

China's Special Envoy to the Middle East Zhai Jun During Meeting With Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Bagheri Kani in Moscow Said Iran Is a "Special Partner" of Beijing in West Asia, Appreciating Tehran's Measures in the Region

IRAN NEWS

On Wednesday and on the sidelines of the 12th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues in St. Petersburg, Iran and Russia Signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to Develop Bilateral Relations in the Security Sector

2 DOMESTIC

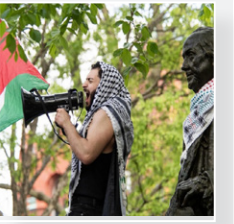


Tajikistan Keen to Invest at Iran's Chabahar Strategic Port

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Columbia University Drops Deadline for Dismantling Pro-Palestinian Protest Camp



> SEE PAGE 3

Iran Calls on BRICS to Play Role in Stopping Israeli Crimes



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has called on the BRICS group of emerging economies to play a role in putting an immediate stop to Israeli crimes against the Palestinians. The call by Iran's deputy foreign minister Ali Bagheri Kani in Moscow on Thursday came as his counterparts and special representatives of BRICS nations met to discuss the latest developments in the West Asia and North Africa region. "The manner and quality of role-playing of individual countries and international organizations in relation to the Israeli regime's crisis mongering and the position they adopt in this regard is effective and will be recorded in history," he said. "Therefore, the members of the BRICS organization should show their political and practical will to completely stop attacks on people and civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip," he said. Bagheri Kani called on the BRICS nations to help with the quick sending of humanitarian aid, especially food, medical equipment and medicine to the Gaza Strip and the complete withdrawal of the occupying forces and the reconstruction of the besieged territory. "At the moment, our focus should be on achieving a complete and permanent halt to the attacks of the Zionist regime in order to reduce the humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip, expand the sending of international humanitarian aid to Gaza, and provide firm support to the activities of humanitarian organizations, especially UNRWA," he said. "Only taking a position and making a statement is not enough, and effective and decisive operational measures must be put on the agenda for the Zionist regime to comply with the wishes of the international community." The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has seen many of its top donor countries announce funding freezes after Israeli accusations without evidence that its members had participated in the October 7 operation against the occupying regime.

Iran, China Discuss Military Cooperation; Beijing Backs Tehran's Legitimate Strikes Against Israel



BEIJING (Dispatches) - Iran and China's defense chiefs discussed ways to enhance military cooperation, also conferring on regional issues. Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani met with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun on the sidelines of the 21st meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Defense Ministers in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Friday. Ashtiani hailed China's stance on the ongoing developments in the region and its condemnation of Israel's terrorist airstrike against Iran's diplomatic premises in the Syrian capital of Damascus earlier this month. It is necessary for Iran and China to boost cooperation and convergence to solve security issues in the region and across the world, the Iranian defense chief said. On April 1, the Israeli regime carried out terrorist airstrikes on the consular section of Iran's embassy in the Syrian capital, which killed two generals of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi and General Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, as well as five of their accompanying officers. In retaliation, the IRGC targeted the occupied territories on April 13 with a barrage of drones and missiles. The retaliatory strikes, dubbed Operation True Promise, inflicted damage on Israeli military bases across the occupied Palestinian territories. Following the reprisal, Iran warned Israel against taking any retaliatory actions and also urged the US to try not to involve itself in the conflict and signaled that it viewed the matter as "concluded." The Chinese defense minister, for his part, slammed Israel's attack on Iran's diplomatic premises in Syria, which he said violated international law. China supports Iran's legitimate right to respond to Israel, Dong added. He invited his Iranian counterpart to take part in a security conference in Beijing and urged for enhanced bilateral cooperation in defense and military arenas. The Chinese defense chief called for an immediate ceasefire in the war-stricken Gaza Strip and the delivery of humanitarian aid there. At least 34,356 Palestinians, mostly children and women, have been killed and 77,368 people wounded in the war that Israel began on October 7 following a retaliatory operation by the Palestinian territory's resistance movements.



President Hails Iran-Africa Expansion of Ties

TEHRAN - President Ebrahim Raisi says the Islamic Republic and the African nations are keen to strengthen ties between the two sides, noting that enhanced ties can form a complementary economy. Raisi made the remarks during the 2nd Iran & Africa International Economic Conference on Friday at Tehran's International Conference Center. "This meeting is a symbol of the will of African nations and Iran to expand economic ties," he told the gathering that hosted representatives from 30 African countries. Raisi hailed the conference as an opportunity for both Iran and the African nations to get familiar with their mutual capacities. "Despite threats and sanctions, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made good progress. The Islamic Republic can be called an advanced and technological country," he said, stressing that getting familiar with the achievements of Iran in the field of emerging technologies is of "great importance." The president said Iran seeks to maintain ties with Africa based on mutual interest, unlike many Western countries that have "plundered" Africa's resources. "Westerners want Africa for themselves but we want Africa for Africa." Tehran believes that Africa has skilled labor forces and can achieve progress in many fields, including emerging technologies, he stressed. Raisi stressed the importance of formulating roadmaps for cooperation between

Iran and the African continent and for cooperation between Iran and each African nation, with defined timelines. He also emphasized the necessity of removing obstacles that hinder the two sides from expanding ties, including the problem of transfer of funds. If Iran's and Africa's capacities are combined, "a complementary economy will be formed," he stressed. Senior officials, including economy ministers, are taking part in this edition of the conference that will wrap up its activities on Monday. Earlier on Wednesday President Raisi improved economic and political relations between Iran and Sri Lanka would benefit the two countries and the Indian Ocean region. Raisi made the remarks in a joint press conference with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe in the island nation's capital of Colombo on Wednesday. He said that Iran is ready to supply technical and engineering services to Sri Lanka to help the country boost its economic and industrial infrastructure. The president made the comments hours after he opened a large hydroelectric project in Badulla, located some 230 kilometers to the east of Colombo. The Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project, which is worth over \$500 million, has been largely designed and built by Iranian companies to help Sri Lanka overcome its electricity and irrigation problems.

Tehran Urges UNSC to Address Belligerent Israeli Atrocities in Gaza, Region



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent ambassador to the United Nations has denounced Israel's destabilizing activities in West Asia, urging the UN Security Council to hold the Israeli regime accountable for its atrocities in Gaza and elsewhere. "Israel's ongoing destabilized and irresponsible actions and atrocities against the nations in the region are a real threat to regional and international peace and security," Amir Saeid Iravani said as he addressed a UN Security Council session in New York on Thursday. He noted that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu seeks to expand and escalate the conflict in the region to stay in power, emphasizing that the members of the Security Council must not allow the body to be held hostage to the ambitions of such a "belligerent regime." "It is time for the Security Council to shoulder its responsibility and address the real threat to international peace and security. The Security Council must promptly fulfill its duty under Chapter 7 of the Charter in response to Israel's reckless defiance. It must take urgent and punitive measures to compel this regime to stop its genocide and massacre against the people of Gaza and uphold its obligations especially fully implement the UNSC resolutions and legally binding orders of the International Court of Justice," the Iranian diplomat pointed out. Iravani underscored that Iran's retaliatory missile and drone strikes against the occupied territories were in response to the Israeli regime's terrorist attack of April 1 against the Islamic Republic's diplomatic premises in the Syrian capital Damascus. "Iran's operation was entirely in the exercise of Iran's inherent right to self-defense as outlined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations and recognized by international law.

Iran Will Give Crushing Response to Aggression



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Army Chief Commander Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi says in any "war of wills" the Islamic Republic will respond to any act of aggression in a more crushing style than ever before. Addressing a meeting with a number of Iranian Army commanders in Tehran on Thursday, Mousavi stressed the importance of remaining vigilant in the face of any possible threat but reiterated at the same time that Iran has no intention to spread war. He added that a series of Iran's retaliatory strikes against the Israeli-occupied territories earlier this month manifested unity among Iran's Army, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and Defense Ministry. The successful strikes, dubbed Operation True Promise, made the friends of the Islamic Revolution happy and surprised the foes with Iran's deterrent power, the senior commander emphasized. Mousavi wished increasing dignity for the honorable Iranian nation and a final victory for the resistance axis, particularly the oppressed people of Palestine in Gaza, as well as acceleration of the Israeli regime's collapse. On April 1, the Israeli regime carried out terrorist airstrikes on the consular section of Iran's embassy in the Syrian capital Damascus, which killed two IRGC generals, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi and General Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, as well as five of their accompanying officers. In retaliation, the IRGC targeted the occupied territories on April 13 with a barrage of drones and missiles. The retaliatory strikes have inflicted damage on Israeli military bases across the occupied Palestinian territories. Following the reprisal, Iran warned Israel against taking any retaliatory actions and also urged the US to try not to involve itself in the conflict and signaled that it viewed the matter as "concluded."

Iran Urges U.S. to Stop Support for Israel as University Revolt Spreads

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has condemned the ongoing crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests in U.S. universities, urging Washington to immediately stop support for Israel. "The suppression and harsh treatment by the American police and security forces of professors and students protesting the genocide and war crimes of the Israeli regime in various universities has deeply worried and abhorred the public opinion of the world," Amir-Abdollahian wrote in a post published on social media platform X on Thursday. "This repression is in line with the continuation of Washington's full-fledged support for the Israeli regime and clearly shows the double standard and contradictory behavior of the American government towards freedom of expression," he said. Amir-Abdollahian touched on "the genocide of tens of thousands of Palestinian women and children, especially after the discovery of mass graves of the sick and injured and medical staff in the vicinity of Nasser Hospital in the Gaza Strip." The global wave of disgust towards the Israeli regime and its supporters cannot be concealed," he said. "The White House must immediately stop supporting the Israeli regime's war crimes, and be held accountable," the top Iranian diplomat stated. Police have arrested hundreds of protesters in locations across the US, as demonstrations against the war in Gaza intensify across university campuses. In the latest crackdown, some 108 arrests were made at Emerson College in Boston. Earlier, 93 people at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles were taken into custody on trespassing charges. Protesters and police also clashed at the University of Texas in Austin. Authorities said 34 people were arrested there too. Universities across the US have seen a growing number of students walk out of class or try to set up encampments to protest against Israel's military campaign in Gaza. The United States has been providing Israel with maximal military and intelligence support since October 7, when the latter unleashed the war. Washington has also vetoed several United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the brutal military onslaught that has so far killed more than 34,100 Palestinians, most of them women and children. American students have been raging against their universities' connection to the Israeli regime and Washington's all-out support for the genocide.



IRAN NEWS



Afghanistan's 1st Rail Cargo Crosses Iran to Turkey

TEHRAN (MNA) – Afghanistan's first export shipment containing 1,100 metric tons of mineral ore was exported by train from Roznak Railway Station in Herat towards Turkey crossing Iran. In a statement, the Afghanistan Railway Department announced that this export included talc mineral exported to the city of Mersin, Turkey. This is the first shipment of Afghanistan's "talc" that has gone to Turkey through Iran, the report added. Spokesman for the Transportation and Aviation Authority of the Taliban government in Afghanistan Imamuddin Ahmadihad previously announced that import and export between Afghanistan and Turkey will be carried out by land route for the first time. Hand-woven carpets and rugs, dried fruits, and precious stones are among the goods exported from Afghanistan to Turkey and other countries.

Iran, Pakistan Eye Boosting Trade Exchanges Fivefold



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – High-ranking officials from Iran and Pakistan stressed increasing bilateral trade fivefold. The trade exchanges between Iran and Pakistan exceeded \$2 billion in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended March 19, 2024), showing a 38-percent growth compared to a year before. Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrpash, who is the head of the Iran-Pakistan Joint Economic Cooperation Commission, in a joint meeting with Pakistani officials emphasized boosting annual trade between the two countries to \$10 billion. According to the existing statistics, the trade exchanges between Iran and Pakistan increased from \$1 billion in 2002 to more than \$2 billion in the last Iranian calendar year, registering a 38 and a 23 percent in terms of value and volume respectively, IRNA reported. Promoting the level of trade between the two countries, especially in the field of transportation, and also the development of infrastructures were put on the agenda as one of the fundamental principles of trade and economic activity during the bilateral meetings between Iran's roads minister and his Pakistani counterpart which promises a considerable growth in bilateral trade activities. Heading a high-ranking political and economic delegation, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi paid an official visit to Pakistan on Monday morning.



Tajikistan Keen to Invest at Iran's Chabahar Strategic Port

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The deputy transport minister of Tajikistan said her country is interested in investing at Iran's Chabahar Port in logistics affairs. In a meeting with Iran's Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development Ali Akbar Safaei, Shayesta Moradzadeh emphasized the interest of her country in making investments at the port in logistics affairs. She also hailed the good level of the bilateral trade and economic relations between Tehran and Dushanbe. Moradzadeh pointed to the common historical and cultural backgrounds between Iran and Tajikistan and added that the trade and economic relations between the two countries have been on the growth trajectory, especially over the past two years. Iran's deputy minister of roads and urban development, for his part, pointed to the resolve of the current

administration for the development of trade and economic cooperation with neighboring countries, especially with Persian-speaking states and emphasized that Iran attaches great importance to enhancing transit and transport cooperation with the neighbors, IRNA reported. The chief executive of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) further pointed out that very good trade awaits Chabahar Port in the future and presently, liner vessels take berth at its Shahid Beheshti Port from India and China directly. Safaei welcomed the investment of Tajik private sector companies at Chabahar Port and added that Tajik investors will be allowed to transit their goods to other countries via Chabahar Port with the construction of a logistics compound at this strategic port.

President Raisi's Visit to Pakistan Has Great Deal of Significance



ISLAMABAD (IP) – Pakistan Ambassador to Iran, Muddasir Tipu has expressed his welcoming views on the recent visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Pakistan. While talking to correspondents of Iranian media in Islamabad, Mr. Tipu talked about the Pakistan-Iran Gas Pipeline Project and said, "Strategically this is a very important project, we have reconsideration, technicalities are also going to meet, there are financial, technical and administrative issues, so we are hopeful that we will have mutually acceptable solution of the matters." Expressing his views about the visit of President Raisi, the Pakistani Ambassador said: "The visit is happening on a very important moment of history and particularly when the new Government has been inducted in Pakistan and this is President Raisi's 1st visit to Pakistan so in that sense it has a great deal of significance. It will deepen Pakistan's ties with Iran, it will promote regional peace and stability, and promote economic development. On trade we have some very good developments, MOUs have been signed, between the two countries." He added: "Iran and Pakistan share a porous 900-kilometer border and we are bound by history, culture, ideology and people to people ties. The visit is going to be critically significant and there are a lot of more opportunities to strengthen these relations and I am so hopeful that there will be very positive outcomes from the visit of President Raisi."

Iranian Firms Export Confectionery Production Equipment to 60 Countries



TABRIZ (IP) – The 17th International Exhibition of Confectionery, Chocolate, and Related Industries is currently underway at the Tabriz International Exhibition Center, showcasing the presence of manufacturing companies. As reported by Iran Press, companies engaged in the production of confectionery, chocolate, and related equipment from various provinces including East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Tehran, Alborz, Khorasan Razavi, Isfahan, Ardabil, Fars, Gilan, Qazvin, and Mazandaran are actively participating in the Tabriz International Confectionery Exhibition. Noteworthy is the attendance of representatives from countries such as Germany, Spain, Turkey, Oman, Italy, India, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Maalek Rahmati, Governor of East Azerbaijan, highlighted the pivotal role of the private sector in global markets during an exclusive interview with Iran Press. He emphasized that the confectionery and chocolate industry is entirely dominated by the private sector, underscoring their success in both domestic and international markets. Governor Rahmati further stated that private enterprises are dedicated to staying abreast of technological advancements by monitoring global markets and adhering to international standards, thereby enhancing the quality of their products. Alireza Mousanejad, Sales Manager of a knowledge-based company operating in this sector, noted in an interview with Iran Press that their company specializes in designing and manufacturing various devices and fully automated production lines for cakes, cookies, biscuits, and other confectionery items. Mousanejad highlighted that their knowledge-based company has successfully exported its manufactured equipment to 60 countries while striving to remain at the forefront of modern technology.

Iran Releases Details of Confiscated Israeli Transit Cargo

TEHRAN (PressTV) – The Iranian police (FARAJA) have released more details of a cargo it seized earlier this month that was made in the Israeli-occupied lands and was bound to be delivered to customers in Uzbekistan via the Iranian territory. FARAJA's head of Enforcement and Protection Units said on Tuesday that the cargo seized on April 15 in the border crossing of Bazargan in Iran's northwest contained more than 22 metric tons of potassium nitrate, a chemical product used as fertilizer in agricultural projects. General Reza Baniasadifar said the product under the commercial name of Haifa Group had been manufactured by the "fake Zionist regime" and was confiscated based on the article 9 of Iran's Export-Import Regulations that prohibits any commercial dealings with the Israeli regime. The Iranian parliament adopted a law earlier this year to toughen restrictions on imports

and transit of goods made by Israeli companies or by their partner and affiliate companies. The law was adopted in response to Israel's brutal aggression on Palestinians in Gaza. Baniasadifar said a domestic company responsible for the transit of the cargo to Uzbekistan had declared it to customs authorities as fertilizers, adding that judicial authorities will decide what would happen to the consignment and the truck that carried it. The cargo seized in Bazargan, a key trade gateway with Turkey, is a first of its kind to be seized on land border crossings in Iran. On April 13, commandos of Iran's elite military force the IRGC boarded an oil tanker owned by an Israeli company nearly two weeks after an Israeli attack on an Iranian consulate in Syria which killed senior IRGC military commanders. Authorities said the ship had been seized because it violated international maritime rules.



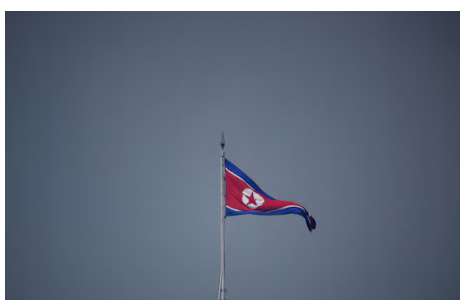
90,000 Iranians to Make Hajj Pilgrimage This Year

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – A total of 90,000 Iranians are estimated to go on Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia this year, Iran's ambassador to Riyadh said. In an interview with Al Arabiya television channel, Alireza Enayati said a total of 90,000 Iranians will travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage this year. He also referred to the resumption of sending Iranians to Umrah (minor Hajj) pilgrimage, saying the religious trips have restarted as a result of the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, reached in 2023. The pilgrims are traveling between Iran and Saudi Arabia with direct flights, the envoy said. The Umrah pilgrimage for the Iranian citizens resumed on March 22 after a nine-year hiatus. After intensive negotiations hosted by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia clinched a deal on March 10, 2023, to restore diplomatic relations and reopen embassies and missions after seven years of estrangement. The two regional heavyweights have underscored the need to respect each other's national sovereignty and refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of one another.

IRAN NEWS

Kim Jong Un Inspects Test-Firing of Multiple Launch Rockets

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on Thursday inspected the test-firing of 240 mm multiple launch rockets manufactured by a newly established defence industry unit, the North's KCNA news agency reported on Friday. The report did not give further details of the unit that produced the artillery. North Korea is believed to be ramping up production of artillery amid allegations by the United States and South Korea that it is supplying Russia with weapons. Both countries deny the allegation. The test firing showed the rockets met the required standards for flight characteristics and accuracy, KCNA said. Kim said the 240 mm multiple launch rocket system, which incorporates new technology, will "bring about a strategic change in strengthening our military's artillery capabilities," according to KCNA. In a separate report, KCNA said Kim visited the Kim Il Sung Military University, named after his grandfather and state founder, to mark the anniversary of the founding of the revolutionary army, the precursor to the country's military.



Macron Urges Stronger Defenses, Economic Reforms



PARIS (Dispatches) - French President Emmanuel Macron called for stronger, more integrated European defenses as he outlined his vision for a more assertive European Union on the global stage. In a speech at the Sorbonne University in Paris, he also said the continent must not become a vassal of the United States. "There is a risk our Europe could die. We are not equipped to face the risks," Macron said. With just three years left of his second and final term in office, Macron, 46, wants to show his critics he retains the energy and fresh thinking that helped propel him into the presidency in 2017 and that he has not become a lame duck leader. In the speech lasting nearly two hours, he warned that military, economic and other pressures could weaken and fragment the 27-nation EU. Russia must not be allowed to win in Ukraine, he said, calling for a boost in Europe's cybersecurity capacity, closer defense ties with post-Brexit Britain, and the creation of a European academy to train high-ranking military personnel. Europeans should give preference to buying European military equipment, he said. "We must produce more, we must produce faster, and we must produce as Europeans," Macron said. The speech won a positive response from Macron's main EU partner, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with whom he has often clashed on defense and trade issues. "France and Germany want Europe to be strong," Scholz said in a post. "Your speech contains good ideas on how we can achieve this." Macron has long called for European "strategic autonomy" involving less reliance on the United States, a stance that has gained greater resonance in the face of Donald Trump's bid to return to the White House. Trump has often accused Europe of free loading on defence at the United States' expense. Europe "must show that it is never a vassal of the United States and that it also knows how to talk to all the other regions of the world," Macron said. Many EU officials believe there is currently no credible alternative to the U.S. military umbrella. Macron said Europe also risks falling behind economically as global free-trade rules are being challenged by major competitors. The European Central Bank should no longer just target inflation, but also growth and climate, he said. The EU should agree exemptions to its own competition rules so it can support firms in sectors such as AI and green energy in the face of "oversubsidies" by the U.S. and China, Macron said.



Columbia University Drops Deadline for Dismantling Pro-Palestinian Protest Camp

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Columbia University backed off late Thursday from an overnight deadline for pro-Palestinian protesters to abandon an encampment there as more college campuses in the United States sought to prevent occupations from taking hold. Police have carried out large-scale arrests in universities across the country, at times using chemical irritants and tasers to disperse protests over Israel's war with Hamas. The office of New York-based Columbia University president Minouche Shafik issued a statement at 11:07 pm (0307 GMT Friday) retreating from a midnight deadline to dismantle a large tent camp with around 200 students. "The talks have shown progress and are continuing as planned," the statement said. "We have our demands; they have theirs." The statement denied that New York City police were invited on the campus. "This rumor is false," it said. A student, identifying herself only as Mimi, told AFP she had been at the camp for seven days. "They call us terrorists, they call us violent. But the only tool we actually have are our voices," she said. Student protesters say they are expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, where the death toll has topped 34,305, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. More than 200 people protesting the war were arrested Wednesday and early Thursday at universities in Los Angeles, Boston and Austin, Texas, where around 2,000 people gathered again on Thursday. Riot officers in the southern state of Georgia used chemical irritants and tasers to disperse protesters on neatly manicured lawns. The Atlanta Police Department said officers responding to the school's

request for help were "met with violence" and used "chemical irritants" in their response. The spreading protests began at Columbia University, which has remained the epicenter of the student protest movement. The protests pose a major challenge to university administrators who are trying to balance campus commitments to free expression with complaints that the rallies have crossed a line. Pro-Israel supporters and others worried about campus safety have pointed to anti-Semitic incidents and allege that campuses are encouraging intimidation and hate speech. "I've never felt more scared to be a Jew in America right now," said Skyler Sieradsky, a 21-year-old student of philosophy and political science at George Washington University. "There are students and faculty standing by messages of hate, and standing by messages that call for violence." Demonstrators, who include a number of Jewish students, have disavowed anti-Semitism and criticized officials equating it with opposition to Israel. "People are here in support of Palestinian people from all different backgrounds... (compelled by) their general sense of justice," a 33-year-old graduate student at the University of Texas, Austin, who said he was Jewish and gave his name as Josh, told AFP. US ally Israel launched its war in Gaza after the Hamas attack on October 7 that left around 1,170 people dead, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures. Hamas militants also took roughly 250 people hostage. Israel estimates 129 remain in Gaza, including 34 presumed dead. At the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, 93 people were arrested for trespassing on Wednesday, authorities said they were cancelling events at the May 10 graduation ceremony.

Modi vs Gandhi Contest Heats Up in India's Election



BENGALURU (Dispatches) - India began voting on Friday in the second phase of the world's biggest election, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his rivals raise the pitch of the campaign by focusing on hot-button issues such as religious discrimination, affirmative action and taxes. Almost one billion people are eligible to vote in the seven-phase general elections that began on April 19 and concludes on June 1, with votes set to be counted on June 4. Modi is seeking a record-equalling third straight term on the back of his economic record, welfare measures, national pride, Hindu nationalism and personal popularity. Surveys suggest he will easily win a comfortable majority. His challenges have formed an alliance of more than two dozen parties and are promising greater affirmative action, more handouts and an end to what they call Modi's autocratic rule. A total of 88 seats out of the 543 seats in the lower house of parliament went to the polls on Friday, with 160 million people eligible to vote. They were spread across 13 states and federal territories in the world's most populous country. More than half of the seats in Friday's contests were in the southern states of Kerala and Karnataka and the northwestern state of Rajasthan. The campaign has become more heated since the first phase of voting on April 19 as Modi and the main opposition Congress party have faced off on communal issues with Modi accusing Congress of favouring minority Muslims, aiming to dilute affirmative action and planning to impose an inheritance tax. Congress has denied the charges and said Modi fears losing and was using divisive language to distract voters from real issues such as unemployment, the price rise and rural distress. But some voters were responding to the BJP: "I will vote for BJP. Muslims will get a lot of benefits if Congress comes to power and I don't want taxpayers' money to go for the benefit of any one community," said Shree Hari S.S., 23, who voted in the tech hub of Bengaluru. Tackling unemployment, inflation and high taxation in the world's fastest growing major economy, however, should be the priorities of the new government, said Karoemulla Basha, 47, a Bengaluru software engineer and a Muslim voter.

"Negative" Factors Building in U.S.-China Ties



BEIJING (Dispatches) - The United States is suppressing China's development, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Friday during talks with his U.S. counterpart Antony Blinken who is on a visit to Beijing aimed at resolving trade and policy differences between the superpowers. Secretary of State Blinken is due to spend several hours with Wang in closed-door meetings at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse as well as a working lunch, as the two sides try to maintain progress in ties despite a broad and complex agenda. As the pair settled into their opening session, Wang told Blinken that the "giant ship" of the China-U.S. relationship had stabilised, "but negative factors in the relationship are still increasing and building". "And the relationship is facing all kinds of disruptions. China's legitimate development rights have been unreasonably suppressed and our core interests are facing challenges," he said. Blinken replied that "active diplomacy" was needed to move forward with the agenda set by President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping when they met in San Francisco in November. "There's no substitute in our judgement for face-to-face diplomacy," Blinken said, adding that he wanted to ensure that "we're as clear as possible about the areas where we have differences, at the very least to avoid misunderstandings, to avoid miscalculations". Blinken and Yang met in a guesthouse which is part of a sprawling complex of villas, lakes

and gardens where many foreign dignitaries, including the then-U.S. President Richard Nixon, have been received. U.S. State Department officials signalled ahead of the sessions that China's support for Russia would feature strongly, saying that Washington is prepared to act against Chinese companies that have been helping retool and resupply Russia's defence industry. They have said that such assistance risks hurting the broader China-U.S. relationship, even as ties stabilise after being hit by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 and the U.S. downing of a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon in February 2023. Despite increasing high-level exchanges and working groups tackling issues such as enhanced military communication and global trade, stark differences remain. Hours before Blinken landed in China on Wednesday, Biden signed a bipartisan bill that included \$8 billion to counter China's military might, as well as billions in defence aid for Taiwan and \$61 billion for Ukraine. The disputed South China Sea also remains a flashpoint, while the U.S. is eager to see more progress on the curbing of China's supply of the chemicals to use to makeentanyl. Todd Robinson, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, and Nathaniel Fick, ambassador-at-large for cyberspace, are among the officials and envoys accompanying Blinken.



Haiti Transitional Gov't Takes Power

PORT-AU-PRINCE (Dispatches) - Haiti's transition council took power in a ceremony on Thursday, formalizing the resignation of former Prime Minister Ariel Henry as the Caribbean country seeks to establish security after years of gang violence wrecking chaos and misery. Henry's finance minister, Michel Patrick Boisvert, will be interim prime minister until the transition council appoints a new head of government, a cabinet and a provisional electoral council set to pave the way for an eventual vote. "Today is an important day in the life of our dear republic, this day in effect opens a view to a solution," Boisvert said after the nine-person transition council were sworn in on Thursday morning. Regine Abraham, a non-voting council member, thanked Haiti's security forces and international mediators, and said the council would focus on security, a national consultation on constitutional reform, preparing for elections, rebuilding the judiciary system and the economy. "We are seeing the total collapse of our institutions and failure of a government," she said. Port-au-Prince residents have "literally been taken hostage," she added. "Facing this unprecedented crisis, the entire population has recognized the urgent need of a firm hand to take us out of this spiral of despair and destruction." Even as the council was sworn in, local media reported houses being set on fire and shooting in the capital's downtown and Delmas areas, posting photos of columns of grey smoke rising above the skyline and videos of families leaving the area with their belongings. Armed gangs, equipped with weapons trafficked largely from the United States, have for years tightened their grip on the capital and sought to topple Henry. Since he pledged to resign last month, they have called for a broader "revolution". Earlier this week, gang leader Jimmy "Barbeque" Cherizier warned members of the transition council to "brace" themselves.

Israel Intensifies Strikes on Rafah Ahead of Threatened Invasion

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israel stepped up airstrikes on Rafah overnight after saying it would evacuate civilians from the southern Gazan city and launch an all-out assault despite allies' warnings this could cause mass casualties. Medics in the besieged Palestinian enclave reported five Israeli airstrikes on Rafah early on Thursday that hit at least three houses, killing at least six people including a local journalist. "We are afraid of what will happen in Rafah. The level of alert is very high," Ibrahim Khraishi, the Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations, told Reuters on Thursday. "Some are leaving, they are afraid for their families but where can they go? They are not being allowed to go to the north and so are confined to a very small area." The Gaza Strip is about 40 km (25 miles) long and between about 5 km (3 miles) and 12 km (7.5 miles) wide and is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. In the seventh month of a devastating air and ground war, Israeli forces also resumed bombarding northern and central areas of the enclave, as well as east of Khan Younis in the south. Israel's stated goal is to destroy Hamas, though it is unclear how they would do so. A United Nations team visiting a site for a staging area and pier for maritime aid operations was forced to take cover in a bunker on Wednesday after the area came under attack, a spokesperson said on Thursday. They were there for "some time," but there were no injuries. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war cabinet was meeting "to discuss how to destroy the

last vestiges, the last quarter of Hamas' battalions, in Rafah and elsewhere," government spokesperson David Mencer said. He declined to say when or whether the classified forum might give a green light for a ground operation in Rafah. Israel has killed at least 34,305 Palestinians, Gaza health authorities said on Thursday. The offensive has laid to waste much of the widely urbanized enclave, displacing most of its 2.3 million people and leaving many with little food, water or medical care. A U.N. expert speaking after visits to Jordan and Egypt said aid agencies were seeing an increasing number of patients suffering from the acute lack of food in the enclave. "What I've seen here was traumatizing. Patients that previously arrived in Egypt primarily with explosive and other war injury related symptoms are now joined by increasing numbers of patients, often children, with chronic diseases and severe malnutrition," Francesca Albanese, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Occupied Territories, told reporters in Cairo. Israel is retaliating against an Oct. 7 Hamas attack that killed 1,200 people and led to 253 taken hostage, according to Israeli tallies. Iranian-backed Hamas is sworn to Israel's destruction due to its occupation of Palestinian territories. Escalating Israeli warnings about invading Rafah, the last refuge for around a million civilians who fled Israeli forces further north earlier in the war, have nudged some families to leave for the nearby al-Mawasi coastal area or try to make their way to points further north, residents and witnesses said.





Nadal Outclasses Blanch in Madrid First Round

MADRID (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal thrashed 16-year-old wild card Darwin Blanch 6-1 6-0 in the first round of the Madrid Open and will face Australian 10th seed Alex de Minaur next. The 22-time Grand Slam champion broke the American at the first opportunity in the second game before grabbing the first set in just 28 minutes. Nadal, who last claimed the title on Madrid's clay in 2017, broke again to take the lead in the second set and kept up the pace, giving a tennis masterclass to Blanch who is still seeking his first tour win. The age gap between the pair was 21 years and 117 days, the biggest between two opponents at ATP Masters 1000 level. The American teen committed 27 unforced errors in what was his second ATP tour match after he had made his debut last month in Miami. "I think today I played against someone with a great future in front of him," Nadal said. "(But) Today he was making mistakes. I tried to be there and be solid all the time without taking a lot of risks. I'm happy to be through and I wish him all the very best." For me after how things developed the last few years, every time I have a chance to be on court on this amazing stadium with unconditional support means a lot to me. Trying to enjoy every moment. "The win was Nadal's record-extending 57th victory in Madrid, a tournament that he has won five times. He will play world number 11 De Minaur in the second round on Saturday. The Australian defeated

Nadal 7-5 6-1 in the second round of the Barcelona Open last week when the Spaniard was playing his first tournament since January. Meanwhile Liudmila Samsonova brought former world number one Naomi Osaka's return to clay to a halt in the second round of the Madrid Open with a 6-2, 4-6, 7-5 victory. Four-time Grand Slam champion Osaka twice battled back from a break down in the second set to force a decisive third but world number 17 Samsonova eventually ground out the victory. Japanese player Osaka returned to tennis in January after a long break and earned her first victory on clay for two years on Wednesday against Greet Minnen. However Russian 15th seed Samsonova, whom Osaka beat at Indian Wells in March, was able to end a four-match losing streak with her victory in two hours 22 minutes in the Spanish capital. Hard-court expert Osaka, 25, is not overly fond of clay and has not won back-to-back matches on the surface since 2019. Samsonova raced into a 4-0 first set lead, breaking in the first and third games as Osaka struggled. After recovering an early break Osaka was broke again in the fifth game and Samsonova took a 4-2 lead. However Osaka battled back and won the next four games to take the set. In the decider the players exchanged breaks before Osaka eventually blinked in the 11th game, with Samsonova wrapping up victory on serve. She will face Madison Keys in the next round.

Curry Named NBA's Clutch Player of the Year



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Golden State Warriors star Stephen Curry is the second recipient of the NBA Clutch Player of the Year Award, the league announced. Introduced last year, when Sacramento Kings guard De'Aaron Fox took home the Jerry West Trophy, the award honors the player "who best comes through for his teammates in the clutch," according to the NBA. Curry edged out Chicago Bulls forward DeMar DeRozan for the honor. Curry received 45 first-place votes (five points each), 18 second-place votes (three points) and 19 third-place votes (one point) for a total of 298 total points from a media voting panel. DeRozan finished with 272 points, including 34 first-place votes. Oklahoma City Thunder star Shai Gilgeous-Alexander came in third with 160 points, including 11 first-place votes. Curry led the league with 189 points in "clutch situations," defined by the league as possessions in the final five minutes of the fourth quarter or overtime when the margin is five points or fewer. Curry shot 49.6 percent overall, 45.7 percent from 3-point range and 95.1 percent from the free-throw line in clutch situations. The future Hall of Famer and two-time league MVP just completed his 15th NBA season having averaged 26.4 points, 4.5 rebounds and 5.1 assists per game while shooting 40.8 percent from deep. But the Warriors did not manage to advance out of the Western Conference play-in round.

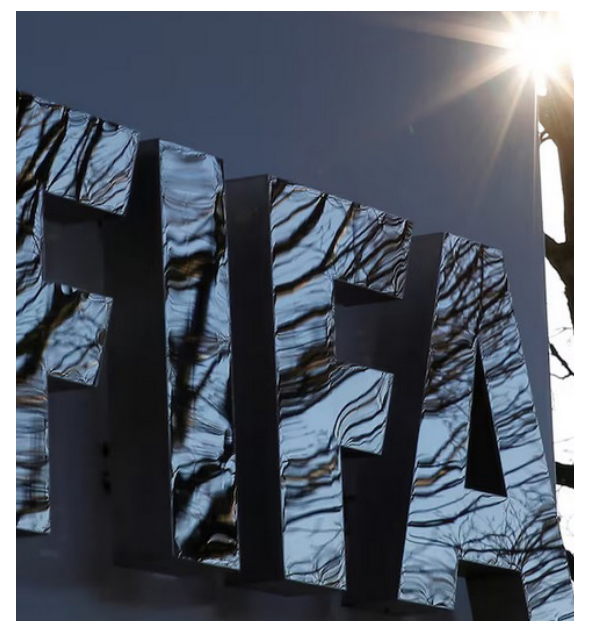
Nuggets Race Past Lakers for 3-0 Series Edge

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Nikola Jokic compiled 24 points, 15 rebounds and nine assists as the visiting Denver Nuggets moved one win away from the Western Conference semifinals with a 112-105 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers. Aaron Gordon added 29 points with 15 rebounds as the Nuggets grabbed a 3-0 lead in the best-of-seven series. Jamal Murray scored 22 points and Michael Porter Jr. added 20 points and 10 rebounds to help the Nuggets extend their winning streak over the Lakers to 11 games. The run includes seven consecutive playoff victories, as Denver swept Los Angeles in last year's conference finals. The Nuggets, who are the reigning NBA champions, can move into the next round as early as Saturday in Game 4 at Los Angeles. Anthony Davis logged 33 points and 15 rebounds and LeBron James produced 26 points and nine assists for the Lakers, who are on their first losing streak of at least three games since the start of the new year, when they were in the midst of a four-game skid. Los Angeles closed the regular season with 11 wins in the final 14 games, then beat the New Orleans Pelicans in a play-in game. Austin Reaves finished with 22 points while D'Angelo Russell did not score in 24 minutes for the Lakers, who held a lead at halftime in every game of the series, including a four-point advantage at the break on Thursday. Russell was 0 of 7 from the floor and 0 of 6 from 3-point range. The Lakers brought some much-needed desperation early, taking a 33-23 lead through one quarter by holding the Nuggets to 39.1 percent shooting from the floor. Denver hit 44 percent from the field in the second quarter and trailed 53-49 at halftime. The Nuggets turned a 9-0 run

early in the second half into a 69-61 lead and grabbed their first double-digit lead of the game at 81-69 with 2:35 remaining in the third quarter on a 3-pointer from Reggie Jackson. The Nuggets lost Jackson to a sprained left ankle less than two minutes later, and he did not return. Denver entered the fourth quarter with an 83-75 lead, and a step-back jumper from Porter put the Nuggets up 97-86 with 6:54 remaining. The Nuggets weren't threatened from there. The Lakers shot 5 of 27 (18.5 percent) from 3-point range. The Nuggets had a 51-38 rebounding advantage. Meanwhile Joel Embiid set a playoff career high with 50 points to lift host Philadelphia past the New York Knicks 125-114, cutting the 76ers' deficit in the Eastern Conference first-round playoff series to 2-1. Embiid shot 13 of 19 from the field and 19 of 21 from the free-throw line. Tyrese Maxey added 25 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 15 and Cameron Payne had 11 for the Sixers, who dropped two close games in New York to start the series.



FIFA Signs Four year Worldwide Partnership Deal With Saudi Aramco



ZURICH (Dispatches) - World soccer governing body FIFA has signed a partnership with oil and gas conglomerate Saudi Aramco that will run through to the end of 2027, it said in a statement on Thursday. The four-year deal will see Aramco become a worldwide partner of FIFA, including in major tournaments such as the World Cup 2026 and the Women's World Cup 2027. "This partnership will assist FIFA to successfully deliver its flagship tournaments... enable us to provide enhanced support to our 211 FIFA member associations across the globe," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in the statement. Saudi Arabia has been pouring billions into sports worldwide such as golf, football, motorsports and martial arts. Sport is one of the pillars of the government's Vision 2030 economic diversification plan that seeks to build new industries and create jobs. Some critics have called it an effort to distract from its human rights record. State-owned Aramco owns the Saudi second-tier side Al-Qadsiah and is building a stadium in Dammam that will stage matches during the Asian Cup 2027 and potentially the World Cup 2034, which Saudi Arabia is all but certain to host. "Through this partnership with FIFA we aim to contribute to football development and harness the power of sport to make an impact around the globe," Aramco president and CEO Amin H. Nasser said.

Man City Crush Brighton to Close Gap on Arsenal

BRIGHTON (Dispatches) - Manchester City demolished Brighton 4-0 as Phil Foden's double lifted the Premier League title chasers to within one point of leaders Arsenal on Thursday. England forward Foden struck twice before the interval to put the result beyond doubt. Julian Alvarez ended his goal drought after half-time to ensure injured striker Erling Haaland wasn't missed as his absence with a muscle problem stretched to a second successive game. "It is a good result for us, really good," Guardiola said. "I said before, what we have done in the past, it does not mean we will do it in the future. We know the margins are so tight. We have to win every one. Each game we are closer." Liverpool's surprise defeat at Everton on Wednesday was a welcome boost for City in the title race after Arsenal had thrashed Chelsea 5-0 on Tuesday. And City's stroll on the south coast kept the destiny of the title in their hands. Guardiola's team, who have a game in hand on both Arsenal and third-placed Liverpool, will be crowned champions for an unprecedented fourth successive season if they win their last five matches. With at least four goals in each of their last four league games, City are rounding into form at just the right moment once again. But Guardiola warned: "What happened to Liverpool, two defeats in a row, it can happen to Arsenal, it can happen to us." What is important is that still we are there. There are a lot of games to play. "Next up for City, who are unbeaten in 18 league games, is a trip to Nottingham Forest on Sunday, while Arsenal head to Tottenham just hours earlier. Guardiola has bemoaned the "unacceptable" fixture schedule that he believes puts his players' health at risk, blaming the pile-up for their sluggish performance in Saturday's 1-0 win against Chelsea in the FA Cup semi-finals. While City searched for the energy

to propel them a step closer to the title, Brighton couldn't have been any fresher as they played for the first time in 12 days. But there was no sign of any weariness from the champions as they took the lead with a typically eye-catching move in the 17th minute. Foden took possession 30 yards from goal and drifted towards the right flank, where his astute pass found Kyle Walker's run. Walker floated a pinpoint cross into the area and De Bruyne timed his run perfectly as the Belgian's diving header lifted the ball over Brighton keeper Jason Steele into the roof of the net. De Bruyne's fourth goal in his last five games marked the first time the midfielder had scored with his head in his Premier League career. In a rare moment of concern for the City defence, Brighton nearly snatched an immediate equaliser, but Lewis Dunk's header was too close to Ederson. Guardiola's men doubled their lead in the 26th minute thanks to a stroke of luck when Foden won a dubious free-kick. Foden didn't waste the opportunity, unleashing a powerful shot that took a wicked deflection off Pascal Gross as it flashed past the wrong-footed Steele. The England forward's 23rd goal in all competitions this season was followed by his 24th eight minutes later. City's relentless pressing panicked Brighton's Valentin Barco into surrendering possession to Bernardo Silva and Foden seized on the loose ball, driving a clinical finish into the far corner from 12 yards. Alvarez had scored once in his previous 16 games and Haaland's replacement ended that barren run with his first league goal since January in the 62nd minute. Walker lost control of the ball after breaking into the area, but his lunging tackle stopped Steele collecting it and Alvarez pounced to slot home from close range.

