

President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, Speaking at a Youth Population Event in Tehran, Emphasized the Importance of Population Growth for National Security, and Announced More Government Support Needed for Families Desiring More Children

IRAN NEWS

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani Condemned the Friday Terrorist Attack in the City of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, Against Foreign Tourists and Civilians Where Four Foreign Nationals and Three Afghans Were Killed

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Iran, Azerbaijan to Inaugurate Border Dam



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The presidents of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan will (today) on May 19 inaugurate a dam built jointly by the two neighbors on the Aras River at the common border. The Qiz-Qalasi dam, constructed jointly by Iran and the Azerbaijan Republic, will come on stream on Sunday in a ceremony to be attended by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and his Azeri counterpart Ilham Aliyev. The embankment dam is located in the Khoda Afarin region in Iran's northwestern province of East Azarbaijan. With a capacity of 62 million cubic meters, the Qiz-Qalasi dam will supply water to the irrigation and drainage networks of Khoda Afarin county. A hydroelectric power station coupled with the dam has also been designed to generate 270 MWh of electricity per annum. Known as the biggest water project in Iran's northwestern border areas, the Qiz-Qalasi dam is estimated to regulate 2 billion cubic meters of water every year. On May 7, the chief executive of Iran's East Azerbaijan Regional Water Company announced the Qiz Qalasi Dam, the largest joint water project between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, will become operational in the coming days. The construction operation of the dam, which is the most important project in the northwest of the country, has been completed and it will be inaugurated in the coming days in the presence of Iranian President Raisi and his Azeri counterpart Aliyev. Yousef Ghaffarzadeh stated. This project, which includes the development of the Khoda Afarin reservoir dam 196km downstream of the Aras River with a capacity of 1.6 billion cubic meters has been fully designed and implemented by expert Iranian engineers, he emphasized.

Palestinians Say Ready for Long War of Attrition



GAZA (Dispatches) - The military wing of Hamas says Palestinians are ready for a long war of attrition, pledging to stand up to Israel's ground invasion of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip and elsewhere. "Despite our full desire to stop the aggression against our people, we are prepared for a long battle of attrition against the enemy, dragging them into a swamp where they will gain nothing but the death of their soldiers and the capture of their officers," Qassam Brigades spokesman Abu Obeida said in a video message. "This is because we are the people of this land and are its rightful owners," he added. His remarks come as fighting is raging in Gaza as Israel intensifies its ground invasion of Rafah despite international concerns for the hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians in the southern city. In the past 10 days, Palestinian fighters have targeted 100 Israeli military vehicles, including tanks, armored personnel carriers as well as bulldozers, Abu Obeida said. They have inflicted heavy casualties on Israeli soldiers by blowing up tunnels, launching rockets and mortars, and through sniping and close-quarters combat. The Israeli military, he said, does not announce the exact figure of its losses in Gaza. "The al-Qassam Brigades fighters inflicted severe blows on the Zionist enemy in the eastern flank of Rafah city," Abu Obeida said. He said the Israeli military had made a big mistake by deciding to launch a ground invasion of Rafah, the Zaitoun neighborhood, and Jabalia refugee camp, rendering its troops easy targets for Palestinian fighters.

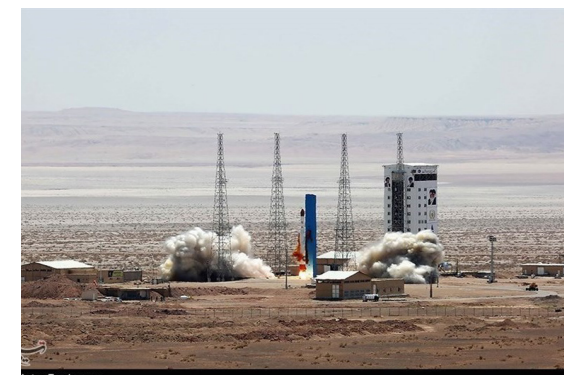


Deputy FM Says BRICS Core of Global Efforts to Build Just World

TEHRAN - Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani says the BRICS group of emerging economies is the core of the international will to build a justice-based world and serve the interests of independent countries. The BRICS group serves as the "core and engine of a global collective effort for creating a world rooted in justice and safeguarding the interests of independent countries," he told a meeting held to discuss Iran-Russia relations on Friday. The Iranian diplomat is in Kazan, the Republic of Tatarstan, to take part in the 15th International Economic Forum "Russia-Islamic World: KazanForum 2024". He said Iran and Russia are determined to make use of BRICS' active and joint capabilities to establish a just world. "Our firm will in the BRICS group is to prepare the ground for the joining of other regional and international actors to move more effectively and efficiently in international relations," he added. He noted that member states of the BRICS, particularly Brazil, South Africa and India, can help independent countries play a role in creating a just world that will promote peace and welfare of nations across the globe. Iran officially became a member of the BRICS at the beginning of 2024, five months after it announced its acceptance as full member into the group along with Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. BRICS was formed by and initially consisted of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which collectively represent around 40% of the global population and a quarter of the

world's gross domestic product (GDP). Iran was among dozens of countries that sought membership in BRICS and had submitted a formal application to join the body. The BRICS bloc of emerging economies is considering developing an independent payment system based on digital currencies and blockchain to reduce reliance on western financial systems. The BRICS bloc of emerging economies is considering developing an independent payment system based on digital currencies and blockchain to reduce reliance on western financial systems. Elsewhere in his address, Bagheri Kani extended his congratulations to Russian President Vladimir Putin on his landslide reelection victory and expressed hope Tehran and Moscow will further promote cordial relations in all fields at regional and international levels. He said Iran is actively participating in the Russia-Islamic World Economic Forum and seeks to make its utmost efforts to remove the obstacles in the way of enhanced cooperation. Given growing relations between Tehran and Moscow in recent years, the two sides need to turn common capacities into multilateral projects to further boost mutual relations and use the capacities of regional and international countries in this regard, the Iranian diplomat emphasized. He said Iran and Russia are determined to improve bilateral cooperation in different sectors with the purpose of establishing relations based on justice among independent countries.

IRGC Unveils Plan for Homegrown Satellite Constellation



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps has long-term plans to create a satellite constellation, a commander said. Speaking to Tasnim, Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force's Space Division General Ali Jafarabadi said the establishment of a satellite constellation is on the agenda of the IRGC. A constellation may include five to 500 satellites, he said, noting that it will be inevitable for the IRGC to create its own constellation according to the plans that have been already arranged. The commander said Iran must prepare the infrastructures for manufacturing a large number of satellites and stabilize the satellite carrier industry to create its own constellation. General Jafarabadi pointed to the progress in developing the "Qaem-105" satellite carrier, which he said is expected to take off in the winter or spring of 2025. Known as the IRGC's first four-stage satellite carrier, Qaem-105 can carry a payload twice as heavy as that of Qaem-100, he added. The successful launch of Qaem-105 will enable Iran to send heavier satellites into higher altitudes, he stated. In remarks in January, General Jafarabadi said that within the next three years, Iran will test launch the "Qaem-120" satellite carrier, which is planned to send satellites into an orbit 36,000 kilometers above Earth. On January 20, the IRGC Aerospace Force successfully put Soraya satellite into an orbit 750 kilometers above Earth in 11 minutes with Qaem-100, a three-stage satellite carrier running on solid fuel.

Foes Unable to Tolerate Iran's Progress



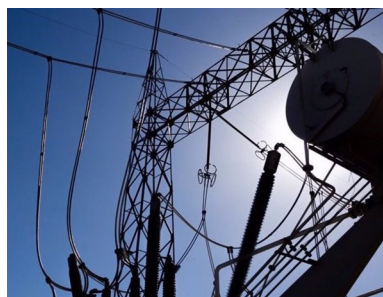
TEHRAN (MNA) – Deputy Head of the Basij Media Organization Major General Qassem Ghoreishi says that the enemies cannot stand the achievements of the Islamic Republic. Addressing the closing ceremony of the First National Hope Media Cup on Saturday, the commander said that media plays a key role in promoting the Jihad of Clarification, a media movement put forward by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a bid to clarify the misunderstood concepts regarding the country's developments. The Iranian reporters should create hope in the country, he said, adding that the correspondents are expected to neutralize the media hype adopted by the enemy's mainstream media. The enemies have always sought to inject and instill disappointment in Iranians' society, he said, noting that they resort to all possible evil instruments to advance their interests. The commander called on the media activists to promote the accomplishments achieved by Iran in all fields. Also at the ceremony, the Head of Basij Media Organization touched on the themes of the Hope Media Cup, noting that the event is being held to address Jihad of Clarification, Jihad of Service, and Jihad of Hope. Mortaza Karamouzian termed the festival as the most effective media event in the country. The First National Hope Media Cup which started today at the Comprehensive University of Islamic Revolution in the capital city will run for two days. The enemy's main plan is to use false publicity, or propaganda, as they call it. The way to overcome propaganda is with "clarification." Clarifying the truth [must be done] by different people, with different voices, with different interpretations, and using new forms, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has said.

Hamas Rejects U.S. Floating Pier for Gaza Aid as Publicity Stunt

GAZA (Dispatches) - The Hamas government in Gaza has rejected America's establishment of a temporary floating pier designed to increase the amount of aid getting into the besieged strip as a publicity stunt "to beautify its ugly face." "The floating water dock off the coast of Gaza does not meet the needs of our Palestinian people for food. We demand the opening of land crossings and the immediate and urgent entry of aid and goods through them," the Gaza government media office said in a statement issued on Friday night. U.S. President Joe Biden ordered the construction of the pier in March. Shortly afterward, the U.S. deployed naval ships to the Eastern Mediterranean to construct the "floating pier" that will reportedly receive aid from Cyprus, and send it onward to Gaza. The U.S. announcement came amid mounting pressure on Israel to allow aid into Gaza as the UN and other aid agencies have warned of imminent famine due to Israel's prevention of the land-based delivery of life-saving aid to Gaza. The U.S. military said on Friday that trucks carrying humanitarian assistance will soon begin moving ashore "in the coming days." USAID response director Dan Dieckhaus said on Wednesday the construction of the pier - known as a Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS) system - is complete. Hundreds of tons of aid have arrived in Cyprus, where screening takes place before being loaded onto ships for delivery to the pier, reports said. The U.S. military said commercial ships would collect pallets from Cyprus and deliver them to a floating platform anchored several kilometers off the coast of Gaza. The Gaza government said in the statement that the "American administration is trying to beautify its ugly face and appear civilized by establishing a floating water dock off the coast of Gaza City, claiming its purpose is to deliver humanitarian aid and food to our Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, who are subjected to policies of starvation, forced displacement, and genocide carried out by the 'Israeli' occupation army, with active participation, full involvement, and real endorsement from the American administration." "Since the start of this genocidal war, the US has continued to supply the occupation with over 200,000 rockets and bombs, some weighing 2,000 pounds of explosives, used by the occupation to annihilate entire residential neighborhoods. This has resulted in over 35,000 martyrs, more than 79,000 wounded, and 10,000 missing," the statement said. "We question the intentions of the American administration, which is managing and perpetuating the genocide war, forming a protective wall for the 'Israeli' occupation, and continuing its absolute support for the war against civilians," it added.



IRAN NEWS



Iran, Turkey Start Electricity Trade

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The chief executive of Iran's Power Generation, Distribution and Transmission Management Company (TAVANIR) announced the start of the electricity trade between Iran and Turkey. The negotiation to start the electricity trade between the two sides was finalized in Ankara in a meeting held between CEO of TAVANIR Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi and Turkey's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources. An expert-level meeting was held at the Turkish Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources with the aim of developing relations between the two countries, where the two sides exchanged views regarding the development of the capacities of the electricity exchange, Rajabi Mashhadi stated. Considering the construction and completion of the HVDC BTB substation in Turkey's city of Van with an electricity generation capacity of about 500 megawatts, it was agreed that the electricity exchange would begin in the shortest time possible aimed at supplying electricity at peak hours between the two countries through the mentioned substation, he noted.

U.S., West Have No Qualms About Violating Int'l Law



TEHRAN (MNA) – The United States and the West have no qualms about violating international law, Spokesman of Iran's Government Ali Bahadori Jahromi said. "International law suffers from the weakness of enforcement guarantee; Some political comments double this suffering," he wrote in a post on social media, referring to the letter of 12 US totalitarian senators who have threatened the International Criminal Court and its judges for fulfilling their legal duties. The United States and the West have accepted international law in a graded manner and do not shy away from violating it for purely political reasons, Bahadori Jahromi stressed. He further emphasized that the success and effectiveness of the international law system require a serious revision both in terms of structure and content. Referring to the ongoing U.S.-backed Israeli regime's genocidal war in the Gaza Strip, the Iranian official said that the arbitrary behavior of Western countries has slowed down the process of maturation of international law and its enforcement. The events in Gaza have exposed the practical inefficiency of the international law system in preventing such tragedies in the world, and it is another clear historical document on the reality of the approach of some Western countries toward the issue of human rights.

Russian Firms Invited to Invest in Iran's Tourism Infrastructures



TEHRAN - Iran's envoy to Russia referred to tourism as one of the capacities for the development of ties between the two countries, inviting Russian companies to invest in Iran's tourism infrastructures. Speaking in a meeting held with the participation of Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Baqeri and some ranking officials of Russia on the sidelines of the 15th International Economic Forum "Russia-Islamic World" in Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazem Jalali pointed to the investment of Russian companies in the tourism infrastructures of the countries of the region and added that Iran welcomes Russian firms willing to invest in the construction of hotels and tourism infrastructures in Iran, IRNA reported. He further pointed out that Iran is ready to provide Russian investors with the required facilities. Elsewhere in his remarks, Jalali referred to the measures taken in recent years to increase the number of flights between cities of the two countries and added that different Iranian cities like Shiraz, Isfahan, Rasht, and Tabriz have the capacity to launch

direct flights to Russian cities. Launching a direct flight from Kazan to Iran is on the agenda and a Russian company has expressed its readiness in this regard, the envoy added. Later he also said Iran and Russia are cooperating to create a single BRICS currency. Iran is actively participating in the activities organized under Russia's chairmanship in BRICS, and the countries are working to create a single currency for the association, Jalali said in a press conference during "Russia - Islamic World: Kazan Forum". The ambassador noted that Iran, as a new member state of the association, is conducting large-scale work in BRICS, TASS reported. "The creation of a new single currency within the framework of the association is what Russia and Iran are working on," the diplomat stated. Jalali said the United States uses dollar to create restrictions, and therefore the use of national currencies in mutual settlements is on the agenda. "More than 60% of bilateral trade is in rubles and rials," he said, adding that the relations between Russia and Iran are now at the "golden stage."

Iran RAILEXPO Inaugurated in Tehran



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The 11th International Exhibition of Rail Transportations & Related Industries Equipment dubbed "IRAN RAILEXPO 2024" was inaugurated at the Tehran Permanent International Fairgrounds on Saturday. The inaugural ceremony was attended by Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrashi and CEO of Railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran Miad Salehi. More than 100 domestic companies and five foreign companies from China, Russia, India, and the Republic of Azerbaijan have participated in this exhibition to showcase their latest achievements and technologies in the railway industry. Concurrent with organizing this exhibition, the 15th Meeting of the Heads of Railway Authorities of the ECO Member States and the 9th Rail Committee Meeting of the ECO Transit Transport Coordinating Council will be held with the participation of Iran, Turkey, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, IRNA reported. The domestically-manufactured GM locomotive engine, Model GT26, and Locomotive Microprocessor Control System (LCS) will also be unveiled in the exhibition, the report added.

Ceasefire in Gaza Prelude to Security in Red Sea



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The clashes in the Red Sea are considered the spillover of Israeli brutal attacks on Gaza, so if the U.S. and its allies seek peace, security, and tranquility in the region, especially in the Red Sea, they must try to set up an immediate ceasefire in the war-torn strip, an Iranian ambassador said. Mohsen Bakhtiar, Iran's Ambassador to Beijing, made the remarks in an interview with the Chinese Phoenix TV, noting that the Islamic Republic has tried from the get-go of the conflict in Gaza to stop the onslaught, but the Zionist regime and its supporters attempted to block the efforts and pave the way for the genocide. So, their attempts to veto the draft resolutions regarding a ceasefire in Gaza caused the spillover of tension in the region, in particular in the Red Sea, he argued, adding that the Zionist regime martyred thousands of innocent people in Gaza, so the regime crossed all redlines and even attacked mosques, churches, and hospitals. In response to the crimes committed by the Israeli regime in Gaza, the Yemeni Armed Forces kicked off attacks on ships affiliated to the regime and its staunch allies (the US and the UK) in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb, and the Indian Ocean. As to the Israeli regime's attack on Iran's consulate in Syria, the envoy said that those who claimed to be the flag-bearer of human rights and international law showed all-out support for the regime and refrained from condemning this heinous act, adding that this was while the European states and the leaders of the G7 were expected to show objection to it. Moreover, he pointed to the relationship between Iran and China, saying that the two countries enjoy historical ties and their people have experienced amicable relations for centuries.

Iran Increases Saffron Exports in New Packaging

TEHRAN (ANA) - Iran exported 221 tons of saffron worth \$207,786,281 to 55 countries last year (March 21, 2023-24) with exports in packages of less than 30 grams witnessing 22% growth, an economic official said. Head of the Study, Monitoring and Market Development Office of the Central Organization of Rural Cooperatives of Iran Rouhollah Latifi said that Iran exported 221 tons of saffron worth \$207,786,281 to 55 countries last year of 1402 in the Iranian calendar (March 21, 2023-24). However, Latifi said that the declared exports value of \$207,786,281 to international markets last year witnessed a 15.7% decrease as compared to the year before, namely 1401 (March 21, 2022-23). "In 1402, the export of saffron in packages of less than 30 grams witnessed a good growth and accounted for 22% of the total exported saffron. In 1401, this amount was about 15.5% of the total weight of the exports of the product," the official added. "31.4 tons of saffron exported in 1402 were in packages of less than 10 grams, and this product witnessed a 67.2% increase compared to the

year before and 42 countries were its destination. Also, 131 kg of saffron powder was exported in packages less than 10 grams in the previous year, recording 56% increase compared to the year before and 11 countries were its direct buyers," added Latifi. "16.4 tons of saffron were exported to 29 countries in 10-30 grams packages, showing 12.5% more than the year 1401. Meanwhile, 463 kilograms of processed saffron powder products in 10-30 grams packages were exported to 11 countries in 1402, indicating 14.9% decrease compared to the year before," he continued. "173 tons of saffron exported in 1402 were saffron packages of more than 30 grams," he added. The UAE is the first destination with the purchase of 67,120 kg of saffron, followed by China with the purchase of 49,200 kg, Spain with 43,820 kg, and Afghanistan with 21,716 kg and a growth of 198%, Qatar with 5,774 kg, Italy with 5,604 kg, Kuwait with 3,301 kg, Oman with 2,993 kg, Bahrain with 2,683 kg, and France with 2,433 kg, Latifi said.



Azerbaijan Intends to Relocate Embassy in Tehran

BAKU (Dispatches) - Azerbaijan's Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that the embassy of this country in Tehran has been moved to a new location, and after its completion, the diplomatic activity of the embassy will be resumed soon. The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman, Aykhan Hajizada, addressed inquiries from local media regarding the potential re-opening of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran. Hajizada noted that following the terrorist attack against Azerbaijan's Embassy in January of last year, one of the main directions of the negotiations with the Iranian side was around the issue of full security assurances of the Embassy. "During the last few months, the expectations of our country were conveyed to the Iranian officials within the framework of contacts and negotiations, while proper work was carried out with the Iranian side to relocate our Embassy to a new venue that meets all the requirements necessary for the Embassy," he said. The spokesman stressed that as a result of carried out work, the new location of Azerbaijan's Embassy in Tehran has already been determined. "Currently, appropriate measures are being taken to create the necessary conditions for the Embassy in the said venue and building. After the mentioned works are completed, it is planned to restore the activity of the Embassy in the new venue," Hajizada added.

Gunmen Kill Three Spanish Tourists in Afghanistan

KABUL (Dispatches) - Three Spanish tourists were killed and at least one Spaniard was injured in an attack by gunmen in Afghanistan's central Bamyan province, Spain's foreign ministry said on Friday. Earlier on Friday, Taliban interior ministry spokesman Abdul Mateen Qanice had said that three foreign tourists and one Afghan citizen had been killed in the attack. Four foreign nationals and three Afghans were also injured in the attack when gunmen opened fire, he added. Four people have been arrested, he said. The Spanish foreign ministry said that the consular emergency unit had been fully mobilised and the victims and their families were being assisted. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez wrote on social messaging platform X that he was "shocked by the news of the murder of Spanish tourists in Afghanistan". There was no immediate indication of why the attack happened.



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



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israeli forces battled Hamas fighters in the narrow alleyways of Jabalia in northern Gaza on Friday in some of the fiercest engagements since they returned to the area a week ago, while in the south militants attacked tanks massing around Rafah. Residents said Israeli armour had thrust as far as the market at the heart of Jabalia, the largest of Gaza's eight historic refugee camps, and that bulldozers were demolishing homes and shops in the path of the advance. "Tanks and planes are wiping out residential districts and markets, shops, restaurants, everything. It is all happening before the one-eyed world," Ayman Rajab, a resident of western Jabalia, said via a chat app. Israel had said its forces cleared Jabalia months earlier in the Gaza war, triggered by the deadly Hamas-led attacks on southern Israel on Oct. 7, but said last week it was returning to prevent Islamist militants re-grouping there. In southern Gaza bordering Egypt, thick smoke rose over Rafah, where an escalating Israeli assault has sent hundreds of thousands of people fleeing from what was one of the few remaining places of refuge. "People are terrified and they're trying to get away," Jens Laerke, U.N. humanitarian office spokesperson, said in Geneva, adding that most were following orders to move north towards the coast but that there were no safe routes or destinations.

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.

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, Viginum, 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. Viginum 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". Viginum said at least 86 posts on social media platform X, formerly Twitter, were published by profiles of people who list a connection to the Azeri ruling presidential party YAP. "On May 15 and 16, Viginum has detected on X and Facebook a massive and coordinated spread of content manifestly inaccurate and misleading accusing French police of killing pro-independence protesters in New Caledonia," the report said. It published screenshots of the accounts and a minute-by-minute account of the posts. Azerbaijan has reacted angrily to French military support for Armenia, another republic in the South Caucasus with which it has fought two wars in the past three decades. Azerbaijan last year recaptured the Karabakh region, where ethnic Armenians had enjoyed de facto independence since the early 1990s. France, which has a large ethnic Armenian community, has been sympathetic towards Armenia and provided military equipment. It asked Baku for clarification in November about a campaign that targeted the Olympic Games. According to officials the campaign in New Caledonia has been in the works for several months and has even seen Azerbaijan organise anti-French networks on the ground, including through the financing of events. "Azerbaijan is outsourcing its dispute (with France)," a French source with knowledge of the government's view told Reuters.

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.

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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.

Woods Packing 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. "I got off to bad start and the rough grabbed me at two," Woods told reporters.

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.

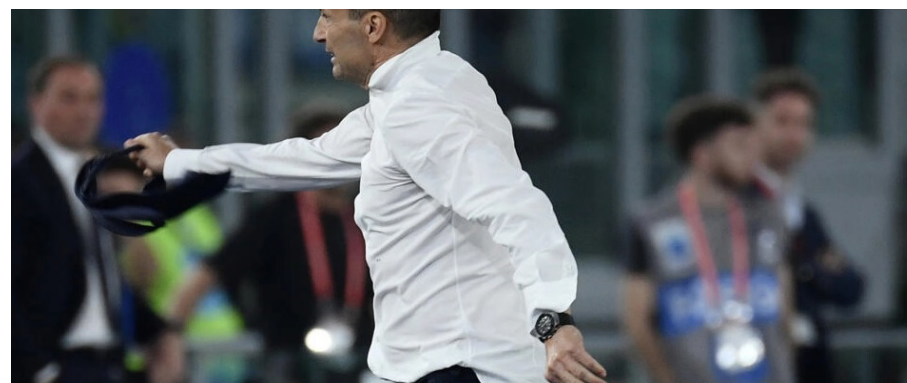
"I was just hanging on in the second set. I brought my energy up. I was really just hanging on and waiting and the patience was kind of good today," Zverev said on court.

"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."

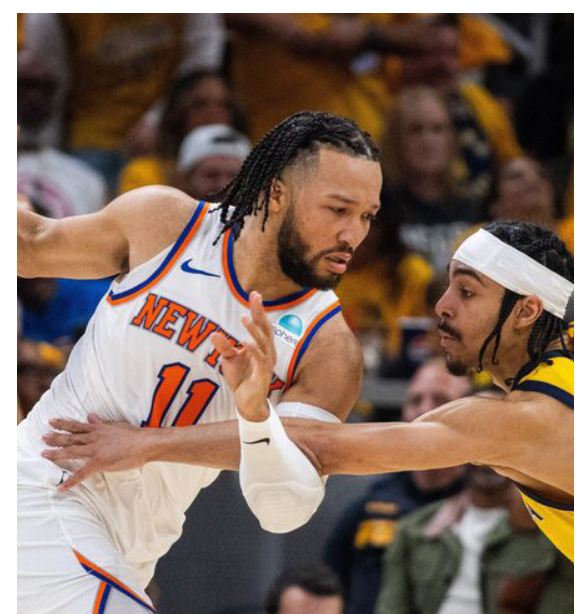
Juventus Sack Allegri for Italian Cup Rampage

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.



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. Indiana tacked on a 9-1 run later in the quarter with McConnell's three-point play making it 84-66 with 2:39 left.

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." Seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton was fourth ahead of team-mate George Russell and

Carlos Sainz in the second Ferrari, leaving an exasperated Verstappen back in seventh ahead of team-mate Sergio Perez.

