dispatches) - Pope Francis has said in an interview that Ukraine should have what he called the courage of the "white flag" and negotiate an end to the war with Russia that followed Moscow's full-scale invasion two years ago and that has killed tens of thousands. Francis made his comments in an interview recorded last month with Swiss broadcaster RSI, well before Friday's latest offer by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan to host a summit between Ukraine and Russia to end the war. Erdogan made the fresh offer after a meeting in Istanbul with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Zelenskyy has said while he wants peace he will not give up any territory. The Ukrainian leader's own peace plan calls for the withdrawal of Russian troops from all of Ukraine and the restoration of its state borders. The Kremlin has ruled out engaging in peace talks on terms set by Kyiv. A spokesman for Zelenskyy did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the pope's remarks. In the interview Francis was asked for his position on a debate between those who say Ukraine should give up as it has not been able to repel Russian forces, and those who say doing so would legitimise actions by the strongest party. The interviewer used the term

"white flag" in the question. "It is one interpretation, that is true," Francis said, according to an advance transcript of the interview and a partial video made available to Reuters on Saturday. It is due to be broadcast on March 20 as part of a new cultural program. "But I think that the strongest one is the one who looks at the situation, thinks about the people and has the courage of the white flag, and negotiates," Francis said, adding that talks should take place with the help of international powers. "The word negotiate is a courageous word. When you see that you are defeated, that things are not going well, you have to have the courage to negotiate," Francis said. It was believed to be the first time Francis has used terms such as "white flag" or "defeated" in discussing the Ukraine war, although he has spoken in the past about the need for negotiations. In a statement, Vatican spokesman Matteo Brunni said the pope had picked up on the term "white flag" spoken by the interviewer and used it "to indicate a stop to hostilities (and) a truce achieved with the courage of negotiations". Last year the 87-year-old pope sent a peace envoy, Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, to Kyiv, Moscow and Washington to sound out leaders in those countries.



## TRUMP, BIDEN TRADE SALVOS IN GEORGIA FACE-OFF

ATLANTA (Dispatches) - A defiant and bitter Donald Trump returned to the state where he faces criminal charges for undermining the 2020 US presidential election, looking to win the battleground of Georgia as a stepping-stone to taking back the presidency. Trump was stumping in Georgia on the same day as President Joe Biden, who campaigned in nearby Atlanta, signifying the critical role the state will play in November's general election. In his remarks, Trump repeatedly insisted falsely he was the victim of widespread election fraud and he blasted the Georgia district attorney, Fani Willis, who is prosecuting him for interfering with the 2020 election, accusing her of working with the Biden administration to target him. "They're trying to take us out, and it's not going to work," Trump told the crowd at an arena in Rome, Georgia. Biden, meanwhile, took aim at Trump for entertaining Hungary's right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban at his Florida club in recent days, accusing him of "sucking up to dictators and authoritarian thugs all around the world." "When he says he wants to be a dictator, I believe him," Biden said. There may not be a more hotly contested state than Georgia in the November 5 general election, which swung to Biden in the 2020 election and was central to Trump's fraud claims. Trump is expected to clinch his party's nomination on Tuesday when Georgia, along with Hawaii, Mississippi and Washington State hold nominating contests. On Thursday, Biden delivered a State of the Union speech laden with criticisms of Trump, accusing him of threatening democracy, kowtowing to Russia and sinking bipartisan immigration reform.

## Macron's Coalition Blasts Far Right at EU Election Campaign Launch

PARIS (Dispatches) - Allies of French President Emmanuel Macron on Saturday sought to cast the country's far-right forces as bedfellows of the Kremlin as the centrist alliance launched its campaign for European Parliament elections. Speaking in the northern city of Lille, 34-year-old Prime Minister Gabriel Attal lambasted the far-right National Rally (RN), which leads Macron's alliance by a wide margin ahead of the June elections, and accused them of betraying the interests of France and Europe. "They have always said 'no' to Europe," France's youngest prime minister said. "The only difference now is that they are hiding it a little and the 'no' has turned into a 'nyet'," Attal said, accusing Marine Le Pen's party of flirting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Edouard Philippe, Macron's former prime minister and leader of the Horizons party, warned about the risks of appeasement, citing British statesman Winston Churchill to castigate those who are feeding "a crocodile" hoping it will eat them "last". Macron, who plans to join the campaign at a later stage, has asked his ministers to fight the RN "every step of the way" as he tries to curb the rapid rise of the far right. In France's polarised political landscape, Russia's war against Ukraine has emerged as a major hot-button topic. Macron has been seeking to hammer home the importance of greater support for Ukraine and last week caused an uproar by refusing to rule out the dispatch of Western ground troops to the ex-Soviet country. In an apparent response to Macron, Putin has warned of a "real" risk of nuclear

war. The European elections are seen as a key milestone ahead of France's next presidential election in 2027, when Le Pen is expected to mount a fourth bid for the top job and Macron cannot stand again due to term limits. Macron has picked Valerie Hayer, the 37-year-old head of the Renew group in the European Parliament, to lead his camp in the polls. A daughter of French farmers, Hayer is relatively unknown to the public. Speaking in Lille, she also attacked the RN and said her camp's responsibility was to thwart "this worst-case scenario". "In this campaign we will be the only ones to defend Europe," she said. "In three months, we will face a choice: act or suffer, strengthen our Europe or give up in the face of those who want to tear it down," Hayer added. The head of the National Rally's list for the European elections is 28-year-old Jordan Bardella, a rising star of far-right French politics. Last weekend Bardella hammered on the far right's central theme of immigration when the party launched its election campaign in the southern port of Marseille. Members of the opposition have accused the president of using the conflict to boost his coalition's standing ahead of the European elections. Earlier this week, Bardella described Macron's stance on Ukraine as "no limits and no red lines". He said he had pleaded with the French leader "not to go to war with Russia" in talks earlier this week. On Saturday, Bardella dismissed the attacks on his party as an "unhealthy obsession". "Nothing on Europe, nothing on France, nothing for the French," he posted on X.





## Verstappen Dominates in Jeddah for Another Red Bull One-Two

JEDDAH (Dispatches) - Defending three-time world champion Max Verstappen consolidated his lead in this year's embryonic Formula One title race with another majestic victory on Saturday when he led Red Bull team-mate Sergio Perez home at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. The 26-year-old Dutchman dominated from pole position to chequered flag to finish 13.643 seconds ahead of Perez, who hung on to second despite taking a five-second penalty for an unsafe release from a pit-stop. The pair finished 18.6 seconds clear of Charles Leclerc of Ferrari, whose team-mate British teenager Oliver Bearman, at 18 the youngest ever Ferrari driver and third-youngest in F1 history, came home a remarkable seventh to make a points-scoring debut. Bearman, watched by his father David and Carlos Sainz, whose seat he was given when the Spaniard went into hospital for the removal of his appendix on Friday morning, drove with impressive calmness and aplomb. Oscar Piastri finished fourth for McLaren ahead of Fernando Alonso of Aston Martin, George Russell of Mercedes and Bearman with two more Britons Lando Norris and seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton taking eighth and ninth for McLaren and Mercedes. Nico Hulkenberg finished 10th for Haas. It was Verstappen's ninth consecutive victory, his second this year in Red Bull's second one-two finish and the 100th podium of his career, bringing him his 56th F1 win. "It's one of the more physical races, a tough one," said Verstappen. Perez said: "Overall, it is a great day for the team, on a different track to Bahrain, and now we have to keep this momentum going." "It was a bit boring

because the Red Bulls were too quick," said Leclerc, who clocked the fastest lap. He praised his unexpected new teammate. "Ollie did an incredible job... Today, seventh in his first race - it's hugely impressive. He is hugely talented." After another day of paddock intrigue, resulting in Red Bull calming troubled waters with senior advisor Helmut Marko confirmed as staying in his post to the satisfaction of Verstappen, there was great anticipation on the grid ahead of the floodlit race. Bearman was the centre of attention and showed no nerves as he lined up 11th. Pierre Gasly reported a gearbox problem to Alpine before the start when Verstappen pulled clear and Leclerc fought off a challenge from Perez, but the Mexican came back to take second at the start of lap four. Bearman stayed out of trouble as Gasly became the first retirement in 2024. "You are doing well, really well, but we are quicker than the cars in front," Ferrari told him in an early nudge to begin attacking before Lance Stroll lost control of his Aston Martin at Turn 22, smacking heavily into the barriers. The Safety Car was deployed, with Verstappen pitting for hards, gifting Norris the lead. The champion rejoined second ahead of Hamilton, who also did not pit. On the re-start, Bearman - who had pitted - made his first F1 passing move, lunging inside Yuki Tsunoda for 11th while Norris pulled a second clear of Verstappen at the front. The Dutchman sized up his prey and swept past Norris with the aid of DRS (Drag Reduction System) into Turn One on lap 13 to regain the lead while Perez, who had also pitted, took third from Hamilton.

## KANE EQUALS 60-YEAR-OLD RECORD



MUNICH (Dispatches) - Harry Kane scored a hat-trick as Bayern Munich thumped Mainz 8-1 on Saturday, equalling a 60-year-old record and keeping alive his team's hopes of catching leaders Bayer Leverkusen. Kane, who also laid on two assists, now has 30 goals in his first season in Munich colours, matched the record for a maiden campaign set by German legend Uwe Seeler for Hamburg in 1963-64. With nine games remaining, the England captain has also drawn nearer to the season record of 41 goals set by Bayern's Robert Lewandowski in 2020-21. The win was Bayern's second biggest this season, just behind their 8-0 demolition of Darmstadt in October. Midfielder Leon Goretzka, who scored a double, said: "It was a convincing win - the kind we've missed this season." Bayern are now seven points behind Xabi Alonso's unbeaten Leverkusen, who host lowly Wolfsburg. "It's our duty to keep giving it everything we've got," Goretzka said. "If Leverkusen get shaky, we've got to be there." Having sealed their progression to the Champions League quarter-finals on Tuesday with a 3-0 home win over Lazio, Bayern were direct and decisive against Mainz. Outgoing manager Thomas Tuchel said midweek Bayern needed to "win, win, win" to have any chance of catching Alonso's side and Kane obliged early, tapping in a Jamal Musiala pass after 13 minutes. Kane had a header saved seven minutes later, but Leon Goretzka was on hand to knock in the rebound. Nadiem Amiri wove an incredible free kick through Bayern's defence shortly after but England striker Kane restored Bayern's two-goal lead in first-half stoppage time, collecting a lofted Goretzka pass on the turn and blasting home. Thomas Mueller added a fourth early in the second-half to break Mainz's resistance, allowing Bayern to run riot, with further goals to Musiala, Serge Gnabry, Kane and Goretzka to bring the tally to eight.

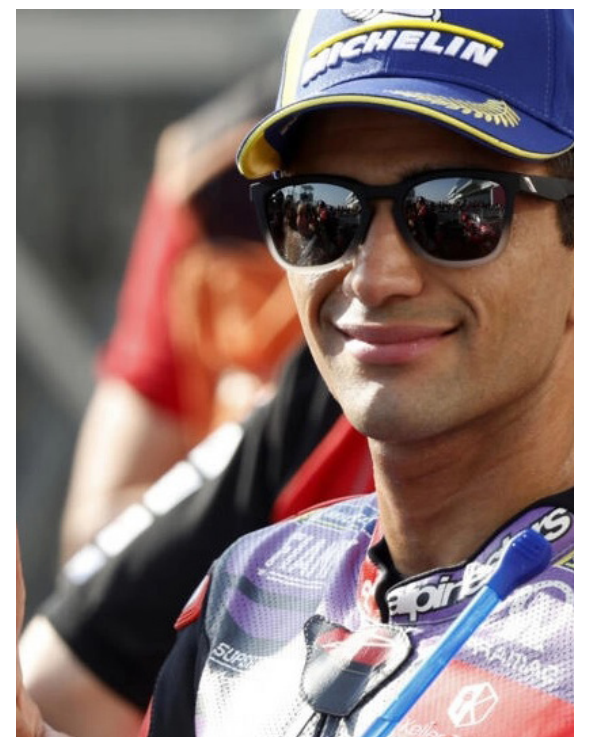
## Djokovic Ends Five-Year Indian Wells Absence With Difficult Win

INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic struggled to a winning comeback at the ATP-WTA Indian Wells Masters five years after his last appearance, defeating Aleksandar Vukic 6-2, 5-7, 6-3. World number one Djokovic, who had not played since losing an Australian Open semi-final to Jannik Sinner on January 26, is chasing a sixth title at the desert venue in the season's first Masters event. The 36-year-old Serb captured the 400th Masters-level victory of his career, joining Rafael Nadal as the only men to reach the 400 milestone at the elite level. The 24-time Grand Slam champion has won his last 11 Masters matches, collecting titles last season in Cincinnati and Paris Bercy. In the women's draw, third seed Coco Gauff rallied from four games down in the final set to defeat France's Clara Burel 2-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4). Former number one Naomi Osaka continued her comeback after motherhood as she reached the third round with a 7-5, 6-3 victory over Liudmila Samsonova. Djokovic claimed the opening set in 35 minutes with two service breaks but had to come from a break down in the third against his 69th-ranked Australian opponent. Vukic held to 6-5 in the second set and landed a reflex service return winner on the line to square the match at a set each. In the third set, top seed Djokovic broke for a 3-2 edge and closed out victory with a second break after just over two hours, notching his 51st win at the tournament where he first competed in 2006. "It was difficult to go through him - He played amazing," Djokovic said of Vukic. "He was ripping his forehead and crushing his serve." In the third set I managed to crack the code. I stepped it up and finished the match in great style." Danish seventh seed Holger Rune was handed a free ride into the third round when former Wimbledon finalist Milos Raonic of Canada pulled out of their match with an injury. US 12th seed Taylor Fritz, the 2022 winner, dispatched Alejandro Tabilo of Chile 7-6 (7/2), 6-2 in 73 minutes, pumping out 14 aces among his 27 winners. No. 13 Grigor Dimitrov, a 2021 semi-finalist, advanced past Alexandre Muller of France 7-5, 6-2. Britain's Cameron Norrie reached the third round over Italy's Lorenzo Sonego 6-4, 6-4. Last weekend's Dubai champion, Ugo Humbert, the 14th seed from France, defeated American Patrick Kyson by the same scoreline. Reigning US Open champion Gauff, who had a first-round bye, needed more than two and a quarter hours to advance. Third-ranked Gauff was playing in front of a home crowd for the first time since winning her first Grand Slam title last

September. Gauff, who turns 20 next Wednesday, broke a WTA record by reaching 50 wins as a teenager at the Masters 1000 level, a category established in 2009. Gauff trailed her 47th-ranked French opponent 4-0 and 5-2 in the deciding third set, but was able to power back and throw it into a tie-breaker. She paved the way by breaking Burel to love as the Frenchwoman served for victory leading 5-4. In the tie-breaker, Gauff advanced on her third match point as Burel swung wide. Fifth-ranked Jessica Pegula was knocked out 6-2, 3-6, 6-3 by Anna Blinkova, who took revenge for a loss to the American at the start of the month in San Diego. Blinkova, ranked 45th, added a second high-profile name to her victims' list after defeating Elena Rybakina at the Australian Open. Unseeded Emma Raducanu benefitted as Dayana Yastrenska retired four games into their match with an unspecified injury, handing the Briton a 4-0 win and a place in the third round.



## MARTIN SPRINTS TO FIRST POINTS OF NEW MOTOGP SEASON IN QATAR



LUSAIL (Dispatches) - Jorge Martin got the first points on the board in the new MotoGP season, winning the sprint in Qatar with defending double world champion Francesco Bagnaia in fourth. Pole-sitter Martin, narrowly beaten by Bagnaia for the title last year, led from the flag under lights at the Lusail International circuit. The Spanish rider was followed across the line by South African Brad Binder (KTM) and Aleix Espargaro (Aprilia). But Martin revealed afterwards that it had not been all plain sailing on his Ducati-Pramac bike. "It was fast, today I was really close to crashing on a lot of corners. We need to work on the bike and let's see tomorrow if we can enjoy a big one (in the grand prix itself)." Binder was all smiles, saying: "It's always awesome to finish on the podium, especially in the first race back." Martin, who had claimed the front of the grid with a record lap time in qualifying earlier, led Binder into the first corner of MotoGP's 75th anniversary season. The two front runners quickly built up a half second gap from the rest of the pack led by Aleix Espargaro. Bagnaia, who set off from fifth, was up a place by the end of the first lap. Fabio di Giannantonio, winner of the grand prix in Qatar last year, took a thumping fall from his VR46 Ducati bike on lap eight. Bagnaia was up into a podium place with seven laps to go, with Marc Marquez up to fourth on his first outing since switching from Honda to Ducati's satellite Gresini team. Running wide at a corner a few laps later left the door open for Espargaro to nip past the former six-time MotoGP world champion. And Espargaro got the measure of Bagnaia with one lap left to knock 'Pecco' off the first of 21 sprint podiums in 2024.

## Havertz Takes Arsenal Top of Premier League

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal needed Kai Havertz's late winner to go top of the Premier League by beating Brentford 2-1 as Manchester United kept alive their faint hopes of finishing in the top four with a 2-0 win over Everton. Liverpool's blockbuster clash against Manchester City at Anfield gave the Gunners the chance to edge ahead in the title race. An eighth consecutive Premier League win took Mikel Arteta's men one point ahead of Liverpool and two clear of defending champions City. But they had to overcome a glaring error from Aaron Ramsdale on his return to the Arsenal goal. All seemed to be going to plan for the home side when Declan Rice continued his fine goalscoring form by heading in Ben White's cross on 19 minutes. However, there was a sting in the tale in a moment Ramsdale will want to forget in first-half stoppage time. The England international was making just his second Premier League start since September as the on-loan David Raya was ineligible to feature against his parent club. Ramsdale's lack of match sharpness may have been a factor as he dallied on the ball as his attempted clearance ricocheted off Yoane Wissa into the net. The Arsenal goalkeeper bounced back after the break to make vital saves from Ivan Toney's spectacular effort and Nathan Collins' header. Havertz then bulleted home a header from another White cross four minutes

from time. "Massive win for us. These points were so important for us and you could see that in the second half," said Havertz. "We didn't play our best in the first half but it's even better to win it this way." Everton were made to pay for conceding two first-half penalties as Bruno Fernandes and Marcus Rashford scored from the spot. Erik ten Hag's team are now eight points adrift of fourth-placed Aston Villa and three behind Tottenham in fifth, who face each other on Sunday, in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League. "We need wins," said Ten Hag. "We're still in the hunt but it depends on them." "We have to win our games but we know, in the Premier League, everyone is killing everyone." Everton sit four points above the relegation zone as their winless league run extended to 11 games. Alejandro Garnacho was the difference maker at Old Trafford as his quick feet twice provoked spot-kicks. James Tarkowski was the first Everton defender lured into a mistimed challenge on Garnacho after 10 minutes and Fernandes rolled home his eighth goal of the season. Garnacho danced through a series of challenges in the 36th minute before he was chopped down by Ben Godfrey. Fernandes passed over penalty duties to Rashford and Jordan Pickford was unable to deny the forward, who fired home his fifth goal in nine league games.

