

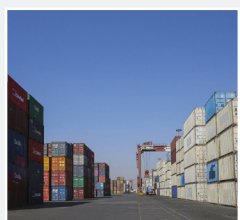
Highlighting the Resistance Front's Military Capabilities, the Deputy commander of the IRGC's Quds Force for Coordination Said the Israeli Regime Will Never Be Able to Beat the Resistance, Even With the U.S.' Support

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Largest Gold Mine Has Revised Up Its Proven Reserves With Authorities Hoping It Would Lead to a Major Increase in Output and Would Significantly Boost Jobs in Northwestern Iran Where It Is Located

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DOMESTIC



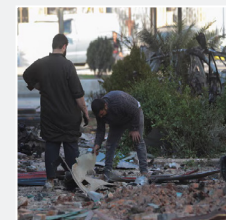
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INTERNATIONAL

Syrian Rebels Sweep Into Aleppo, Nearby Province



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Iran Seeks Justice for Victims Over Germany's Role in Iraqi Chemical Attacks



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has vowed to uphold "truth and justice" for victims of chemical attacks during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and hold German companies accountable for supplying chemical weapons to the former Iraqi regime.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmacel Baghaei remarked in a post on his X account on Saturday marking the International Day of Remembrance for all Victims of Chemical Warfare.

"Iran persists in its demand for 'truth & justice' regarding those German companies and others that actively and knowingly contributed to Iraq's Chemical Weapons program," he wrote.

He emphasized that there is no statute of limitations for war crimes.

The spokesperson paid tribute to Iranian soldiers and civilians who were martyred or injured by deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's chemical attacks during the regime's imposed war on Iran.

During the 1980-88 war, the Iraqi army continuously employed chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and civilians, leaving tens of thousands dead on the spot and many more suffering for years to come.

The former Iraqi regime used chemical weapons more than 500 times against Iranian forces and civilians in five border provinces.

In these inhumane attacks, a wide range of toxic chemical products, including mustard and nerve and choking agents, was used against Iranians, some of them used for the first time.

At least 10,000 Iranians were killed and more than 107,000 civilians, including women and children, sustained injuries in these attacks.

In one of the most notorious attacks, the Saddam regime dropped mustard gas bombs on Sardasht, a small city in Iran's West Azarbaijan Province on June 28, 1987. The attack killed at least 119 Iranian civilians and injured another 8,000, leaving some of them permanently disabled.

Western countries -- including Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, France and the United States -- contributed to the Iraqi regime's chemical weapons program at the time.

Victims continue to suffer to this day because of illegal Western sanctions targeting medical supplies and equipment to Iran.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



Gov't and Parliament Determined to Serve the People

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized the government's and parliament's shared commitment to serving the people and addressing the country's challenges. He expressed confidence that through mutual collaboration and understanding, all problems could be overcome.

"We have spent three hours working alongside parliamentarians today, and both the government and the parliament are determined to serve the people," Pezeshkian stated, addressing the Majlis open session. "Together, with cooperation, unity, and shared insight, we will resolve any difficulties. We are committed to fostering consensus as a common pact between us."

The President emphasized that there was no issue that could not be solved through unity. "In the world, for every problem, there are countless solutions. If we stay united and act based on experience, expertise, and effective management, we can resolve the concerns of the people and strengthen public trust in Islam, the government, and the parliament."

Pezeshkian further outlined the government's efforts in forming an inclusive cabinet, which represents a wide range of political views. "In the formation of the cabinet, we aimed to create a structure of consensus, utilizing diverse perspectives without being bound by any political faction or group. This was a historic move, as every cabinet member was able to secure a vote of confidence from parliament," he added.

The President also expressed gratitude for the parliament's detailed and professional examination of the budget bill. "We are working on addressing the concerns raised by parliamentarians and aim to finalize an operational budget," Pezeshkian said.

"We hope that, with the continued collaboration of all parties, we will address the fiscal imbalances and challenges facing the country. Our need for your support is greater than ever," the President continued.

In a statement on economic disparities, the President assured that solutions existed, but emphasized the necessity of collective action. "There are certainly solutions to address the fiscal imbalances we are facing. We must work together to find and implement the right solutions for the country."

Pezeshkian touched upon the government's priorities, including addressing issues related to

healthcare workers, wheat farmers, retirees, and ensuring fair pension adjustments. "We have faced numerous challenges, but we have worked hard to resolve as many as possible," he said.

He reaffirmed Iran's commitment to peaceful international relations, stating that the government has made significant efforts to expand its diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and beyond. "We are in no way seeking war or bloodshed," he said.

He also criticized those responsible for escalating violence in the region. "Those who spread war and violence are often the same individuals who claim to champion freedom and democracy. As a human being, not just as a President, I find it deeply disturbing to witness the bombing of children and women, the mass killings, and the ongoing atrocities, including the deaths of over 10,000 children. The world watches these crimes, and it is shameful," Pezeshkian said.

The President further questioned the credibility of those who claim to uphold human rights. "How can they speak of human rights when they are bombing civilians, hospitals, and mosques? These actions show that they have no humanity. This tragedy is happening with the support of the United States and their weapons."

Pezeshkian reiterated that Iran had never sought to infringe upon the territorial integrity of any country. "Our region does not need foreign intervention. We hope that, through dialogue, we can resolve misunderstandings with our neighbors," he stated. "For the first time, every country in the region has condemned Israel's aggression against Iran. We are grateful for their solidarity."

Addressing the situation in Syria, the President urged Islamic nations to step in and prevent Israel and the United States from exploiting the situation for their benefit. "We hope that Islamic countries will intervene and prevent Israel and the U.S. from taking advantage of the crisis," Pezeshkian said.

In conclusion, the President thanked parliamentarians for their support and expressed optimism that, through continued cooperation and expert guidance, both the government and the parliament would successfully address the people's concerns.

American-Zionist Plot in Syria Aims to Destabilize West Asia



TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says the resurgence of Takfiri terrorism in northern Syria is part of an American-Israeli project that aims to spread insecurity in the West Asia region.

In a phone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday, Araqchi said the international community bears responsibility for combating the vicious scourge of terrorism.

He added that Iran, Russia and regional countries, particularly Syria's neighboring states, must maintain vigilance and improve coordination to "thwart this dangerous plot and counter terrorists' measures in Syria."

The Russian foreign minister, for his part, briefed his Iranian counterpart on his assessment of the latest developments in Syria.

Lavrov called on all sides to take more coordinated steps to combat terrorism and urged close consultations between Tehran and Moscow.

The top Iranian and Russian diplomats reaffirmed their countries' firm support for Syria's national sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as the Arab country's government and army in their fight against terrorist groups.

Araqchi and Lavrov stressed the importance of pursuing the issue within the framework of the Astana talks and emphasized that Iran, Russia and Turkey are required to hold more coordination as the guarantors of the Astana peace process.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allied terrorist factions advanced into sections of Syria's second-largest city of Aleppo on Friday, seizing areas including al-Hamdaniyah, al-Furqan, and al-Zahra after two days of heavy clashes, according to local sources. However, Syrian forces quickly launched counter-operations to repel them.

The so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based monitor, said Russian warplanes had launched raids on areas of Aleppo city for the first time since 2016 to stop terrorist advances.

Takfiri Terrorists Will Get Nowhere in Face of Resistance Forces



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says foreign-backed Takfiri terrorist groups that have recently intensified their attacks are doomed to fail in the face of resistance forces defending the region.

Araqchi made the remarks during a ceremony on Sunday, a few days after terror outfits led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched their largest assault in Syria in years, took control of parts of the country's second-biggest city, Aleppo, and advanced southward toward the city of Hama.

The Syrian army announced later that it thwarted the large-scale terrorist operations through a preemptive strike.

According to Araqchi, West Asia is witnessing new conspiracies every day, and today it is the presence of Takfiri terrorist groups that are moving in the same direction with the US and Israel.

"These groups and their supporters should know that they will get nowhere in the face of the resistance forces and those who are fighting for the honor and dignity of their country and the region," Araqchi added.

"This fact has been proved in recent years, and their renewed efforts will get nowhere, too. We will see the defeat of these groups in the region."

Syria has been gripped by foreign-backed militancy since March 2011, with Western countries and their regional allies aiding terrorist groups that are wreaking havoc in the Arab country.

The new terrorist assault led the Syrian army to target the positions held by the militants, with President Bashar al-Assad vowing to defend the country's stability and territorial integrity.

In a statement on Saturday, the Syrian defense ministry said the forces were positioned on the city's northern and eastern countryside, asserting, "Towns near Hama have not been entered."

Iran's Naval Power Achieves Global Recognition



TEHRAN - The commemoration of Iran's Navy Day was marked by a grand ceremony at the Persian Gulf International Conference Center. The event was attended by prominent figures, including Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araqchi, Advisor to the Supreme Leader Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, and delegations from countries such as Azerbaijan, Russia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Oman, alongside military attachés from 24 nations.

Rear Admiral Irani, Commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN), spoke about the historical significance of Navy Day. He highlighted the bravery of naval martyrs during the Iran-Iraq War and emphasized the Navy's pivotal role in halting Iraq's advance just 67 days into the conflict.

He reflected on Iran's resistance against U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, paying homage to the crew of the martyr ships Paykan, Sahand, and Joshan. The Admiral praised the Navy's recent achievement—a historic global circumnavigation led by the Iranian-built destroyer Dena and the Makran ship, demonstrating the Navy's growing self-sufficiency and strength.

Rear Admiral Irani underscored Iran's advancements in naval technology, including the production of destroyers, submarines, missile-launching frigates, hovercraft, and drones—all developed domestically.

Syria Rejects Allegations of Withdrawing From Northern City

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria dismisses allegations of the country's forces withdrawal from the northern city of Hama in the face of foreign-backed Takfiri terrorists, considering such claims to be part of a "media war" aimed at tarnishing Damascus' ongoing and successful counterterrorism efforts.

In a statement on Saturday, the Syrian defense ministry said the forces were positioned on the city's northern and eastern countryside, asserting, "Towns near Hama have not been entered."

It, therefore, urged citizens "not to believe rumors published by opposition media."

Video footage emerging from the battlefields also showed Syrian soldiers confirming their ongoing deployment in the city.

The General Command of the Syrian Army, meanwhile, described allegations to the contrary as a "coordinated media war aimed at undermining the morale of our people and our valiant army."

"Our valiant army remains steadfast, strong, and committed to its duty of defending the homeland and its people against all forms of terrorism and its supporters."

In another statement, the General Command likewise reaffirmed the forces' steadfastness in their underway efforts to push back against the Takfiris.

It said the soldiers had engaged in redeployment across a vast array of northern areas in preparation for a counteroffensive aimed at fending off a large-scale attack by the terrorists.

The measure was taken towards "reinforcing defensive lines to absorb the attack, preserve the lives of civilians and soldiers, and prepare for a counterattack," it said.



The forces would, meanwhile, "await the completion of military reinforcements and their deployment across combat axes in preparation for the counteroffensive," the statement pointed out.

It noted that the terrorists engaged in the attack numbered thousands and were deploying heavy weaponry and large drone squadrons, adding that their attacks had claimed the lives of dozens of Syrian soldiers.

"However, they (the terrorists) were unable to establish fixed positions due to the ongoing concentrated and

powerful strikes by our armed forces," the statement said.

Earlier this week, members of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) Takfiri terrorist group were reported to have overrun many government-controlled areas and killed dozens of Syrian soldiers in the Arab country's north.

Later, though, it was also reported that the Syrian army had thwarted large-scale terrorist operations in the Aleppo Province through a preemptive strike.

The General Command cited the Russian Coordination Center in Syria as saying that the army and its allied Russian air forces had killed as many as 300 terrorists over the past 24 hours after eliminating 600 of them throughout the two preceding days.

The statement reminded that the HTS's recent attack on the northern areas came amid intense Israeli aerial assaults against Syria, referring to the terror outfit's alliance with the Israeli regime and Tel Aviv's efforts at targeting Syria's all-out counterterrorism push.

Citing a notable instance of the two sides' alliance, the General Command referred to the HTS' "explicitly thanking Israel for its assassination of [the Lebanese resistance movement] Hezbollah's leaders earlier this year."

IRAN NEWS



Wagon Imports to Continue, Not Canceled

TEHRAN (ILNA) - In a press briefing following the 284th session of the Tehran City Council, Mehdi Chamran, the council's chairman, provided updates on various municipal issues. Chamran announced that the General Assembly of the Bus Company would convene to address the need for capital increases, as the company is not profitable and requires financial support. He also noted progress on resolving a backlog of cases related to urban gardens.

On the topic of transportation infrastructure, Chamran emphasized that the import of subway wagons has not been canceled. He highlighted efforts to secure the government's 5% financial contribution, which is expected to be completed this week. Wagon construction is underway, and tram systems have already arrived and are being cleared for use. Additionally, over 80 electric buses, supplementing previously imported models, have entered the country and are awaiting standardization approvals for release.

Lapis Lazuli Corridor Less Justifiable for Afghans Compared to Iran Route



TEHRAN - Hassan Mirshafi, the Special Representative of Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development for Afghanistan Affairs, addressed recent agreements between Azerbaijan and the Taliban concerning the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. He discussed the potential exclusion of Iran from Afghanistan's transit routes and the status of Tehran-Kabul transit agreements, as well as collaboration on infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.

Mirshafi emphasized that each country pursues agreements and partnerships based on its interests, noting Afghanistan's efforts to expand its transportation networks despite being landlocked. He highlighted Afghanistan's need to identify viable routes for exporting goods, given its lack of maritime access.

"Afghanistan, surrounded by China, Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan, seeks to utilize regional capacities to develop transit corridors. Regional and international players also have vested interests in shaping these corridors to suit their economic goals," he stated.

Mirshafi stressed Iran's competitive advantages in transit, citing the country's strategic position and established corridors. He warned that neglecting this opportunity could lead to lost potential in regional transit markets.

Referring to Afghanistan's reliance on Iran for trade, Mirshafi underscored the economic inefficiency of alternative routes like the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. "No corridor is as prepared or cost-effective as Iran's. Alternatives, such as the Lapis Lazuli route, are less economical due to increased transportation costs from multiple modal changes," he explained.

Mirshafi highlighted cultural and linguistic ties between Iran and Afghanistan, which bolster trade relations. He also noted recent meetings, including the visit of Afghanistan's railway chief to Iran, where agreements were made to enhance cooperation.



Iran's Trade Growth With Eurasia: A Strategic Shift for Economic Expansion

TEHRAN - Strengthening Iran's trade relations with Eurasian countries to access global markets is a core component of the 14th administration's foreign policy. Through strategic planning and trade facilitation, Iran's exports to Eurasia have surged 2.5 times in recent years.

According to Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, head of the Trade Development Organization, speaking at a meeting with producers and traders in Tehran, Iran entered into a free trade agreement (FTA) with Eurasia four years ago. This move significantly reduced tariffs or eliminated them altogether. As a result, trade with Eurasian countries has expanded 2.5 times.

Dehghan Dehnavi emphasized that the Eurasia agreement is Iran's first free trade experience, where 87% of tariffs have been removed. He stated that traders must prepare for new levels of competition, as Eurasian countries are also eager to supply goods in the Iranian market.

On December 25, 2023, in Saint Petersburg, Russia, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Iran was signed. This agreement aims to reduce or eliminate both tariff and non-tariff barriers and bolster economic cooperation. With the agreement, 87% of tariff codes for goods traded between Iran and the EAEU will be zeroed out.

The agreement has already been ratified by the parliaments of Belarus, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan. Armenia and Kazakhstan, along with Iran, must finalize their legislative processes to implement the deal. The Iranian parliament is currently reviewing the agreement and is expected to present it for approval soon.

The objective of the EAEU, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, is to create a shared market, foster economic unity, reduce transport costs, and promote healthy competition in sectors such as agriculture, energy, technology, and transportation.

The 9th and 10th annual EAEU Forum was held in Yerevan, Armenia, on October 1-2, 2024, with a high-ranking Iranian delegation representing both the public and private sectors. During the event, business dialogues between Iran and the EAEU were held, focusing on enhancing commercial and industrial cooperation in agriculture, industry, transport, and financial processes.

Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref, in his speech at the meeting of the EAEU Prime Ministers, emphasized Iran's intent to strengthen both bilateral and multilateral political and economic relations with EAEU members. He highlighted that sustainable economic development can only be achieved through deeper cooperation among regional countries, and platforms like the EAEU play a crucial role in realizing such partnerships.

Aref also pointed out that Iran is ready to assume a more active role in the union, leveraging its internal capacities, including its \$80 billion trade potential, vast oil and gas resources, significant transit advantages, and skilled workforce.

Iran's key role in the North-South international transit corridor was also underscored as a crucial area for collaboration with the EAEU members, with Iran offering special logistics and trade facilitation for countries along this route.

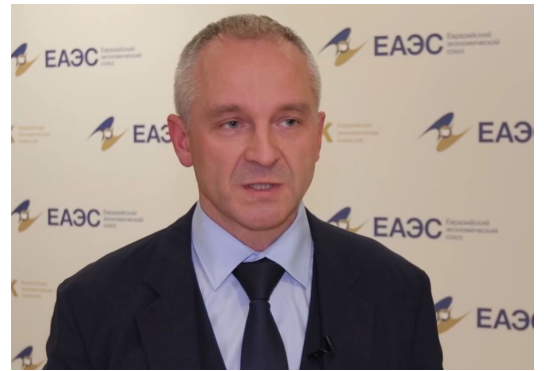
According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration, exports to EAEU member countries have grown by 16% in the first five months of 2024 compared to the same period in the previous year. Iran's exports to these nations totaled 2.2 million tons, marking a 35% increase. The value of these exports was \$748 million, a 16% rise from the prior year. Notably, Kyrgyzstan saw the most significant growth in exports.

Mohammad Sadegh Qanadzadeh, the Deputy for International Business Development at the Trade Development Organization, discussed the prospects of Iran-EAEU trade. He noted that 87% of the goods exchanged between the two sides would now benefit from the free trade provisions under the agreement. He stressed the need for comprehensive infrastructure improvements in transport and logistics, alongside addressing financial and currency-related issues to support exporters and traders.

Qanadzadeh highlighted that Iran should capitalize on the Eurasian opportunity to expand its global trade presence. Strengthening trade ties with neighboring countries, particularly Armenia, is seen as a vital step to increase trade volumes and boost bilateral economic relations.

In summary, Iran's increasing trade ties with Eurasia are part of a broader strategy to integrate more deeply into the global economy. With the new FTA and continued investment in infrastructure, Iran is poised to enhance its position in regional and global markets.

Iran Moves Closer to Gaining Observer Status in the EAEU



Iran has taken another significant step toward securing observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as its application was approved during a meeting of deputy prime ministers from the member countries. The decision now awaits final approval from the heads of state of the EAEU.

Dmitry Volvach, Deputy Minister of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, announced on Saturday that Iran's request for observer status would be reviewed at the EAEU Supreme Council meeting in December 2024. He clarified that the decision to grant observer status to applicant countries falls within the authority of the heads of state of the EAEU member nations.

Volvach expressed optimism, forecasting that the EAEU leaders will elevate Iran's partnership to observer status at the upcoming summit, recognizing the country as a significant partner.

Iran submitted its request for observer status in the EAEU in August 2024.

In a related development, the Iranian Ambassador to Russia, Kazem Jalali, confirmed in a meeting on November 19, 2024, that Iran had formally applied for observer membership. He noted that the application would be addressed during the December 2024 summit of EAEU heads of state, where the final approval of the observer status will be granted.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is an intergovernmental economic union comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Uzbekistan, Moldova, and Cuba currently hold observer status. The EAEU was established nearly a decade ago, in 2014.

In 2023, the EAEU signed a free trade agreement with Iran, which still requires ratification by the national parliaments of EAEU member states and the Iranian Parliament. Some of the signatory countries have already completed the parliamentary approval process.

Once the agreement is finalized, approximately 87% of Iranian exports to EAEU member states will be tariff-free. In turn, exports from EAEU countries to Iran will also benefit from the same tariff exemptions.

Annual Fish Exports of 1,300 Tons from Khuzestan to Basra



TEHRAN - Mohammad Javad Amani, Head of the Ahvaz Chamber of Commerce, in an interview with ILNA, stated that the launch of the Shalamcheh to Basra railway line will significantly facilitate trade between Khuzestan province and Iraq. Amani emphasized that while the railway is primarily intended to ease passenger movement, it will also strengthen commercial relations. He noted that the current transportation infrastructure is insufficient to handle the flow of passengers crossing the joint border of Khuzestan and Iraq, especially during the Arbaeen period when about one million pilgrims from Afghanistan and Pakistan travel through Khuzestan to reach Karbala and Najaf.

This large volume of travelers makes it difficult for commercial vehicles to move efficiently. Amani suggested that if some of the cargo traffic is shifted to the railway line, it would reduce vehicle congestion, benefiting both Iranian and Iraqi parties. The large number of land travelers makes it challenging to maintain order and health protocols.

Amani also mentioned that more than 400 trucks cross the Mehran border into Iraq daily. He pointed out that while there are significant challenges in cargo transport at the Chazabeh border, the Shalamcheh border remains the smoothest for trade.

The Head of the Ahvaz Chamber of Commerce reported that Iran's food exports to Basra this year reached \$1.3 billion, with goods traveling through both the Shalamcheh and Chazabeh borders. He clarified that goods from other parts of the country are sent to Iraq via the Mehran border.

Additionally, he highlighted that annual fish exports from Khuzestan to Iraq amount to 1,300 tons.

Amani underscored that overall, trade between Iran and Iraq is progressing well, with bilateral trade expanding beyond goods to include technical and engineering services. Iraqis are utilizing Iranian services in refineries, pipelines, and industrial facilities.

Iran's Rail Connection to Neighbors and Increasing Multimodal Transit Prioritized by Railway Authority



TEHRAN - The 34th session of the UIC (International Union of Railways) Regional Assembly for the Middle East was held on Thursday, December 8, 2024, hosted by Turkish Railways. The event was attended by CEOs and senior managers from most of the railway operators of the UIC Middle East regional assembly, as well as the Director General and President of the UIC, and the UIC Regional Coordinator for the Middle East.

During the session, the CEO of Iranian Railways emphasized the strong potential for cooperation among the regional assembly members in various railway transport sectors. He noted that large-scale projects are underway in many member countries related to the construction and completion of railway infrastructure, border connections, and expanding rail transport, which promises a bright future for trade and communication between the nations of the region, as well as between Europe and Asia.

Mr. Zakeri highlighted that the UIC's Middle East regional office has a significant role in implementing regional programs and fostering closer ties among members to enhance cooperation. He added that efforts will be made to further strengthen the role of the regional office in advancing the goals of the UIC Middle East assembly.

The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development expressed hope that cooperation in technical and operational fields among members would be strengthened with the support of the UIC.

The Iranian Railway CEO listed several key priorities for Iran's railway, including the operationalization of international transit corridors through Iran, establishing rail connections to neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Turkey, increasing multimodal transport and transit, and providing customer-centric services.

He noted that in the last two months, cargo exchanges between Afghanistan and Turkey via Iran had been activated, and expressed hopes for significant growth in trade volume among the three countries.

In the meeting, the CEO proposed several topics for inclusion in the annual action plan for the UIC Middle East assembly. These include analyzing obstacles to international transport among members, enhancing railway competitiveness, strengthening working groups established by UIC, collaborating with other UIC regions, defining joint projects, sharing experiences, and establishing an electronic data exchange system for international transport among members.

The session also covered reports on UIC projects related to railway standardization, hydrogen trains, HVAC systems for trains, resilience to adverse weather and natural disasters, particularly in the event of earthquakes, as well as the creation of a safety working group for the Middle East region.

Other key topics discussed included enhancing rail security, introducing new global railway projects for the Middle East, such as the Future Railway Mobile Communication System (FRMCS), establishing a train wheel testing center in the region, identifying and solving barriers to rail corridors, and addressing educational issues within Middle Eastern railways.

On the sidelines of the conference, the Iranian Railway CEO held constructive talks with his Turkish counterpart to strengthen rail cooperation between the two countries, especially regarding the construction of a new railway line between Marand and Cheshmeh Soraya and its connection to the Karse station in Turkey. They also discussed the revival of the Tehran-Tabriz-Van and Tabriz-Van passenger trains, and how these initiatives could be advanced.

The Iranian Railway CEO also met with the President of UIC, the UIC Director General, the UIC Passenger Division Manager, and the UIC Middle East Coordinator to discuss increasing cooperation between Iranian Railways and the International Union of Railways, as well as the need for greater Iranian participation in UIC programs and activities. They also addressed the activation of the UIC Middle East regional office in Tehran.

Soil Erosion in Iran Seven Times Higher Than the Global Average



TEHRAN - Soil erosion in Iran is alarmingly seven times the global average, posing serious environmental and economic challenges. This issue was highlighted during the World Soil Day conference held at the Ministry of Agriculture, with remarks from Shina Ansari, Head of the Department of Environment (DoE).

Ansari emphasized the shared goals of the DoE and the Ministry of Agriculture in protecting and sustainably managing soil. She noted that poor soil quality has significantly impacted agricultural productivity in rural areas, forcing many villagers to migrate to cities in search of better opportunities.

In her speech, Ansari stressed the importance of collaborative efforts between the ministries to mitigate soil erosion and pollution. "By identifying, monitoring, and addressing soil degradation with a focus on public participation and education, we can protect this vital resource," she said. Ansari highlighted that comprehensive data collection, precise measurement, and consistent monitoring are essential for effective decision-making and sustainable soil management.

According to a recent report from Iran's Parliament Research Center, the annual soil erosion rate in Iran is 16.5 tons per hectare—seven times the global average. Despite comprising only 1% of the world's land area, Iran accounts for 7.7% of global soil erosion. Ansari revealed that this phenomenon results in a staggering annual economic loss of \$10 billion.

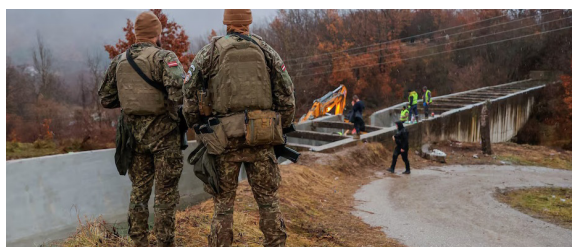
The 2019 Soil Conservation Act, approved by the Iranian Parliament, identifies two key areas for intervention: erosion and pollution. While the Ministry of Agriculture is tasked with managing soil erosion, the DoE oversees pollution control. Ansari highlighted the need for stronger integration of efforts across institutions, aiming for sustainable management and effective data exchange.

China Blasts U.S. Arms Sale to Taiwan

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China vowed "resolute countermeasures" to a recently approved U.S. arms sale to Taiwan, and complained to the U.S. for arranging for the democratically governed island's president to transit through U.S. territory. The U.S. State Department approved the potential sale, worth an estimated \$385 million, of spare parts and support for F-16 jets and radars to Taiwan, the Pentagon said on Friday. The sale was announced hours before Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te left on a visit to Taipei's three diplomatic allies in the Pacific, with stops in Hawaii and the U.S. territory of Guam.



Kosovo Blames Serbia for Blast at Key Water Canal as Tensions Escalate



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Kosovo worked to shore up water and power supplies on Saturday and stepped up security at strategic sites after an explosion hit a canal that sends water to its two main power plants, an incident Pristina labelled a "terrorist act" by neighboring Serbia.

Serbia's foreign minister Marko Djuric denied what he said were "baseless allegations" about Belgrade's involvement in an X post on Saturday, and suggested that Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's government was involved, without providing evidence.

Kurti said later Saturday that police have made arrests following the attack, adding that water flow had been partially restored.

Law enforcement have also "carried out searches" and "collected testimony and evidence, and the criminals and terrorists will have to face justice and the law", the prime minister told journalists while visiting the site of the explosion.

The explosion has increased tensions between the two Balkan countries. Ethnic Albanian-majority Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 almost a decade after a guerrilla uprising against its rule, but Serbia has not recognized Kosovo as an independent state.

Relations remain especially frayed in the north where the blast occurred, and where the Serb minority refuses to recognize Kosovo's statehood and still sees Belgrade as their capital.

The explosion occurred around 7pm (1800 GMT) on Friday near the town of Zubin Potok. The exact cause was not clear.

Kosovo's Security Council, which held emergency talks early on Saturday, said its armed forces were activated to prevent similar attacks.

Security was already heightened after two recent attacks where hand grenades were hurled at a police station and municipality building in northern Kosovo where ethnic Serbians live.

"The Security Council has approved additional measures to strengthen security around critical facilities and services such as bridges, transformer stations, antennas, lakes, canals," the council said in a statement on Saturday.



Syrian Rebels Sweep Into Aleppo, Nearby Province

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - The Syrian army said on Saturday dozens of its soldiers had been killed in a major attack by rebels who swept into the city of Aleppo in the northwest, forcing the army to redeploy in a huge setback for Bashar al-Assad's regime.

The surprise attack led by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has jolted the frontlines of the Syrian civil war that has largely been frozen since 2020, reviving fighting in a corner of the fractured country near the Turkish border. The army said it was preparing a counteroffensive to restore state authority.

Acknowledging the rebel advance, the Syrian army command said insurgents had entered large parts of Aleppo, which had been under full state control since government forces backed by Russia and Iran drove rebels out eight years ago.

Images from Aleppo showed a group of rebel fighters gathered in the city's Saadallah al-Jabiri Square after entering the city overnight, a billboard of Assad looming behind them.

"I am the son of Aleppo, and was displaced from it eight years ago, in 2016. Thank God we just returned. It is an indescribable feeling," said Ali Jumbaa, a rebel fighter, television footage showed.

The Syrian military command said militants had attacked in large numbers and from multiple directions, prompting "our armed forces to carry out a redeployment operation aimed at strengthening the defense lines in order to absorb the attack, preserve the lives of civilians and soldiers, and prepare for a counterattack".

The rebels also took control of Aleppo airport, according to a statement by their operations room and a security source.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitor, said the rebels had also advanced in Hama and Idlib provinces, taking control of "dozens of strategic towns without any resistance".

By Saturday evening, they seized at least four towns in the central Hama province and claimed to have entered the provincial capital

"Many of the towns they have seized are ghost towns, emptied of their population when the Syrian army captured them with the help of Iran," said FRANCE 24's Middle East expert Wassim Nasr.

"So those people fighting today are fighting to go back to those towns," Nasr added.

The fighting revives the long-simmering Syrian conflict as the wider region is roiled by wars in Gaza and Lebanon, where a truce between Israel and the Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah took effect on Wednesday.

The attack was launched from insurgent-held areas of northwestern Syria that remain outside Assad's grasp.

Russia's Defense Ministry said its air force had carried out strikes on Syrian rebels in support of the country's army, Russian news agencies reported.

Speaking on Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow regarded the rebel attack as a violation of Syria's sovereignty. "We are in favour of the Syrian authorities bringing order to the area and restoring constitutional order as soon as possible," he said.

The Syrian Civil Defense, a rescue service operating in opposition-held parts of Syria, said in a post on X that Syrian government and Russian aircraft carried out air strikes on residential neighbourhoods, a gas station and a school in rebel-held Idlib, killing four civilians and wounding six others.

Syrian military sources said Russia has promised Damascus extra military aid that would start arriving in the next 72 hours.

"The Russians want to help the Syrian regime more - but their military resources in Syria are much reduced as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine," said FRANCE 24's Nasr.

Israeli Airstrikes on Gaza Kill Two Aid Workers



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Two aid workers were killed in Israeli airstrikes in Gaza on Saturday, with Israel saying it had killed a militant who took part in the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and who it said was employed by a U.S.-based charity.

The first was a World Central Kitchen member, who was hit in a vehicle in Khan Younis in Southern Gaza. The Israeli military said that he had taken part in the attack on Kibbutz Nir Oz in southern Israel and was under surveillance but did not offer any evidence.

Reuters could not independently verify whether he took part in the attack last year.

The family of the man, Ahd Azmi Qdeih, said the Israeli allegations were false and meant to justify his unlawful killing. They said he was an engineer who dedicated his life to charitable work.

World Central Kitchen confirmed the airstrike and said it had no knowledge about an employee involved in the Oct. 7, 2023 attack.

"We are heartbroken to share that a vehicle carrying World Central Kitchen colleagues was hit by an Israeli airstrike in Gaza," it said in a statement posted on X. "World Central Kitchen had no knowledge that any individual in the vehicle had alleged ties to the October 7th Hamas attack."

Many Thousands Rally to Oppose Georgian Gov't After Break With EU

TBILISI (Dispatches) - Many thousands of demonstrators gathered late on Saturday in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, building barricades, breaking windows and setting off fireworks outside parliament, in protest against the government which called off talks to join the EU.

Riot police responded by firing water cannon and tear gas into the crowds.

The demonstrations were by far the biggest since the increasingly anti-Western ruling party was re-elected last month in a vote the pro-EU opposition says was rigged.

At one point a small fire broke out in the parliament building, possibly caused by a firework. Protesters burned an effigy of Georgia's richest man, the ruling party's founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, on the steps of parliament.

Georgian media reported other protests in towns and cities throughout the country.

Earlier on Saturday, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze accused the pro-EU opposition of plotting a revolution. The State Security Service said political parties were attempting to "overthrow the government by force".

The country, long one of the most staunchly pro-Western states to emerge from the breakup of the Soviet Union but lately drawn closer into Moscow's orbit, was thrown into crisis on Thursday, when the ruling Georgian Dream party said it was halting European Union accession talks for the next four years. It accused the EU of blackmailing Georgia.

EU membership is overwhelmingly popular in Georgia, which has the aim of joining the bloc enshrined in its constitution.

Standing outside the parliament building in the capital, where flags of the EU and Georgia hung side by side, protester Tina Kupreishvili said she wanted Georgia to uphold its constitutional commitment to joining the EU.

"The people of Georgia are trying to protect their constitution,



trying to protect their country and the state, and they are trying to tell our government that rule of law means everything," she told Reuters.

President Salome Zourabichvili, who opposes the government and supports EU membership but whose powers are mainly ceremonial, said she would not leave office when her term ends next month, because the new parliament was illegitimate and had no authority to name her successor.

Georgian Dream won almost 54% of the vote in the Oct. 26 election, defeating an opposition that says the vote was rigged. Both the ruling party and Georgia's electoral commission say the election was free and fair. Western countries have called for an investigation.

The ruling party campaigned on keeping the country at peace, and accuses the opposition of trying to draw Georgia into war with Russia on behalf of the West.

Prime Minister Kobakhidze accused opponents of the halt to EU accession of plotting a revolt, along the lines of Ukraine's 2014 Maidan protest, which ousted a pro-Russian president.

"Some people want a repeat of that scenario in Georgia. But there will be no Maidan in Georgia," Kobakhidze said.

Georgian media reported that the country's most senior diplomats in the United States, Italy, the Netherlands and Lithuania had resigned in protest at the halt to EU talks.

Over 200 serving diplomats signed an open letter condemning the government's stance. Hundreds of employees at Georgia's defense, justice and education ministries, and at the central bank, have also signed open letters condemning the decision to freeze EU accession talks.

The Interior Ministry said on Saturday it had detained 107 people in the capital, Tbilisi, during a protest on Friday night which saw demonstrators build barricades along the central Rustaveli Avenue and hurl fireworks at riot police, who used water cannon and teargas to disperse them.

Trump Discussed Border, Trade With Canada's Trudeau

OTTAWA (Dispatches) - U.S. President-elect Donald Trump said he discussed the border, trade and energy in a "very productive" meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau amid fears of a trade war.

Trudeau paid an unannounced visit to Florida on Friday evening and had dinner with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago residence, days after Republican Trump pledged to impose 25% tariffs on Canadian and Mexican imports after he is sworn in as president in January.

That pledge has raised fears of a trade war between the U.S. and two of its biggest trading partners.

Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum warned this week that Trump's tariff plan would have dire consequences for both countries and suggested possible retaliation.

Trump wants to use tariffs as a tool to get Mexico and Canada to help stem the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S., particularly the deadly opioid fentanyl, and also migrants crossing illegally into the U.S.

"We discussed many important topics that will require both countries to work together to address, like the Fentanyl and Drug Crisis that has decimated so many lives as a result of Illegal



Immigration, Fair Trade Deals that do not jeopardize American Workers, and the massive Trade Deficit the U.S. has with Canada," Trump said in a post on Truth Social.

"Trudeau has made a commitment to work with us to end this terrible devastation of U.S. Families," he added.

Trudeau, in a post on social media X on Saturday, said he looked forward to the two working together.

"Thanks for dinner last night, President Trump. I look forward to the work we can do together, again," Trudeau said.

The prime minister's office did not respond to a request for comment about the meeting.

Justin Trudeau, West Palm Beach, Florida, November 30, 2024. REUTERS/Carlos Barria Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab

A Canadian government official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told Reuters that it was a positive, wide-ranging dinner that lasted three hours.

On Friday, Trudeau said at a news conference in Canada he was taking the possible tariffs seriously.

"Donald Trump, when he makes statements like that, he plans on carrying them out," he said.



Arsenal Up to Second With West Ham Trashing

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal thrashed West Ham 5-2 to climb up to second in the Premier League, while Justin Kluivert scored the first ever Premier League hat-trick of penalties in Bournemouth's 4-2 win at Wolves.

The Gunners have struck 13 goals in a week to refind their form and cut the gap to runaway leaders Liverpool, who host struggling defending champions Manchester City in Sunday's blockbuster clash, to six points.

"We are back to our best form. We look fluid and dynamic we are all enjoying football right now," said Bukayo Saka, who shone with a goal and two assists.

"It has been a top week for us. We have built a lot of momentum and we want to go on to the next few games."

Arsenal scored four times before the break in a 6-0 rout at the London Stadium last season and went one better this time as all the goals came in a manic first half, Gabriel Magalhaes' threat from set-pieces is well-known but the Brazilian was inexplicably not picked up to head in Saka's corner on 10 minutes.

Saka then teed up Leandro Trossard to double the lead before he stepped aside for Martin Odegaard to score Arsenal's third from the penalty spot.

Kai Havertz slotted in from Trossard's pass to make 4-0 after just 36 minutes.

Another heavy home defeat increased the pressure on West Ham boss Julen Lopetegui.

The Hammers flickered into life with two goals in two minutes through Aaron Wan-Bissaka and a brilliant Emerson Palmieri free-kick.

But Saka restored the three-goal advantage from the spot after Gabriel was felled from another corner.

Kluivert made history at Molinex to curtail Wolves' mini-revival.

There were three goals inside eight minutes as the Dutchman opened the scoring, Jorgen Strand Larsen

replied for Wolves before Milos Kerkez made it 2-1 for the visitors.

Kluivert made it 3-1 just 10 minutes later and completed his hat-trick 16 minutes from time after Evanilson also set a record by winning a third penalty.

"I was not completely sure I should allow him to take the third one," said Bournemouth boss Andoni Iraola.

"It is difficult, every time you shoot the first one, you give information to the keeper."

Strand Larsen pulled another goal back for Wolves, but Gary O'Neil's men slip back into the relegation zone.

Brentford continued their stunning home form to thrash Leicester 4-1 in front of the Foxes' in-coming manager Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Facundo Buonanotte had put the visitors in front in west London.

But Brentford roared back to make it six wins and one draw from seven home league games this season - the best points return in the Premier League.

Yoane Wissa started the comeback before Schade took centre stage. The German had only scored two Premier League goals since joining the Bees in 2023 but matched that tally before half-time to put the home side in front.

Schade then rounded off the scoring to show Van Nistelrooy the scale of the task that awaits him ahead of his first game in charge at home to West Ham on Tuesday.

"The shining star today was Kevin Schade," said Brentford manager Thomas Frank.

"I celebrated so much his first because I know how hard it's been for him because he's had so many injuries and he's wanting to play in the team."

Verstappen Given Grid Penalty for Qatar F1 Grand Prix



DOHA (Dispatches) - Newly-crowned four-time world champion Max Verstappen has been stripped of pole position at the Qatar Grand Prix for impeding Mercedes driver George Russell in qualifying.

Red Bull's Verstappen was given a one-place grid penalty for blocking Russell with the British driver starting on pole instead of the Dutchman.

Hours after Verstappen claimed his first pole position for five months a one-place penalty was imposed for driving unnecessarily slowly, a manoeuvre that pushed Russell into the gravel.

The Red Bull driver clocked the fastest lap in one minute and 20.520 seconds and Russell was originally second for Mercedes just 0.055 seconds adrift.

But the British driver cried foul immediately.

"Super-dangerous by Verstappen," said the Mercedes driver, whose thoughts prompted the stewards to investigate.

"I ended up going through the gravel and all over the floor it felt like it was scraping," said Russell.

McLaren's Lando Norris remains third while sprint-race winner Oscar Piastri of McLaren was fourth with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc on the third row along with Lewis Hamilton in sixth for the Grand Prix.

Norris admitted his disappointment at missing out on a front row start.

"It's not what we hoped for, but it was the maximum we could do. My lap was pretty good, but not quick enough."

Suns Deal Warriors Their Third Straight Loss

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Devin Booker and Tyus Jones stole the spotlight from a Kevin Durant-Stephen Curry showdown with a combined 46 points and 18 assists and the Phoenix Suns held off the visiting Golden State Warriors 113-105.

Durant shot just 7-for-20 but still managed 21 points and added 10 rebounds for Phoenix, which won for just the second time in its last eight games.

Curry went 8-for-21 overall and 3-for-10 from deep for 23 points for Golden State, which dropped its fourth straight.

The Suns created their winning margin in the first half, running up a 66-49 lead behind 13 points from Grayson Allen, 12 from Booker and 11 from Jones. The Suns went 14 of 21 on 3-pointers in the half.

The Warriors got within 85-78 with 1:04 remaining in the third quarter, but then went scoreless the rest of the period and added just eight points in the first seven minutes of the fourth quarter, falling behind 103-86.

It was still a 15-point game after Durant hit a jumper with 3:35 to play, but Golden State made one last push, using a 13-3 flurry to get within 108-103 on Curry's interior hoop with 1:11 to go.

But Booker capped a game-high, 27-point performance with four straight free throws, making him 8-for-8 for the game, and the Suns



kept the visitors at arm's length throughout the final minute.

Booker and Jones each had nine assists. Jones had 19 points, making seven of his nine shots overall and four of his five 3-point attempts.

Allen chipped in with 17 points and Royce O'Neale 11 for the Suns, who made only four 3-pointers in the second half yet finished 18-for-35.

Andrew Wiggins added 18 points for the Warriors, who made only 14 of their 40 shots from distance. Draymond Green put up 13 points to go with seven assists, while Jonathan Kuminga and Brandin

Podziemski added 12 points apiece and Buddy Hield 11.

Curry and Podziemski each had seven rebounds.

Meanwhile Giannis Antetokounmpo recorded his third triple-double of the season with 42 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists as the Milwaukee Bucks extended their winning streak to six games, beating the visiting Washington Wizards 124-114.

Damian Lillard had 25 points and 10 assists, Brook Lopez scored 18 points, AJ Green added 13 off the bench and Taurean Prince had 11 for Milwaukee, which won for the eighth time in its past nine games.

Antetokounmpo registered his first career 40-point triple-double and went 15-for-24 from the field.

Washington lost its 14th straight game and is two setbacks away from matching its franchise-record losing streak of 16. The Wizards were 9-for-32 (28.1 percent) from 3-point range.

Jordan Poole led Washington with 31 points. Former Bucks point guard Malcolm Brogdon tallied season highs of 29 points and 11 rebounds, and Jonas Valanciunas and Corey Kispert had 16 points apiece.

Bayern's Musiala Scores Late Goal to Snatch 1-1 Draw at Borussia Dortmund



DORTMUND (Dispatches) - Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich scored an 85th-minute equalizer through in-form Jamal Musiala to rescue a 1-1 draw at Borussia Dortmund in the Klassiker on Saturday and go seven points clear at the top.

Dortmund, who had won their previous six home games in the league this season, took a 27th-minute lead thanks to Jamie Gittens's superb solo effort before the visitors suffered another blow six minutes later when top scorer Harry Kane was taken off injured.

Kane, who was set for a scan later on Saturday, is now doubtful for next week's German Cup clash against holders Bayer Leverkusen.

The Bavarians, who had won their last seven matches across all competitions without conceding a goal, improved after the break and carved out a string of chances but lacked some clinical finish before Musiala's equalizer.

"We're annoyed with the first half because we did not play the way we had wanted. We improved in the second half but we would have liked to score earlier," said Bayern's Thomas Mueller.

"I had a chance, (Dortmund keeper) Gregor (Kobel) did well to close the space. Leroy also had an opportunity. Overall the draw is in order."

In a rollercoaster first half, Dortmund had to take off injured defender Waldemar Anton after only 17 minutes.

The hosts, however, struck with their first chance of the game when England youth international Gittens shook off Konrad Laimer, charged into the box and whipped a shot past keeper Manuel Neuer for his fourth league goal.

Bayern, unbeaten in the league, then saw Kane, who has 14 league goals, taken off and replaced by Thomas Mueller.

The veteran player almost scored two minutes after the restart when Musiala found him in the box but his point-blank effort was blocked by keeper Gregor Kobel.

With the visitors now in control, Musiala tried his luck from 20 metres with a curled, low shot before Leroy Sane's poor finish saw his own effort from close range sail wide.

Bayern's Neuer still had to come to the rescue in the 62nd to deny Marcel Sabitzer and keep his team in the game before the unmarked Musiala struck with five minutes remaining, heading in Michael Olise's cross for his sixth league goal.

Saudi Arabia's Dismal Human Rights Record Puts It at Medium Risk to Host 2034 World Cup

PARIS (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia's bid to host the 2034 World Cup was considered "medium risk" for human rights by FIFA in its evaluation report, which said implementing reforms could take "significant time and effort".

The release of the report Saturday comes ahead of the FIFA Congress on December 11, when a vote will be held to select the hosts for the 2030 and 2034 World Cups.

Saudi Arabia is the lone candidate for 2034 while Morocco, Spain and Portugal have formed a joint bid for the 2030 tournament, with Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay all set to host a match as part of the centenary edition.

The Saudi bid "presents a very strong all-round proposition, reflected in the results of the technical evaluation, which assesses the proposed infrastructure (both sporting and general) as well as its commercial potential," FIFA said in its report.

But football's world governing body cautioned, "in terms of human rights, the undertaking involved in implementing the various measures... particularly in certain areas, could involve significant effort and time".

FIFA said that was the basis for the elevated risk rating for a bid



that received an average score of 4.2 out of 5 - higher than the combined bid by the United States, Canada and Mexico for the 2026 World Cup.

"It is important to note that the bid involves significant opportunities for positive human rights impact," added FIFA.

"There is good potential that the tournament could serve as a catalyst for some of the ongoing and future reforms and contribute to positive human rights outcomes for people in Saudi Arabia and the region that go beyond the scope of the tournament itself."

Saudi Arabia has yet to build several proposed stadiums proposed for a tournament that could be held in winter, as was the case in Qatar.

Human rights, a source of deep controversy at the 2022 World Cup in neighbouring Qatar, threatens to become a major talking point once again in the run-up to 2034.

Rights groups highlight mass executions in Saudi Arabia and allegations of torture, as well as restrictions on women under the conservative country's male guardianship system.