

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Force Have Captured a Number of People Involved in Two Fatal Terrorist Attacks on the Bases of Iranian Security Forces in the Southeastern Province of Sistan and Baluchestan

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Iran Used Only 20% of What It Prepared That Night to Punish Israel



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A top commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says only a fraction of Iran's available military resources were used in the retaliatory airstrikes against Israel last month. Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Division, said in an interview on Wednesday that during Iran's punitive strikes - dubbed Operation True Promise - the United States, Britain and France came to the help of Israel in a bid to repel Iran's attacks. He, however, added that the Islamic Republic stood against the superpowers and their allies by using only 20 percent of what it had prepared in order to take action against the Israeli regime. Hajizadeh emphasized that Israel mobilized all its military resources to counter Iran's attacks while the US also deployed its aircraft, cruisers and aircraft carriers in support of Israel. Although Iran had not employed all it had in power, Hajizadeh said, Israel and its allies used all they had in power to counter Iran, adding that the US, which had previously claimed that it had no intention to intervene, stood by the Israeli regime. The IRGC general noted that there are many untold points about the operation, which exposed just a small fraction of Iran's military prowess. He attributed the success of the operation to the unwavering determination of Iranian forces and the wise guidelines of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. In a multi-pronged attack, Iran launched late on April 13 hundreds of drones and missiles at the occupied territories in response to the regime's aggression on the Iranian diplomatic premises in the Syrian capital of Damascus on April 1. The Israeli airstrikes on Iran's embassy compound in Damascus had killed two generals of the Quds Force of IRGC, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi and General Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, as well as five of their accompanying officers. The Israeli regime's aggression on the Iranian diplomatic facilities in Syria drew widespread condemnation from the international community.

Iran Has Right to Respond to Any Israeli Aggression



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran tells the United Nations it reserves the right to respond to any act of aggression by Israel, amid tensions following an unprecedented retaliatory military strike by the country that hit targets deep inside the Israeli-occupied territories last month. Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations Amir Saeid Irvani made the announcement in a letter addressed to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and to the President of the UN Security Council Vanessa Frazier. The letter came in response to correspondences submitted by the Israeli regime to the two UN authorities before and after Iran's attacks against the regime on April 13. The operation, dubbed True Promise, came in response to Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Syria's Damascus on April 1 which killed senior Iranian military commanders. Irvani rejected accusations leveled against Iran in the Israeli regime's letters to UN authorities and said that they were mostly aimed at diverting global attentions from Israel's brutal aggression on Gaza where it has killed more than 34,500 people since early October. The envoy said that Iran's drone and missile attacks against Israel were in the exercise of its inherent right to self-defense as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter. He reiterated that Iran has never initiated a war against Israel and has no intention of doing so in the future. "However, Iran reserves its inherent right under international law to respond to any use of force or acts of aggression against its sovereignty, territorial integrity and security, and national interests," said Irvani.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



Iran Slaps Sanctions on U.S., UK Individuals, Entities for Complicity in Israel's Crimes

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has imposed sanctions on some American and British individuals and institutions involved in terrorism and human rights violations through supporting Israel's barbaric acts against Palestinians, especially those in the Gaza strip. In a statement released on Thursday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said the embargo on U.S. individuals and entities falls in line with the Islamic Republic's human rights obligations as well as commitments to combat terror and counter the financing of the scourge. The sanctions target the American companies, including Lockheed Martin Corporation, General Dynamics Corporation and Skydio, for supplying the occupying regime with weapons. Chevron Corporation is also included in the list for providing Israel with revenue by assisting it in the exploitation of gas wells in the eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, Kharon company is blacklisted due to its role in the banning of the Palestinian Hamas resistance group by the US Treasury Department. Meanwhile, the American figures that are placed under Iranian sanctions are Jason Greenblatt, executive vice president and chief legal officer to Donald Trump and the Trump Organization, and his advisor on Israel; Michael Rubin, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute; and Jason Brodsky, policy director of United against Nuclear Iran. Clifford D. May, founder and president of the Foundation for Defense of

Democracies, CEO of RTX Corporation Gregory J. Hayes, Commander US Special Operations Command Bryan P. Fenton, and US Navy Fifth Fleet Commander Brad Cooper are among the US individuals blacklisted. In a separate statement, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced the names of the British figures and entities sanctioned for supporting and facilitating the Zionist regime's terrorist acts, systematic rights violation, warmongering, use of heavy and prohibited weapons against civilian, displacement of Palestinians, expansion of illegal settlements, and continuation of the Palestinian territories' occupation. The list includes Royal Air force Akrotiri in Cyprus, Royal Navy in Red Sea HMC Diamond, Elbit Systems, Parker Meggitt company, and Rafael UK. It further targets UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps, along with military commanders James Hockenhull, Sharon Nesmith, Paul Raymond Griffiths, Adrian Bird, Richard Kemp, Simon Cloke, and Peter Ivans. "All relevant national institutions of the Islamic Republic ... will take the necessary measures, including the blocking of accounts and transactions in the Iranian financial and banking systems, blocking of assets ... as well as prohibition of visa issuance and entry to the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for effective implementation of the above-mentioned sanctions," read the statement.

Iran, EAEU Members to Launch FTA in 2 Months



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A member of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce anticipated that more than 88% of commodities will be exchanged between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union's member states with zero tariffs within the next two months. The free trade agreements between countries will facilitate the exporters' access to the target market, a member of the board of directors of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce, Kambiz Mirkarimi said. He noted that a Free Trade Agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union's members, including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, was one of the most important deals signed by the country in recent years. Iran's exports to the EAEU members stood at about \$260 million until 2018, but after the implementation of the FTA in 2019, the country's exports to these countries immediately increased to above \$400 million, he said. It is expected that the FTA will be ratified by the parliaments of all member states of the union within the next two months, he said, noting that trade tariffs on more than 88% of the goods exchanged among Iran, Russia, and EAEU members will be reduced to zero. This development will increase the competitiveness of Iranian products against the goods made in China, India, and other rivals, Mirkarimi stated. The free trade agreement between the EAEU and Iran was signed during the EAEU Summit in St. Petersburg on December 25, 2023, Mehr reported. In 2018, Iran and the EAEU inked a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), which came into effect on October 27, 2019. The two sides later began negotiations to upgrade the PTA to an FTA.

Yemen Announces New Phase in Pro-Gaza Retaliatory Operations



SANAA (Dispatches) - The Yemeni army has declared the initiation of a fresh phase in Yemen's retaliatory operations, carried out in solidarity with the Palestinians facing the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza. In a statement, Yahya Saree, a spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces, announced "the commencement of the fourth phase of escalation." The statement noted that the decision comes in solidarity with the Palestinians, amid an expected Israeli invasion of the southern city of Rafah where nearly more than half of Gaza's population of 2.4 have sought shelter from Israeli strikes elsewhere in Gaza. According to the statement, the Yemeni forces, under the new phase, will target all ships heading to Israeli ports "in the Mediterranean Sea in any area within our reach." Saree warned that the military would also "impose comprehensive sanctions" on all ships of companies involved in supplying and accessing the Israeli ports, regardless of their nationality, and "prevent all ships of these companies from passing through the operational area of the Armed Forces, regardless of their destinations," if Israel launched a ground offensive against Rafah. The statement vowed "broader and stronger escalatory stages" until the Israeli war on Gaza ends, and the siege imposed on people there is lifted. Saree made the statement during a million-man rally in the capital Sana'a. Almost every week, Yemenis take to the streets of several cities across the country to condemn the Israeli crimes in Gaza and reiterate their support for their country's retaliatory operations against Israel.

EU Urged to Respect Iran Armed Forces

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian says the European Union must respect the country's Armed Forces in line with international law. In a phone call with EU foreign policy chief Joseph Borrell on Wednesday, Amir-Abdollahian warned against any European move to blacklist the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). The IRGC plays a constructive role in establishing lasting security in the region and fighting against terrorism, he added. The European Parliament on Thursday adopted a resolution condemning Iran's extensive drone and missile strikes against the Israeli regime, in a vote of 357-20, and called for further sanctions to be imposed on Iranian entities. The resolution also reiterated the European Parliament's long-standing call to include Iran's IRGC on the EU list of terrorist organizations. This came as the US, Canada and Britain also announced that they were targeting Iran's drone and missile industries by taking measures against individuals and companies "closely involved" in Iran's production of unmanned aerial vehicles. In a statement released on Saturday, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kan'ani denounced the trio's coercive measures against several real and legal entities linked to the Iranian Armed Forces, stressing that such moves could by no means undermine the Iranian government and nation's determination. Elsewhere in his remarks, Amir-Abdollahian reiterated the need to put an immediate end to Israel's genocide and crimes against the people of Palestine, particularly in Gaza. The top Iranian diplomat said that the United Nations needs to play a genuine role in Gaza on both regional and international levels by taking Palestinians' rightful demands into account. At least 34,568 people, most of them women, children and adolescents, have been killed and more than 77,765 injured in Israel's war in Gaza that was launched on October 7 following al-Aqsa Storm, a retaliatory operation staged by the Palestinian resistance groups. In his remarks, the Iranian foreign minister also defended Iran's retaliatory strikes against the occupied territories as legitimate, saying the move was based on self-defense right. 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, dubbed Operation True Promise, inflicted damage on Israeli military bases across the occupied Palestinian territories. In the Wednesday telephone call, Amir-Abdollahian also welcomed the continuation of Iran-Europe dialogue, saying it will promote cooperation between the two sides. He added that Iran took positive steps during the talks to revive a US-abandoned nuclear deal -- officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) -- but the negotiations failed to achieve any outcome due to the excessive demands of certain parties. The top Iranian diplomat also said his country's cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is on a good path.

IRAN NEWS



Iran Private Sector ready to Help Syria Reconstruction

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - President of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Samad Hassanzadeh has said that the Iranian private sector is ready to help the reconstruction of Syrian infrastructure and industrial sector. Hassanzadeh made the remarks during a meeting in Tehran on Wednesday with his Syrian counterpart Muhammad Abu Al-Hoda Al-Lahham. The meeting took place as a Syrian delegation is on a visit to the Iranian capital to participate in Iran Expo 2024. Addressing the meeting, the Iranian side said that the low level of exchanges between Iran and Syria are mainly due to failing to implement a free trade agreement signed between the two countries 13 years ago as well as problems on the way of banking transactions. Hassanzadeh said that Syria should give a list of its priorities and plans to Iran so that the Iranian investors can help the reconstruction and renovation of the industries of the war-hit country.

Iran's Foreign Trade Value Grows About 48% in One Month



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iran's foreign trade (total imports and exports) registered about 47.63 percent hike in the first month of the current Iranian calendar year (March 19 to April 22, 2024). The country's foreign trade, including the crude oil, gas condensates, technical-engineering services and electricity included, reached \$10.420 billion between March 19 and April 22, 2024, showing a 47.63 percent growth compared to the same period last year. In this period, Iran exported \$7.680 billion worth of products to other countries. In return, the country imported \$2.740 billion worth of goods into the country, the report added. Iran's trade balance, with the crude oil, gas condensates, technical-engineering services and electricity included, turned positive as much as \$4.940 billion in the first month of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 19, 2024). According to the report, Iran exported \$4.180 billion worth of crude oil, gas condensates and fuel oil from March 19 to April 22, 2024. In addition, 9.7 million tons of goods were exported from the country between March 19 and April 22, 2024. China, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Oman were of Iran's main export target markets in the first month of the current Iranian calendar year. Regarding the foreign goods transited from the country, the report added that 1.6 million tons of foreign products were transited through the Iranian land and territory in the first month of the current Iranian calendar year.



Iran, UAE to Start New Chapter in Economic Exchanges

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrpash has emphasized that Tehran and Abu Dhabi are keen on starting a new chapter in economic interactions. The minister who is also head of the Iran-UAE Joint Economic Cooperation Commission wrote on his social media account on Thursday that after listening to the viewpoints of Iranian and Emirati merchants and economic players in the [Arab] country, we are seeking to start a new chapter in economic interactions between the two countries. He also pointed to the fact that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the second trade partner of Iran, saying that the two sides had intensive negotiations in the Wednesday meeting of the joint economic cooperation commission, and he also took part in a lengthy meeting with Iranian and Emirati tradesmen. Bazrpash also held talks with UAE Minister of Economy Abdulla Bin Touq Al Marri and a delegation of Emirati CEOs, which led to the signing of two cooperation agreements. The Iranian minister also addressed reporters by

saying that as a result of mutual efforts, it can be predicted that trade volume between the two countries will reach 30 billion dollars in the future. The Iran-UAE Joint Economic Cooperation Commission convened after a 10-year interval, which is an achievement by the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi, who pursues the expansion of trade ties with the neighboring countries. Bazrpash also met with Vice President of the United Arab Emirates Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The two officials discussed the expansion of mutual cooperation, as well as trade ties during the meeting at the presidential palace of the UAE. Upon his arrival on Wednesday, the Iranian minister and head of the joint economic commission held talks with businessmen and members of the commission to pave the way for improving trade exchanges. Bazrpash addressed reporters as saying that given the measures, which will be put on the agenda, it can be predicted that trade volume between the two countries will reach 30 billion dollars in the future.

Iran Eyes Joint Investment with Qatar in Asia, Africa



TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The Iranian industry minister proposed that Iran and Qatar can make joint investment in the African countries, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It seems that Iran and Qatar could carry out joint investment projects in the African countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, Abbas Aliabadi said on the sidelines of the 6th Export Potential Exhibition of Iran, entitled "IRAN EXPO 2024", held in Tehran. Stressing the need to broaden economic and trade relations between Iran and Qatar, the minister said the two countries enjoy high potential for cooperation in various fields. Aliabadi said the participation of Qatari companies in Iran Expo 2024 provides an opportunity to advertise the export potential of Iran. Qatar has made huge investment in recent years in the airport transportation and air fleet sector, the Iranian minister said, adding that Tehran is keen to cooperate with the Qatari companies in various industrial and agricultural fields, IRNA reported. Known as the most prestigious export event in Iran, "Iran Expo 2024" opened in Tehran on April 27 and will run through May 1.

Iran-Estonia FMs Discuss Crews of Seized Israel-Linked Ship



TEHRAN (IRNA)- Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told his Estonian counterpart Margus Tsahkna that the Islamic Republic has freed all crew members of the ship seized in Iranian waters, and if the captain of the ship cooperates all crew members can return to their countries, including Estonia. Amir-Abdollahian and Tsahkna held a phone conversation on Thursday, discussing issues of mutual interests as well as regional development. Amir-Abdollahian noted that the seized ship, which turned off its radar while in Iranian territorial waters and endangered maritime security, has been seized by Iran in accordance with legal regulations. All vessels are expected to observe laws to maintain maritime security, he added. The top Iranian diplomat pointed to the genocide in Gaza, urging all states to help push for a sustainable ceasefire in the area, the removal of the siege, and a prisoner swap between the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli regime. Estonian foreign minister, for his part, appreciated Iran's cooperation in releasing the crew members of the ship. He also called for collaboration among all countries to help stop the war in Gaza. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' Navy Special Force seized the MCS Aries container ship near the Hormuz Strait. The Portuguese-flagged container ship was seized on April 13 for violating maritime laws.

Tehran, Havana to Launch Joint Committee of Commerce

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Chambers of Commerce of Iran and Cuba have signed an agreement for launching a joint committee of commerce to help lift the obstacles on the way of bilateral trade. The agreement was signed in Tehran by President of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Samad Hassanzadeh and his Cuban counterpart Antonio Luis Carricarte Corona. The visit to Iran Chamber of Commerce by the Cuban Chamber of Commerce president and his accompanying delegation took place as a 27-member Cuban group of businesspersons are in Tehran to attend Iran Expo 2024. An Iran-Cuba Business Forum was also held on the same day where officials and businesspeople from both sides explored ways to give a boost to trade exchanges. Addressing the business forum, the president of Iran Chamber of Commerce noted that trade relations between Iran and Cuba are lagging behind their

diplomatic relations, calling for further promotion of trade exchanges between the two countries. Noting that the level of trade between Iran and Cuba has been growing over the past years, Hassanzadeh underlined the role of the private sectors to take full advantage of the potentials on both sides. He further highlighted that the East-South corridor which runs through Iran and the country's southeastern Port of Chabahar provide Cuba with access to the Eurasian region. Speaking in the meantime, Cuban Ambassador to Tehran Alberto Gonzalez Casals said that his country seeks to become a hub for the entrance of Iranian products into the Latin American region. In Cuba, Iran is known for its political and military capabilities, but Iranian goods and products are not known, because there are still obstacles in the way of trade and investment between the two countries, the ambassador said.



Tehran, Baku Stress Expansion of Military and Defense Cooperation

TEHRAN (IP) - The Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces in a meeting with Azerbaijan's Deputy Minister of Defense emphasized the expansion of military and defense cooperation between Tehran and Baku within the framework of the agreements.

Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces yesterday, Thursday, in a meeting with Karam Mustafa Yev, Deputy Minister of Defense and Commander of the Nakhchivan Army in Tehran, while stressing the importance of improving the level of relations between the two countries in various sectors, including the military, said: "Cultural, historical, religious and political commonalities create a suitable platform for the interaction between the two countries' armed forces." In this meeting, the Azerbaijani Deputy Minister of Defense and Commander of the Nakhchivan Army, referring to the significance of bilateral relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, said: "The cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries is being developed and promoted within the framework of the agreements of the third joint commission on military and defense cooperation." In this meeting, the process of bilateral military relations and cooperation was also discussed and opinions were exchanged, and the necessity of continuous consultations between the authorities of the two countries at different levels was emphasized.



Dams Strain as Water, Death Toll Keep Rising in South Brazil

BRASILIA (Dispatches) - The death toll from floods and mudslides triggered by torrential storms in southern Brazil climbed to 39 on Friday, officials said, as they warned of worse to come. As the rain kept beating down, rescuers in boats and planes searched for scores of people reported missing among the ruins of collapsed homes, bridges and roads. Rising water levels in the state of Rio Grande do Sul were straining dams and threatening the metropolis of Porto Alegre with "unprecedented" flooding, authorities warned. "Forget everything you've seen, it's going to be much worse in the metropolitan region," Governor Eduardo Leite said Friday as the streets of the state capital, with a population of some 1.5 million, started flooding after days of heavy downpours in the region. The state's civil defense department said at least 265 municipalities had suffered storm damage in Rio Grande do Sul since Monday, injuring 74 people and displacing more than 24,000 - a third of whom have been brought to shelters.

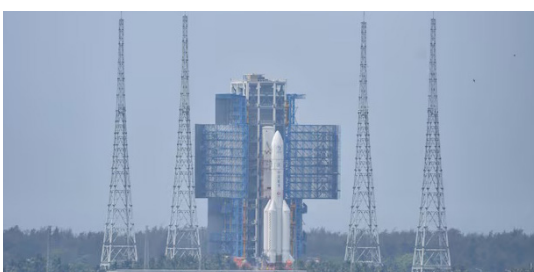


Turkey Freezes Trade With Israel



ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday said Turkey's move to halt trade with Israel was designed to force the country to a ceasefire in Gaza. The decision, announced on Thursday, is the latest indication of deteriorating relations between the two countries. "We have taken some measures to force Israel to agree to a ceasefire and increase the amount of humanitarian aid to enter" Gaza, Erdogan told a group of businessmen in Istanbul. "We will oversee the consequences of this step we have taken in coordination and consultation with our business world." Already in April Turkey, one of the few Muslim-majority nations to recognise Israel, announced it was restricting exports to Israel, covering 54 products from iron and steel to jet fuel. "We do not run after hostility or conflict in our region," Erdogan said Friday. "We do not want to see conflict, blood or tears in our geography. We know now that we did the right thing." The Gaza Strip is suffering a humanitarian crisis caused by Israel's war against Hamas that has been raging since October 7, with the United Nations and aid agencies warning of impending famine. The war started with Hamas's unprecedented October 7 attack on Israel that resulted in the deaths of 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures. Israel estimates that 129 captives seized by militants during their attack remain in Gaza. The military says 34 of them are dead. Israel's retaliatory offensive against Hamas has killed more than 34,600 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. An outspoken advocate of the Palestinian cause, Erdogan has become one of the most strident critics in the Muslim world of Israel's offensive in Gaza.

China Launches Historic Mission to Retrieve Samples From Far Side of the Moon



WENCHANG (Dispatches) - China launched an uncrewed spacecraft on a nearly two-month mission to retrieve rocks and soil from the far side of the moon, the first country to make such an ambitious attempt. The Long March-5, China's largest rocket, blasted off at 5:27 p.m. Beijing time (0927 GMT) from Wenchang Space Launch Center on the southern island of Hainan with the more than 8 metric ton Chang'e-6 probe. Chang'e-6 is tasked with landing in the South Pole-Aitken Basin on the far side of the moon, which perpetually faces away from the Earth, after which it will retrieve and return samples. The launch marks another milestone in China's lunar and space exploration programme. "It is a bit of a mystery to us how China has been able to develop such an ambitious and successful programme in such a short time," said Pierre-Yves Meslin, a French researcher working on one of the scientific objectives of the Chang'e-6 mission. In 2018, Chang'e-4 gave China its first unmanned moon landing, also on the far side. In 2020, Chang'e-5 marked the first time humans retrieved lunar samples in 44 years, and Chang'e-6 could make China the first country to retrieve samples from the moon's "hidden" side. The launch was attended by scientists, diplomats and space agency officials from France, Italy, Pakistan, and the European Space Agency, all of which have moon-studying payloads aboard Chang'e-6. But no U.S. organisations applied to get a payload spot, according to Ge Ping, deputy director of the China National Space Administration's (CNSA) Lunar Exploration and Space Program.



Hamas Delegation Heads to Cairo for Truce Talks

GAZA STRIP (Dispatches) - Hamas said its delegation was heading to Cairo on Saturday to resume Gaza truce talks, as the United Nations warned that Israel's threatened assault on the city of Rafah could produce a "bloodbath". Foreign mediators have been waiting for the Palestinian militant group to respond to a proposal to halt fighting for 40 days and exchange hostages for Palestinian prisoners. "The only thing standing between the people of Gaza and a ceasefire is Hamas," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday. Months of negotiations have stalled in part on Hamas's demand for a lasting ceasefire and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's repeated vows to crush the group's remaining fighters in Rafah. Blinken on Friday also reiterated Washington's objections to the long-threatened Rafah offensive, saying Israel has not presented a plan to protect the civilians sheltering there. "Absent such a plan, we can't support a major military operation going into Rafah because the damage it would do is beyond what's acceptable," he said. Humanitarian groups and the United Nations have also begged Israel to call off an attack on Rafah, where 1.2 million people have sought refuge. WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned Friday that an incursion into the far-southern city could have dire implications. "WHO is deeply concerned that a full-scale military operation in Rafah, Gaza, could lead to a bloodbath, and further weaken an already broken health system," Tedros said on X, formerly Twitter. The UN's health agency announced it was nevertheless making contingency plans,

restoring health facilities and pre-positioning supplies. "This contingency plan is Band-Aids," said Rik Peepker, the WHO representative in the Palestinian territories. "The ailing health system will not be able to withstand the potential scale of devastation that the incursion will cause." A senior Hamas official confirmed to AFP that a delegation led by Khalil al-Hayya, deputy head of the group's political arm in Gaza, would arrive in Cairo on Saturday morning. The Palestinian militant group, which has been in power in the Gaza Strip since 2007, maintains it is considering the latest truce proposal with a "positive spirit". But a top Hamas official accused Netanyahu of trying to derail the latest proposed Gaza truce with his threats to keep fighting with or without a deal. "Netanyahu was the obstructionist of all previous rounds of dialogue... and it is clear that he still is," senior Hamas official Hossam Badran told AFP by telephone. Badran said Netanyahu's insistence on attacking Rafah was calculated to "thwart any possibility of concluding an agreement" in the negotiations. US news site Axios reported that CIA director William Burns arrived in Egypt on Friday night. The United States, along with Egypt and Qatar, has been trying to seal a ceasefire deal in the nearly seven-month-old war. During the last truce, over one week in November, 80 Israeli hostages were exchanged for 240 Palestinian prisoners. Egyptian sources told the Wall Street Journal that Israel would give the truce talks another week, failing which it would launch its long-threatened Rafah offensive.

U.S. Campus Protests Wane After Crackdowns, Biden Rebuke



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Pro-Palestinian protests that have rocked U.S. campuses for weeks were more muted Friday after a series of clashes with police, mass arrests and a stern White House directive to restore order. Police in Manhattan cleared an encampment at New York University after sunrise, with video posted to social media by an official showing protesters exiting their tents and dispersing when ordered to do so. The scene appeared relatively calm compared to crackdowns at other campuses around the country -- and some worldwide -- where protests over Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza have multiplied in recent weeks. University administrators, who have tried to balance the right to protest and complaints of violence and hate speech, have increasingly called on police to clear out the demonstrators ahead of year-end exams and graduation ceremonies. At the University of Chicago, the school's president said talks with protesters on a compromise had failed and indicated that the university might intervene in an encampment there as a result. The news came the same day that dozens of American flag-wielding counter-protesters showed up and confronted the school's pro-Palestinian group, but police separated the two sides, local media reported. More than 2,000 arrests have been made in the past two weeks across the United States, some during violent confrontations with police, giving rise to accusations of use of excessive force. President Joe Biden, who has faced pressure from all political sides over the conflict in Gaza, gave his first expansive remarks on the protests Thursday, saying that "order must prevail." "We are not an authoritarian nation where we silence people or squash dissent," Biden said in a brief address from the White House. "But

neither are we a lawless country. We're a civil society, and order must prevail." His remarks came hours after police moved in on demonstrators at the University of California, Los Angeles, which had seen a violent confrontation when counter-protesters attacked a fortified encampment there. A large police contingent forcibly cleared the sprawling encampment early Thursday while flash bangs were launched to disperse crowds gathered outside. Schools officials said that more than 200 people were arrested. On the US West coast Friday, protesters at a University of California, Riverside encampment were set to disband by midnight following a compromise with administrators. The agreement came after similar compromises at New Jersey's Rutgers University Thursday and Brown University in Rhode Island earlier in the week. Republicans have accused Biden of being soft on what they say is anti-Semitic sentiment among the protesters, while he faces opposition in his own party for his strong support for Israel's military offensive. "There should be no place on any campus, no place in America for anti-Semitism, or threats of violence against Jewish students," Biden said. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona echoed the condemnation in a letter to university leaders on Friday, pledging to investigate reports of anti-Semitism "aggressively," CNN reported. Meanwhile, similar student protests have popped up in countries around the world, including in Australia, France, Mexico and Canada. In Paris, police moved in to clear students staging a sit-in at the Sciences Po university. An encampment has grown at Canada's prestigious McGill University, where administrators on Wednesday demanded it be taken down "without delay."



Georgian PM Rejects U.S., EU Criticism of Draft Foreign Agents Law

TBILISI (Dispatches) - Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze rejected criticism from the United States and European Union of a draft "foreign agents" law, saying opponents of the bill were unwilling to engage in a meaningful discussion. The draft legislation, which is winding its way through the Georgian parliament, would require organisations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as agents of foreign influence, a requirement opponents attack as authoritarian and Kremlin-inspired. Several thousand protesters took to the streets again on Friday to voice their opposition, moving towards the headquarters of the ruling Georgian Dream party and then attending a Holy Friday service ahead of Orthodox Easter Sunday. The European Union and the United States have urged Tbilisi to drop the legislation or risk harming its chances of European Union membership and a broader Euro-Atlantic future. The standoff is seen as part of a wider struggle that could determine whether Georgia, a country of 3.7 million people that has experienced war and revolution since the fall of the Soviet Union, moves closer to Europe or back under Moscow's influence. Kobakhidze said the legislation was necessary for transparency and accountability in the South Caucasus nation. "I explained to (senior U.S. diplomat Derek) Chollet that false statements made by the officials of the U.S. State Department about the transparency bill and street rallies remind us of similar false statements made by the former U.S. Ambassador in 2020-2023," Kobakhidze said on X. He said the previous U.S. statements had encouraged violence from what he called foreign-funded actors and had supported "revolutionary processes" which he said had been unsuccessful.

ICC Warns Against Threats

THE HAGUE (Dispatches) - The International Criminal Court prosecutor warned on Friday against unspecified threats and intimidation, amid reports that Israel is concerned the tribunal could issue arrest warrants over the war in Gaza. The Hague-based ICC did not say if the comment related to its investigation into possible war crimes by Israel or Palestinian groups in Gaza and the West Bank. The office of ICC chief prosecutor Karim Khan said on X, formerly Twitter, that it was aware of "significant public interest" in its activities and said it sought to "engage constructively with all stakeholders." But it added that the court's "independence and impartiality are undermined, however, when individuals threaten to retaliate against the court or against court personnel." "Such threats, even not acted upon, may constitute an offence" against the ICC's "administration of justice", it warned, calling for an end to such activity. Khan's office declined to say where the threats had come from and which investigation was concerned, when questioned by AFP. US and Israeli media reports have suggested the ICC prosecutor could issue warrants against both Israeli politicians -- including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu -- and Hamas leaders. Netanyahu said Wednesday on X that the ICC was "contemplating issuing arrest warrants against senior Israeli government and military officials as war criminals." "This would be an

outrage of historic proportions," he said, alleging that the ICC was "trying to put Israel in the dock". The Axios news outlet has reported that Israel warned Washington it would take retaliatory steps against the Palestinian Authority that could lead to its collapse if the ICC issues arrest warrants. US members of Congress had also warned of retaliation by Washington, Axios reported. The United States says it also opposes the ICC probe into Israel's conduct in Gaza, arguing it has no jurisdiction. Neither the United States nor Israel are members of the court. The White House reiterated that position on Friday, while condemning any threats against the ICC. "We obviously oppose any threats or intimidation to public officials, including ICC officials," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told a briefing. She said she would not comment on "what could be next and if we would weigh in if they were to move forward" with charges. In 2020 the administration of then-president Donald Trump targeted the ICC with sanctions over its investigation into Afghanistan. The Biden administration lifted them. One legal expert said the statement by the ICC's office of the prosecutor (OTP) was likely related to the "ongoing investigation in Palestine" given recent Israeli government statements about "threats to the Palestinian Authority in response to the potential issuance of arrest warrants".





Auger-Aliassime to Face Rublev in Madrid Open Final

MADRID (Dispatches) - Felix Auger-Aliassime said "it's crazy times for the elite of our sport" as the Canadian benefited from yet another retirement to set-up a Madrid Open final clash against Andrey Rublev. Czech 30th seed Jiri Lehecka became the latest player to withdraw in the Spanish capital through injury, as he sustained a back problem and was forced to retire at 3-3 in the opening set of his semi-final against Auger-Aliassime. Top seed Jannik Sinner withdrew ahead of his quarter-final with Auger-Aliassime, citing a hip injury, while Jakub Mensik also gave the Canadian free passage when he retired early in the second set of their third round. The Masters 1000 tournament in Madrid has been dealt one blow after another, starting with the pre-event withdrawal of world number one Novak Djokovic. After losing Sinner to injury, the tournament also saw its third seed bow out as Daniil Medvedev retired midway through his quarter-final with Lehecka on Thursday. Carlos Alcaraz, meanwhile, announced on Friday he was withdrawing from next week's Masters 1000 in Rome due to a forearm injury. "It's crazy. I don't know if it's ever happened to a player before, it's kind of a weird situation to be in on my part," said a stunned Auger-Aliassime, who is through to the first Masters final of his career by playing just three completed matches. Lehecka felt something in his back as he attempted a serve early in the match and took an eight-minute off-court medical timeout before play resumed at 3-3. It was all over three points later as Lehecka fell to the ground in pain, bringing the match to an abrupt end. "I couldn't believe

what was happening when I saw that his back blocked on him. I feel really bad for him," said Auger-Aliassime. "It's crazy times for the elite of our sport, withdrawing from many events. But obviously for me it's kind of a weird rhythm not having played that much and being in the finals. But I can just focus on the first week of tennis I had." Rublev reached the fifth Masters final of his career with a 6-4, 6-3 win against American Taylor Fritz. The seventh-seeded Rublev arrived at the tournament carrying a four-match losing streak but rebounded in the Spanish capital, claiming five impressive wins, including one over world number three Alcaraz in the quarter-finals. "For sure mentally I was feeling much better (this week) and I was able to perform, putting emotions in the right direction, for sure that helped me to be in the final," said Rublev. After getting broken in the opening game, Rublev recovered immediately and won the last seven points of the first set to take the lead in 39 minutes. A break of serve in the sixth game of the second frame was enough for the Russian to complete a 72-minute victory. Rublev leads his head-to-head 4-1 against Auger-Aliassime but four of their five encounters have gone to a deciding set. Auger-Aliassime lost their most recent clash in Rotterdam in February after holding three match points. "We've always had three-set battles, even back in 2018, I was much younger," said the 23-year-old Canadian. "He's always a player that fights hard, that's always present every tournament, us players have highs and lows but he's always there."

Mitchell Scores 50, But Magic Force Game 7



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Paolo Banchero scored 27 points and Franz Wagner added 26 as the host Orlando Magic forced a Game 7 in the Eastern Conference first-round series with a 103-96 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers. Jalen Suggs sank six 3-pointers to highlight his 22-point performance for the fifth-seeded Magic, who overcame 50 points by Donovan Mitchell to even the best-of-seven series at three wins apiece. Orlando forced its first Game 7 since the 2009 playoffs. The Magic will visit Cleveland on Sunday afternoon for Game 7 in a series that has featured the home team winning the first six games. The winner of Sunday's game will advance to the conference semifinals to square off against the top-seeded Boston Celtics. "This is the moment that you play for," Orlando coach Jamahl Mosley said about Game 7. "It's why you do it. You do it for these moments. So being on the road, Game 7, the ability to come together to continue to grow in each game. I think that what this group is looking forward to." Mitchell made 22 of 36 shots from the floor and fellow guard Darius Garland added 21 points for the fourth-seeded Cavaliers. Despite missing a chance to advance in Game 6, Cleveland coach JB Bickerstaff exuded confidence heading into Sunday's win-or-go-home matchup. "Our guys will be ready for the moment," Bickerstaff said. "Our guys have been really good at home. We don't expect that to change." Mitchell scored all 18 of his team's fourth-quarter points, highlighted by a 3-pointer to forge an 89-89 tie with 4:01 to play. Banchero made a 3-pointer and a layup and Cole Anthony answered Mitchell's short jumper with a tip-in with 1:57 left to boost Orlando's lead to 96-91. Mitchell scored from the interior and sank a 3-pointer to pull Cleveland within four at 100-96 with 20.6 seconds left. Suggs made a free throw to extend the Magic's advantage and Evan Mobley failed to convert at the other end to effectively end the game.

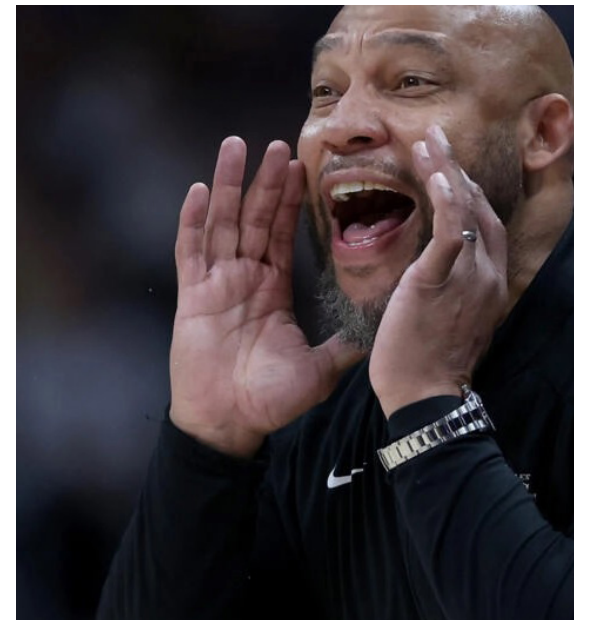
Verstappen Says Future Is With Red Bull

MIAMI (Dispatches) - Formula One triple world champion Max Verstappen said Red Bull was his home but then closed his meeting with the media at the Miami Grand Prix by teasing that you never know what life holds. With Red Bull's top rated designer Adrian Newey having announced earlier this week he was leaving, Verstappen seemed to put an end to mounting speculation he too was listening to offers, declaring his future was with the energy drink outfit. Reports in Germany have linked Verstappen to a possible move to Mercedes, who are looking for a replacement with seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton set to join Ferrari at the end of the season. Mercedes boss Toto Wolff has knocked back speculation about a meeting with Verstappen's management after this weekend's Miami race while the Dutchman also brushed aside rumours by suggesting not even 250 million euros (\$268 million) would tempt him away from Red Bull. But before departing Verstappen opened the door to a move just a crack, teasing you should never say never. "My future is with Red Bull," declared Verstappen. "Money is not going to be a differentiator for me to go somewhere. I'm happy with what I'm earning right now." "It's



about performance. It's always about performance at the end of the day." "At the moment, I can say that I want to stay with the team because I believe in the project that we have." "But at the end of the day, in sports, but also in life, you never know what's going to happen in the future." "If performance is the currency to acquire Verstappen's services then no team on the starting grid is richer than Red Bull. Despite a season of turmoil and scandal Red Bull's dominance has continued unabated. Internal divisions resulting from a female employee's allegations of inappropriate behavior against team boss Christian Horner, for which he was cleared, have been a distraction as has Newey's imminent departure. But on the track Red Bull has remained focused and unchallenged. "I think it is always very important to remain calm and focus on your job," Verstappen told reporters. "At the end of the day, we need to have the fastest car." "That's what I have always demanded." "So, basically, it goes on like it was going on before." "At the moment, everyone is very focused on what we have to do." "Winning helps a lot."

Lakers Fire Head Coach Ham After NBA Playoff Ouster



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Darvin Ham was fired as head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers on Friday, four days after the team was ousted from the NBA playoffs by Denver, the club announced. Ham went 90-74 in two seasons guiding the Lakers, but the team was swept by eventual NBA champion Denver in last year's Western Conference final and eliminated in five games in round one by the Nuggets this season. "We greatly appreciate Darvin's efforts on behalf of the Lakers and recognize the many accomplishments achieved over the past two seasons, including last year's remarkable run to the Western Conference finals," Lakers vice president of basketball operations Rob Pelinka said. "While this was a difficult decision to make, it is the best course of action following a full review of the season. This organization will remain unwavering in its commitment to deliver championship-caliber basketball to Lakers fans around the world." In addition to who will be hired to guide the squad next, the Lakers face uncertainty over the future of superstar LeBron James, a four-time NBA Most Valuable Player who can opt out of his contract next season. "I've seen, heard a lot of reports about my future. I said it last night and I'll say it again. I do not know yet as I'm only thinking about spending time with my family & friends! When I know after speaking with the fam, my counsel as well as my representation about it then you guys will know. Until then. Love," James tweeted on Tuesday.

Guardiola Backs England for Euro 2024 Glory

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola has backed England to win Euro 2024 if they follow his club's route to continental glory. Guardiola finally guided City to their first Champions League crown last season after a number of near misses earlier in his reign. The Spaniard feels Gareth Southgate can do the same with England following their own painful failures on the brink of silverware. England were beaten in the European Championship final by Italy on penalties at Wembley in 2021, lost the World Cup semi-final against Croatia in 2018 and were beaten by France in the 2022 World Cup quarter-finals. "They are really good. It's not just the talent of the strikers, it's the whole package, the whole group and Gareth knows perfectly what he has to do," Guardiola told reporters on Friday. "So I have the feeling, everyone has the feeling, that the England national team, (from) the last events - the World Cup and European Championship - they make steps, they are on the verge, they are really close. They lost a final, got to a semi-final. "When you arrive at these stages every two years, it's going to happen. It's quite similar to us, we were close, and in the end we lifted it." Guardiola believes the English passion for football, which has often weighed heavily on their players at tournaments, will prove a more uplifting factor this time. "I see the reaction when they play European Cups or World Cups, people go crazy on the streets. They go crazy for the national team," Guardiola said. "That proves how proud

they are and, at the end of the day, as a football player, that is the best, your country is proud of what you are doing for your country, and the way you are playing, reaching the last stages." "Just believe it. If they believe it, they can do it. Believe it, believe it, they can do it." City forward Phil Foden could have a key role to play for England after an outstanding season at club level. The 23-year-old's performances were recognised as he was named the Football Writers' Association men's Player of the Year on Friday. Guardiola believes Foden, who has progressed through the club's youth ranks to become one of their most important players, could go on to become one of City's greatest ever. "This club has a long, long history. You can't forget what happened with the players who played at Maine Road, like everyone knows. I think the club has been built with many, many top-quality players," he said. "But I have the feeling if he continues his career until the end here, and continues that level, he can be one of the best, that's for sure."

