

Statistics of Pakistan's Ministry of Commerce Indicate That Iran's Export of Non-Oil Products to This Neighboring State in the First Quarter of the Current Year Registered a 16 Percent Growth Compared to Last Year's Corresponding Period.

# IRAN NEWS

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei Has Said That the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Is the Greatest Anti-Terror Organization in the World

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### Israeli Support for Anti-Iran Terrorist Group Revealed



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Israeli channels and groups have recently come under scrutiny for their financial and moral support of the anti-Iran terrorist organization Jaish al-Adl (known in Iran as Jaish al-Dhulm). Seeking financial assistance, Jaish al-Adl shared a cryptocurrency address to solicit financial aid, which Israeli channels and groups subsequently amplified, declaring their support for the terror group's aim. The Zionists explicitly stated, "This electronic wallet belongs to freedom fighters against ... the Islamic Republic of Iran and fights against them inside Iran; support them as much as you can." This revelation underscores the close ties between terrorists of Jaish al-Adl and its Israeli supporters, as evidenced by their financial backing. Previously, the Israeli media outlet "Terror Alarm" had openly expressed support for Jaish al-Adl terrorists, further solidifying the connection between the two entities. The terror outfit is responsible for numerous attacks against civilians and military personnel in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. The extremist group, self-identified as defenders of the rights of the people of Balouchestan, cited concerns over the development of Makran coasts as justification for their recent terror acts in towns of Chabahar and Rask in the south of Sistan and Baluchestan province. This rationale, however, has been met with public outrage, revealing Jaish al-Adl's hostility towards the region's inhabitants.

### Israeli Forces Hit by New Missile Attacks



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movement has carried out a missile strike against a gathering of the Israeli regime's forces in southern Lebanon. The movement announced the development in a statement, saying it had targeted the forces near the town of al-Dhahira in the country's Tyre District on Monday. The missile strike set off missile sirens in Galilee in the northern part of the occupied territories, Qatar's Al Jazeera television network reported. Hezbollah said it had conducted the Monday operation "in support of our steadfast Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and in support of their brave and honorable resistance." The Israeli regime has been waging sporadic attacks against Lebanon since October 7, 2023, when it launched a genocidal war against Gaza. The attacks have prompted a firefight with Hezbollah. On Sunday, the resistance group released a video showing its fighters shooting down an advanced Israeli drone over southern Lebanon after it violated the Arab country's airspace. Hezbollah said in a statement that the Israeli Hermes 450 drone had been shot down when "it was attacking our... people." Also on Sunday, Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television network said some 62,000 Israeli settlers had fled areas lying in the northern part of the occupied territories amid fear of strikes by Hezbollah. Hezbollah fought off two Israeli wars against Lebanon in 2000 and 2006, forcing a humiliating retreat upon the Tel Aviv regime's military on both occasions. By the way, fighters from the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah shot down an advanced Israeli drone over southern Lebanon. "The Islamic Resistance confirms that the enemy drone that its fighters shot down in the airspace of the al-Aishiya area in southern Lebanon is a Hermes 450," the movement said in a late Sunday statement, Press TV reported. Hezbollah added in its statement that the Israeli Hermes 450 drone was shot down when "it was attacking our honorable and steadfast people." It said shooting down of the drone was part of the movement's operations carried out in support of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

### Raisi in Pakistan to Improve Security, Trade Ties

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi arrived in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad on Monday on a key official visit aimed at promoting security and trade ties. Heading a high-ranking politico-economic delegation, Raisi arrived in Islamabad on Monday on a two-leg visit which will also take him to Sri Lanka. He was welcomed by Pakistani Minister of Housing and Works Mian Riaz Hussain Pirzada and a number of officials upon his arrival. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif welcomed the Iranian president. During the ceremony, the national anthems of the two countries were played and the Iranian president reviewed a guard of honor of the Pakistan Armed Forces. Immediately after the ceremony, Raisi and Sharif held a private meeting. The Iranian president and Pakistani prime minister will co-chair a session of the two countries' high-ranking delegations. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and President Raisi, in a meeting held here at the PM House on Monday, agreed to bolster bilateral relations in diverse fields, particularly in combating terrorism in the region. The meeting saw a comprehensive exchange on enhancing Iran-Pakistan relations across various sectors, underscoring the significance of fostering stronger ties between the two nations. Key areas of discussion included strategies to augment trade volumes and bolster communication networks, reflecting a shared commitment to advancing economic collaboration. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif highlighted the historical significance of President Raisi's visit, marking it as the first head of state visit to Pakistan following the February 2024 general elections, a gesture warmly embraced by the Pakistani nation. Before leaving Tehran for Islamabad on Monday morning, Raisi said Iran considers Pakistan's security as its own, saying that promotion of security along the border with Pakistan will benefit both nations. The Iranian president



said the regional tour to Pakistan and Sri Lanka also aims to boost economic and trade ties. "In line with its neighborliness policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran is determined to take new steps to develop and promote relations with neighboring countries," he added. The president noted that Iran has deep-rooted, civilizational and historical relations with Pakistan as one of the most important countries in South Asia. Tehran and Islamabad have always attached importance to political and economic ties as well as regional and extra-regional cooperation, Raisi said. Raisi further emphasized that Tehran and Islamabad share the same stance on human rights, defending the oppressed Palestinian people, and fighting terrorism. He noted that various topics, in particular economic and trade, energy and border issues, are on the agenda of his talks with Pakistani authorities. He emphasized that the two neighboring countries aim to increase the value of their trade and economic exchanges to \$10 billion given their great capacities. The Iranian president also said that the expansion of economic and trade ties with Sri Lanka is among the goals of his trip to Colombo. Pointing to the considerable growth in cooperation between the two countries in the technical and engineering sectors, Raisi expressed hope that his visit will be a turning point in the promotion of ties between Iran and Sri Lanka. In a meeting with Pakistani Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar in Islamabad on Monday, Raisi said relations between Iran and Pakistan are beyond mere good neighborliness and are based on fraternity and deep and historical bonds. The Iranian president added that foreign powers are not interested in the expansion of ties between the two neighboring states. Given the great and numerous capacities of Tehran and Islamabad, the two sides should further develop ties to serve both nations' interests, he emphasized.

### Hezbollah Lauds Operation True Promise as Historic Event in Anti-Israel Struggle



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - A senior official with the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement has hailed Iran's recent retaliatory operation against Israel, describing the extensive missile and drone strikes as a historic development in the course of the struggle against the occupying Tel Aviv regime. Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, head of Hezbollah's Executive Council, said on Sunday that the Islamic Republic of Iran has long been a staunch advocate of resistance movements, stressing that the Axis of Resistance is deeply indebted to the country's generous support in this regard. "Throughout the retaliatory operation that the Islamic Republic of Iran carried out against the occupying enemy, scores of Iranian missiles and drones filled the skies over the occupied Palestinian territories. This was a historic development and presented a fine and outstanding example of what will soon unravel in support of Palestine," he noted. Safieddine added that Iran's retaliatory strikes came as the country simply employed only a tiny fraction of its military strength, and did not bring its sophisticated indigenous munitions into action. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) launched extensive missile and drone strikes last week on the Israeli-occupied territories. The retaliatory strikes, dubbed Operation True Promise, inflicted damage on Israeli military bases across the occupied lands. It came after the Israeli attack on April 1 against the Iranian consulate in Damascus, located next to the embassy building in Damascus's Mezzeh district. The airstrike killed two senior Iranian military personnel who were on an advisory mission to Syria as well as five of their accompanying officers. Elsewhere in his remarks, Safieddine described Israel as the outward symbol of cruelty and criminality in the world. He continued to assert that the United States and the Israeli regime have clinched an agreement in order for the latter to be given carte blanche for genocide against Palestinians.

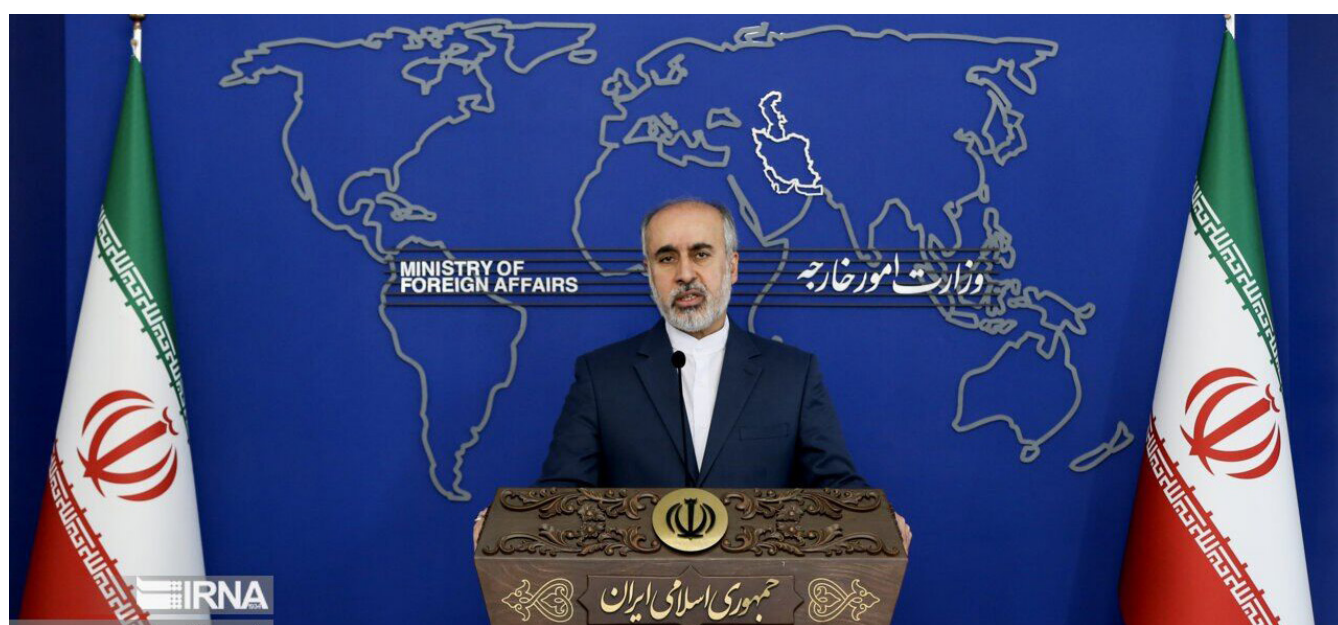
### Missiles, Drone Hit Two U.S. Military Bases in Eastern Syria



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Two major military bases used by the occupying American forces in Syria have come under missile and drone attacks amid simmering anti-US sentiments in the region over Washington's support for the Tel Aviv regime's genocide in Gaza. According to Lebanon's al-Mayadeen news channel, the attacks came early Monday, targeting the US military base in the al-Omar oil field as well as Kharab al-Jir base, both in eastern Syria. The report added that the US base at the al-Omar oil field was targeted with four missiles, while the Kharab al-Jir base was targeted with three missiles and a drone. Al-Mayadeen said the two bases, which are the most important American bases in eastern Syria, were attacked less than an hour apart. There has been no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks. There were also no reports on any possible casualties or the extent of damage at the two bases. Quoting two Iraqi security sources, Reuters said the missiles were launched from the town of Zummar in northern province of Nineveh. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which is an umbrella group of anti-terror fighters, has claimed responsibility for most previous retaliatory strikes on US military bases in Iraq and neighboring Syria. The group has asserted that its strikes on American and Israeli military sites will continue as long as the Tel Aviv regime's genocidal war on the besieged Gaza Strip continues. Israel launched its brutal onslaught on Gaza, targeting hospitals, residences, and houses of worship after the territory's resistance movements launched a surprise attack, dubbed Operation al-Aqsa Storm, against the usurping regime on October 7, 2023. At least, 34,097 Palestinians have been killed, most of them women and children, and 76,980 others sustained injuries in the regime's genocide. More than 1.7 million people have been internally displaced as well. The United States has supplied Israel with weapons and intelligence support and blocked UN Security Council resolutions that called for a humanitarian ceasefire in the Palestinian territory.

## Iran Proved It Respects Int'l Mechanisms to Punish Aggressor

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani says the Islamic Republic conducted its military action against the Zionist regime after interference by the U.S. prevented Tehran from punishing the regime within international mechanisms which Iran respects. Kanaani made the comments during his weekly press briefing in Tehran on Monday, more than a week after Iran launched hundreds of missiles and drones at the Israeli regime's military targets to punish it for a strike earlier in April against the Iranian consulate in Syria. "As a committed member state of the UN Charter, Iran proved that it had intended to punish the aggressor within international mechanisms, but unfortunately the Islamic Republic failed to fulfill its duty because of interference by the US and some other members of the UN Security Council (UNSC)", he said, in reference to a move by the US, France, and the UK to prevent the passage of a UNSC resolution that would have condemned Israel for its attack on the Iranian embassy. The spokesman elaborated on the diplomatic measures Iran took to explain that how the Israeli regime had violated international law and conventions by attacking the Iranian embassy on April 1. Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian's trips, phone conversations and letters sent to international bodies were just part of the Iranian diplomatic efforts that resulted in a UNSC debate on the Israeli attack, Kanaani said. Iran showed that it respects international mechanisms to punish the regime, he noted, adding that the Islamic Republic's military action against Israel was a legitimate move. The recent incident was not of great importance, and even the Israeli regime refused to propagate it because it was not valuable, Kanaani said, adding that those objects were quadcopters that attempted to conduct operations but were shot down by Iran's defense system, and the foe could not benefit from this move. The spokesman added that Iran has proven it will not hesitate to respond to any party when it comes to maintaining its national security, and in line with its continued measures, Iran will keep on defending its national security in accordance with international laws. If further sanctions are imposed on Iran, it would be considered as a reward for the aggressive Zionist regime, he said, noting that such a move would also be seen as an illegal deed against a government, which resorted to legal measures to deter this belligerent regime. He also argued that it is regrettable that the European Union has not spoken out against the Zionist regime, which has been conducting aggression against the people of Gaza for nearly seven months and is engaged in massacres and genocide, but the bloc speaks about imposing sanctions on Iran, and if they do so, the act will be documented as a shameful action in history. Security in the South Caucasus is one of the important priorities of Iran's foreign ministry and other relevant bodies, and this issue affects the security of the region, Kanaani said.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iran Red Crescent Society Eyes Chairmanship of BRICS Health Working Group

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Head of Iran Red Crescent Society (IRCS) Pir-Hossein Koulivand has said that the IRCS is the main candidate for chairmanship of the Health Working Group of BRICS group of developing countries. He made the remarks during a meeting in Tehran on Sunday with Alena Peryshkina, Co-Chair of the BRICS Civil Forum. Pointing to different potentials of IRCS, Koulivand said that with 3 million volunteer members and 70,000 specialized aid workers, this society provides services in road, mountain and seaside accidents round the clock. He said that the IRCS enjoys 18 helicopters, hundreds of aid vehicles and also has established warehouses for saving first aid and essential items to help in different accidents. The official also pointed to rescue operations carried out by IRCS in earthquakes in Türkiye, Afghanistan and Syria as part of the overseas activities of the society. Koulivand added that the IRCS also has several health centers across the world which are providing services to people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The BRICS official, in the meantime, hailed the IRCS huge potentials in different areas, voicing BRICS's willingness to cooperate with this society.

## Agrifood Exports Hit \$6.3b in One Year



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran has exported as much as \$6.3 billion worth of animal, fishery, agricultural and food products in the past calendar year to late March, according to the spokesman for the country's House of Industry, Mine and Trade. Rouhollah Latifi said that the figure indicates a 20.5% hike when compared to that of a year earlier. He added the Iran exported more than 8.8 million tons of animal, fishery, agricultural, greenhouse, dairy and food products in the one-year timespan which marks a 12.2% year-on-year increase. The spokesman also added that as much as 136.4 million tons of non-oil goods, valued at more than \$49 billion, were exported from the country last year. He went on to say that the 15 neighboring countries were responsible for receiving some 87 and 80 percent of the Iranian exports in terms of tonnage and value respectively. Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Pakistan and Afghanistan were the top five destinations for Iran's exports of agrifood products over the past year, Latifi said.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

جمهوری اسلامی ایران  
وزارت امور خارجه

## Israel's aggression, crimes in Gaza root cause of crisis in region

TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister says the Israeli regime's crimes against Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip are the main cause of the existing crisis in the West Asia region. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was speaking in a phone conversation with his Finnish counterpart, Elina Valtonen, on Sunday. During the conversation, the two top diplomats discussed the latest developments in bilateral relations as well as the ongoing situation in West Asia. "The Zionist regime's acts of aggression and crimes in Gaza constitute the root cause of the crisis [in the West Asia region]," the Iranian foreign minister said, stressing that Iran does not seek to foment tension in the region. He added, "Establishment of peace in the region requires adoption of a correct approach [by all parties] and avoiding double-standard and contradictory stances." Noting that all involved parties should try to stop the war in Gaza, Amir-Abdollahian urged the European governments to "immediately stop selling weapons to the aggressive and occupying Israeli regime, which are used to

massacre Palestinian women and children, in order to help restore stability and sustainable security to the region." Israel launched its brutal onslaught on the Gaza Strip, targeting hospitals, residences, and houses of worship after the territory's resistance movements launched a surprise attack, dubbed Operation al-Aqsa Storm, against the usurping regime on October 7, 2023. At least 34,097 Palestinians have been killed, most of them women and children, and 76,980 others sustained injuries in the regime's genocidal war. More than 1.7 million people have been internally displaced as well. Finland's foreign minister, for her part, noted that any increase in tensions in the West Asia region would not benefit anybody, condemning any measure that could further escalate regional tensions. Valtonen also expressed concern about the rising civilian toll in Israel's onslaught on Gaza, noting that establishment of an immediate ceasefire without any preconditions is a major priority for her country.

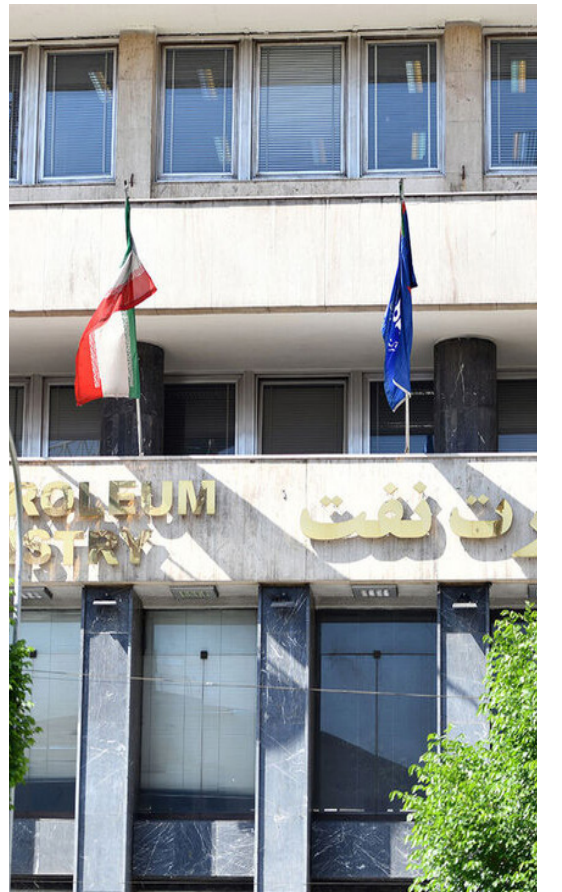
## Commodities Traded On IME Exceeds 12m Tons Last Month



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Within the Iranian month of Farvardin ending on April 19, the Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) witnessed trade of 12,217,336 tons of commodities with a total trading value of nearly \$3b on its physical market, logging growths of 11.1% in volume of trades compared with the month before that. According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor, trade of 9,967,083 tons of commodities valued at more than \$2b. On this floor the IME sold 4,874,540 tons of cement, 2,300,500 tons of iron ore, 1,651,254 tons of steel, 1,130,100 tons of sponge iron, 66,400 tons of zinc, 39,395 tons of aluminum, 16,645 tons of copper, 400 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 200 tons of cast iron and 45 tons of precious metals concentrate. There were also 1 tons of saffron sold on its agricultural trading floor. Furthermore, the exchange saw trade of 2,111,435 tons of commodities worth more than \$978m on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor. Items traded on this floor included 669,935 tons of bitumen, 666,100 tons of vacuum bottom, 380,504 tons of polymeric products, 197,000 tons of lube cut, 136,246 tons of chemicals, 41,935 tons of sulfur, 19,294 tons of oil, 1,560 tons of feedstocks and 835 tons of waterproofing materials.

## Oil Ministry, AEOI Sign MOU



TEHRAN (Shana) - Oil Ministry and Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on Monday to boost cooperation in a range of different issues including technology.

Under the terms of the deal, the two sides will cooperate on a variety of issues including realization of general policies of the Islamic establishment, going ahead with the resistance economy policies, meeting mutual needs and boosting technological capabilities of the country.

The 10-articles memorandum also covers issues like cooperation in doing research and deployment of new nuclear technologies such as using rays in oil, gas, refining and petrochemical sectors as well as facilitating providing services and products.

The document was signed by Atomic Energy Organization of Iran's deputy for strategic planning and supervision, Mohammad Ghannadi Maraghe and the deputy Minister of Petroleum for Engineering and Research, Vahidreza Zeidifar, on behalf of the Oil Ministry.

The two sides also reached an agreement to establish a strategic committee, comprising the two sides' representatives, in order to facilitate and accelerate implementation of the MoU's contents and take other necessary steps with regard to enforcement of the document.

## Defense Diplomacy Part of Iran's Foreign Policy

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian ambassador to Sri Lanka Alireza Delkosh has said that defense diplomacy is a part of Iran's foreign policy that serves as a tool in achieving major goals, as well as establishing peace, stability, and security. The commemoration ceremony for the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Day was held on the threshold of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's official visit to Sri Lanka, amid a warm welcome from the presence of political, economic, and military representatives of Sri Lanka and ambassadors of China, Russia, Qatar, Türkiye, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cuba and Bangladesh. During the ceremony, Delkosh congratulated Iran's Army Day and highlighted that the Islamic Republic of Iran's Army is unique in bolstering its military capabilities and turning itself into a fully popular force in the country. Referring to the Israeli terrorist attack

on Iran's consulate building in Syria on April 1, 2024, he underlined that Iran's retaliatory response has been carried out in line with Article 51 of the United Nations. The Defense Attaché at the Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran to Sri Lanka, Colonel Homayoun Aliyari, went on to point out the importance of the Indian Ocean, the geopolitical significance of Sri Lanka, and some of the threats to the region, including the presence of trans-regional military forces, and noted that the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran are fully prepared to cooperate with neighboring and regional countries for establishing peace and security. Meanwhile, Sri Lankan Defense Secretary General Kamal Gunaratne congratulated Iran's Army Day during the ceremony and added that Iran had always supported Sri Lanka during its 30 years of civil wars, and their cooperation led to the defeat of terrorism in Sri Lanka.



## Ties With Serbia Important for His Country

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has told his Serbian counterpart that the Islamic Republic attaches importance to its relations with the European country. Amir-Abdollahian and Serbia's Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić talked on the phone on Sunday, discussing relations between their countries. The top Iranian diplomat said that his country respects Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, adding that the Islamic Republic's policy is to support security and stability in the Balkan region. The promotion of co-existence among different ethnic groups and followers of various religions is also a main policy of Iran, he added. The Serbian foreign minister expressed satisfaction with close interactions between high-ranking officials of the two countries, and announced Serbia's solidarity with Iran. He also said that independent governments need to enhance cooperation in the face of attempts by some Western countries to put pressure on them through adopting double standards and using international bodies as a tool to achieve their goals. The two foreign ministers stressed the need for further expansion of ties between their countries.

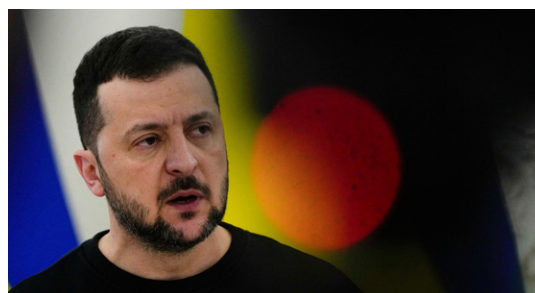
# IRAN NEWS



## Tens of Thousands Evacuated From Storm in South China as flood warnings mount

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Eleven people are missing following storms that battered southern China, state media said Monday, with tens of thousands evacuated away from the torrential downpours. Heavy rain has descended upon the vast southern province of Guangdong in recent days, swelling rivers and raising fears of severe flooding that state media said could be of the sort only "seen around once a century." "A total of 11 people are missing after continuous heavy rainfall hit many parts of (Guangdong) in recent days," state news agency Xinhua said, citing the local emergency management department. More than 53,000 people have been relocated across the province, it added. Of those, more than 45,000 were evacuated from the northern Guangdong city of Qingyuan, which straddles the banks of the Bei River, a tributary in the wider Pearl River Delta, state media reported Sunday. Heavy rain is expected to continue on Monday, with meteorological authorities forecasting "thunderstorms and strong winds in Guangdong's coastal waters" - a stretch of sea bordering major cities including Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Neighbouring provinces, including parts of Fujian, Guizhou and Guangxi, will also be affected by "short-term heavy rainfall", the National Meteorological Centre said. "It is expected that the main impact period of strong convection will last from daytime until night," it added. Guangdong province is China's densely populated manufacturing heartland, home to around 127 million people.

## Zelenskiy Urges Speedy Passage of Ukraine Aid in U.S. Senate



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy welcomed the passage of \$60 billion in aid for Ukraine by the U.S. House of Representatives but urged Washington to quickly turn the bill into law and proceed with the actual transfer of weapons, saying long-range arms and air defense systems were top priorities. In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press", Zelenskiy said the passage of the bill would send a powerful message to Russia that Washington stands by Kyiv and that it would not be "a second Afghanistan." "I think this support will really strengthen the armed forces of Ukraine and we will have a chance for victory," Zelenskiy said through an interpreter. During the interview he repeatedly urged U.S. lawmakers to take swift action to pass the bill in the Senate. He said Ukraine urgently needed U.S. long-range weapons including ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile Systems) and air defense systems to turn around its fortunes on the battlefield. "This is crucial. These are the priorities now," Zelenskiy said. ATACMS are long-range guided missiles. The White House last October confirmed that it had provided Kyiv with a type of ATACMS capable of hitting targets up to 165 km (102 miles) away. Ukraine had repeatedly asked the U.S. administration for the ATACMS and pledged not to use them inside Russia's territory. The U.S. House of Representatives, with broad bipartisan support, passed a \$95 billion legislative package providing security assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. Aid for Ukraine had been held up for months, because of the opposition of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who urged Republican lawmakers to block it. Almost 26 months since the 2022 invasion, Russia is slowly advancing in eastern Ukraine and has ramped up its bombardments of cities and towns behind the front lines amid a slowdown in Western military assistance. The legislation now proceeds to the Democratic-majority Senate, which passed a similar measure more than two months ago. U.S. leaders, from Democratic President Joe Biden to top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell, had been urging Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson to bring it up for a vote. The Senate is set to begin considering the bill on Tuesday, with some preliminary votes that afternoon. Final passage is expected sometime next week, which would clear the way for Biden to sign it into law.



## Conflicts Push Global Military Expenditure in 2023 to All-Time High

LONDON (Dispatches) - Global military expenditure saw its steepest increase in over a decade in 2023, reaching an all-time high of \$2.4 trillion as wars and rising tensions fuelled spending across the world, researchers said Monday. Military spending rose across the globe with particularly large increases in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, according to a new report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). "Total military spending is at an all time high ... and for the first time since 2009, we saw spending increase across all five geographical regions," Nan Tian, a senior researcher at SIPRI, told AFP. Military spending rose by 6.8 percent in 2023, the "steepest year-on-year increase since 2009," according to the report. "It's a reflection of the deterioration of peace and security around the world. There's really not a region in the world where things have gotten better," Tian said. The United States, China, Russia, India and Saudi Arabia were the top five spenders, respectively. The continuation of the war in Ukraine led to an increase in spending by Ukraine, Russia and "a whole host" of European countries, Tian said. Russia boosted spending by 24 percent, reaching \$109 billion in 2023, according to SIPRI's estimates. Since 2014, when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea, the country's military spending has risen by 57 percent. Ukraine's military spending rose by

51 percent, reaching \$64.8 billion, but the country also received \$35 billion in military aid, of which the majority came from the US, meaning the combined aid and spending equaled over nine tenths of Russia's spending. Tian noted that while Moscow's and Kyiv's overall budgets were relatively close in 2023, Ukraine's military spending equalled 37 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and 58 percent of all government spending. By contrast, in Russia, which has a larger economy, military spending amounted to just 5.9 percent of its GDP. "So the room for Ukraine to increase its spending is now very limited," Tian said. In Europe, Poland saw the largest increase in military spending by far, up by 75 percent to \$31.6 billion. Spending also rose across the Middle East, where Israel -- the region's second-largest spender -- saw a 24-percent increase, to \$27.5 billion in 2023 -- mainly driven by the country's offensive in Gaza in response to the October 7 attack by Hamas. Saudi Arabia, the Middle East's largest spender, also upped its spending by 4.3 percent to an estimated \$75.8 billion. The US -- which spends more on its military than any other nation -- increased spending by 2.3 percent to \$916 billion. China boosted spending on its military for the 29th straight year, raising it by another six percent to an estimated \$296 billion.

## Deepfakes of Bollywood Stars Spark Worries of AI Meddling in India Election



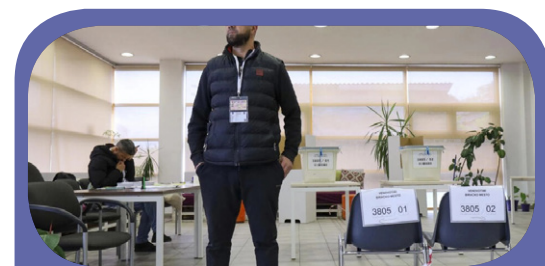
MUMBAI (Reuters) - In fake videos that have gone viral online, two of India's A-list Bollywood actors are seen criticizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and asking people to vote for the opposition Congress party in the country's ongoing general election. In a 30-second video that shows Aamir Khan and another 41-second clip of Ranveer Singh, the two Bollywood actors purportedly say Modi failed to keep campaign promises and failed to address critical economic issues during his two terms as prime minister. Both AI-generated videos end with the Congress election symbol and slogan: "Vote for Justice, Vote for Congress." The two videos have been viewed on social media more than half a million times since last week, a Reuters review shows. Their spread underlines the potential role such AI (artificial intelligence)-generated content can play in the mammoth Indian election that started on Friday and will continue until June. AI and AI-generated fakes, or deepfakes, are being increasingly used in elections elsewhere in the world, including in the U.S., Pakistan and Indonesia. Campaigning in India has long focused on door-to-door outreach and public rallies, but extensive use of WhatsApp and Facebook as campaigning tools started in 2019. This year's general election - in which Modi is expected to secure a rare third term - is the first in which AI is being used. A Congress spokesperson, Sujata Paul, shared actor Singh's video with her 16,000 followers on X on April 17 and by Saturday afternoon, her post had been reshared 2,900 times, liked 8,700 times and received 438,000 views. Paul told Reuters by telephone she was aware the video was marked "manipulated media" by X, but she did not want to delete it as, while posting, she thought the person was a look alike of Singh and "it has creativity for sure." The post was no longer visible on X on Sunday, hours after Reuters sent a request for comment to Congress' head of social media cell, who did not respond. Both actors have said the videos are fake. Facebook, X and at least eight fact-checking websites have said they are altered or manipulated, which the Reuters digital verification unit has also confirmed.

## Ecuador Voters Overwhelmingly Approve of Extradition, Anti-Gang Measures



QUITO (Dispatches) - A solid majority of Ecuadorian voters on Sunday approved the extradition to the United States of organized crime bosses in a referendum on measures against drug trafficking and gangs, the electoral council said. The "yes" vote in favor of extradition received 65 percent of valid ballots, while "no" received 25 percent, according to a quick count of results, the electoral council said at a news conference. Nearly 13.6 million of the country's 17.7 million inhabitants were eligible to cast a "Yes" or "No" on 11 referendum questions on the ballot. President Daniel Noboa hailed the result as helping the fight against crime: "We have defended the country, now we will have more tools to fight crime and restore peace to Ecuadorian families," Noboa said earlier after the release of an exit poll. Once-peaceful Ecuador has been grappling with a shocking rise in violence, flaring up due to a rise in narcotics trafficking, that has seen two mayors killed this week. If Ecuador's constitution is changed to allow extradition, the nation would follow in the footsteps of Colombia and Mexico, which have sent scores of reputed crime bosses to stand trial in the United States. New bloodshed stained voting day as assailants shot dead a prison warden. Damian Paredes, chief of the El Rodero prison in coastal Manabí state, "was victim of an attack that

unfortunately cost him his life," the national prison authority said in a statement. Ecuadorian prisons have become nerve centres for organised crime groups and a bloody battleground that has claimed the lives of more than 460 inmates in three years. Paredes, who had assumed his prison post just five days ago, was gunned down as he ate lunch with his family in the town of Jipijapa, local media reported. Noboa declared in January a state of "internal armed conflict," with about 20 criminal groups blamed for a spasm of violence sparked by the jailbreak of a major drug lord, still on the run. Gangsters kidnapped dozens of people, including police and prison guards, and opened fire in a TV studio during a live broadcast, part of a days-long spasm of violence that caused about 20 deaths. Despite the deployment of soldiers to combat gangs, violence has persisted. Two mayors have been killed in the past week, making it five in a year and three in less than a month. Since January last year, at least a dozen politicians have been slain in Ecuador, including presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, who was gunned down last August after a campaign event. In Sunday's vote, Noboa was seeking popular backing for his plans to clamp down even harder on those responsible for such acts.



## Serb Majority in N. Kosovo Boycotts Vote on Removing Ethnic Albanian Mayors

MITROVICA (Dispatches) - Ethnic Serbs in Kosovo's tense north on Sunday boycotted an extraordinary local election on whether to oust their ethnic Albanian mayors in a territory riddled with deadly tensions. The vote could have paved the way for the election of Serbs to the mayoral posts after the appointment of the ethnic Albanians sparked violence in the Belgrade-backed region with a Serb majority. But only 253 out of some 45,000 eligible voters cast ballots, the Central Election Commission said (CEC). For the election to be valid turnout has to be above 50 percent. Therefore the vote has failed, CEC chair Kreshnik Radonijqi said. "The boycott implies the continuation of the 'status quo' ... Serbs in the north continue to be an instrument in the hands of Belgrade for political bargaining," the Koha Ditore daily paper said online. Tensions in Kosovo's troubled north have been smouldering for months, following local elections won by the ethnic Albanian mayors in April last year. Ethnic Serbs boycotted the elections and Serb protesters later clashed with Kosovo police and NATO troops as the Albanian mayors tried to take office. Around 30 NATO peacekeepers were injured. Led by the largest Serb and Belgrade-backed party, Serb List, thousands of citizens of North Kosovo's four municipalities signed petitions in January for the dismissal of all the current mayors in the north by a referendum.

## Thousands of Colombians Protest Petro's Economic, Social Reforms

BOGOTA (Dispatches) - Tens of thousands of Colombians marched on Sunday to reject economic and social reforms being proposed by the leftist government of President Gustavo Petro, the latest in a series of demonstrations against Petro's policies. The reforms, which Petro says will fight deep inequality but which opponents say will damage the country's already-struggling economy, were key campaign promises for the 64-year-old leader, who took office in 2022. Despite gray skies and rain, some 70,000 people marched in Bogota, the capital, according to city government estimates, chanting "out with Petro," waving national flags and blowing on trumpets before gathering in the central Bolivar Square. The march comes after a Senate committee earlier this month rejected a proposed health reform aimed at stripping power from insurers and expanding access to healthcare, as the government took control of two major insurers it said had failed to correctly care for patients. The government is expected to propose a new version of the health reform once the new legislative session begins in July. Pension and labor reforms are still being debated by lawmakers. "This government's policies are dire. The health system, despite its flaws, was working and now Petro is putting an end to it by plunging patients who have no healthcare or medicine into a crisis," said Monica Leon, a 45-year-old doctor. Accountant Miguel Angel Larrota, 52, said he was protesting against bad governance

and demanding that Petro "not destroy what works and put an end to the corruption he promised to fight." Paloma Valencia, a senator from the opposition Democratic Center, a conservative political party founded by former President Alvaro Uribe, said the march was bringing together not only opponents but people who voted for Petro two years ago. People also took to the streets in the city of Medellin and in Cali, near the Pacific coast. Marches have also previously taken place in support of Petro's reforms.





## Bellingham Clinches Real Madrid Dramatic Clasico Win Over Barcelona

MADRID (Dispatches) - Jude Bellingham snatched Real Madrid a dramatic 3-2 Clasico win over champions Barcelona on Sunday with a "fundamental" goal to take them 11 points clear at the top of La Liga. Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti hailed the England midfielder's decisive intervention to take Los Blancos to the brink of the Spanish title. Madrid twice came from behind with Vinicius Junior and Lucas Vazquez netting to level Andreas Christensen and Fermin Lopez strikes, before Bellingham rammed home the winner in stoppage time. "He arrived at just the right time, he worked so hard in the game, it's been a while since he scored and today he scored a goal that could be fundamental in winning the league," said Ancelotti. Barcelona, second, bounced back with a strong performance after their Champions League exit at the hands of Paris Saint-Germain but their last stand was demolished by Bellingham. Madrid showed the same grit to stay in the match as they did midweek against Manchester City on the way to the final four in Europe, before Bellingham's knock-out blow left the Santiago Bernabeu crowd delighted. Madrid's top scorer with 21 goals across all competitions, the former Borussia Dortmund man netted twice in Madrid's Clasico win over Barcelona in October and is shining in his first season in Spain at only 20 years old. "We took a huge step towards La Liga," Vazquez, key in all three Madrid goals, told Real Madrid TV. "We've had a very good season, we're on a very good path,

now we just have to polish it off and we'll go for everything." Madrid's penalty-saving hero against City, goalkeeper Andriy Lunin, made an early mistake to hand Barcelona the lead. The Ukrainian strayed from his line to try and deal with a corner but got nowhere near the ball and Christensen nodded into the empty net. However Madrid were quickly level through Vinicius, who fired over a fine chance before levelling from the spot. The sensational Vazquez escaped Joao Cancelo far too easily and was tripped in the area by 17-year-old Barca centre-back Pau Cubarsi. Barcelona were not deterred and made inroads down their right flank with Lamine Yamal giving Eduardo Camavinga a torrid time. The 16-year-old starlet thought he had struck with a clever flick from a corner but Lunin pushed the ball to safety, with Barcelona arguing it had already crossed the line. La Liga does not contract goal-line technology and using VAR the officials could not confirm the ball had completely entered the goal, so the Catalans were left frustrated. "We deserved much more given the way we played but there's not much we can do," said Xavi. "(Not having goal-line technology) is a disgrace." Barcelona were dealt a blow on the stroke of half-time when midfielder Frenkie de Jong was taken off on a stretcher after hurting his ankle in a challenge by Fede Valverde. Xavi also brought Lopez on for Christensen at the interval and it paid dividends for the coach after a slower start to the second half.

## Ruud Defeats Tsitsipas to Win Barcelona Open

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Casper Ruud gained sweet revenge over Stefanos Tsitsipas as he beat the Greek fifth seed 7-5 6-3 to win the Barcelona Open. Just seven days after Tsitsipas thumped Ruud in straight sets to win the Monte Carlo Masters, it was the Norwegian third seed who came out on top in the latest battle between the two 25-year-olds as he secured a 10th ATP title on clay. "Honestly, this has been worth the wait," Ruud said after capturing the biggest title his career, with all his previous triumphs being in ATP 250 tournaments. After seven failed attempts to win a final above the ATP 250 level, Ruud was relieved to finally get over that hurdle. "A lot of finals that I've lost have been tough, a bit disappointing, of course," he said. "Any time you reach a final, it's nonetheless a good week, so you can't be too hard on yourself but this one has been a long time coming." Ruud also halted Tsitsipas' 10-match winning streak. The Greek gained an early break but Ruud soon got into his groove and from then on he frustrated Tsitsipas with his baseline tactics. Ruud maintained the upper hand throughout the second set, during which he did not face a break point. "In the final in Monte Carlo I was always on the back foot, too far behind, and he had too much time to control the game," said Ruud. Meanwhile Elena Rybakina had little trouble in seeing off Marta Kostyuk 6-2 6-2 to win the Stuttgart Open on Sunday, her third title this year. Rybakina adds the Stuttgart title to her wins in the Brisbane International and the Abu Dhabi Open this year. For Kostyuk, this was her second final defeat of 2024 after she lost the decider of the San Diego Open in March. "I want to congratulate Marta of course, been a great tournament, great matches you played here, you're playing really amazing and hopefully we'll play many more finals," Rybakina said. The

Kazakhstani fourth seed broke to love in the opening game and cruised to the first set, breaking again to make it 5-2 and then holding to love. Kostyuk had no answer and when her opponent broke serve once more in the first game of the second set, the unseeded Ukrainian cut a forlorn figure as she dropped to her knees. Rybakina, who defeated world number one and winner of the last two titles Iga Swiatek in the semi-finals, showed no mercy and Kostyuk forced her only break points over the course of the match when 3-2 down in the second set. If there was to be a comeback, this was Kostyuk's chance, but the 21-year-old looked close to tears as she failed to take advantage of three break points, constantly looking in frustration at her coach in the crowd.



## Liverpool Bounce Back to Keep Title Bid Alive

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool got back on track after a miserable week as a 3-1 win at Fulham kept their Premier League title bid alive, while Nottingham Forest launched an astonishing rant at the officiating in their 2-0 defeat against Everton. Jurgen Klopp's side crashed out of the Europa League quarter-finals against Atalanta on Thursday after suffering a damaging Premier League defeat at home to Crystal Palace last weekend. The Reds' hopes of giving Klopp a glorious farewell were dwindling but they climbed back into the title race with a much-needed first win in three league games. Liverpool are now in second place, behind leaders Arsenal on goal difference and one point ahead of third placed Manchester City, who have a game in hand on their two title rivals. Next for Liverpool is the Merseyside derby at Everton on Wednesday, while Arsenal host Chelsea on Tuesday and City travel to Brighton on Thursday. "Fulham usually cause us more problems so it was a good performance at the right moment," Klopp said. "We want to stay in that race, that's clear. Arsenal won yesterday, Manchester City will win their game. Klopp responded to signs of fatigue from his team in recent weeks by dropping Mohamed Salah to the bench among five changes. And Liverpool took the hint with a more cohesive display by the banks of the River Thames in west London. Trent Alexander-Arnold put Liverpool ahead in the 32nd minute with a superb free-kick that flashed into the top corner. Fulham defender Timothy Castagne levelled from close-range after Liverpool failed to clear in first half stoppage-time. Ryan Gravenberch restored Liverpool's advantage in the 53rd minute with a scorching blast from the edge of the area for his first Premier League goal. Diogo Jota wrapped up the points in the 72nd minute, drilling a clinical low finish into the far corner. Everton took a giant stride towards extending their 70-year stay in the English top-flight in a highly controversial victory over Forest. Idrissa Gueye and Dwight McNeil scored the goals that took the Toffees five points clear of the relegation zone.



## Man United Got Away With It in FA Cup Semis

LONDON (Dispatches) - Erik ten Hag admitted Manchester United "got away with it" after his team won an FA Cup semi-final penalty shootout against Coventry on Sunday following an astonishing collapse during the match. The Premier League side scraped through at Wembley after the game ended 3-3 following extra time, with Rasmus Hojlund scoring the decisive spot kick. United won 4-2 on penalties against the Championship side but only after throwing away a 3-0 lead during a chaotic second half. It is the latest chapter in a frenzied campaign for the club, who are in danger of missing out on a European place next season. They have made a dangerous habit of tossing away winning positions over recent weeks, conceding an alarming number of chances and they reverted to their bad habits against the 1987 FA Cup winners. "We suffer (on) occasions, we let each other down and we let the result slip away. But today we got away with it," Ten Hag told reporters. But the Dutch manager insisted Sunday's result was still a positive achievement for the club and played down any notion of embarrassment at the manner of victory. "I see the mistakes we make. We can't look away from it. But it's not an embarrassment. As I say, it's a huge achievement," he added, noting United had made the FA Cup final in back-to-back seasons. "In the last 20 years, United was five times in the final. Now we are two times in two years. So it's a huge achievement." But, of course, when you are so in control in the game, and you're so dominating the game and 3-0 up, and then we should bring it over the finish and the way we did was not good." The under-pressure United boss praised his side's character in the shootout as a "good sign" but conceded their collapse during the match was "completely unnecessary". Asked about morale in the dressing room Ten Hag said there were "mixed feelings": "They are also disappointed," he added, referring to the way United allowed Coventry back into the match. The United boss said his players would need to play for their places in next month's final at Wembley against arch-rivals Manchester City, who beat Chelsea on Saturday in the other semi-final at Wembley. "The players should prove that they can play in the final and to give performances in the coming weeks," he said, as United battle to finish high enough in the Premier League table to qualify for Europe next season.

## Thunder Edge Pelicans in Thriller

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Shai Gilgeous-Alexander drained a go-ahead basket with 32.5 seconds left as Western Conference top seeds Oklahoma City clawed out a 94-92 victory over New Orleans in their NBA playoff opener. Hours after he was named a finalist for NBA Most valuable Player along with Denver star Nikola Jokic and Luka Doncic of the Dallas Mavericks, Gilgeous-Alexander scored 28 points to lead the Thunder. The Pelicans were missing star Zion Williamson because of a hamstring strain but they refused to buckle at Oklahoma's Paycom Center. A pulsating contest featured 20 lead changes and was a marked contrast to the wins posted earlier by the Boston Celtics, Milwaukee Bucks and Los Angeles Clippers, who all roared out of the gates on the way to dominant victories. The Celtics, fueled by Jayson Tatum's first career playoff triple-double, parlayed a 14-0 start to a 114-94 victory over the Miami Heat. The Clippers shrugged off the absence of Kawhi Leonard, bullying the Mavs early on the way to a 109-97 victory over the Mavericks - who put up just eight points in the second quarter. In Milwaukee, Damian Lillard scored all 35 of his points in the first half as the Bucks built a 69-42 halftime lead and held on to beat the Indiana Pacers 109-94 despite the absence of Giannis Antetokounmpo. The first half in Oklahoma City saw a dozen lead changes and ended deadlocked at 43-43. An 11-0 scoring run gave the Thunder a nine-point lead midway through the third period, but the Pelicans countered every punch they threw and were up by two after Brandon Ingram's layup with 3:34 left to play. Gilgeous-Alexander tied it with 1:36 remaining and was fouled on his go-ahead basket, making the free-throw for a 93-90 Thunder lead. Trey Murphy III scored 21 points to lead the Pelicans and CJ McCollum added 20 but missed a three-point attempt in the waning seconds. "We didn't execute down the stretch the way we wanted to. We let

them believe, but we did enough to get the 'W,'" the 25-year-old Gilgeous-Alexander said. "One game closer to our goal." Jalen Williams scored 19 points and Chet Holmgren had 15 points, 11 rebounds and five blocked shots for the Thunder, who host game two of the best-of-seven series on Wednesday. In Los Angeles, James Harden scored 28 points and handed out eight assists for the Clippers, drilling six of their 18 three-pointers. Paul George added 22 points and Ivica Zubac scored 20 points with 15 rebounds for Los Angeles, who seized control early as Dallas and NBA regular-season scoring leader Doncic struggled. The Mavs connected on just two of 21 attempts in the second quarter and trailed by 26 at the break. Eight-time All-Star Kyrie Irving made all eight of his attempts on the way to 20 points in the third quarter as the Mavericks came alive. Doncic would finish with 33 points and 13 rebounds and Irving scored 31, but they were in too deep of a hole to escape. "In the second half, that is how we should play the whole game," Doncic said. Mavs coach Jason Kidd said his players were too passive in the face of the Clippers' early physicality - Harden said that was just the effect the Clippers were going for. "We can't ease into games," Harden said. "We've got to be the physicality team from the beginning, and we did that." In Milwaukee, the Bucks were more than up to the task without Antetokounmpo, who remained sidelined with a left calf injury. Lillard's explosive first half included a 19-point first quarter, and his 35 points were a record for any Bucks player in any half of a playoff game. He didn't make a basket in the second half, but his teammates picked up the slack and the prolific Pacers offense was held under 100 points for just the second time this season. Tyrese Haliburton, chosen ahead of Lillard for the US Paris Olympic squad, finished with just nine points for the Pacers, who were led by Pascal Siakam's 36 points and 13 rebounds.

