

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Announced That Iran Has Been Selected to Host the International Handicrafts Center Following a Recent Decision by the World Handicrafts Summit in the Philippines

IRAN NEWS

The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran Says the Islamic Republic's Economic Growth Rate Is the Highest Among Other Countries in West Asia as It Registered a 5-Percent Growth Rate in 2023

2 DOMESTIC

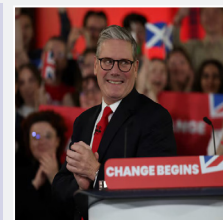


Liquidity Growth in the 13th Gov't Reaches Lowest Level in 62 Years

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Starmer Pledges National Renewal After Labour Wins UK Election



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Leader Hails People's Participation in Iran Election Runoff



TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Friday hailed the Iranian people's "active involvement" in the presidential election as polls opened nationwide Friday.

"Thank God this is a good day; the day of participation and active involvement of our dear people in a significant national event: the elections," Ayatollah Khamenei said after casting his ballot at a polling station in Tehran.

"I have heard that people's passion and interest is higher than the first round. May God make it this way and if it is, it will be gratifying," Ayatollah Khamenei noted.

Polling places opened at 8 a.m. (0430 GMT) on Friday and was to be closed at 6 p.m. (1430 GMT), but the Interior Ministry extended it.

The runoff election was happening because no candidate won a clear majority in the June 28 vote.

"God willing, our dear people will be able to vote and choose the best," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

"At this stage, people should be more motivated to finish the job and have our president tomorrow," he said.

"May God help the nation succeed and prosper the country and make all those who are struggling in this way subject to his grace and mercy."

Candidates Masoud Pezeshkian and Saeed Jalili emerged as frontrunners, yet neither succeeded in obtaining an outright majority, necessitating the current runoff.

Pezeshkian has a background as a health minister and is a legislator from Tabriz in the northwest. Jalili holds experience as a diplomat and the chief nuclear negotiator.

This election will choose a new president after President Raisi passed away in a helicopter crash on May 19.

Mohsen Eslami, the election headquarters spokesperson, said on Thursday that there are 58,640 polling stations, the same as before. He also said that early results could be announced by Saturday morning. The election headquarters has confirmed that 61 million people can vote.

Iran Calls for Establishing a Joint Free Zone Network in SCO

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The acting head of the Presidency proposed at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit to establish a network of joint free zones within the organization and to establish economic pacts such as preferential and free trade agreements.

Mohammad Mokhber on Thursday at the 24th SCO Summit in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, said: "Considering that transit and trade activities are complementary to each other, we propose to establish a 'Network of Joint Free Zones' and to implement economic agreements such as preferential and free trade agreements within the organization."

He added: "There are numerous opportunities and capacities in the member countries of the SCO for interaction in the fields of trade, production, energy, transportation, agriculture, customs, telecommunications, and also the development of technology in the field of artificial intelligence. These capacities should be utilized for the welfare of nations and the establishment of sustainable peace and inclusive development in the Shanghai region and worldwide. Activating transit corridors plays a key role in facilitating trade, economic development, and consequently, the political stability of member countries."

The acting head of the Presidency further added: "We believe that SCO members can engage in trade exchanges with global countries faster and at lower costs through the North-South Corridor and the southern ports of Iran."

He emphasized: "Distinguished leaders; the Islamic Republic of Iran strongly opposes the use of political tools, especially unjust unilateral sanctions in the energy sector. As a major producer of energy resources, particularly oil and gas, it has always pursued a policy of multilateralism in the energy sector and actively participated in drafting the 'SCO Energy Cooperation Strategy' and supports its approval and implementation."

Mokhber asserted: "Fortunately, the issue of using national currencies and increasing their share in the settlement of commercial transactions between member countries is seriously on the organization's agenda, and the Islamic Republic of Iran supports the continuation of specialized working group negotiations in this area until the final goal of reducing or eliminating the dollar from multilateral exchanges is achieved."

He emphasized: "Based on the experience gained under the SCO Banking Union, we believe that the 'Establishment of a Joint Shanghai Bank' can enhance the level of financial and economic cooperation among member countries."

He also stated: "Additionally, the Islamic Republic of Iran is fully prepared to implement the 'Action Plan for Scientific and Technological Cooperation among Member Countries in Priority Areas,' particularly in the latest medical technologies, biotechnology, and artificial

intelligence."The acting head of the Presidency continued: "The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the documents and agreements reached within the SCO, including the comprehensive and long-term 'SCO Development Strategy' and other related documents."

Mokhber remarked: "At the beginning of my speech, I honor the memory of the martyred President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi and the martyred Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and acknowledge their effective role in advancing the multilateral diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past three years, especially in joining the SCO and BRICS. I also appreciate the sympathy, messages, and dispatch of representatives from member countries to participate in their commemoration ceremonies."

He emphasized: "I must also extend my gratitude to Mr. Tokayev, the esteemed President of Kazakhstan, and the government of this country for their efforts over the past year during their chairmanship of the SCO. Additionally, I congratulate the full membership of the Republic of Belarus in the organization to Mr. Lukashenko and the people of Belarus. We also offer our condolences to the government and people of Russia for the recent terrorist incidents in Dербent and Makhachkala, and we express our sympathy with the survivors of this tragic event."

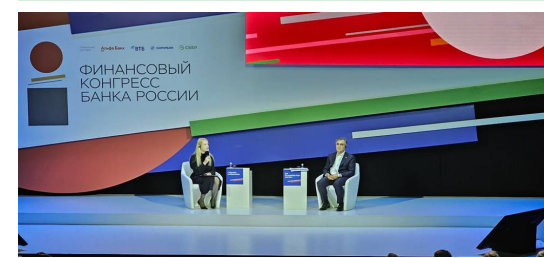
The acting head of the Presidency asserted: "Unfortunately, over the past nine months, contrary to all international norms and any sense of human decency, we have witnessed a widespread wave of genocide, war crimes, and the mass killing of innocent women and children in Gaza by the Zionist regime."

Mokhber continued: "We strongly condemn the continuation of the brutal and organized crimes of the Zionist regime with US support against the resilient and oppressed people of Gaza, which has shocked humanity and left international organizations inactive. We emphasize the necessity of effective actions by countries, especially SCO members, to immediately stop the war crimes of the Zionist regime and the need for the prompt, adequate, and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid throughout Gaza."

He concluded: "Finally, I congratulate the People's Republic of China on becoming the next president of the SCO, and I thank the government and people of the friendly and brotherly Republic of Kazakhstan for their excellent hosting and warm hospitality."

He added: "I am confident that the decisions and agreements resulting from today's meeting will play a significant role in increasing the level of coordination to jointly address current and emerging threats and challenges, as well as in enhancing the cooperation of member countries in various economic, political, scientific, and cultural fields."

Iran Ready for Establishing a Joint Financial Institution Among BRICS Countries



TEHRAN - Iran's Governor of the Central Bank, addressing Russian economic activists, emphasized the necessity of expanding banking cooperation between the two countries. He highlighted the potential of regional institutions and local currencies to circumvent oppressive sanctions and the dominance of the dollar in international financial exchanges. He called for the creation of an institution similar to FATF among BRICS member countries. Iran and Russia, stated in the Russian Financial Congress on Thursday that Iran currently complies with all international anti-money laundering regulations. He suggested that establishing an institution similar to FATF among BRICS countries would be a great opportunity to develop banking cooperation among member countries. The event, attended by Ms. Nabiullina, the Governor of the Central Bank of Russia, and a group of Russian economic activists, also saw Farzin criticizing the political treatment of Iran and Russia by the international FATF. He mentioned that with the BRICS summit being chaired by Russia, Iran is ready to fully support Russia in advancing joint proposals for BRICS activities and creating a new financial system among BRICS members. Farzin identified finding solutions for money transfer and settlement as one of the key topics of discussion among BRICS countries. He cited the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) as an excellent opportunity to eliminate the dollar from transactions among member countries, which include India and Pakistan. Recently, Belarus has applied for membership, and Russia is also invited to join, as the union offers significant potential for enhancing cooperation between Iran and Russia. The Central Bank Governor stated that understanding and dialogue would significantly strengthen relations between the two nations. He pointed out that recent diplomatic communications between political leaders of the two countries have positively influenced and strengthened economic relations. He proposed that the two countries, with the help of the Governor of the Central Bank of Russia, should eliminate the dollar from trade exchanges and use local currencies for payments.

Lebanon a Hell With No Return for Zionists in Case of War



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's interim foreign minister has praised Lebanon's resistance as a vigorous actor against the Israeli regime, warning that in case of a new war the Arab country will turn into a "hell with no return" for the occupying entity.

Ali Bagheri Kani made the remark on the sidelines of the Iranian government's weekly cabinet meeting in the capital Tehran as tension has intensified between the Hezbollah resistance movement with the Israeli aggression on the country's south since October last year, concurrent with the regime's brutal onslaught against Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip.

"In Lebanon, the resistance has played a role as a vigorous actor that created deterrence both in the international field and in the field of diplomacy," Bagheri Kani said.

Lebanon will be definitely "a hell with no return for the Zionists" in case of a new war, he added.

Since early October last year, Hezbollah and Israel have been involved in a series of deadly clashes. These confrontations were initiated after the Tel Aviv regime launched a genocidal assault on the Gaza Strip following a surprise operation by the Palestinian Hamas resistance group.

Hezbollah has vowed to maintain its retaliatory strikes as long as the Israeli regime continues its Gaza war, which has killed 37,925 people have been killed and 87,141 wounded in Israel's war on Gaza since October 7.

Hezbollah officials have repeatedly said they do not want a war with Israel, but if it happens they are ready.

Foreign Trade Hits \$40b in Q1



TEHRAN - Mohammad Rezvani-Far, the Director-General of Iran's Customs Administration, announced that the weight of non-oil exports in the first quarter of this year was 37.8 million tons, showing a 5.6% increase compared to the same period last year.

Rezvani-Far added that the country's exports, including crude oil, fuel oil, technical and engineering services, and suitcase trade, amounted to 25.7 billion dollars.

He declared the value of the country's foreign trade (total imports and exports) in the first quarter of 1403 to be 40 billion dollars.

The Deputy Minister of Economy and Director-General of Iran's Customs Administration stated that in the first quarter of 1403, considering the export of crude oil, fuel oil (reported by the Ministry of Oil), and technical and engineering services, there was a foreign trade surplus of 11.4 billion dollars. Without considering the export of crude oil, fuel oil, and technical and engineering services, there was a foreign trade deficit of about 800 million dollars. He mentioned that in the first quarter of this year, 15.6 million tons of petrochemical products worth 6.2 billion dollars were exported, showing a 7.26% increase in weight and an 8.85% increase in value. Rezvani-Far stated that the three major export commodities in the first quarter of this year were liquefied natural gas with 1.6 billion dollars, liquefied propane with 864 million dollars, and methanol with about 604 million dollars. According to him, among the top ten export commodities, the highest growth in value was attributed to liquefied petroleum gases and gaseous hydrocarbons with 87%, polyethylene film grade with 63%, and iron or steel rods with 18% growth. Regarding commodities that experienced the most significant decrease in value among the top ten export commodities, he mentioned that liquefied butane with a 13% decrease, iron and steel ingots with a 9% decrease, and liquefied natural gas with a 3% decrease had the most significant value reductions.

U.S. Aircraft Carriers Not Worth the Money After Yemeni Ops

SANAA (Dispatches) - The leader of the resistance movement Ansarullah of Yemen has praised the country's naval units for maritime operations against Israeli-linked vessels in the Red Sea.

"Battle in the Red Sea has attested the fact that U.S. aircraft carriers are an obsolete weapons system, and are not worth spending money on," Abdul-Malik al-Houthi said in a televised speech broadcast live from the Yemeni capital Sana'a on Thursday afternoon.

He said the U.S. Navy vessels dread Yemeni Armed Forces' homegrown ballistic missiles, kamikaze drones as well as unmanned surface vehicles, and that American military officials themselves acknowledge that Yemeni operations are efficient.

"U.S. attempts to Yemeni maritime operations are ineffective, and have so far failed to produce any promising results. Americans have come to realize the extent of the Yemeni Armed Forces' military might," Houthi said.

"Achievements made by Yemeni Armed Forces are coming to light day by day," the Ansarullah chief said.

"Yemeni forces are employing more anti-ship ballistic missiles with pinpoint accuracy."

Houthi said Yemeni naval forces have conducted multiple pro-Palestine operations in waters off the coast of the country this week, and that the US and its Western allies have escalated their missiles strikes against Yemen.



The Ansarullah chief underscored that Americans are trying to involve others in their aggression against Yemen, and are trying to persuade other countries to open up their airspace for attacks against the Arab nation.

Last month, U.S. officials ordered the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, the aircraft carrier leading America's response to Yemen's operations, to return home after a twice-extended tour.

The Eisenhower had repeatedly been targeted by the Yemeni forces during its time in the Red Sea. On the day of its return, a Yemeni military spokesman claimed another attack on the carrier.

Despite months of U.S.-led airstrikes, Yemeni forces have continued their operations, drawing from an arsenal of increasingly advanced weapons to attack Israeli, US and UK vessels in and around the Red Sea.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Ansarullah leader called on Arab states to designate the occupying Tel Aviv regime as a terrorist entity.

"While Arab governments classify [the Lebanese resistance movement] Hezbollah as a terrorist entity and the Arab League had maintained the designation until very recently, they are reluctant to blacklist the Zionist enemy despite its terrible crimes," Houthi stated.

"Conspiracies against Hezbollah are doomed to failure as the resistance movement continues its operations against Israel wholeheartedly."

IRAN NEWS



Iran Launches Project to Save Lake Urmia

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran has inaugurated a water storage and transfer project to revive Lake Urmia in the northwest of the country which has been receding in recent years.

Iran's Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian, in a ceremony on Thursday, launched the canal system in West Azerbaijan province to supply up to 180 million cubic meters per year of water from Badinabad dam to Lake Urmia.

Lake Urmia was once one of the world's sixth saltwater lakes and the biggest of its kind in West Asia.

Unsustainable water consumption by farmers in the region and climate change have taken a toll on the lake.

However, the lake has been in a better condition due to the increase in downpours in the catchment area and the release of water from upstream dams.

15% Growth in Iran's Exports to OIC Member Countries

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



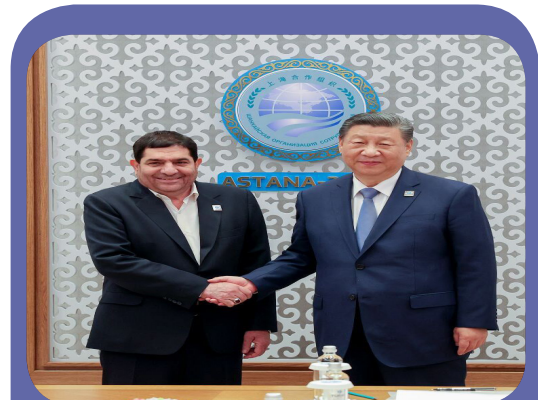
TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Customs Administration announced a 15% increase in the value of Iran's exports to the 56 member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Mohammad Reza Razvani-Far, Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance said that in the first quarter of 1403 (Iranian calendar year), Iran exported a total of 21.5 million tons of goods worth \$8.6 billion to the 56 OIC member countries. This represents a 6% increase in weight and a 15% increase in dollar value compared to the same period last year.

He specified that during this period, imports from these countries amounted to about 5.2 million tons, valued at \$6.9 billion, showing an increase of 20% in weight and 7% in value compared to the first quarter of the previous year.

Razvani-Far added that the total trade with these countries in the first quarter of 1403 reached 26.7 million tons and \$15.5 billion, reflecting an 8% increase in weight and an 11% increase in dollar value compared to the same period last year.

The tables below provide detailed statistics on exports, imports, and total trade with each OIC member country during the first quarter of 1403 compared to the same period last year.



Tehran-Beijing Described as Ties as Strategic

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Acting President Mohammad Mokhber said that the relationships between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China are strategic and based on mutual interests and respect.

Mokhber made this remark on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Thursday, noting that the relations between Iran and China are strategic and expanding based on mutual interests and respect.

The Iranian official added that both countries are determined to continue and expand comprehensive cooperation in economic, commercial, and energy sectors.

Xi Jinping, for his part, emphasized that China's policy to expand its relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran is not influenced by external factors.



Liquidity Growth in the 13th Gov't Reaches Lowest Level in 62 Years

TEHRAN - The Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance stated that in March 2024 and February 2023, we had the lowest liquidity growth rate in 62 years. One of the best GDP growth rates was in 2011; however, in 2023, after 11 years, the per capita GDP rate reached that year's level.

Seyed Ehsan Khandouzi said on Wednesday, on the sidelines of the Cabinet meeting and in a gathering of journalists: "I have three pieces of news regarding the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance. This week, the Cabinet approved an amendment to the law implementing the general policies of Principle 44, which, after 16 years, required significant revisions in important areas related to the management of government agencies, privatization processes, and all related supervision stages, as well as the eligibility assessment of buyers. This will be put on the agenda of the Islamic Consultative Assembly."

He added: "The second point is that an important event in taxation has occurred. The Cabinet agreed to earmark part of the country's tax revenues for the implementation of development projects in the same province. Starting next month, this option will be available to taxpayers in different parts of the country, allowing them to choose which semi-finished provincial part of their paid taxes should be allocated to."

The Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance stated: "We hope

this will be a very constructive message in directing tax revenues towards provincial development projects and increasing tax compliance with greater incentives."

Khandouzi emphasized: "The third Cabinet resolution this week concerned raising the minimum capital for insurance companies, which was done after several years. The total base capital for insurance companies in the field of personal insurance is set at 900 billion tomans, for property and liability insurance companies at 1,100 billion tomans, for companies handling both personal and property and liability insurance at 1,400 billion tomans, and for reinsurance companies, the minimum capital must be 1,500 billion tomans."

The Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance stated: "If we consider long-term 25-year periods, we have had an average liquidity growth of 28%. Over 62 years, the average liquidity growth has been 25.7%."

He further noted: "In March 2024 and February 2023, we had the lowest liquidity growth rate in 62 years. One of the best GDP growth rates was in 2011; however, in 2023, after 11 years, the per capita GDP rate reached that year's level. We hope the realities presented by the Statistical Center, the Central Bank, and the World Bank will be considered, and that during the election days, the facts will not be distorted."

Tehran, Kuala Lumpur Eye Developing Tourism Cooperation



TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Tourism of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Ali Asghar Shalibafan in a meeting with the Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture of Malaysia, described the organization of cultural events and programs as a foundation for developing tourism relations between the two countries.

Shalibafan, in his meeting with Firdous Akbar Khan, Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, referred to the cultural and religious commonalities between the two countries. He stated that increasing mutual understanding through various means is a way to develop balanced tourism relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Malaysia.

Shalibafan mentioned that holding exhibitions of handicrafts, food, customs, and specialized events can be powerful tools for mutual understanding between Iran and Malaysia.

He emphasized the importance of establishing direct flight routes as one of the ways to accelerate mutual relations between the two countries, stating that this should be included in the joint cooperation memorandum.

The Deputy Minister also highlighted the mutual affinity among the Muslim populations of both countries, considering it a unique advantage in Iran-Malaysia tourism relations. He emphasized the importance of enhancing mutual understanding of each other's tourism potentials and turning these opportunities into practical initiatives for the private sector.

In conclusion, he expressed readiness to host Malaysians to further explore and understand Iran's favorable tourism environment.

In this meeting, the Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture of Malaysia, on the sidelines of the "Iran Road Show" held in Malaysia to introduce the tourism potentials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, described Iran as an attractive destination for Malaysians. He emphasized the use of all available tools for mutual understanding between the two countries.

Firdous Akbar Khan noted that focusing on the tourism industry is among the country's executive priorities, indicating their goal to attract 36 million tourists in 2024. He mentioned that paying attention to the Iranian market is a special initiative for this year, requiring planning and action based on a joint cooperation memorandum for balanced development.

He also stressed the need to establish direct flights between the two countries and pointed out that the serious participation of more than 100 Malaysian private sector companies in the event introducing Iran's tourism potentials demonstrates the enthusiasm and readiness of industry stakeholders for the existing opportunities.

At the end of the meeting, it was decided that after consolidating the viewpoints of both the private and public sectors from both countries, key points for developing tourism relations between Iran and Malaysia will be included in a joint cooperation memorandum. The intended executive paths will then be outlined in collaboration with stakeholders in this field.

Chinese Companies Outpace Iranians in Afghanistan's Market



TEHRAN - Touching upon the presence of Iranian contractors in Afghanistan and the state of engineering service exports to this country, Secretary of the Iranian Association of Technical and Engineering Services Exporters Bahman Salehi Javid stated: "Given that the Afghan government is highly unstable and has yet to be recognized politically in international circles, relations with this country are unorganized, making the risk of operating in Afghanistan very high."

He explained that involvement in Afghanistan, considering its political conditions, entails not only financial risks but also personal safety risks. "Currently, the contracting market in Afghanistan is not economically viable for engineering companies. However, some companies are willing to take these risks and operate in Afghanistan. There are numerous projects available for engineering companies in this market, including urban development, mining, road construction, rail construction, and transportation lines in the East-West corridor. These development projects have been a focus for all Afghan governments, including the Taliban."

The Secretary of the Iranian Association of Technical and Engineering Services Exporters continued: "Iranian engineering companies are sporadically present in this market. There were plans for barter agreements between countries, wherein \$2 billion worth of road construction projects would be exchanged, and a contracting consortium was to be formed. The most significant project was the completion of the East-West corridor in Afghanistan."

Iran, Turkmenistan Sign Gas Swap Deal to Supply Iraq



TEHRAN (IP) - After intense negotiations, Iran and Turkmenistan have signed an agreement to swap Turkmen natural gas to Iraq through Iran.

The contract was signed in a ceremony attended by Ali Mojtaba Rozbahani, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Turkmenistan, and Maksat Babayev, the Chairman of State Concern Turkengas. Under the terms of the agreement, Turkmenistan will export up to 10 billion cubic meters of gas to Iraq through Iran's pipeline network.

This deal builds upon the successful gas swap arrangements between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan through Iran in 2022 and 2023. The agreement highlights the growing energy cooperation between Iran and its neighbors in the region.

By facilitating the transit of Turkmen gas to Iraq, Iran is leveraging its strategic location and pipeline infrastructure to generate revenue and strengthen its ties with Central Asian countries. The swap arrangement also benefits Iraq, which has been grappling with energy shortages and high demand for natural gas to fuel its power plants and industrial sector.

The successful negotiation of this contract underscores the pragmatic approach adopted by Iran and Turkmenistan in addressing their energy needs and finding mutually beneficial solutions despite the complex geopolitical landscape in the region.

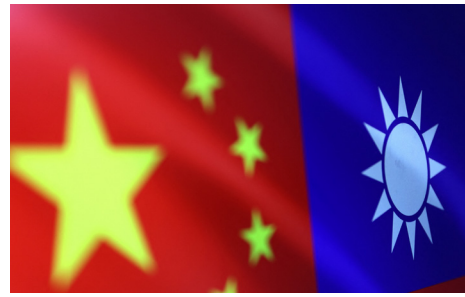
Taiwan Reports More Chinese Military Activity

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwan on Friday reported renewed Chinese military activity nearby with another "combat patrol" as the government called on Beijing not to escalate tensions after the seizure of a Taiwanese fishing boat.

China, which views democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory, has stepped up its pressure over the past four years, both militarily and politically.

On Tuesday, Chinese officials boarded and detained a Taiwanese fishing boat for illegally operating in the country's waters, in what a senior Taiwan official said may be act of psychological warfare.

Taiwan's defence ministry said that starting just before 7 a.m. (2300 GMT) on Friday, it had detected 26 Chinese military aircraft, including J-16 fighters, carrying out a "joint combat readiness patrol" with Chinese warships.



Israel Sends Delegation to Negotiate Hostage Release Deal With Hamas



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told U.S. President Joe Biden on Thursday he has decided to send a delegation to resume stalled negotiations on a hostage release deal with Hamas, their administrations said.

A source in the Israeli negotiating team, speaking on condition of anonymity, said there was a real chance of achieving agreement after Hamas made a revised proposal on the terms of a deal.

"The proposal put forward by Hamas includes a very significant breakthrough," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The Israeli response to the Hamas proposal, submitted via mediators, was in marked contrast to past instances during the nearly nine-month war in Gaza, where Israel has said the conditions attached by Hamas were not acceptable.

An Israeli official said the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency would lead the Israeli delegation for the talks.

Netanyahu was scheduled later on Thursday to have consultations with his negotiating team, then discuss the hostage release talks with his security cabinet.

The White House said Biden and Netanyahu, on a phone call, discussed the response received from Hamas on possible terms of a deal.

"The president welcomed the prime minister's decision to authorize his negotiators to engage with U.S., Qatari, and Egyptian mediators in an effort to close out the deal," it said in a statement.

In the phone call, Netanyahu repeated his position that Israel would only end its war in Gaza when all its objectives had been achieved, his office said in a statement.

The source in the Israeli negotiating team said: "There's a deal with a real chance of implementation."



Starmer Pledges National Renewal After Labour Wins UK Election

LONDON (Dispatches) - Prime Minister-elect Keir Starmer pledged Friday to start a period of "national renewal" in the UK after his opposition Labour party crossing the 326-seat threshold for a working majority in the House of Commons, defeating the ruling Conservatives in the general election.

Keir Starmer on Friday was to become Britain's new prime minister, as his centre-left opposition Labour Party swept to a landslide general election victory, ending 14 years of right-wing Conservative rule.

"The Labour Party has won this general election, and I have called Sir Keir Starmer to congratulate him on his victory," a sombre-looking Rishi Sunak said after he was re-elected to his seat.

"Today, power will change hands in a peaceful and orderly manner with goodwill on all sides," the Tory leader added, calling the results "sobering" and saying he took responsibility for the defeat.

At a triumphant party rally in central London, Starmer, 61, told cheering activists that "change begins here" and promised a "decade of national renewal", putting "country first, party second".

But he cautioned that change would not come overnight, even as Labour snatched a swathe of Tory seats around the country, including from at least eight Cabinet members.

Defence Secretary Grant Shapps was the highest-profile scalp of the night so far, with other big names, including senior minister Penny Mordaunt and leading Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg also defeated.

Finance minister Jeremy Hunt hung on to remain an MP, but only by 891 votes.

Labour raced past the 326 seats needed to secure an overall majority in the 650-seat parliament at 0400 GMT, with the final result expected later.

An exit poll for UK broadcasters published after polls closed at 2100 GMT on Thursday put Labour on course for a return to power for the first time since 2010, with 410 seats and a 170-seat majority.

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The Tories would only get 131 seats in the House of Commons - a record low - with the right-wing vote apparently spliced by Nigel Farage's anti-immigration Reform UK party, which could bag 13 seats.

In another boost for the centrists, the smaller opposition Liberal Democrats would get 61 seats, ousting the Scottish National Party on 10 as the third-biggest party.

The projected overall result bucks a rightward trend among Britain's closest Western allies, with the far right in France eyeing power and Donald Trump looking set for a return in the United States.

British newspapers all focused on Labour's impending return to power for the first time since Gordon Brown was ousted by David Cameron in 2010.

"Keir We Go," headlined the Labour-supporting Daily Mirror. "Britain sees red," said The Sun, the influential Rupert Murdoch tabloid, which swung behind Labour for the first time since 2005.

Biden Says He Is Not Going Anywhere



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Joe Biden said "I'm not going anywhere" as he faced calls by many Democrats to end his re-election bid, using the Fourth of July celebrations on Thursday to hit back at doubts about his stamina and mental acuity to continue his campaign.

The 81-year-old Democrat's shaky showing at a June 27 debate with Republican rival Donald Trump means his every appearance is now closely scrutinized. Many Democratic voters are worried about whether he can keep up a grueling pace of work for the next 4-1/2 years and some in his party have urged him to step aside.

Biden was hosting the annual U.S. Independence Day festivities at the White House on Thursday, including a barbecue for a few thousand active-duty military service members and their families.

Biden, in a suit with no necktie, began his remarks with a forceful "Happy Independence Day!"

Reading from a teleprompter, Biden made no major errors in delivering brief remarks, but at one point appeared to go off script to make reference to a war cemetery that Trump declined to visit while in office.

"By the way, you know, I was in that World War One cemetery in France. The one that one of our colleagues, a former president didn't want to go...," he said, his voice dropping to a low volume and trailing off.

"I probably shouldn't have said, anyway," Biden added, before continuing his remarks.

As Biden mingled and took selfies with guests, someone called out for him to "Keep up the fight."

"You got me, man. I'm not going anywhere," Biden said, repeating his pledge to remain in the race despite the growing calls to step aside.

Abigail Disney, granddaughter of Walt Disney who founded the company that bears his name, and who has been a major Democratic donor, became the latest donor to call for Biden to withdraw from the presidential election, telling CNBC on Thursday that she will halt donations to the Democratic Party until he does so.

Vice President Kamala Harris is the leading contender to take his place in the Nov. 5 election if Biden were to drop out, sources have said, though his allies believe he can assuage the concerns of voters and donors.

Ukrainian Forces Pull Back From Part of Strategic Eastern Town



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine's military said its troops had pulled back from part of Chasiv Yar in the eastern Donetsk region, a day after Russia said its forces had taken control of a district in the strategic town.

Chasiv Yar stands on high ground. If Russian forces establish full control over the town, they could potentially use it as a staging post to advance westwards towards the Ukrainian cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk.

Russia's Defence Ministry said on Wednesday its forces had taken control of the "Novyi" district, which lies to the west of Siverskyi Donets-Donbas canal that runs through the eastern part of the town.

"It became impractical to hold the canal neighbourhood after the enemy entered it, because it threatened the lives and health of our servicemen and the positions of our defenders were destroyed," military spokesman Nazar Voloshyn told Ukrainian television.

"The command decided to pull back to more protected and prepared positions, but even there the enemy does not stop its active combat actions," he said.

Xi and Putin Set Out Ambitions for Eurasian Security Club



ASTANA (Dispatches) - China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin pressed their case on Thursday for closer security, political and economic cooperation between countries of the vast Eurasian region as a counterweight to Western alliances.

They were speaking on the second and final day of a summit in the Kazakh capital Astana of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a club launched in 2001 by Russia, China and Central Asian states and now including India, Iran and Pakistan.

"SCO members should consolidate unity and jointly oppose external interference in the face of the real challenges of interference and division," Xinhua news agency quoted Xi as saying, warning against the West's "Cold War mentality".

President Putin, in his address to the SCO, reiterated Russia's call for "a new architecture of cooperation, indivisible security and development in Eurasia, designed to replace the outdated Eurocentric and Euro-Atlantic models, which gave unilateral advantages only to certain states".

He once again blamed the West for the war in Ukraine and said Russia was ready

to freeze the conflict if Kyiv and its backers accepted Moscow's terms for talks.

Putin said last month the proposed new Eurasian security pact should be open to all countries across the region, including current NATO members. But the aim, he said, should be to gradually remove all external military presence from Eurasia, a clear reference to the United States.

The SCO nations represent new key buyers of Russian commodities such as oil and gas, as Western sanctions imposed over the Ukraine war have forced Moscow to pivot towards Asia.

Putin also hailed on Thursday the increasing use of national currencies - instead of the dollar - in trade between SCO countries and called for the creation of a new payment system within the group.

Western sanctions have left Moscow cut off from traditional payment systems such as SWIFT, while hundreds of billions of dollars in Russian foreign reserves remain frozen. "The multi-polar world has become reality," Putin said. "More and more countries support a fair world order and are ready to vigorously defend their legal rights and traditional values."



Djokovic, Swiatek Advance Before Wimbledon Celebrates British Hero Murray

LONDON (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic survived a minor scare in his hunt for a record-equalling eighth Wimbledon trophy before Iga Swiatek produced a more assured display to reach the third round on an emotional marked by the start of Andy Murray's farewell.

Having announced that this year was his Wimbledon swansong, Murray ensured there was barely a dry eye on Centre Court where the two-times All England Club champion was celebrated by past and present Grand Slam winners after a doubles loss partnering his brother Jamie.

It was a fitting end to a day where several Britons were given top billing before Murray, who will delight fans at least one more time by playing in mixed doubles alongside Emma Raducanu, took centre stage.

One local hope, 277th-ranked Jacob Fearnley, surprised fans by pushing Djokovic hard before the 37-year-old Serb advanced with a battling 6-3 6-4 5-7 7-5 victory.

Djokovic, last year's runner-up, said he was still not at 100% after having minor surgery on his right knee following an injury at last month's French Open.

"I do feel that has an impact on my movement a little bit in terms of the speed," said Djokovic, who is bidding to equal the Wimbledon tally of Roger Federer and also capture a record-extending 25th Grand Slam title.

"It's not yet there where I want it to be. I'm late on the balls that I'm normally not late on.

"That's the part which I guess comes with matches. So the longer I stay in the tournament, I think the better the chances that my movement will improve.

"The earlier rounds are where I'm still a little bit rusty on the movement. That's what I felt today, at least."

Top seed Swiatek, fresh from her Roland Garros success, had no trouble as she powered past Croatian Petra Martić 6-4 6-3 to remain on course for her maiden Wimbledon triumph.

"I'm happy to play in a solid way," said Swiatek, who has now reached at least the third round in 18 consecutive Grand Slam tournaments.

"It's not like I'm going in the first rounds of Grand Slams knowing that I should win or I should take it for granted. I'm ready to battle even in the first rounds.

"I'm happy that I'm consistent, for sure."

Swiatek's Polish compatriot and seventh seed Hubert Hurkacz did not have a good day, however, becoming the third men's top-eight player to exit when he retired from his clash against Frenchman Arthur Fils with a knee injury.

Stefanos Tsitsipas was another casualty after the 11th seed from Greece went down 7-6(6) 7-6(10) 3-6 6-3 to Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori in the evening.

On the women's side, 2022 champion Elena Rybakina endured a mid-match blip to get past Laura Siegemund 6-3 3-6 6-3.

James Signs Two-Year Deal to Stick With Lakers



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - LeBron James, the NBA's all-time leading scorer, has agreed to sign a two-year, \$104-million maximum contract to return to the Los Angeles Lakers, according to multiple reports.

Both ESPN and The Athletic, citing sources, said four-times NBA champion James would have a player option for the 2025-26 season and a no-trade clause.

James's decision to stick with the Lakers, who drafted his son last week, was hardly a surprise as several outlets reported over the weekend that he intended to opt out of his \$51.4-million player option for next season and seek a new deal with the team.

Reuters was unable to reach James's agent for comment while the Lakers did not immediately respond when asked to confirm the reports.

In six seasons with the Lakers the four-times league MVP has averaged 27 points per game, eight assists and 7.9 rebounds.

The Lakers finished seventh in the Western Conference this year with a 47-35 record and went on to lose to the defending champion Denver Nuggets in the first round of the NBA playoffs.

James, 39, has long expressed a desire to play in the NBA with his son Bronny and the Lakers brought him one step closer to fulfilling that dream by selecting the 19-year-old in the second round of the 2024 NBA Draft.

The younger James, speaking during his introductory news conference this week, said he was ready for the pressure of playing alongside his father, who is regarded as one of the best players in NBA history.

Norris, Verstappen Make Up After Spielberg Drama

SILVERSTONE (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen welcomed the restoration of his friendship with Lando Norris after the Briton had said he did not expect any apology from the three-time champion following their crash last Sunday.

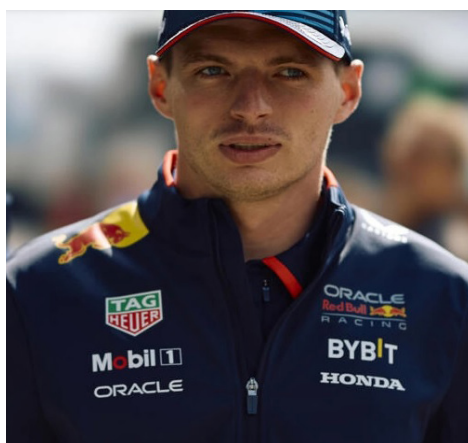
The Red Bull driver said he and Norris had spoken last Monday, following their controversial collision in the Austrian Grand Prix at Spielberg, and had quickly agreed that they should continue to race each other hard in the same way.

"I said after the race that there's no point in discussing it now because emotions are running high," said the Dutchman.

"And then I woke up early and immediately because I wanted to talk to Lando, of course, but he had already texted me in the morning on Monday.

"So on the day afterwards, your emotions are a bit lower so actually I respected that a lot -- and we are great friends and he's a very nice guy, honestly.

"So I was really upset and disappointed that we had got together because on the track we race each other hard, but as a friend you are disappointed that this



could happen.

"But we very quickly said that we had to race each other hard because that is what we like to do and we have always done that not only in Formula One but also on-line and stuff and that's what we enjoy with each other -- battling hard and that is what we will continue to do."

The 64th lap collision came with Norris attempting to pass the three-time world champion and series leader for the race lead and resulted in both cars suffering punctures.

Verstappen rejoined after a pit-stop and finished fifth after being given a 10-second penalty for causing the crash while Norris pitted and retired.

McLaren's Norris, who trails Verstappen by 81 points in the drivers' title race, had taken the sting out of their argument by admitting he had over-reacted.

Portugal Star Silva Defends Ronaldo Against Critics



HAMBURG (Dispatches) - Portugal's Bernardo Silva defended captain Cristiano Ronaldo against criticism levelled his way after the superstar's penalty miss against Slovenia at Euro 2024, and said the forward's emotional reaction was "normal".

Ronaldo, now 39 and playing at his sixth European Championship, has struggled at the tournament in Germany and his inability to find the net so far has raised doubts as to whether he still deserves a starting spot in Roberto Martinez's team.

"Regarding Cristiano, we are humans and he felt emotional when he missed the penalty. That is totally acceptable," Silva said on the eve of Portugal's quarter-final clash with France in Hamburg.

Portugal reached the last eight by beating Slovenia on penalties, but only after Ronaldo had a spot-kick saved by goalkeeper Jan Oblak in extra time -- he did later convert his penalty in the shootout.

"You want to help the team and he felt he could have done better in that moment," Silva added of the missed penalty.

"In my opinion it's a very good penalty and a great save from Oblak. Then he cried for a bit which is normal, which is how humans deal with emotions sometimes.

"So I don't see any reason for people to discuss it. But obviously people will because that's the business."

Without a goal to his name at the Euros, the all-time men's leading international goalscorer with 130 strikes has at times appeared desperate, notably with the number of unsuccessful attempts he had from free-kicks against Slovenia.

"We don't complain about the criticism. It's for the good and for the bad. It's part of the job," Silva added in defence of his captain and the criticism of the former Real Madrid player.

"Everyone knows a little bit about football. When it comes to June and the World Cup or a Euros, everyone thinks they are a manager. We get that and accept that."

Meanwhile, coach Martinez suggested that Ronaldo might not necessarily get to strike a free-kick if the opportunity presents itself against France.

Martinez Saves Argentina in Copa Shootout Win Over Ecuador

HOUSTON (Dispatches) - Argentina beat Ecuador 4-2 on penalties to move into the semi-finals of the Copa America after goalkeeper Emi Martinez made two saves in the shootout following a 1-1 draw in regulation time.

Lisandro Martinez's opener for Argentina was cancelled out by Kevin Rodriguez in stoppage time, and with no extra time at the Copa America apart from the final the match went straight to penalties.

Lionel Messi clipped the crossbar with Argentina's first effort in the shootout but Martinez saved from Angel Mena and Alan Minda as the defending champions moved into a semi-final match-up against Venezuela or Canada.

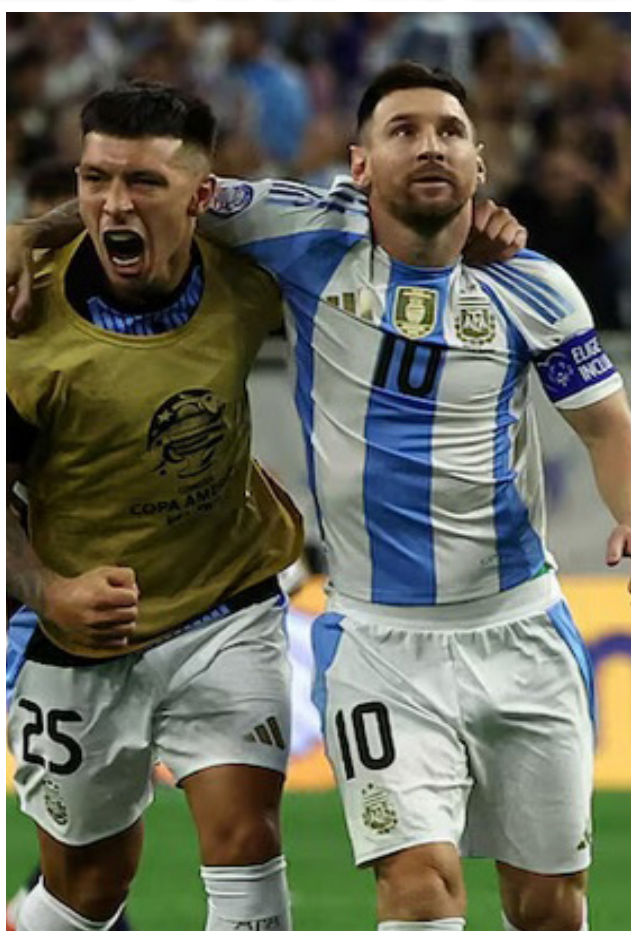
"In penalties, the team has blind confidence in its goalkeeper and that is fundamental," Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said. "Even after Leo's miss and with all that means for the team, it's very important that our goalkeeper came up clutch.

"I think it's not enjoyable when you win in this way. Of course, we are happy, but I didn't enjoy this victory."

Messi started the game despite being an injury doubt after missing their final group match against Peru due to a hamstring issue, and the Argentina captain broke the record for most minutes played in the tournament's history.

Argentina dominated possession early on but it was Ecuador who created the first chance when Jeremy Sarmiento found space to shoot from a tight angle and forced Martinez into a save.

But as Argentina's fans found their voice their team took the lead in the 35th minute when Alexis Mac Allister's



headed flick-on found Martinez at the far post and the defender nodded home his first international goal.

Ecuador turned up the pressure in the second half and it paid off at a corner on the hour mark when the cross was deflected onto Rodrigo De Paul's hand and the referee immediately pointed to the spot.

Skipper Enner Valencia stepped up and sent Martinez the wrong way but Ecuador's top scorer saw his effort come off the post before Argentina defender Cristian Romero blocked a shot from the rebound.

Martinez turned to the crowd and roared in delight with his arms raised and the miss took the wind out of Ecuador's sails.

"He's the captain and he took the penalty because he was feeling confident enough, but he missed. That happens in football," Ecuador coach Felix Sanchez said.

"In many other areas of the game, he was able to contribute... We really appreciate that he took the chance. It's a lottery today, it didn't go in. Maybe next time it will."

But as the game went into stoppage time Ecuador, who have never beaten Argentina at the Copa America, found the equaliser when John Yeboah whipped in a cross and Rodriguez stayed outside to direct a header past Martinez in the 91st minute.

The Argentina goalkeeper had the last laugh, however, making two crucial saves in the shootout before Nicolas Otamendi scored the decisive kick to book a semi-final spot.