

Iran Will Respond Directly to Any Threat Originating From the Zionist Regime, Army Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiumars Heydari Says, in the Islamic Republic's Latest Warning to Israel

IRAN NEWS

Head of the Civil Aviation Organization of Iran (CAO) Mohammad Mohammadi-Bakhsh and Qatar's Acting President of the General Civil Aviation Authority Mohamed Faleh Al Hajri Reviewed Further Cooperation and Enhancement of Relations in a Meeting in Doha

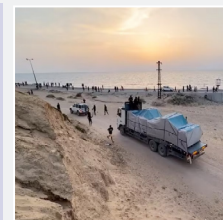
2 DOMESTIC

New Chinese Ambassador Presents Copy of Credentials to Iran FM

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Fierce Fighting in Northern Gaza as Aid Starts to Roll Off U.S.-Built Pier



> SEE PAGE 3

European Trio Warned After Deploying Warplanes to Defend Israel Against Iran Operation



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian commander sounds a note of warning addressed to the UK, Germany, and France after the trio deployed their warplanes to defend the Israeli regime against a retaliatory operation staged by Iran last month. Brigadier General Esmail Qa'ani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), made the remarks on Wednesday. "All criminals should know [this] that their measures and crimes have been chalked up to their accounts," Qa'ani said. "France, Germany, and the UK should not think that they deployed the planes that night and that the issue was over. Yes, that night was over, but they will be held accountable in due course," he added. The commander was addressing a ceremony held to mark 40 days since the martyrdom of the IRGC's General Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi. Haji Rahim, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, an IRGC Quds Force commander, and five of their accompanying officers were all martyred on April 1 in an Israeli terrorist attack against Iran's diplomatic premises in the Syrian capital Damascus. In retaliation, the IRGC targeted the occupied territories late on April 13 with a barrage of drones and missiles. The retaliatory strikes, dubbed Operation True Promise, inflicted heavy damage on Israeli military bases across those territories. According to Qa'ani, the United States and the entire Western military alliance of NATO contributed all of their military capabilities towards defending the occupying regime against the Iranian operation.

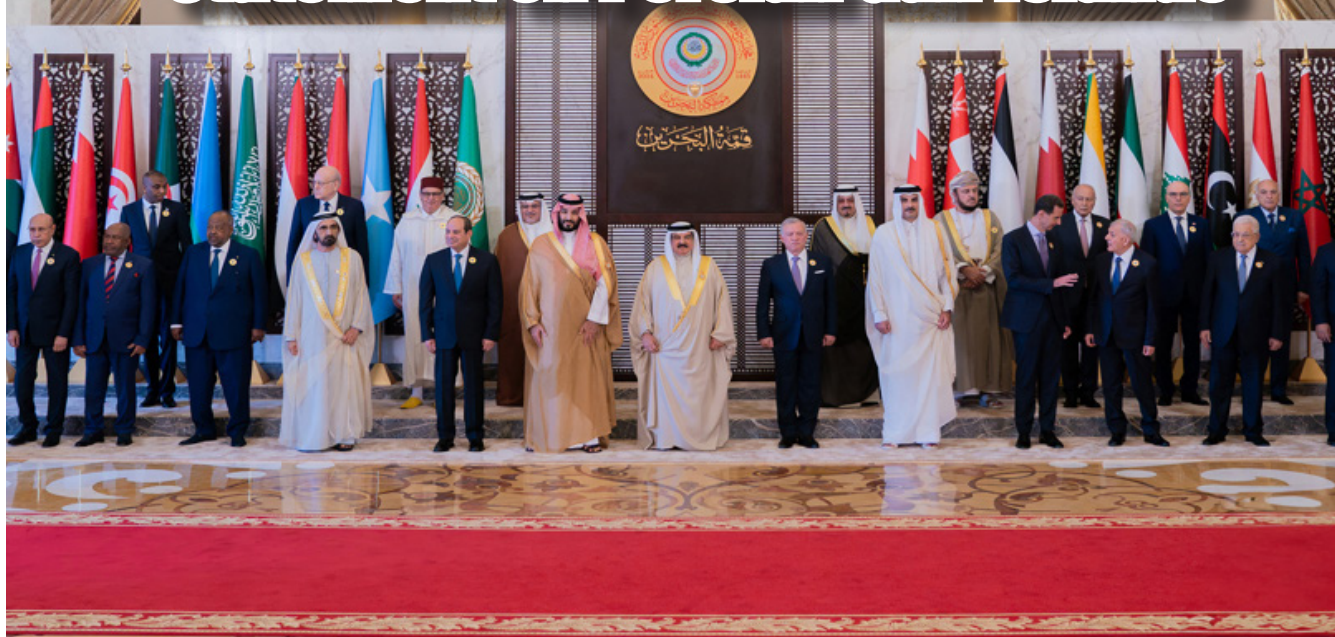
Iran, IAEA to Cooperate on Unresolved Issues



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's top nuclear energy official says the Islamic Republic will continue to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to resolve disputed issues surrounding its nuclear program. Mohammad Eslami, who serves as head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said on Wednesday that Iran had sorted out almost half of the issues raised by the IAEA about its nuclear sites. "...two sites remain, which are in the process of being resolved and the deputies from the two sides are negotiating and interacting on them based on the plan we have agreed upon," Eslami told reporters on the sidelines of a Cabinet meeting in Tehran. He said ongoing work between Iran and the IAEA is completely separate from stalled negotiations that are aimed at reviving a 2015 international agreement on Iran's nuclear program, known as the JCPOA. His remarks came days after IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi visited Iran to attend a major nuclear science conference and to hold talks with senior officials of the country. Grossi and Iranian officials have described bilateral meetings in Tehran as positive. In an interview with the Financial Times published on Tuesday, Grossi said that he had seen a desire in the Iranian authorities for engaging in serious negotiations with the IAEA. That comes against the backdrop of some media reports and statements by Western government officials suggesting Iran is not willing to cooperate with the UN nuclear watchdog because it has not benefitted from the JCPOA.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

Iran Rejects Unacceptable Arab League Statement on Persian Gulf Islands



TEHRAN - Tehran has dismissed "baseless" and "unacceptable" the Arab League statement on Abu Musa, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the Persian Gulf, reiterating its sovereignty over the three Iranian islands. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani made the remarks on Thursday after the 33rd Arab League summit repeated the United Arab Emirates' claim to the trio of the Iranian islands in its final statement following a meeting in the Bahraini capital Manama. "It has been stated and emphasized time and again that the three Iranian islands of Abu Musa, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs are an integral and eternal part of the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said. The Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs have historically been part of Iran, proof of which can be found and corroborated by countless historical, legal, and geographical documents in Iran and other parts of the world. However, the United Arab Emirates has repeatedly laid

claim to the islands. The islands fell under British control in 1921 but on November 30, 1971, a day after British forces left the region and just two days before the UAE was to become an official federation, Iran's sovereignty over the islands was restored. Additionally in its statement, the 22-member Arab League called for an immediate end to the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip, the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation forces from the Palestinian territory, the lifting of an Israeli siege, and the opening of all crossings for the entry humanitarian aid. Kanaani welcomed the points raised in the statement in defense of the oppressed people of Palestine and the condemnation of the Israeli war crimes in Gaza. He also emphasized the need for further unity among Muslim countries to stop Israeli atrocities. Since early October, Israel has killed at least 35,272 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and injured 79,205 others.

President Urges Experts to Provide Solutions Than Creating Dead End



TEHRAN - Emphasizing that none of us have an excuse before God and the people for failing to remove the obstacles, President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi says, "It is true that the constitution subordinates any kind of development to the protection of the environment, but the expert's view should not create a dead end, but the expert should solve the problem and find a way to boost production and create employment". Following the plans of the second visit of the Popular Administration to Mazandaran province, President Raisi attended the meeting of the administrative council of the province, and emphasized the importance of vision, approach and action in order to bring about transformation, stating, "We believe that there is no problem in the country that cannot be solved; Our belief and logic is the belief and logic of 'we can'. The President added, "We believe that with our logic of 'we can', great things can happen to us, as we observed today in the celebration of the revival of stagnant production units, that some famous and big units of the province, which were caught in a deplorable situation in the past, today prospered and have good plans for the development of production and employment". Raisi described the revival of 395 production units as a proof and a manifestation that great things can be done with the existing capacities in the province and the country, he said, "Today, during the visit to the village of Khormakela, I witnessed beautiful effects of attracting people's participation in the economy". The President stated that the people, the Leader and the family of the martyrs have a right to expect from us managers under this roof and that great things can happen in your hands, and said, "One of your most important missions is to give a platform to the people and use the popular labour force in all fields".

Iran Arms for Yemen "Lies" by U.S. Aim to Justify Aggression



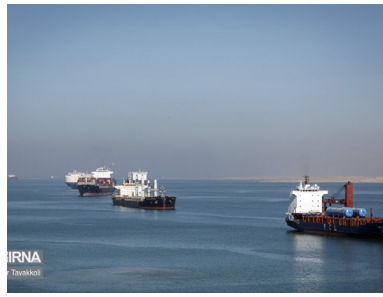
TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations has unequivocally dismissed US allegations about the Islamic Republic's interference in Yemen, saying Washington aims to achieve its short-sighted political interests in the region through spreading lies and misinformation. Amir Sa'eed Iravani made the statement in a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and rotating President of the UN Security Council Pedro Comissario Afonso in response to the recent U.S. accusations against Iran at a Security Council meeting on the situation of Yemen. During the public UNSC meeting on May 13, U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Robert Wood claimed that the Islamic Republic was sending "advanced weapons, including ballistic and cruise missiles" for Yemen's military and Ansarullah resistance movement. "It is regrettable that, once again, the U.S. representative used the Security Council's platform to advance its short-sighted political interests and to justify and legitimize the US's ongoing illegal actions and military aggression against Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity by spreading lies and misinformation about the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the situation in Yemen," Iravani wrote in his letter. "The Islamic Republic of Iran unequivocally rejects these unfounded allegations." Iravani also rejected the identical allegations made against Tehran by the representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom and France in another meeting on Yemen in April. "The Islamic Republic of Iran has made it clear that it is committed to the Security Council's relevant resolutions on the situation in Yemen and has not engaged in activities in contravention of these resolutions," the Iranian diplomat said.

Iran Ready to Share Nuclear Expertise With All Countries: AEOI chief

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) has expressed the country's preparedness to share its achievements in the nuclear sector with other states, particularly with neighboring countries. Behrouz Kamalavandi made the remarks on Wednesday during a meeting with participants at the third Iranian-Arab Dialogue Conference, which was held in Tehran on May 12-14. "Iran has 50 years of history and experience in the nuclear field and has been able to train many scientists and specialists," he said. "Iran stands ready for comprehensive cooperation in order to transfer its nuclear expertise and technology to all countries, especially neighboring ones. We extend the hand of friendship to all states." The AEOI spokesman also highlighted Iran's achievements in the area of uranium enrichment and the production of radiopharmaceuticals despite Western sanctions. He further pointed to Israel's assassination of Iranian scientists and its acts of industrial and cyber-sabotage aimed at slowing the Islamic Republic's nuclear progress, saying, "We did not obtain the nuclear industry easily in our country and we paid a heavy price for it." Meanwhile, Kamalavandi expressed regret that political issues have prevailed over negotiations between Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), stressing that the talks should be technical and within the framework of Safeguards Agreement. Iran, he added, has currently one nuclear power plant and is constructing two more as part of plans to generate 20,000 megawatts (MW) of nuclear electricity by the next 20 years. Last month, the AEOI head said the country intends to construct more nuclear plants and increase the capacity of nuclear power generation as part of efforts to ensure national energy security. Mohammad Eslami made the announcement during a visit of the first unit of Iran's only nuclear plant in south of the country on April 22, saying that the Bushehr nuclear power plant has managed to produce a considerable amount of electricity in the past years. Over the past years, Iran has made great strides in its peaceful nuclear energy program in defiance of illegal sanctions and other hurdles created by the Western powers.



IRAN NEWS



Iran Signs \$2.75b Worth of Contracts on Developing Sea-Based Technologies

QESHM (IRNA) - Iran has signed 21 contracts valued at \$2.75 billion to develop sea-based technologies. The contracts were signed as part of the 1st edition of Iran Sea-Based Economy International Matchmaking Event (ISBE 2024) in Qeshm Island, southern Iran. The contracts included cooperation agreements for the purchase of five vessels to be used in the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), construction of five other vessels, the launch of a smart dry port in Zahedan, offering smart shipping services, as well as the purchase and construction of 40,000 TEUs. Two other contracts were about the purchase and construction of 12 container ships and five other methanol carrying ships. The ISBE 2024 opened in a ceremony participated by Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade Abbas Aliabadi in Qeshm Island on Tuesday. The event focuses on the development of domestic and foreign cooperation among players of sea-based economy.

Tehran, Astana Can't Be Held Hostage by Global Geopolitics



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Ali Akbar Jokar says Tehran and Astana have a lot in common and cannot be held hostage by various geopolitical events in the world. Jokar made the remarks in an exclusive interview with "Eurasia: Politics and Culture", an Astana-based information and analytical portal about Eurasia and the world. While expressing his views on the economic cooperation between the two countries, the Iranian envoy said that "the relations between Tehran and Astana are exemplary all over the world" not only because of geographical connection but also because of very deep and centuries-old cultural and historical ties. "Although some manifestations of big powers affect our trade, commerce and economic interactions" he said, adding that there exist no insoluble problems between Iran and Kazakhstan as "the two countries have the will at the highest political level to develop successful relations". "There is the Caspian Sea between our countries, which connects us, and Kazakhstan has the opportunity to access the Indian Ocean and international waters through Iran", Jokar clarified. The Iranian ambassador continued by saying that "Astana has a high potential to enter the 80-million market of Iran and the market of Persian Gulf countries as well as to Africa via sea".

New Chinese Ambassador Presents Copy of Credentials to Iran FM



TEHRAN (IRNA) - China's New Ambassador to Tehran Cong Peiwu has presented a copy of his credentials to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian at the start of his diplomatic mission in the Islamic Republic. Cong Peiwu met with the top Iranian diplomat on Wednesday four days after he arrived in Tehran. Amir-Abdollahian appreciated efforts by Cong Peiwu's predecessor

to progress Tehran-Beijing relations, expressing hope that the new ambassador will take the same path to help strengthen ties between the two countries. Cong Peiwu said that Iran and China enjoy deep and long-running relations, adding that the Chinese government gives special importance to promoting all-out cooperation with Iran.

Lawsuit Filed Against U.S. Over 2019 Khash-Zahedan Bombing



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The lawyer representing the families of victims of a deadly terrorist attack in southeastern Iran has announced that a lawsuit has been filed against the US government for supporting regional terrorist groups, including the one responsible for the 2019 bombing in Sistan and Baluchestan province. The Judiciary held a press conference to explain the legal action taken by the families of the martyrs and victims of the February 3, 2019 bombing on the Khash-Zahedan road that killed at least 27 members of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and wounded another 13. The Pakistan-based so-called Jaish al-Adl terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack. Hossein Sadeq-Zadeh, the lawyer of the families of the victims of the terrorist attack, stated, "This terrorist act was carried out by the proxy agents of the United States." The lawyer said that a lawsuit is being pursued against the US government, leaders and senior officials in Iranian courts. Early this year, the IRGC launched a missile strike against two major strongholds of Jaish al-Adl in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan after the terrorist group claimed responsibility for an attack on a police headquarters in southeastern Iran that killed 11 police forces.

Iran Self-Sufficient in Drone, Missile Production



TEHRAN (IRNA) - A senior Iranian defense official says the Islamic Republic has designed and produced highly advanced drones and missiles without reliance on any country and despite draconian sanctions imposed by the West. Brigadier General Afshin Khajefard, head of Iran's Aviation Industries Organization (IAIO) of the Defense Ministry, said on Wednesday, "We are affected by sanctions, and the enemy is trying to ensure that the Islamic civilization is not prominent." "The field of science and technology is one of the areas that the enemy does not want to be developed in our country," he added. Despite the outside pressure, Iran has made significant progress in the defense industry, particularly in the production of various types of drones and missiles. The Iranian-made drones can fly for 6 to 7 hours depending on different situations to reach their targets, Khajefard said. Regarding Iran's Operation True Promise of April 13, an unprecedented missile and drone attack against the Israeli regime, the official said both the operation and the air defense that was deployed to deter a possible counterstrike were an exemplary military action in the air domain. "In this operation, we actually struck the enemy in an area where we felt we might not have had full control," he noted. The European Union (EU) on Tuesday said it had expanded its sanctions regime to target Iran's missile industry on top of the existing restrictions on the country's drone program. The new sanctions came a month after the Iranian Armed Forces launched the Operation True Promise against the Israeli regime in retaliation for an airstrike on Iran's diplomatic premises in Syria that killed Iranian generals.

RAI Earmarks \$500m for Renovating, Repairing Railway Fleet

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The chief executive of the Railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran (RAI) said a \$500 million fund has been allocated for purchasing the equipment, repairing and modernizing the railway fleet of the country using oil bartering. Miad Salehi made the remarks in a meeting with the producers and repairmen of the railway fleet of the country, adding that another \$500 million will also be earmarked for buying locomotives. The CEO of RAI further pointed out that

50 freight locomotives of the Railway Company will be delegated to the private sector in the next month, the website of Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (MRUD) reported. With the coordination made in this regard, the contract for delegating 50 freight locomotives and another contract of investment for repairing 15 other locomotives (ROT) will be unveiled in a ceremony as well, the deputy roads minister added.



Culture Minister Offers Hosting 2nd SCO Film Festival in Tehran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili has proposed that the second Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) International Film Festival be held in Tehran. Addressing the 21st meeting of the ministers of culture of the member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on Wednesday, Esmaili said that the West attempts to deviate people from civilized culture and progress. "We should try to accurately introduce the manifestations of high culture with the originality of the countries of the Middle East and the SCO members which has a long history," he added. Common culture, traditions, and customs as unbreakable threads are the cause of unity between nations and can be the cause of closeness, he noted. Iran, as a civilized country, is ready for cultural and artistic cooperation in the form of SCO, he stressed. He also suggested the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Film Union.

Croatia Gets Third Gov't Led by Pro-EU PM Plenkovic

SARAJEVO (Dispatches) - The Croatian parliament on Friday approved a government dominated by the conservative pro-European HDZ party, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, marking his third term in the job following a parliamentary election last month. The long-ruling HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), which led the NATO member country of 3.8 million people to join the EU's Schengen free travel area and the euro zone last year, formed a coalition with the far-right Homeland Movement (DF). Homeland Movement will have three ministers in the 18-member government. "We want successful, vital, just, sustainable and sovereign Croatia," Plenkovic told lawmakers presenting the government programme. Of 141 present MPs, 79 voted for and 61 against the government, with one abstention. Anti-immigrant DF has campaigned on a platform of defending traditional family values and against allowing the minority Serb party to join any future coalition, raising fears that the new cabinet will be oriented more to the right. But under a coalition agreement between the two parties, the HDZ will keep its ministers of internal affairs and culture, which means that policies in key sectors concerning migrant policy and minority rights will not change, analysts say.



Peru Protesters Slam New Insurance Law



LIMA (Dispatches) - Hundreds of protesters in Peru's capital marched to demand the scrapping of a new law that describes transgender people, among others, as having a mental illness so they can access health benefits. Around 500 demonstrators peacefully walked the streets of downtown Lima, hoisting banners with slogans that read "No more stigmas" and "My identity is not a disease." The law, which was approved administratively last week by the government of President Dina Boluarte, specifies that those who identify as transgender, along with "cross dressers" and "others with gender identity disorders," are considered to be diagnosed with "illnesses" that are eligible for mental health services via both public and private providers. The protesters reached the health ministry offices, but no clashes were reported. "Gender identities are no longer considered pathologies," said activist Gahela Cari Contreras, who accused Boluarte's government of trying to trample on the LGBTQ+ community's rights. "We're not going to let them." Critics of the law have argued that its update of the country's PEAS health regulations was unnecessary, since existing rules already allowed for universal access to mental health services. Government officials have sought to chalk up the controversy as a misunderstanding. In a statement released shortly after the law was promulgated, the health ministry insisted that it rejects the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people and that the legal language simply seeks to ensure more complete health coverage. The ministry "categorically reaffirms respect for the dignity of the person and their free actions within the framework of human rights, providing health services for their benefit," according to the statement.



Fierce Fighting in Northern Gaza as Aid Starts to Roll Off U.S.-Built Pier

The Israel Defense Forces said troops killed more than 60 militants in Jabalia in recent days and located a weapons warehouse in a "divisional-level offensive". A divisional operation would typically involve several brigades of thousands of troops each, making it one of the biggest of the war. "The 7th Brigade's fire control centre directed dozens of airstrikes, eliminated terrorists and destroyed terrorist infrastructure," the IDF said. At least 35,303 Palestinians have now been killed, according to figures from the enclave's health ministry, while aid agencies have warned repeatedly of widespread hunger and dire shortages of fuel and medical supplies. Israel said on Friday that its forces retrieved the bodies of three people killed at the Nova music festival in Israel on Oct. 7 and taken into Gaza. In response, Hamas said negotiations were the only way for Israel to retrieve hostages alive: "The enemy will

not get its prisoners except as lifeless corpses or through an honourable exchange deal for our people and our resistance." Talks on a ceasefire have been at an impasse. Israeli tanks and warplanes bombarded parts of Rafah on Friday, while the armed wings of Hamas and Islamic Jihad said they fired anti-tank missiles and mortars at forces massing to the east, southeast and inside the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. UNRWA, the main U.N. aid agency for Palestinians, said more than 630,000 people had fled Rafah since the offensive began on May 6. "They're moving to areas where there is no water - we've got to truck it in - and people aren't getting enough food," Sam Rose, director of planning at UNRWA, told Reuters on Friday by telephone from Rafah, where he said it was eerily quiet.

France Accuses Azerbaijan of Meddling in New Caledonia



PARIS (Dispatches) - France accused Azerbaijan of fanning the flames of riots in the French-ruled Pacific island of New Caledonia by flooding social media with what it said were misleading photos and videos targeting French police. Paris has cracked down on rioters who are angry over a contested electoral reform and is trying to restore order in the remote overseas territory after three nights of upheaval in which four people have been killed. The French government's watchdog for online disinformation campaigns, Vigimur, a unit created in response to Russian activity in Africa, published a report on Friday identifying Azeri social media accounts spreading anti-French propaganda. French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin first levelled the charges against Azerbaijan on Thursday, without providing any evidence. Azerbaijan's foreign ministry swiftly denied what it called insulting allegations and reiterated on Friday it was not connected to the New Caledonia protests. "Instead of accusing Azerbaijan of allegedly supporting pro-independence protests in New Caledonia, France should focus on his country's failed policy towards the overseas territories that led to such protests. We once again call on France to stop baseless claims against our country," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Aykhan Hajiyev. Vigimur said the campaign included a picture montage showing dead pro-independence protesters next to a white man in a khaki outfit with a rifle held in a shooting position, with the caption: "The French police are murderers".

Ukraine Braces for Heavy Battles as Putin Says Russia Carving Out Buffer Zone



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine's top commander warned on Friday of "heavy battles" looming on the war's new front in the northeastern Kharkiv region as Russian President Vladimir Putin said Moscow was carving out a "buffer zone" in the area. Russian forces attacked the Kharkiv region's north last Friday, making inroads of up to 10 kilometres (6 miles) and unbalancing Kyiv's outnumbered troops who are trying to hold the line over a sprawling front nearly 27 months since the invasion. Colonel-General Oleksandr Syrskyi said the attack had expanded the combat zone by around 70km and that Russia had launched its incursion ahead of schedule after "it noticed the deployment of our forces". "We understand there will be heavy battles and that the enemy is preparing for that," the head of the Ukrainian armed forces wrote in a statement on the Telegram app. Russian forces have the initiative on the battlefield and are slowly advancing in the east, exploiting Ukrainian shortages of manpower and months of delays

in arms supplies from the West. Speaking during a state visit to China, Putin said Russia was creating a "buffer zone" in Ukraine's northeast to protect its own border regions, but said capturing the city of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest, was not part of the current plan. Faced with Russian airstrikes throughout the war, Kyiv has scrambled to develop drones and missiles and staged strikes on facilities in Russia it says are being used to support the war and bomb Ukrainian towns, cities and power facilities. Kharkiv's mayor said a Russian missile strike on Friday had killed two people and injured 25 more in the city. Putin told a news conference in China that the assault on Kharkiv region was a response to Kyiv's shelling of Russian border regions such as Belgorod where he said civilians were dying. "They are shooting directly at the city centre, at residential areas. And I said publicly that if this continues, we will be forced to create a security zone, a buffer zone. That is what we are doing," he said.



Singapore Inaugurates New PM

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Singapore inaugurated Lawrence Wong on Wednesday as its new prime minister and fourth leader since independence six decades ago, completing a carefully calibrated power transfer designed to guarantee continuity in the wealthy city-state. Wong, 51, comes from among a crop of so-called "4G" leaders, a new generation of politicians hand-picked by the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to take over the reins of the key Asian trade and financial centre. Wong will retain his current position as finance minister and takes charge of a country led for two decades by Lee Hsien Loong, the 72-year-old son of Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore who stayed in politics until his death in 2015. The succession has been long coming, with Lee's plans of stepping down before he turned 70 upended by the pandemic, and by a transition fumble when his anointed successor unexpectedly ruled himself out of the running in 2021. When the date for the handover was announced last month, Wong said he accepted the responsibility "with humility and a deep sense of duty" towards Singapore and its 5.9 million people. "Every ounce of my energy shall be devoted to the service of our country and our people," Wong pledged in a video on his social media accounts. Wong rose to prominence in 2020 as co-chair of the pandemic taskforce and was named Lee's successor in April 2022 after a series of consultations between the political leadership and Wong's peers. He was promoted to deputy prime minister and led a high-profile public consultation exercise to chart a "social compact" between the government and the people on dealing with issues like sustainability, inequality and employment.

Anti-Gov't Protests Simmer in Georgia

TBILISI (Dispatches) - Thousands of Georgians led by Orthodox Christian clerics marked "Family Purity Day" on Friday, marching down the same central avenue in Tbilisi that has been the scene of some of the fiercest anti-government protests in the country's history. The contrasting groups staging the marches - pro-Orthodox and conservative on one side and pro-European on the other - spotlight the deep divisions within Georgian society as it grapples with an unprecedented political crisis. For over a month, thousands of protesters, many of them young people, have filled Tbilisi's streets on a near-nightly basis to voice their opposition to a draft law on "foreign agents" they condemn as authoritarian and Russian-inspired. The United States and the European Union have repeatedly warned the ruling Georgian Dream party to drop the bill, which protesters fear will harm the South Caucasus country's bid to join the European Union. Dozens of rallygoers have been arrested or hospitalised since mid-April after police deployed water cannon and fired tear gas canisters and stun grenades to disperse the crowds. By contrast, Friday's march received the tacit support of Georgian Dream, whose leading members including Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze took part. Declared an official government holiday this year, the "Day of Family Purity and Respect for Parents" celebrates what the Georgian Orthodox Church calls the country's "family values" of marriage between a man and a woman. LGBTQ rights are a contentious topic

in Georgia, a traditionally Orthodox Christian country of 3.7 million. Georgian Dream introduced a bill in March that would ban sex changes and adoption by same-sex couples, among other restrictions, a move seen by opponents as an attempt to boost its popularity ahead of elections later this year. The Church began marking "Family Purity Day" in 2014, one year after an LGBTQ rights rally in Tbilisi was violently dispersed by crowds led by priests and conservative groups. May 17 is commemorated in many countries as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. On Friday, throngs of mostly families and elderly people paraded down Tbilisi's streets, brandishing Orthodox icons and Georgian flags. Outside parliament, where just a few days ago protesters were led away by police, people queued for their turn to kiss a large icon held aloft by a priest clad in black robes.





Zverev Equals Becker Record to Set Up Rome Final With Jarry

ROME (Dispatches) - Germany's Alexander Zverev equalled compatriot Boris Becker's record by reaching an 11th Masters final when he ended the Rome Open giant-killing run of Alejandro Tabilo to set-up a title showdown against Nicolas Jarry. World number five Zverev, who lifted the Rome trophy in 2017, battled back to see off Tabilo 1-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 to tie Becker's record for the most Masters finals by a German since the series began in 1990. Third seed Zverev looked like he would become the latest high-ranking victim of an unusual men's tournament when he was battered in a sensational opening set. But Zverev battled back and after coming through a tight second set his class eventually showed, making the final at the Foro Italico for the third time. "I was just hanging on in the second set. I brought my energy up. I was really just hanging on and waiting and the patience was kind of good today," Zverev said on court. "He hit me off the court in the first set and I did not play well at all, but he was a big reason why. He gave me no rhythm and I am happy I turned it around in the tie-break and ran away in the third set." Tabilo's run to the last four had become one of the stories of a tournament which was shed of a host of top men players either to pre-event injuries or shock

early eliminations. The 26-year-old Chilean had defeated world number one Novak Djokovic in the third round and the 32nd-ranked player showed little fear of Zverev until he began to play more passively in the second set tie-break. Zverev will be a big favourite to win Sunday's championship match when he faces Tabilo's countryman Jarry, who won his first Masters 1000 semi-final against Tommy Paul 6-3, 6-7 (3/7), 6-3. Jarry is guaranteed to move up to a career-high number 17 in the world rankings after reaching his seventh ATP final. The 28-year-old is hunting his fourth tour title after coming through a more prosaic encounter with American Paul than Zverev had with Tabilo. Jarry took the first set after breaking in game eight. Paul fought back and won a more eventful second set, but instead of pushing on he missed the chance to become the first American to reach the Rome final since Andre Agassi 22 years ago. Jarry sealed the deal after wasting four match points in the most dramatic game of the contest, setting up the biggest match of his career. "I was able to come back with my tennis in the third set, play very aggressive. To finish the match is never easy but I made it through and it's an amazing feeling," said Jarry.

Woods Picking His Bags After Disastrous PGA Championship Outing



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - A disastrous six-over-par 77 in the second round of the PGA Championship saw 15-times major winner Tiger Woods miles from the projected cut line in Louisville, Kentucky, on Friday, in his first tournament since the Masters. Woods enjoyed a Masters milestone last month with his 24th consecutive made cut at the major but was seven over par through 36 holes at Valhalla Golf Club with the projected cut at -1 when play was suspended due to darkness on Friday. It was the latest setback for the former world number one, who has kept a limited competition schedule after a horrific 2021 car crash and struggled to shake off the rust. "I need to play more. Unfortunately, I just haven't played a whole lot of tournaments, and not a whole lot of tournaments on my schedule either," said Woods. "Hopefully everything will somehow come together in my practice sessions at home and be ready for (the U.S. Open at) Pinehurst." His second round turned disastrous almost immediately, as he had a triple bogey on the second and fourth holes and a bogey on three. Any momentum he might have salvaged from birdies on the seventh and eighth holes evaporated after a pair of flubbed putts led to bogeys on the 11th and 12th, though he ended the day on a sweeter note, with a birdie on the par-five 18.

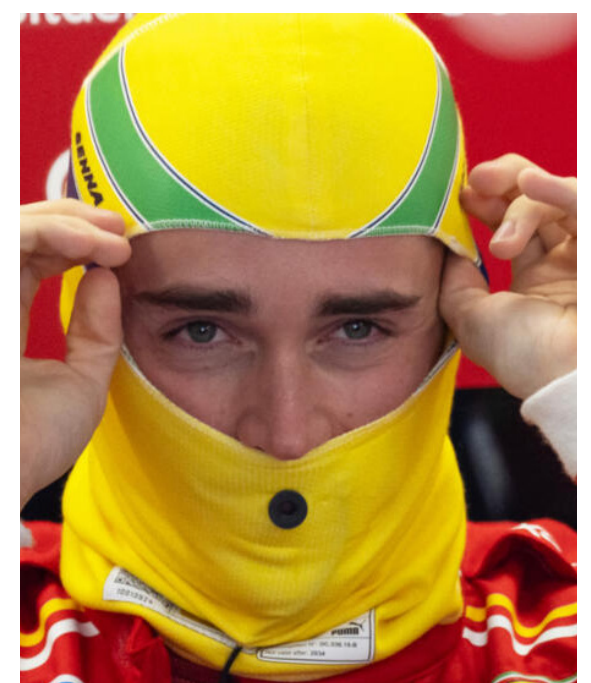
Pacers Cruise Past Knicks, Send Series to Game 7

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Pascal Siakam recorded 25 points, seven rebounds and five assists and the Indiana Pacers forced a Game 7 with a stellar 116-103 victory over the New York Knicks in the Eastern Conference second-round series in Indianapolis. Myles Turner added 17 points and eight rebounds for the sixth-seeded Pacers. Tyrese Haliburton had 15 points and nine assists, Andrew Nembhard added 15 points, six rebounds and six assists and T.J. McConnell also put up 15 for Indiana. Jalen Brunson scored 26 of his 31 points in the second half for the second-seeded Knicks. Miles McBride scored 20 points, Donte DiVincenzo added 17 and Precious Achiuwa had 12 points and eight rebounds. Game 7 is Sunday afternoon at New York. The home team has won all six games of the series. The Pacers led by as many as 23 points in Game 6 after the series featured consecutive blowouts. Indiana won 121-89 in Game 4 before New York rolled to a 121-91 victory in Game 5. New York's Josh Hart had five points and eight rebounds in 31 minutes on Friday while laboring through a left abdominal injury. He exited with 9:53 left in the game, and the Knicks ruled him out a short time later. Obi Toppin added 11 points for Indiana, which shot 53.8 percent from the field, including 9 of 26 (34.6 percent) from 3-point range. The Pacers held a 47-35 rebounding edge. The Knicks made

43.9 percent of their field-goal attempts and were 13 of 34 (38.2 percent) from behind the arc. The Pacers used a 10-2 run early in the second half to begin to pull away. Turner capped it with a dunk to give the hosts a 71-58 advantage with 8:56 left in the period.



Leclerc Shines at Imola as Verstappen Rues Bad Day



IMOLA (Dispatches) - Charles Leclerc shone in the sunshine while Max Verstappen slithered and grumbled as the Ferrari driver dominated practice for this weekend's Emilia Romagna Grand Prix. Leclerc made the most of a heavily-revised package while championship leader and three-time world champion Verstappen struggled for his usual Red Bull performance at the Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari. "It's been a difficult day," said Verstappen. "We struggled for grip and balance and I was never comfortable in the car. It moved around a lot. We have a lot of things to look at and improve. It's a performance issue and we need to improve for tomorrow if we are to be competitive. It looks like the others have all made a step forward and now it's up to us to catch up. It's been a bad day." Leclerc clocked a best lap in one minute and 15.906 seconds to ease 0.192 clear of nearest rival Oscar Piastri of McLaren with RB's Yuki Tsunoda snatching third in a closely-bunched pack at the front of the field. It signalled a successful first day too for Leclerc's partnership with new race engineer Bryan Bozzi after the "scarlet scuderia" chose to make mid-season changes in their line-up. "For sure, it all went quite smoothly today and the upgrades worked well, which is a good step for us, so it was a good day altogether," said Leclerc. "But tomorrow the forecast is for a big change in the wind and the track conditions with some bad weather forecast for Sunday. So we have to keep our feet on the ground and work carefully because qualifying here is super-important as it is not an easy circuit for overtaking."

Juventus Sack Allegri for Italian Cup Rampage

ROME (Dispatches) - Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri was sacked on Friday for his explosive behaviour during the team's midweek Italian Cup triumph which the Serie A club deemed "incompatible" with its values. "Juventus announces that it has relieved Massimiliano Allegri from the role of coach of the men's first team," the Turin club said in a statement. "The dismissal follows certain behaviours during and after the Italian Cup final which the club deemed incompatible with the values of Juventus and those who represent it should have." The club wished Allegri, 56, "good luck in his future endeavours". Allegri was sent off in the final minutes of Wednesday's 1-0 win against Atalanta for ranting at match officials and then dismissively waved away sporting director Cristiano Giuntoli during the post-match celebrations. Allegri, who won 12 trophies with Juventus over two spells as manager, is also alleged to have manhandled and threatened the chief editor of newspaper Tuttosport before the post-match press conference. He had boiled with anger on the sidelines, ripping off his tie and jacket in the presence of John Elkann, the scion of the powerful Agnelli family and the CEO of the holding company Exor which controls Juventus and motor sport icon Ferrari. Juve had already been widely reported to be replacing Allegri with Bologna coach Thiago Motta in the summer following an underwhelming season, but were pushed to announce their decision with two matches remaining in

the current campaign. Juventus sit fourth in Serie A, 25 points behind champions Inter Milan, after collecting just 15 points in their last 15 league matches and are at Bologna on Monday night, with the two teams already qualified for next season's revamped Champions League. The Turin giants did not specify when asked by AFP whether they had dismissed Allegri with just cause, a move which would potentially save the club from paying

the Italian the remaining year of his contract, worth around seven million euros (\$7.6 million) before bonuses. The Italian Football Federation's disciplinary tribunal has launched an investigation into Allegri, who on Thursday was given an automatic two-match ban in the cup for his straight red card but could receive further punishment.

