

Foreign Tourists Will Be Able to Obtain a "Tourist Card" During Their Visit to Iran to Easily Change Their Currencies to rials, the Iranian Minister of Cultural Heritage, tourism, and Handicrafts Says

IRAN NEWS

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Iran's Economy Expands by 4% in April-September



TEHRAN - The Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) has reported a 4% expansion in the Iranian economy in the first half of the calendar year that started in late March.

SCI figures published on Monday showed that Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) had reached 50.691 trillion rials (over \$72 billion) in the six months to September 21, up from 48.727 trillion rials reported in the same period last year.

The data showed that Iran's GDP without oil also rose 2.6% year on year in April-September to reach 38.374 trillion rials.

SCI uses fixed prices reported in 2021 as a baseline for its calculation of economic indicators.

Its figures showed that Iran's manufacturing and mines sector, which includes oil production activity, had expanded by 5.3% in the six months to late September compared to the same period last year.

They showed that the Iranian agriculture sector's GDP had increased by 2.9% while the services sector had expanded by 2.5% over the same period.

Iran's economic growth has continued in recent years despite a regime of US sanctions that restrict the country's oil exports and its access to financial and banking services.

A steady rise in oil exports to Asian markets, especially the private buyers in China, has contributed to Iran's solid economic growth in recent years.

Latest estimates suggest Iran has been selling more than 1.5 million barrels per day of crude oil.

SCI's figures showed that Iran's oil sector GDP, which covers oil and gas extraction and sale, had expanded by 8.8% in the six months to late September compared to the same period last year.

Minister Says Country Faces Challenges in Attracting Foreign Investment



TEHRAN - Economic and Finance Minister, Abdolnasser Hemmati, acknowledged that the country has faced challenges in attracting foreign investment, stating that in the past two years and eight months, only \$2.1 billion in foreign investment has been secured.

Speaking in a special interview on Sunday night, Hemmati compared Iran's investment performance with countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which experienced significantly higher investment inflows last year.

Hemmati pointed out that Iran's economic growth has not exceeded three to four percent, making it difficult to achieve the targeted eight percent growth in the near future.

He highlighted the country's productivity level, which he described as nearly zero, and noted that foreign capital used in production remains limited. Hemmati emphasized the importance of improving productivity to foster economic growth.

He also outlined plans for aiming at eight percent economic growth, stressing that this year will mark the final year for banks to hold businesses. According to Hemmati, the non-viable financial positions of banks are partly due to their involvement in business ventures. He proposed that next year, these business holdings should be divested.

Hemmati further stated that banks should focus on financing projects through specialized companies, and that the financing of the production chain can be achieved with the support of credit instruments in commodity exchanges.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK



Iran Vows to Do All in Its Power to Counter Terrorists

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian has expressed Iran's resolve to utilize all capacities at its disposal to counter terrorists in Syria in coordination with the country's neighbors.

In a live televised interview on Monday night, Pezeshkian said that his telephone conversations with his Syrian and Russian counterparts, as well as the Qatari emir and the Iraqi prime minister, focused on the issue that "terrorists and conspirators should not be allowed to drag the region into war and bloodshed again."

"We respect the territorial integrity of all countries, which we believe should not be violated under any pretexts," he added.

"We will do our best to establish security and peace, and confront terrorists. We will coordinate our efforts with the neighboring, brotherly, and friendly countries."

The remarks came as Syria is grappling with resurgence of Takfiri terrorism, sponsored by the US and Israel, after the pair failed in the bloody war on the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

Iran was the first country to rush to Syria's aid following the 2011 outbreak of foreign-sponsored violence in the Arab country.

In 2017, Syrian forces, backed by Iran and Russia, scored a monumental victory over the Daesh terrorist group.

Pezeshkian continued: Our government has decided to have the Chamber of Commerce and private sector entrepreneurs accompany officials on such trip and follow up on their needs and the work that we can do for them. "In most of these trips, we are striving to have our manufacturers and industrialists present and to pave the way for these exchanges to take place".

On relations with China, the Iranian president said he had fruitful discussions with his Chinese counterpart that resulted in good agreements and efforts are underway to implement and make them operational.

We have also spoken to Russia and based on communications, programs and treaties we agreed upon, experts are reviewing the fields of oil, gas, roads and electricity in order to implement them, he added.

Pezeshkian further said Russian President Vladimir Putin during a telephone conversation agreed to send two of his deputies to Iran next week to finalize the agreements between the two

countries that can be formally inked during the meeting in Eurasia or in Moscow in January.

He described the recent European sanctions as provocative, saying the Europeans showed their true face and followed the US footsteps by boycotting Iran's shipping and aviation sectors.

Despite all this, we are trying to prove that we are not looking for war but peace, Pezeshkian said, adding that these mischiefs they are doing to disappoint our people but "hostile behavior of the Europeans with sanctions on Iran is thought-provoking".

The president also touched on healthy relations with regional countries including India and Iraq and called Iran's neighbors brothers but warned that the enemies are looking to sow discord and therefore "we must be vigilant not to get into disagreements with our neighbors".

The government had negotiated with India and Iraq and signed a series of agreements, Pezeshkian said, adding that "We are also working on agreements that we can have with other neighboring and friendly countries".

On the north-south corridor, the Iranian president said the Minister of Roads and Urban Development personally inspected to solve any problems to the project which according to him can solve the country's many problems once it becomes fully operational in accordance with treaties and partnership with regional countries.

He also reacted on the crisis in Syria and said the attacks by terrorists there is against the UN Security Council resolution and that Damascus should complain to the Council against the countries that help those terrorists.

Pezeshkian said the crisis needs to be resolved through diplomacy as the leaders and officials of the four countries, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Syria, are set to hold talks and meetings under the Astana peace process.

The president also accused the Zionists of trying to prevent Iran from reaching agreements with the world by creating conflict in the region.

During his interview, Pezeshkian also mentioned about some tragic incidents since taking office, including the Israeli assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, the head of the Palestinian resistance movement in Tehran on the night of the presidential inauguration, as well as the crimes of the occupying Zionist regime in Gaza and Lebanon during this period.

Iran, Russia Pledge Support for Syria in Battle Against Terrorists



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The presidents of Iran and Russia have pledged support for Syria in its battle against terrorism as the Arab country is grappling with a surge in terrorist activities in the north.

In a phone conversation on Monday, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, discussed the unfolding security situation in Syria following the Israeli-engineered terrorist offensive in the country.

They warned that the recent terrorist moves in Syria pose a serious threat to stability and security of the Arab nation and the entire region.

Pezeshkian said a ceasefire agreement between the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah and Israel created a glimmer of hope for peace in the region but the terrorist moves in Syria, supported by the Israeli regime, "once again put the region on alert."

He added that the resurgence of terrorism in Syria would spread insecurity and conflict in the region.

"We believe that the recent incidents are part of a dangerous plan by the US and the Zionist regime to disrupt the region's political geography in favor of the Zionists," the Iranian president said.

He, however, emphasized that such plots would be thwarted through unity and cooperation among the regional countries.

Pezeshkian commended Russia's role in maintaining regional peace and stability and its support for Syria's territorial integrity and expressed Tehran's readiness to improve cooperation with Moscow in this regard.

Minister Calls for Expansion of Economic Cooperation Between ECO Member States



MASHHAD (IRNA) - Iran's foreign minister has called for efforts to further strengthen the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and expand economic cooperation between member states.

Speaking at the 28th Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers (COM) in Mashhad on Tuesday, Abbas Araqchi said the meeting is an important opportunity to exchange views on the expansion of such cooperation and discuss the latest developments in the organization.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been holding the rotating presidency of ECO for the past year and has seriously focused its efforts on advancing the important goals of this large regional organization in order to develop consensus and transcendence among the people of the region and ECO, he noted.

He expressed hope that the foreign officials attending the summit will take note of Khorasan Razavi province's abundant economic, commercial, tourism, agricultural, national and regional potential during their stay in the provincial capital, Mashhad.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Araqchi said the meeting is an opportunity to discuss regional and global developments.

For more than a year, we have been witnessing the unbridled and brutal crimes of the Zionist regime against the people of Gaza and Lebanon in the region and the world, he said.

Iranian, Turkish FMs Discuss Syria Developments, Anti-Terror Fight

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Foreign

ministers of Iran and Turkey have discussed mutual relations as well as the latest developments in the region, particularly the resurgence of terrorism in Syria and the anti-terror fight.

Heading a diplomatic delegation, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi arrived in Ankara early Monday following a short visit to Syria.

Araqchi and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan held talks on Monday and are scheduled to attend a joint press conference.

During the meeting, Araqchi said regional countries have common concern about the resurgence of terrorism and the spread of insecurity in Syria.

He urged regional countries, particularly Iran and Turkey, to boost cooperation and convergence to protect regional stability and security.

The top Iranian diplomat emphasized that Israel, backed by the United States, strives to exploit the ongoing sensitive situation in the region caused by the regime's unprecedented aggression in Gaza and Lebanon and to divert the international community's attention to its crimes.

"The recent moves by terrorist groups in Syria and the spread of instability and insecurity in this country are in line with the Zionist goals," Araqchi pointed out.

Referring to Israel's repeated violations of a ceasefire agreement it struck with Hezbollah, he said all Muslim and regional countries shoulder the responsibility to end the Tel Aviv regime's aggression.

Muslim and regional countries should also help the refugees in Gaza and Lebanon as winter approaches, the Iranian minister added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Araqchi said Tehran and Ankara are firmly determined to improve relations and expressed hope that the 9th meeting of Iran-Turkey high level cooperation council



will be held early in 2025.

The Turkish minister, for his part, expressed his country's resolve to boost cooperation with Iran in various economic, political, cultural and security fields as well as the fight against terrorism.

Fidan also voiced concern over the spread of insecurity and instability in Syria and warned against its adverse consequences for regional countries.

Speaking to reporters upon his arrival in Ankara, the top Iranian diplomat said both sides should address their common concerns about the ongoing regional developments.

He pointed to Iran's constant consultations with Turkey on various issues, expressing hope that the two countries would reach an understanding on regional issues that would promote stability in the region and prevent Syria from becoming a hub for terrorists.

Speaking in a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart, Araqchi said the resurgence of terrorism in Syria poses a grave danger to the country's security, stability and territorial integrity.

He said the ramifications of such a volatile situation will certainly affect everyone, notably Syria's neighbors.

"Takfiri terrorist groups active in Syria are in close contact and coordination with the United States and the Zionist regime."

The Iranian foreign minister said these groups spread insecurity in Syria with the purpose of deviating global attention from the crimes of Israel in Palestine and Lebanon and making up for the regime's defeat in the face of the Resistance.

The top Iranian diplomat placed a premium on safeguarding the achievements of the Astana peace talks, saying Tehran and Ankara have agreed that the next meeting of the process at the foreign ministerial level would be held soon.

During the press conference, the Turkish foreign minister said in order for a ceasefire to last, meaningful pressure must be exerted on Israel.

IRAN NEWS



Turkey Requests Energy Exchange Agreement With Iran

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Mustafa Ranjabi Mashhadi, CEO of Tavanir, discussed the request of members of Parliament during separate meetings focused on eight electoral districts. These sessions, attended by representatives from various regions, led to the approval of several resolutions, including efforts to improve the country's electricity grid and address issues such as rural electrification, the transition to self-healing cables, and the establishment of provincial electricity companies. Another significant decision was the pursuit of a potential electricity exchange agreement between Iran and Turkey. The Turkish company Boika's CEO presented the request, confirming that they had secured the necessary permits from the Turkish government and were ready to begin technical negotiations with Tavanir.

Health Tourism Development Highlighted as an Achievement of ECO Summit in Mashhad



TEHRAN - The Deputy for International Affairs at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences (MUMS) has identified the promotion of healthcare capacities, the development of health tourism, and the growth in the number of international students as key outcomes of the 28th Meeting of Foreign Ministers from Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) member states in Mashhad.

Dr. Shapour Badi'i emphasized that the participation of foreign ministers from ECO member countries has showcased Mashhad's capabilities in various fields, particularly in medical services, academic advancements, and cultural offerings.

He noted that the presence of international officials in Mashhad has elevated the academic and educational quality at MUMS, significantly contributing to its appeal for international students. According to Dr. Badi'i, the number of international students at MUMS has more than doubled this year compared to the previous year, thanks to sustained efforts and initiatives.

"Mashhad, with its spiritual significance due to the holy shrine of Imam Reza and its distinguished medical professionals and high-quality healthcare services, has become a significant destination for health tourism," Dr. Badi'i added. He highlighted that many visitors come to Mashhad seeking both spiritual solace and medical treatment.

This year, MUMS has been ranked first in Iran for its achievements in the health tourism sector, a reflection of its efforts to enhance healthcare services.

Dr. Badi'i stressed that promoting Mashhad's capabilities internationally will lead to positive impacts on the healthcare system and provide effective medical services for health tourists.



Iran's Minuscule Share of 160m Chinese Tourists

TEHRAN - Iran's Tourism Minister, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, has highlighted the country's lack of infrastructure to support the influx of 15 million tourists by the end of its Seventh Development Plan. Despite Iran's vast tourism potential, the country's share in the global tourism market remains minimal.

In a meeting with members of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Amiri emphasized the need for a strategic shift in government policies toward private sector involvement. He stated that the government must step away from direct management roles, focusing instead on facilitation, support, and regulatory oversight.

Amiri underscored the significance of addressing economic imbalances and fostering international relations. "Development cannot progress without global engagement," he noted. He also stressed the importance of cooperation between the government, parliament, and private sector to achieve economic goals.

Tourism, according to Amiri, is not just about industries like steel and oil; it's also about cultural and human development. With three key areas under its domain—cultural heritage, tourism, and handicrafts—each has immense economic potential if leveraged correctly.

Amiri highlighted Iran's position among the top 10 countries in terms of historical heritage. The country boasts 40,000 historical sites out of a global total of one million. However, he lamented that insufficient recognition and registration of these sites prevent Iran from claiming the top global spot. Iran's rich cultural heritage remains its greatest asset in attracting tourists, but the tourism sector is currently underperforming.

Tourism has the potential to catalyze growth in various related sectors, such as airlines, markets, hotels, and restaurants. However, to realize this potential, significant improvements in infrastructure are necessary.

The Seventh Development Plan aims to attract 15 million tourists to Iran. To achieve this, the government must focus on enhancing infrastructure, such as opening 100 new hotels annually and procuring 150 additional airplanes. The

current transportation and hospitality systems are far from adequate to meet these goals.

The plan also envisions generating \$6 billion from medical tourism, requiring the attraction of 2 million medical tourists. This ambitious target underscores the urgent need for investment and streamlined bureaucratic processes.

Iran's global image poses another challenge. Amiri acknowledged that "Iranophobia," promoted by adversaries, has deterred tourists. However, 85% of tourists who visited Iran found it to be a safe and appealing destination. Enhancing this perception is critical to increasing tourist inflows.

Amiri proposed practical steps such as introducing a "tourist card," which would allow visitors to access funds in Iranian currency for seamless transactions. He also highlighted the need to simplify processes at entry points to make Iran more tourist-friendly.

Iran has seen a sharp decline in tourists from neighboring Azerbaijan, dropping from 1.8 million to just one-tenth of that figure. Persian Gulf countries, particularly Iraq, remain a focus area, with 7 million Iranian tourists traveling to Iraq annually, compared to 3 million Iraqi visitors to Iran.

Amiri also pointed out that the Southeast Asian market, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, holds significant potential. Additionally, while China sends 160 million tourists abroad annually, only 160,000 visit Iran. This represents a tiny fraction of the market, especially compared to Turkey, which attracts millions of Chinese tourists. Similarly, despite sending millions of Iranian tourists to Turkey, only about 800 Turkish tourists visit Iran.

Iran's tourism sector is plagued by infrastructure deficiencies, limited global engagement, and negative perceptions. However, with its rich cultural heritage and strategic planning, the country has the potential to transform its tourism landscape. Realizing the ambitious goals set in the Seventh Development Plan will require significant investment, policy reforms, and international collaboration.

Iran Ranks 31st in Global Handicrafts Exports



TEHRAN - Iran has significant potential in health tourism, the art and craft of carpet weaving, and handicraft exports, but these opportunities remain underutilized, according to Samad Hassanzadeh, President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture. Speaking at a business breakfast with the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism, Hassanzadeh emphasized the crucial role of tourism in economic growth, which many countries leverage effectively.

Despite the global recognition of Iranian carpets as a symbol of the nation's cultural heritage, Hassanzadeh highlighted that Iran has not capitalized sufficiently on this sector. He noted that 2.5 million people in Iran earn their livelihood from the carpet industry, which is steeped in historical significance.

Out of 400 globally recognized handicraft disciplines, 300 are registered in Iran, making the country a leader in this field after India and China. However, Hassanzadeh lamented that Iran ranks 31st in handicrafts exports—a position that does not align with its vast capabilities.

Hassanzadeh also addressed health tourism, pointing out Iran's untapped potential. He noted that while countries like Turkey have achieved notable success in this sector through meticulous planning, Iran's efforts have been hampered by negligence and a lack of focus.

Ehad Azimzadeh, head of the Tourism Commission at the Iran Chamber, raised concerns about the country's ability to handle an influx of tourists. Referring to a government target of attracting 15 million tourists under the Seventh Development Plan, he questioned whether the current infrastructure—including hotels, airlines, and transportation services—could meet this demand.

Azimzadeh criticized Iranian banks for monopolizing resources and failing to support businesses. He warned that without immediate investments in infrastructure, Iran would struggle to accommodate even a fraction of the projected tourists.

Shahab Ali-Arab, Vice President of the Tourism Commission, underscored the disparity between Iran and neighboring countries in attracting tourists. He noted a 95% decline in tourist arrivals from Iraq in the spring of 2023 compared to the previous year, according to official statistics.

In response, the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism questioned the accuracy of these statistics and clarified that negotiations with Iraq have resulted in an agreement to attract 5 million Iraqi tourists. The ministry is committed to closely monitoring and verifying tourism data to ensure reliability.

The discussions underscored the urgent need for strategic reforms, infrastructure investments, and accurate data to harness Iran's potential in tourism and handicrafts. With the right policies, Iran could better align its economic outcomes with its vast cultural and industrial resources.

Russians Turn to Iranian Butter Amid Supply Challenges



TEHRAN - Ali Ehsan Zafari, the head of the Dairy Products Union, in an interview addressed the recent shortage of butter in Iran, highlighting key issues surrounding its supply.

Zafari criticized the unrestricted export of butter, stating, "The same individuals who now advocate for widespread domestic supply were previously responsible for creating shortages by allowing excessive exports. They must take responsibility for the resulting scarcity."

He explained that the Iranian government initially allowed butter to be exported without duties. This policy attracted Russia, which, due to European sanctions, had turned to the Iranian market for dairy products. Seizing this opportunity, domestic dairy industries prioritized exports over local demand, exacerbating the shortage.

To address the issue, the government imposed export duties on butter and raised the foreign exchange revenue per kilogram from \$3 to \$6 to curb exports. These measures were intended to stabilize domestic supply.

Zafari emphasized that the increased domestic supply resulted from government pressure rather than voluntary action by dairy producers.

On the rising prices of dairy products, Zafari noted that the cost of raw milk had surged by over 20%, reaching nearly 30%, leading to a 25% increase in the price of dairy products.

Regarding the Veterinary Organization's recent emphasis on banning raw milk sales in traditional dairies, Zafari highlighted health risks, stating, "Raw milk sourced from farms can carry harmful pathogens. If these are not eliminated during processing, diseases such as brucellosis can be transmitted from animals to humans."

He added, "Raw milk often enters the industry with a high microbial load, requiring advanced equipment like bacteriophages to ensure safety. However, such technologies are absent in traditional dairies, posing a risk to public health."

Western Obstruction to the Creation of Iran-Iraq Joint Corridor



TEHRAN - Mojtaba Yousefi, a member of the Civil Commission and representative of Khuzestan Province, spoke about the importance of launching the Shalamchek-Basra railway as soon as possible.

He highlighted that the issue of transit is addressed in Article 54 of the Seventh Development Plan, noting that transit and logistics are key sources of sustainable revenue for countries. In today's world, where energy and fuel are essential for transportation, countries that can maximize their use of these capacities will generate higher revenues. Furthermore, this sector is not easily subject to sanctions.

Yousefi explained that European countries, which lack natural resources and energy, rely on transit corridors, with 50% of their GDP tied to these transit networks. This approach should be reflected in Iran's economy as well. For the first time, the Seventh Development Plan established a National Transit Headquarters, chaired by the president and with the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development acting as its secretariat. This body aims to centralize decision-making, avoid overlap, and streamline actions. Yousefi emphasized that it is the president's responsibility to resolve unfinished projects through this body and that transport councils should be formed to address various transportation issues.

He further elaborated on the benefits of operationalizing transit routes, pointing out that such actions would bring both sustainable security and non-sanctionable, sustainable income. Over the past few years, China has invested in developing the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, a facility with a capacity of over 120 million tons, to ensure access to international waters.

Yousefi continued, "The distance between Chabahar Port and Latakia Port, which leads to Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, is under six days by land and can even be covered in three days.

However, if Pakistan were to circumvent Iran by sea, the same distance would take 12 days to reach Latakia."

He noted that while Gwadar takes just four days to connect to Latakia through Iran, a sea route bypassing Iran would increase transportation costs significantly.

Yousefi emphasized the advantages of the Shalamchek-Basra railway, describing it as a mutually beneficial connection for both Iran and Iraq. However, he pointed out that Western countries are hindering the creation of such regional connections because they recognize that these projects would enhance regional security and create non-sanctionable, effective ties between the countries.

"The Shalamchek-Basra railway project, which began during the previous administration, has reached the implementation stage, with both passenger and freight sections under progress," he confirmed.

Regarding Iraq's focus on the passenger section of the project and whether it would undermine Iran's transit objectives, Yousefi explained that while the project starts with the passenger section, the freight segment will complement it. He emphasized that the freight section must be economically viable for both countries and called for an acceleration of project implementation despite Western obstruction.

Yousefi also addressed the claim that Iraq's stance is a primary reason for the project's slow pace, clarifying that the real obstacle stems from Western countries opposing joint Iran-Iraq projects, such as the Shalamchek-Basra railway. "This is the main reason why regional energy and transportation corridors are not being established," he added. However, he pointed out that the rail corridor would offer significant benefits for both Iran and Iraq.

Carpets and Saffron in Riyadh's Sights



TEHRAN - Farshid Farzanegan, a member of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, responded to reports of Saudi Arabia's interest in strengthening its economic ties with Iran. Farzanegan noted that since the diplomatic agreement reached in March 2023 between the two countries to restore diplomatic relations, significant steps have been taken to enhance economic cooperation. For example, in the months following the agreement, Iran exported about \$14 million worth of steel to Saudi Arabia.

He emphasized that Saudi Arabia is working to strengthen its relationships with both Iran and the United States simultaneously, reflecting Riyadh's strategy to maintain a balanced approach in international relations and benefit from cooperation with both countries.

Farzanegan highlighted that products such as carpets and saffron are key items in Iran's exports to Saudi Arabia, though the trade between the two nations could encompass a wide range of goods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, processed food products, construction materials, steel, and dried fruits. He also pointed out that to balance the trade, it is important to consider imports from Saudi Arabia to Iran.

Russian Drone Attack Leaves Parts of Ukraine's Ternopil Without Power

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - An overnight Russia drone attack has left Ukraine's western city of Ternopil without electricity, a regional military official said on Tuesday, a week after Moscow's strikes cut power to much of the city and its surrounding region.

"Energy workers and rescuers are eliminating the consequences of the attack. Stock up on water, charge your phones," Serhiy Nadal, the head of the regional defence headquarters in Ternopil, said on his Telegram messaging channel.

The full scale of the attack on Ternopil, a major city in Ukraine's west, was not immediately clear. Air raid alerts over the Ternopil region, of which the city of Ternopil is the administrative centre, lasted for about 2-1/2 hours, starting at around 2330 GMT on Monday.

One person was killed and several were wounded in Russia's drone attack on Ternopil earlier on Monday.



Georgian President Seeks West's Support in Standoff With Her Own Gov't



TBILISI (Dispatches) - Georgia's president, locked in a standoff with her own government, appealed to Western countries on Monday to back what she called a "national movement" in support of Georgia's integration with the European Union.

President Salome Zourabichvili was speaking shortly before protesters and police resumed clashes for the fifth straight night since the governing Georgian Dream party said last week that it was suspending talks on joining the EU.

Critics saw that announcement as confirmation of a Russian-influenced shift away from pro-Western policies and back towards Moscow's orbit, something the ruling party denies.

Zourabichvili, who has personally remonstrated with riot police, told Reuters that she wanted European countries to send a "very clear message" that they would not recognise the outcome of an October election in which official results gave Georgian Dream 54% of the vote, and would push for a re-run.

Zourabichvili and the opposition parties have said that the poll was fraudulent, a charge denied by both Georgian Dream and the electoral commission.

Zourabichvili says that Russia, having already invaded Ukraine, is conducting a "hybrid war" against Georgia and other countries such as Moldova and Romania, a NATO and EU member.

As darkness fell on Monday, thousands of demonstrators assembled once again outside parliament and riot police, as on previous nights, fired water cannon to fend off protesters throwing fireworks.

The 72-year-old president, who was born in France to Georgian parents and once served as French ambassador to Georgia, said strong support from the West was "the only political way out of this crisis. There is no other political recipe".

She praised "very courageous" officials who have resigned in protest against the government, including four ambassadors and the head instructor of the interior ministry's training academy.



Israel and Hezbollah Exchange Strikes as Ceasefire Violations Mount

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - At least nine people were killed and three injured from Israeli strikes on two southern Lebanese towns, Taloussa and Haris, as the Israeli military said it struck dozens of Hezbollah targets throughout Lebanon.

Earlier yesterday, Lebanese authorities reported two additional deaths in Israeli strikes on other parts of southern Lebanon, including a state security member killed while on duty, bringing the day's death toll to 11.

The latest Israeli strikes came shortly after Hezbollah accused Israel of violating a ceasefire agreement and fired missiles on an Israeli military position in the disputed Shebaa Farms area in what the Iran-backed group called a "defensive warning strike."

Residents in Beirut also told Reuters they heard drones flying overhead at low altitudes late in the evening.

The exchange of fire put a US-brokered ceasefire between the two in an increasingly fragile position less than a week after it took effect.

The truce prohibits Israel from conducting offensive military operations in Lebanon while requiring Lebanon to prevent armed groups, including Hezbollah, from launching attacks on Israel.

The Israeli military reported no casualties from Hezbollah's two missile launches but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed a "strong" response.

Hezbollah said its rocket fire, the first operation the group had announced since the ceasefire came into effect on Wednesday, was in retaliation for repeated Israeli violations of the truce.

Lebanese speaker of parliament Nabih Berri, a Hezbollah ally who negotiated the truce on behalf of Lebanon, said Beirut had recorded at least 54 ceasefire violations by Israel since Wednesday.

Lebanon's official news agency NNA said Israeli forces fired two artillery shells toward the southern Lebanese town of Beit Lif in the Bint Jbeil district, while heavy machine gun fire targeted Yaroun. No injuries were reported in either incident, NNA said.

Berri urged the committee tasked with monitoring the truce to "urgently" ensure Israel halts its breaches.

"We are engaging through a mechanism with France, Israel, and Lebanon to investigate and address reports of violations," US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, adding that early ceasefire periods are often fragile but had broadly succeeded in reducing violence.

Lebanon and Israel have already traded accusations of breaches, and yesterday Lebanon said the violations had turned deadly.

One person was killed in an Israeli air attack on Marjayoun, about 10 km (6 miles) from Israel's northern border, Lebanon's health ministry said. Lebanon's state security agency said an Israeli drone strike in Nabatieh killed a member of its force, calling the incident a "flagrant violation" of the truce.

The Lebanese army said an Israeli drone struck an army bulldozer near the Syrian border, wounding one soldier.

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to questions about the incidents in Marjayoun and Nabatieh but said it had targeted military vehicles near Hezbollah infrastructure in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and near the Syrian border.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar denied wrongdoing, accusing Hezbollah of moving weapons south of the Litani River in defiance of the agreement.

"Israel is committed to the successful implementation of the ceasefire, but we will not accept a return to the situation as it stood on October 6, 2023," Saar said in a statement.

Public broadcaster Kan reported that US envoy Amos Hochstein, who brokered the truce, warned Israel over alleged violations.

Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for a "powerful blow" against Hezbollah, saying the group had made a "big mistake" by targeting Israeli territory.

Romania to Hold Presidential Run-Off After Top Court Validates First Round



BUCHAREST (Dispatches) - After a ballot recount, a top Romanian court validated the first round of a presidential race in which a far-right outsider emerged as the frontrunner, plunging the country into turmoil amid allegations of electoral violations and Russian meddling.

The Constitutional Court's unanimous decision came after it had asked the Central Election Bureau to recount and verify all 9.4 million ballots cast in the first round of the presidential election on Nov. 24. The election bureau approved the request and proceeded with the recount.

Monday's decision is final.

Calin Georgescu, a little-known far-right populist and independent candidate, narrowly won the first round, beating the incumbent prime minister Marcel Ciolacu. Georgescu will face reformist Elena Lasconi, the leader of the Save Romania Union party, in a runoff on Sunday.

Lasconi beat Ciolacu by just 2,740 votes.

The recount was prompted by a complaint lodged by Cristian Terhes, a presidential candidate who garnered 1% of the ballot. Terhes' media office said the court ordered the recount "due to indications of fraud," alleging that valid votes cast for Ludovic Orban — who had dropped out of the race but remained on the ballot — were reassigned to Lasconi.

He also claimed that Lasconi's party had urged people to vote before some diaspora polls had closed, saying it violated electoral laws against campaign activities on polling day.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President-elect Donald Trump has a message for Hamas as his return to the White House approaches.

"Everybody is talking about the hostages who are being held so violently, inhumanely, and against the will of the entire World, in the Middle East — But it's all talk, and no action!" he wrote on Truth Social on Monday. "Please let this TRUTH serve to represent that if the hostages are not released prior to January 20, 2025, the date that I proudly assume Office as President of the United States, there will be ALL HELL TO PAY in the Middle East, and for those in charge who perpetrated these atrocities against Humanity."

"Those responsible will be hit harder than anybody has been hit in the long and storied History of the United States of America. RELEASE THE HOSTAGES NOW!" Trump concluded.

Trump's remarks came after U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that Hamas is starting to feel pressure and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has agreed that "the time is right" for a cease-fire agreement that returns the remaining captives from Gaza after President Joe Biden's administration spoke to the family of American hostage Edan Alexander.

"I do think that Hamas is feeling the pressure. They're



feeling the pressure because one of their main partners in crime here, Hezbollah, has now cut a cease-fire deal," Sullivan explained on Sunday's "Face the Nation."

"They're feeling the pressure, of course, because their top leader, Sinwar, has been killed. So, they may be looking anew at the possibility of getting a cease-fire and hostage deal," he added. A 13-part ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel was announced last week.

Sullivan further added that the Biden administration is "working actively with all of the key players in the region, including Israel and Turkey and Qatar and Egypt," to bring to fruition a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas — one that will hopefully return the remaining hostages home and also end the war in the region.

Trump's Monday warning also came a day after naming businessman and daughter Tiffany Trump's father-in-law Massad Boulos as his pick for senior adviser on Arab and Middle Eastern affairs.

Also on Sunday, the president-elect likened the Jan. 6 rioters to "hostages" in response to Biden pardoning his son Hunter Biden.

"Does the Pardon given by Joe to Hunter include the J-6 Hostages, who have now been imprisoned for years? Such an abuse and miscarriage of Justice!" Trump wrote in a Truth Social post on Sunday.

U.S. Faces Dire Threat Over Ukraine Deal

LONDON (Dispatches) - The U.S. would face a "dire threat" from China, Iran and North Korea if Ukraine is forced into concessions to end its war with Russia, NATO's secretary-general has warned Donald Trump.

Mark Rutte cautioned against the president-elect's plans for a peace deal, which he said would lead to the West's enemies "high fiving" and plotting their own attacks.

He told the Financial Times there must be a "good deal" for Ukraine when the time comes to negotiate with Russia, and he called for the U.S. to continue military support in the meantime.

Mr Trump has promised to bring a swift end to the war in Ukraine, and his allies have suggested he may lean on Kyiv to offer territory to Russia in exchange for a ceasefire.

However, supporters of Ukraine including Sir Keir Starmer have argued that the West must continue to supply arms.

On Monday night, Sir Keir acknowledged for the first time that the war would end in a negotiated settlement. His speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet came hours after Joe Biden authorised a further package of military aid.

Mr Rutte, who met Mr Trump and his foreign policy team on Nov 23 to discuss a "range of global security issues facing the alliance," said he had warned the president-elect about a sharp end to the war during their discussion.

"We cannot have a situation where we have Kim Jong-un and the Russian leader and



Xi Jinping and Iran high-fiving because we came to a deal which is not good for Ukraine," he told the FT.

"Long-term, that will be a dire security threat not only to Europe but also to the U.S." The alliance chief, who took office in October, added that there were deep military and economic ties between Russia, China, North Korea and Iran with money and weapons changing hands, fuelling the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

"The fact that Iran, North Korea, China and Russia are working so closely together... [means] these various parts of the world where conflict is...are more and more getting connected," he said.

Mr Rutte's intervention suggests Nato and other Western countries may try to convince Mr Trump to continue U.S. support for Ukraine by arguing that it is in America's interests to do so.

Several of Mr Trump's top team have said they believe Ukraine is a European problem, and that the US's focus should be on China and Iran.

Mr Rutte's attempt to connect global issues may prove persuasive, despite opposition to high levels of military spending on Ukraine within the Republican Party.

Mr Trump has already called on NATO members to increase domestic military spending to 3 per cent of GDP, a 50 per cent boost from its current level.



Steelers Outlast Bengals in Slugfest

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Russell Wilson completed 29 of 38 passes for 414 yards and three touchdowns to lead the visiting Pittsburgh Steelers to a 44-38 shootout win over the Cincinnati Bengals. The 414 passing yards were the second most in Wilson's career. Wilson completed passes to 10 different receivers for the Steelers (9-3), who bounced back from a loss 10 days earlier in Cleveland and ensured a non-losing season for the 21st consecutive year. After the Bengals cut their deficit to six on a 3-yard TD catch by Andrei Iosivas with 2:39 remaining in regulation, Pittsburgh recovered an onside kick and quarterback Justin Fields clinched the victory with a third-down run that allowed Pittsburgh to run out the clock. Joe Burrow went 28-of-38 passing for 309 yards and three touchdowns for the Bengals (4-8). He got taken down for a pair of strip-sacks, including one that led to a 21-yard scoop-and-score by Payton Wilson in the fourth quarter. Burrow also threw an interception for Cincinnati, which dropped its third straight game. Eagles 24, Ravens 19: Saquon Barkley ran for 107 yards and a touchdown and Philadelphia defeated host Baltimore for its eighth consecutive victory. Jalen Hurts passed for 118 yards and a touchdown and rushed for 29 yards and a score for the Eagles (10-2), who have not lost since Sept. 29. In a showdown between Philadelphia's No. 1 defense and Baltimore's No. 1 offense, the Eagles held the Ravens (8-5) to their second-fewest points and second-fewest yards (372) this season. Lamar Jackson passed for 237 yards and two TDs but lost for just the second time in 25 career starts against NFC opponents. Justin Tucker's struggles continued, as he missed two field goals and an extra point. Vikings 23, Cardinals 22: Sam Darnold threw a go-ahead touchdown pass to Aaron Jones with 1:13 remaining as Minnesota stormed back to beat Arizona in Minneapolis. Darnold completed 21 of 31 passes for 235 yards and two touchdowns for the Vikings (10-2), who never led until the final 73 seconds. The Vikings trailed 19-6 late in the third quarter before rallying to score 17

of the final 20 points, securing their fifth straight victory. Tyler Murray completed 31 of 45 passes for 260 yards, one touchdown and two interceptions for the Cardinals (6-6). Trey McBride caught 12 passes for 96 yards, Marvin Harrison Jr. had a touchdown reception and James Conner led the team with 68 rushing yards. Colts 25, Patriots 24: Anthony Richardson threw a 3-yard touchdown pass to Alec Pierce before powering his way into the end zone on a two-point conversion attempt with 12 seconds left to lift Indianapolis over New England in Foxborough, Mass. Richardson completed 12 of 24 passes for 109 yards, two TDs and two interceptions. He added 48 yards and a score on the ground, where Jonathan Taylor led the way with 96 yards on 25 carries for the Colts (6-7). The Patriots (3-10) amassed 200 rushing yards, getting 73 from Rhamondre Stevenson, 62 from Antonio Gibson and 59 from quarterback Drake Maye. Maye also had 238 yards, one touchdown and one interception on 24-for-30 passing. Bills 35, 49ers 10: Josh Allen became the first quarterback since 1970 to score a rushing touchdown, pass for a touchdown and have a scoring reception in the same game and Buffalo clinched the AFC East for the fifth consecutive season with a convincing victory over San Francisco at Orchard Park, N.Y. Allen threw two touchdown passes, including one to himself, while joining four other players in the touchdown hat trick category. James Cook rushed for 107 yards and a touchdown as Buffalo (10-2) joined the Kansas City Chiefs as AFC teams to clinch postseason berths. Ray Davis rushed for a touchdown and Mack Hollins caught one for the Bills, who thrived in game-long snowy conditions. Brock Purdy (shoulder) returned from a one-game absence and completed 11 of 18 passes for 94 yards for the 49ers (5-7). Isaac Guerendo rushed for a touchdown for San Francisco, which lost its third straight game. The 49ers lost star running back Christian McCaffrey in the second quarter due to a knee injury. McCaffrey had 53 yards on seven carries and caught two passes for 14 yards before exiting.

Davis Cup Final 8 to Be Staged in Italy Until 2027



LONDON (Dispatches) - The Davis Cup's Final 8 stage will be held in Italy from 2025 to 2027, with next year's edition taking place in Bologna, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) said on Monday. The last three editions of the Davis Cup Finals were held in the southern Spanish city of Malaga. Italy last hosted the final of the tournament in 1998, when the country finished runners-up to Sweden. "We are delighted to partner with the FITP (Italian Tennis Federation) for the Davis Cup Final 8," ITF President David Haggerty said in a statement. "Italy has a rich history in tennis and a proven ability to host world-class sporting events." Italy has won the Davis Cup three times, first lifting the trophy in 1976, before being led to back-to-back titles in 2023 and 2024 by world number one Janik Sinner. "The FITP will build on Italy's heritage in this competition, working closely with the ITF to deliver a spectacular event for the fans, as well as build an even greater future for tennis' great global team asset," FITP President Angelo Binaghi said. Italy will also stage the season-ending ATP Finals until 2030. Meanwhile Diana Shnaider's four WTA titles in a breakthrough season took her to the brink of the top 10 in the world and suggested the Russian might soon become known for a lot more than her trademark polka dot bandanas.

Late Penalty Secures Al-Sadd's Progress to Last 16 of Asian Champions League



HONG KONG (Dispatches) - Adam Ounas scored an injury time penalty to earn Al-Sadd a 2-1 win over Saudi Pro League side Al-Nassr on Monday that takes the Qatari outfit into the knockout rounds of the Asian Champions League Elite. The win means Al-Sadd join Saudi trio Al-Nassr, who were missing Cristiano Ronaldo for the loss in Riyadh, Al-Hilal and Al-Ahli in booking their spots in the last 16 of the revamped continental championship. Al-Ahli needed a pair of Ivan Toney penalties to salvage a 2-2 draw with Esteghlal as the Jeddah-based club's perfect record was ended at home while Persepolis defeated Al-Shorta 2-1 and Al-Wasl drew 1-1 with Al-Rayyan. Al-Ahli's draw is the first time the Jeddah-based club have dropped points in the competition after five consecutive wins had guaranteed their place in the last 16 of the competition. Mathias Jaissle's side have 16 points from six games and continue to lead the standings by three points from Al-Hilal, who face Qatar's Al-Gharafa. The top eight finishers in the western and eastern league tables progress to the round of 16, which will be played in March.

Half of those spots on the western side of the draw are now filled with Al-Sadd's late win taking Felix Sanchez's side through to the knockout rounds. Afif, the reigning Asian Player of the Year, gave Al-Sadd the lead after charging from the halfway line to calmly slot past goalkeeper Bento in the 53rd minute. Al-Sadd's Romain Saiss turned Wesley's wicked cross from the left past into his own net in the 80th minute but when Afif was brought down in the area in injury time Ounas stepped up to hit the winner. Al-Ahli, meanwhile, were twice forced to fight back after going behind, trailing for the first time when Rafael Silva put Iran's Esteghlal ahead three minutes before the interval with a volley past Edouardo Mendy. Toney levelled from the penalty spot eight minutes into stoppage time after a foul by Didier Ndong on Fahad Al-Rashidi but Esteghlal went back in front six minutes into the second half when Mohammad Hossein Eslami's strike bounced over Mendy. Eslami's sending off with nine minutes left increased the pressure on the visitors and, with four minutes left, a second Toney penalty salvaged a point for the hosts. In Doha, Oston Urunov and a 103rd minute penalty from Giorgi Gvetsiani secured Persepolis' first victory in the competition against Al-Shorta after Mohammad Ali had given the Iraqis a 19th minute lead with a well-judged lob. Meanwhile, Caio Canedo's 77th minute opener for Al-Wasl of the United Arab Emirates was cancelled out by a Salem Al-Azizi own goal eight minutes later as Qatar's Al-Rayyan claimed a point in the clubs' meeting in Dubai

Brown, Pritchard Lead Celtics Past Heat 108-89

BOSTON (Dispatches) - Jaylen Brown scored 29 points, Jayson Tatum had 18 points and 11 rebounds and Payton Pritchard scored 25 off the bench as the Boston Celtics beat the Miami Heat 108-89. Derrick White added 19 points as the defending NBA champions won for the eighth time in nine games. Jaime Jaquez Jr. had 19 points and 10 rebounds and Tyler Herro scored 19 for Miami. Herro was 2 for 10 from 3-point range, and the Heat shot 23% from beyond the arc and 36% from the field. Both teams were without key players for the second night of a back-to-back after losing on Sunday. Miami played without Jimmy Butler, who has missed five of the first 19 games with a knee injury. The Celtics were without Jrue Holiday, Al Horford and Kristaps Porzingis. Miami scored the first seven points and then went cold while the Celtics ran off 17 of the next 19 points to take the lead. Boston made it a double-digit lead early in the second quarter and went up by 20 in the third. Meanwhile Josh Giddey had 20 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists, helping the Chicago Bulls beat the Brooklyn Nets 128-



102. It was Giddey's first triple-double of the season and No. 12 for his career. Nikola Vucevic had 21 points and 10 rebounds for Chicago, which had lost three of four. Matas Buzelis scored 20 points on 7-for-10 shooting, and Zach LaVine finished with 18. Brooklyn lost its third consecutive game — all in the last four days. Dariq Whitehead scored 18 points for the Nets, and Dennis

Schroder had 16 points and 10 assists. Brooklyn played without forward Cam Johnson because of a sprained left ankle — part of a long list of injuries for the Nets. He scored 26 points in Sunday's 100-92 loss to Orlando. Chicago guard Coby White also was sidelined by a sprained left ankle. The Bulls started to pull away in the third quarter, outscoring the Nets 36-22 in the period. Buzelis' basket off a pass from Giddey made it 92-72 going into the fourth. Meanwhile Luka Doncic returned from a wrist injury and had 36 points in the Dallas Mavericks' 137-131 victory over the Portland Trail Blazers. Doncic, who missed five games, also had 13 assists in the Mavericks' fourth straight win. The Mavs were missing Kyrie Irving, who had 30 points in a 106-94 win Saturday over the Utah Jazz, because of a sore shoulder. The Mavs were also without Klay Thompson (left foot), Dereck Lively II (right knee) and Naji Marshall (illness). Anfernee Simons had 27 points, including 24 in the third quarter, for the Blazers.

FA Cup holders Manchester United Visit Arsenal in FA Cup

LONDON (Dispatches) - The FA Cup holders Manchester United enter the fray at next month's third-round stage with a visit to the record 14-time winners Arsenal, in a repeat of the 2005 final. This stage of the competition sees the arrival of the 44 clubs from the Premier League and Championship, joining the 20 lower-league and non-league sides who won in round two. Southampton v Swansea; Arsenal v Manchester United; Exeter v Oxford United; Leyton Orient v Derby; Reading v Burnley; Aston Villa v West Ham; Norwich v Brighton; Manchester City v Salford City; Millwall v Dagenham & Redbridge; Liverpool v Accrington; Bristol City v Wolves; Preston v Charlton; Chelsea v Morecambe; Middlesbrough v Blackburn; Bournemouth v West Brom; Mansfield v Wigan; Tamworth v Tottenham; Hull v Doncaster; Sunderland v Stoke; Leicester v QPR; Brentford v Plymouth; Coventry v Sheffield Wednesday; Newcastle v Bromley; Everton v Peterborough; Wycombe v Portsmouth; Birmingham v Lincoln; Leeds v Harrogate; Nottingham Forest v Luton; Sheffield United v Cardiff; Ipswich v Bristol Rovers; Fulham v Watford; Crystal Palace v Stockport; Ties will be played over the weekend of Saturday 11 January 2025. The draw was conducted at Old Trafford by former United strikers Mark Hughes and Dion Dublin and that formidable fixture drew groans from those present, the first of only two all-Premier League ties along with Aston Villa v West Ham. United's Wembley victory



in May was the 13th time they had lifted the trophy. Erik ten Hag, the winning manager that day, has since been replaced by Ruben Amorim. Liverpool, eight-time winners and the Premier League leaders, will host Accrington, evoking memories of a 1980s Milk Marketing Board advert where a young Reds fan said: "If I don't drink lots of milk, I'll only be good enough to play for Accrington Stanley." "Accrington Stanley? Who are they?" his friend asked. "Exactly," came the response. Pep Guardiola's out-of-form Manchester City, who lost last year's final, will take part in a local affair against Salford City, who feature a host of former United luminaries among their directors. Newcastle United will host Bromley who like fellow League Two side Salford, are playing in the third round for the first time. Highland League side Fraserburgh will travel to Ibrox to face Rangers in the Scottish Cup fourth round. The draw for the last 32 also sees Dundee host local rivals Dundee United, while holders Celtic entertain Kilmarnock. Non-league Clydebank visit Hibernian, Musselburgh go to Hamilton and Broxburn Athletic host Ayr. Hearts and Aberdeen face tricky away trips, with the Dons facing League Two Elgin City and Hearts going to former league side Brechin. Guardian sport