

The Iranian Space Agency (ISA) Said on Sunday, That Iran Has Successfully Tested the Spin Subsystem of the Saman-1 Space Tug That Was Put Into Orbit Two Days Ago

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani Has Warned That the Ongoing Fighting in Syria Is a Threat to the Entire West Asia Region

2 DOMESTIC

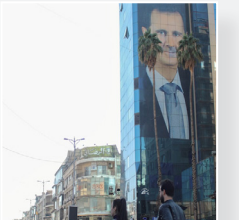


Post-Export Monitoring: A Solution for Boosting Exports and Overcoming Trade Barriers

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Syrian Army Command Tells Officers That Assad's Rule Has Ended



> SEE PAGE 3

Iran Pursuing Its Civilian Nuclear Program Under IAEA Supervision



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry has said that the country's nuclear activities are "transparent" and remain under close supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reiterating the peaceful nature of the nuclear program.

Esmail Baghaei made the remarks on Saturday in response to IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi's recent claims that Iran is rapidly intensifying its uranium enrichment activities, reaching up to 60% purity.

The Iranian diplomat stated that Grossi's remarks on the sidelines of the Manama Dialogue conference in Bahrain are in reference to the "aggressive and unconstructive" approach adopted by the US, Britain, France, and Germany at the IAEA Board of Governors.

During the meeting, Baghaei said, these nations advocated for a resolution targeting Iran.

Baghaei also pointed to Grossi's recent visit to Iran in mid-November, and the agreements signed between the Islamic Republic and the UN nuclear agency to strengthen technical cooperation.

"During his recent visit to Iran, Grossi proposed a series of initiatives, however, the US and the three European nations undermined his efforts by adopting a strategy of pressure and leveraging the IAEA's Board of Governors," the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

Baghaei reaffirmed Iran's commitment to transparency and adherence to international norms in its pursuit of a peaceful nuclear program.

Iran's nuclear activities are conducted under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement, under the supervision of the IAEA, Baghaei said.

"The IAEA has been notified about the Islamic Republic's recent nuclear activities and they will remain under its constant supervision," he stated.

IAEA's Board of Governors on November 21 voted 19 to 3, with 12 abstentions, for a resolution, brought by Britain, France, and Germany (E3), that alleged Tehran had poor cooperation with the agency and requested a "comprehensive" report on its nuclear activities "at the latest" by spring 2025.

On November 27, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) said the country had started injecting uranium gas into its advanced centrifuges following a recent anti-Tehran resolution by the UN nuclear agency's Board of Governors.

148 Domestic and International Companies to Attend in Telecom Exhibition in Tehran



TEHRAN - The 25th Telecom Exhibition is set to launch with the participation of 148 domestic and international companies and a delegation of 30 representatives from regional countries, under the theme "Sustainable Telecommunications in the Era of Artificial Intelligence."

In a press conference held on Sunday, Kobra Razaghzadeh, Acting Deputy of Iran International Exhibitions Company, shared details about the event, which will take place from December 24 to December 27. She highlighted that the exhibition will bring together key players from the public and private sectors, aiming for maximum collaboration. According to Razaghzadeh, the exhibition is part of the organization's efforts to promote strategic development in the telecom industry.

Razaghzadeh emphasized the significance of the event, saying it will host prominent companies active in the digital economy and technology export sectors. Additionally, academic institutions and scientific associations have been invited to participate, showcasing their contributions to the field. Notably, a delegation of 30 representatives from regional countries, including Iraq, Russia, Armenia, and Turkey, will attend, aiming to foster cross-border collaboration and trade.



TEHRAN - Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad opened the 26th Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) Ministerial Meeting in Tehran, emphasizing the importance of cooperation in the global energy sector, adding that the country's annual natural gas production stands at 275 billion cubic meters.

In his remarks, Paknejad welcomed dignitaries, ministers, and representatives from GECF member countries, observer nations, and guest countries. He called the GECF Ministerial Meeting one of the most significant events in the global gas industry, providing an opportunity for members and experts to exchange ideas and strengthen cooperation.

Paknejad also welcomed newly appointed ministers from countries including Bolivia, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Russia, Venezuela, Mauritania, Peru, and Senegal. He expressed gratitude to GECF Secretary-General Mohamed Hamel and his team for their efforts in organizing the meeting.

The Minister addressed the geopolitical tensions in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, warning that such conflicts threaten global energy security. "These tensions undermine the stability of the region and pose significant risks to global energy supply chains," Paknejad said. He called for international coordination and vigilance to address these challenges effectively.

Paknejad highlighted the need for balanced energy policies and warned against the rushed transition from fossil fuels to non-fossil alternatives. He emphasized that oil and gas will still meet at least half of the world's energy needs by 2050. "Attempts to eliminate or replace fossil fuels are unrealistic and pose a threat to global energy security," he stated.

The minister also underscored the growing role of natural gas in meeting global energy demands, with the GECF forecasting that it will account for 26% of the global energy mix by 2050. However, he cautioned that achieving this goal requires substantial investment in the natural gas sector, particularly in the face of current energy policies and ongoing global challenges.

Paknejad called for the liberalization of economic transactions and the elimination of unilateral sanctions, which he said distort international trade and harm energy security. He also highlighted

the importance of increasing investments in natural gas infrastructure to ensure long-term global energy stability.

Iran, one of the world's leading natural gas producers, has made significant progress in expanding its gas production capacity despite facing international sanctions. Paknejad noted that Iran's natural gas production has reached 275 billion cubic meters per year, with gas now constituting over 70% of the country's energy mix.

He reaffirmed Iran's commitment to developing sustainable, environmentally friendly methods for natural gas extraction and utilization. "We are determined to lead in advancing technologies that enhance the efficiency of gas extraction while minimizing environmental impact," Paknejad said.

As one of the founding members of the GECF, Iran plays a key role in shaping the Forum's objectives. Paknejad concluded by reiterating the importance of continued dialogue and cooperation among GECF member states to address the challenges facing the global energy market. "The GECF has the will and readiness to play a more effective role in the global gas and energy markets," he said.

Meanwhile addressing the event, the Secretary General of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) Mohamed Hamel said that there has been a 70% increase in the global demand for natural gas in the past two decades.

The GECF is after safeguarding a bright future for natural gas, Hamel said during his speech at the opening ceremony of the 26th Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Tehran on Sunday.

Natural gas consumption reached record levels in 2023 and is expected to increase by 34% by 2050, Iranian Oil Ministry's news service Shana quoted him as saying at the Forum.

Hamel also appreciated the growing cooperation and coordination between GECF member countries.

GECF chief also referred to the establishment of the Forum in Tehran in 2001, saying the initiative paved the ground for increased cooperation among natural gas-producing countries.

FM, Hamas Political Council Head Discuss Regional Issues, Gaza Ceasefire

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and Mohammad Ismail Darwish, head of the Political Council of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas have discussed the latest developments in the region, particularly the establishment of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

The meeting between Araqchi and Darwish as well as a number of other members of the council took place in Qatar on Saturday on the sidelines of a tripartite meeting among the foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey and Russia - the guarantor states of the Astana peace process.

"The principled stance of the Islamic Republic of Iran in supporting the people and resistance of Palestine and Lebanon against the occupation and aggression of the Zionist regime will continue with strength," Araqchi said.

Israel launched the war on Gaza on October 7, 2023, after Hamas waged the surprise Operation al-Aqsa Flood against the occupying entity in response to the Israeli regime's decades-long campaign of oppression and devastation against Palestinians.

The regime's bloody onslaught on Gaza has so far killed at least 44,664 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and injured more than 105,976 others. Thousands more are also missing and presumed dead under rubble.



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

Araqchi pointed to the ongoing situation in Syria following the resurgence of militant groups and said, "The main goal of the Zionist regime is to divert the attention of the region and the world from the focal point of the crisis, which is the genocide in Gaza, [Israel's] continued aggression against Lebanon and its repeated violations of the ceasefire."

The top Iranian diplomat warned against the "serious dangers" of the developments in Syria and said in case of the continuation of the ongoing situation, the Arab country

would turn into a safe haven for militant groups.

"No country in the region will remain safe from the ramifications of chaos and insecurity in Syria," he emphasized.

Darwish said Hamas and other resistance movements are determined to continue the battle against the Israeli occupation until the rights of the Palestinian people are fully restored.

He hailed Iran's full support for the Palestinian people and resistance.

He said Hamas supports Syria's territorial integrity and national sovereignty and stresses the importance of maintaining the Arab country's position in the resistance front in the face of the Zionist-American plots.

Syria Gov't, Militant Groups Must Start Political Dialogue



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi urges "political dialogue" between the Syrian government and militant groups.

Araqchi made the remarks after a meeting with foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey in the Qatari capital of Doha on Saturday. The top diplomats of the three guarantor states of the Astana peace process discussed the latest developments in Syria following the resurgence of militancy in the Arab country.

He said the "most important" issue agreed by the parties was that "political dialogue between the Syrian government and the legitimate opposition groups" should begin.

He added that the three foreign ministers held a "very good" meeting, which was also attended by United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen.

There was a consensus among all the participants that hostilities in Syria must end immediately and the country's territorial integrity and national sovereignty must be respected based on the UN resolution, the top Iranian diplomat emphasized.

He noted that consultations with the Syrian government and other countries would be continued.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after the summit that he and the foreign ministers of Turkey and Iran had agreed that there had to be an immediate end to "hostilities" in Syria.

Lavrov said Moscow wanted to see dialogue between the Syrian government and opposition in Syria.

The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) armed group launched a large-scale attack in Aleppo and Idlib provinces in the northwest of Syria on November 27, seizing several areas. Since then, the Syrian government forces have been engaged in fierce clashes to regain ground.

The Russian foreign minister said the HTS were "terrorists" regardless of whether they said they had changed their views.

HTS Militants Take Damascus as President Assad's Gov't Falls



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - The Syrian government fell early Sunday in a stunning end to President Bashar al-Assad's 24-year rule over the Arab country after the militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) stormed and captured the capital Damascus.

In a statement on Sunday morning, the HTS militants declared that they had captured the capital, confirming reports of the fall of the Assad government.

Earlier in the day, Reuters quoted an unnamed officer as saying that the Syrian army command notified officers that the Assad government had fallen.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi al-Jalali expressed the government's readiness to "extend its hand" to the militants and hand over its functions to a transitional government.

"I am in my house and I have not left, and this is because of my belonging to this country," he said in a video statement. He also noted that he would go to his office to continue work in the morning, calling on Syrian citizens not to deface public property.

Foreign-backed militants, led by the HTS, waged a surprise two-pronged attack on Syria's Aleppo and the countryside around Idlib on November 27.

Soon afterward, they captured several Syrian cities, including Hama, Homs, Dara'a, Suwayda, and Damascus.

HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani called on militants to leave state institutions unharmed.

"To all military forces in the city of Damascus, it is strictly forbidden to approach public institutions, which will remain under the supervision of the former Prime Minister until they are officially handed over, and it is also forbidden to fire bullets into the air," he said in a statement released on Telegram.

IRAN NEWS



Iran Air Flights Between Mashhad and Saudi Arabia's Dammam Doubled

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's national airline, Iran Air, says it is doubling the number of flights between Iran's Mashhad and Saudi Arabia's Dammam.

The airline said on Saturday that flights between Mashhad and Dammam would increase to four per week to boost economic, political, and tourism interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It comes just a week after flights between the two cities were resumed after a nine-year hiatus. According to the new schedule, flights on the Mashhad-Dammam route will be operated every Tuesday and Thursday. Dammam, the capital of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, is home to a large community of Shia Muslims.

No Guarantee for Stranded Iranian Truck Drivers in Afghanistan



TEHRAN - In late September, over 100 Iranian trucks carrying Iraqi diesel were stranded in Afghanistan's Islam Qala Customs area. Afghanistan rejected the Iraqi fuel, claiming it did not meet their standards. Consequently, Iranian drivers transporting the transit cargo from Iraq to Afghanistan through Iran found themselves stuck.

Initially, the drivers faced a dire situation with no way forward or backward, as Afghan authorities refused to allow border exits. While the conditions were unsafe and challenging, recent developments have seen around 70 of these drivers return to Iran, though approximately 30 remain stuck at the Islam Qala Customs.

Faroud Asgari, head of Iran's Customs Administration, updated ILNA on the situation, stating, "Iranian customs has issued a notice allowing drivers who wish to return to Iranian customs to do so."

He clarified that the cargo in question is Iraqi fuel intended for Afghanistan. Iranian Customs has facilitated two options for drivers: either offloading the cargo in Afghanistan until its fate is decided or returning the shipment to its point of origin in Iraq via Iran. Asgari emphasized that Iranian Customs is fully cooperating with the drivers in either case.

Regarding the stranded cargo, Asgari stated, "We cannot guarantee the safety or fate of the cargo in Afghanistan, as it belongs to a foreign seller and buyer. Iranian Customs does not have the authority to decide on it."

To ensure the safety of the drivers, Iranian Customs has made arrangements for them to stay in secure areas at Iran's customs facilities until the cargo's status is resolved. He noted that the responsibility for the cargo's fate lies with the Afghan government, which must resolve the issue so that Afghan buyers can proceed with their purchase.

"If the cargo belonged to Iran, we would have resolved the issue through diplomatic channels and border meetings. However, this matter requires negotiations between the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan," Asgari added.

The Iranian government's sole measure to support the drivers is offering them the option to return to Iranian customs, a solution already communicated to them.



TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade has stated that shifting from pre-export to post-export monitoring could resolve many of the challenges related to exports and imports.

Speaking at a ceremony honoring exemplary exporters in Isfahan province on Saturday evening, Mohammad Ali Dehghani Dehnavi emphasized the need to transition from pre-export to post-export monitoring. He explained that a major issue in recent years has been the method of oversight and interference in economic processes, which, under the guise of monitoring, has caused disruptions in export and import activities. He believes that changing this approach would eliminate many of these obstacles.

Referring to the issue of currency return obligations for exporters, Dehghani Dehnavi considered this requirement unnecessary, saying that there is no need to demand exporters to commit to returning their foreign exchange to the national economy. He argued that exporters themselves convert the foreign currency into rials to continue their economic activities and secure export shipments, reinvesting it into production and export cycles.

He added that policies like the foreign currency return obligation stem from a pre-export oversight mindset, which ultimately leads to overregulation and obstacles. By shifting to post-export monitoring, these issues can be solved within the natural flow of processes, rather than causing disruptions.

Dehghani Dehnavi pointed out the significant cost of trying to recover just a few million dollars in foreign currency, which sometimes results in sacrificing hundreds of millions of dollars in export capacity. He advocated for allowing exporters to perform their work without unnecessary interference, intervening only when foreign currency is not returned, and dealing with it in accordance with regulations.

The Deputy Minister of Industry also discussed the plans of the Trade Promotion Organization to change this approach, noting that it is a challenging task since many existing regulations are rooted in parliamentary laws, and related bylaws and circulars have been developed based on these laws.

However, he emphasized the ministry's determination to ease trade processes by eliminating unnecessary regulations and promoting simplicity in business operations.

Dehghani Dehnavi highlighted the innovative actions of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, such as organizing training courses for exporter development. He praised these initiatives as valuable and a model for other provinces to follow.

He remarked that Isfahan has consistently led in economic and trade affairs, and this proactive stance could be the source of significant changes in export activities. He expressed confidence that the desired export growth would emerge from these innovations.

The Deputy Minister also mentioned plans to establish export management companies and announced that training courses related to this initiative would lead to the formation of such companies, emphasizing the importance of pursuing this goal with seriousness.

He also noted the creation of specialized working groups in Isfahan, consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Industry, the Chamber of Commerce, and trade experts, to examine and solve issues related to export and import.

Dehghani Dehnavi added that many of these issues could be resolved within these working groups, and when necessary, powers would be delegated to the provincial Ministry of Industry. Unresolved matters would be examined in Tehran.

He reiterated the importance of deregulation and decentralization in export matters, stating that delegating authority is the key to solving many of the challenges in trade and exports. He concluded that these efforts, combined with collective thought and collaboration across all sectors, could lead to a significant export boost for Isfahan, turning the province into a model for the entire country.

At the end of the ceremony, exemplary exporters of Isfahan province for the year 2023 were honored.

\$500m Export Target to Syria Falls Through Amid Uncertainty



TEHRAN - Abdolmir Rabihi, Director General of the West Asia Office at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization, addressed the impact of recent unrest in Syria on Iran-Syria trade. Speaking to ILNA, Rabihi stated that the significant developments in Syria over the past weeks have disrupted expectations. In the first seven months of the Iranian year 1402, Iran's exports to Syria were valued at \$90 million, a figure that dropped to \$78 million in the same period for 1403. Consequently, the goal of \$500 million in exports to Syria this year is now unattainable, leaving the future of trade with Syria shrouded in uncertainty.

Rabihi highlighted Iran's established trade presence in Syria, including two trade centers—one managed by the private sector and the other by the Iran-Syria Joint Chamber of Commerce. Iranian engineering companies have also implemented various private and public sector projects in Syria. Since 2010, a free trade agreement between the two countries has been in effect. Although initially exempting 88 product categories, a bilateral agreement during the High Joint Commission meeting in December 2022 in Tehran extended the tariff exemption to all products. This was aimed at boosting trade volume and achieving the previously set targets.

Addressing Syria's annual \$5 billion import market and Iran's limited \$90 million share, Rabihi pointed to several challenges. These include financial and monetary transaction issues, Syria's war-stricken economy, and its restrictions on foreign currency allocations for imports. Furthermore, before this year's opening of Iraq's transit routes, Iranian traders faced expensive and time-consuming alternatives via Turkey's Mersin port or direct shipping from Bandar Abbas to Syria's Latakia port. The new transit route through Iraq has slightly eased logistical burdens, allowing Syrian traders to transport Iranian goods directly from the Mehran border crossing and other points.

Despite these hurdles, Rabihi noted that trade volume had been growing prior to the unrest. Efforts such as hosting trade exhibitions, sending and receiving trade delegations, and forming joint commissions were all part of a broader strategy to foster trade growth between the two nations.

Iranian Handwoven Carpets: A Global Leader in Handicrafts



TEHRAN - The Secretary of the Tehran Handwoven Carpet Sellers' Union stated that while competition is inevitable and can be both good and bad, Iranian handwoven carpets have always led the way in the global handicraft industry.

Jafar Erfanian-Khah addressed why Iranian carpets, despite their renowned quality and global status, hold a limited share in the international market. He also discussed strategies to enhance this presence. "Iranian carpets have always been the hallmark of global handicrafts and are recognized as the queen of handicrafts worldwide," he said.

Regarding the limited international presence of Iranian carpets, he explained: "Before any product enters a country, its culture must first pave the way. We need to focus on promoting Iranian culture and creating relevant content in other countries to leave a lasting impact and achieve good sales."

When asked why Iranian handicrafts, including carpets, seem to have lost their practical appeal among Iranian families, Erfanian-Khah clarified: "This is not entirely true. It depends on individual tastes. Preferences have changed, and with increased variety, some people still prefer handwoven carpets, while others opt for machine-made alternatives."

He emphasized that handwoven carpets are unique in their health benefits, being the only type of carpet universally endorsed by medical experts.

As the Secretary of the Tehran Handwoven Carpet Sellers' Union, he also outlined his expectations from the government. "More effort is needed in advertising. Otherwise, the carpet industry requires no external help since its strength lies in the unparalleled skills of its artists," he concluded.

Leveraging Women Entrepreneurs for Economic Development



TEHRAN - The President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (CCIMA), Samad Hasanzadeh, emphasized the invaluable contributions of women entrepreneurs in a speech during the "Women and Sustainable Development" conference. Organized by the Women Entrepreneurs Association and attended by Shina Ansari, head of the Environmental Protection Organization, the event highlighted the strategic role of women in driving economic and societal progress.

Hasanzadeh praised Iranian women as symbols of spiritual, Islamic, Iranian, and global values, describing them as trailblazers on the peaks of achievement. He stressed that the chamber is committed to utilizing the expertise of women entrepreneurs to advance the nation's economic agenda.

Citing Islamic figures such as Hazrat Fatimah (S.A.) and Khadijah (S.A.), Hasanzadeh noted that women have historically excelled in human, scientific, social, and economic fields. He lauded the dual roles women play in family and society, emphasizing that Islamic culture values their contributions to family management and child upbringing while also encouraging active participation in economic

activities.

He urged the government to prioritize the sustainability of women-led businesses, noting their significant achievements in the economic sector. "The authorities, including the President, should focus on preserving and expanding these contributions," he said. He also called for the Environmental Protection Organization to take meaningful steps in supporting women entrepreneurs.

Hasanzadeh highlighted the establishment of the Federation of Muslim Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia in 2024 as an example of collaborative opportunities. He encouraged Iranian women entrepreneurs to leverage this platform to enhance their influence and achieve greater success.

"Women have consistently made significant economic contributions, even in challenging circumstances such as energy imbalances and liquidity issues," he said, adding that women can champion energy conservation and efficient resource use. Hasanzadeh stressed the importance of optimizing household consumption and incorporating energy-saving education for children.

IME Posts Weekly Trade of 2.6m Tons



TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 2,633,262 tons of commodities with a total trading value of nearly \$624m on its physical market.

According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,235,887 tons of commodities worth more than \$378m.

On this floor the IME sold 1,327,502 tons of cement, 465,000 tons of iron ore, 336,445 tons of steel, 82,000 tons of sponge iron, 11,095 tons of aluminum, 9,505 tons of copper, 2,050 tons of coke, 2,040 tons of zinc, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate and 50 tons of lead.

In addition to that, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 384,252 tons of commodities worth almost \$208m.

Commodities traded on this floor included 113,335 tons of bitumen, 104,219 tons of polymeric products, 57,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 40,715 tons of chemicals, 39,500 tons of lube cut, 23,200 tons of sulfur, 4,783 tons of oil, 760 tons of waterproofing materials, 520 tons of petroleum products and 260 tons of feedstocks.

The IME also traded within the same week 9,122 tons of goods on its side market.

U.S. readies \$988m Aid Package to Ukraine

SIMI VALLEY (Dispatches) - The United States unveiled a \$988 million aid package of new arms and equipment to Ukraine for its ongoing fight against Russia's invasion on Saturday. The package nearly halves the available \$2.21 billion remaining in Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative as the Biden administration works to commit to buying weapons from industry, rather than pulling from U.S. weapons stocks. The USAI funds will be put toward buying ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems made by Lockheed Martin as well as drones and spare parts to maintain artillery equipment, according to the Pentagon.



Romanian Police Raid Houses Linked to Vote Irregularities Probe



BUCHAREST (Dispatches) - Romanian police raided houses on Saturday linked to a probe into alleged irregularities in the first-round presidential election win of far-right outsider Calin Georgescu, a day after the top court cancelled the imminent run-off. The annulment comes after a spate of intelligence documents declassified this week by the presidency detailed allegations against Georgescu and Russia, including "massive" social media promotion and cyberattacks. The court's move sent shockwaves across the EU and NATO member state bordering Ukraine and opened the way for a new electoral process to start from scratch while a new government is due to set a date for a fresh vote. Three houses in Brasov city in central Romania were being searched on Saturday as part of the investigation "in connection with crimes of voter corruption, money laundering, computer forgery," said a statement from the prosecutor's office. It said the swoop targeted a person involved in the "illegal financing of the electoral campaign of a candidate for the presidency of Romania, through the use of sums of money," without naming Georgescu. The prosecutor's office would not name the person at the heart of the operation either. The investigations also concern the violation of the law on the prohibition of organisations and symbols of a fascist, racist or xenophobic nature, the statement added. Little known outsider Georgescu, who unexpectedly topped the first round of voting on November 24, was favourite to win the second round on Sunday against centrist pro-EU contender Elena Lasconi, several polls revealed. But the documents drawn up for a top security council meeting after the first round of voting "revealed an aggressive promotional campaign, in violation of electoral legislation, and an exploitation of algorithms to increase the popularity of Calin Georgescu at an accelerated pace". One user paid \$381,000 to those involved in the promotion of Georgescu between October 24 and November 24, according to one of the documents. Based on those claims, the constitutional court on Friday unanimously decided to annul the entire electoral process to ensure its "correctness and legality".

Deadly Israeli Strikes Pound Gaza, Qatar Sees Momentum on Truce Talks



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Israeli strikes in Gaza killed at least 34 Palestinians on Saturday, health officials in the enclave said, as Qatar voiced hope of fresh momentum in efforts to reach a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas. The health officials said that an Israeli strike hit a house in Gaza City late on Saturday, killing four women. The Israeli military did not provide an immediate comment on Saturday's strikes across Gaza. The death toll was revised upwards from 30 reported earlier in the day by the Palestinian health ministry, which also said dozens were wounded. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians and militants in the daily death tallies, and Reuters could not independently verify the figures. Israel accuses the Islamist group of using civilian population and property as shields, Hamas denies this. Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said Qatar was engaging with the incoming Trump administration on Gaza after sensing fresh momentum for ceasefire talks following the U.S. election. Donald Trump's Middle East envoy has travelled to Qatar and Israel to kick-start the U.S. President-elect's diplomatic push for a ceasefire and hostage release deal before his inauguration on Jan. 20, a source briefed on the talks told Reuters on Thursday.



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria's army command has notified officers that President Bashar al-Assad's rule has ended following a lightning rebel offensive, a Syrian officer who was informed of the move told Reuters. Syrian rebels said Damascus was "now free of Assad". Earlier Assad flew out of Damascus for an unknown destination on Sunday, two senior army officers told Reuters, as rebels said they had entered the capital with no sign of army deployments. Thousands in cars and on foot congregated at a main square in Damascus waving and chanting "Freedom", witnesses said. "We celebrate with the Syrian people the news of freeing our prisoners and releasing their chains and announcing the end of the era of injustice in Sednaya prison," said the rebels. Sednaya is a large military prison on the outskirts of Damascus where the Syrian government detained thousands. A Syrian Air plane took off from Damascus airport around the time the capital was reported to have been taken by rebels, according to data from the Flightradar website. The aircraft initially flew towards Syria's coastal region, a stronghold of Assad's Alawite sect, but then made an abrupt U-turn and flew in the opposite direction for a few minutes before disappearing off the map. Reuters could not immediately ascertain who was on board. The head of Syria's main opposition group abroad Hadi al-Bahra Syrian on Sunday also declared that Damascus is now "without Bashar al-Assad". Just hours earlier, rebels announced they had gained full control of the key city of Homs after only a day of fighting, leaving Assad's 24-year rule dangling by a thread. Thousands of Homs residents poured onto the streets after the army withdrew from the central city, dancing and chanting "Assad is gone, Homs is free" and "Long live Syria and down with Bashar al-Assad". Rebels fired into the air in celebration, and youths tore down posters of the Syrian president, whose territorial control has collapsed in a dizzying week-long retreat by the military. The fall of Homs gave the insurgents control over Syria's strategic heartland and a key highway crossroads, severing Damascus from the coastal region that is the stronghold of Assad's Alawite sect and where his Russian allies have a naval base and air base.

Syrian Army Command Tells Officers That Assad's Rule Has Ended

Homs' capture is also a powerful symbol of the rebel movement's dramatic comeback in the 13-year-old conflict. Swaths of Homs were destroyed by grueling siege warfare between the rebels and the army years ago. The fighting ground down the insurgents, who were forced out. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham commander Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the main rebel leader, called the capture of Homs a historic moment and urged fighters not to harm "those who drop their arms". Rebels freed thousands of detainees from the city prison. Security forces left in haste after burning their documents. Syrian rebel commander Hassan Abdul Ghani said in a statement early Sunday that operations were ongoing to "completely liberate" the countryside around Damascus and rebel forces were looking toward the capital. In one suburb, a statue of Assad's father, the late President Hafez al-Assad, was toppled and torn apart. Outside the city, rebels swept across the entire southwest over 24 hours and established control. The pace of events has stunned Arab capitals and raised fears of a new wave of regional instability. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Russia issued a joint statement saying the crisis was a dangerous development and calling for a political solution. Syria's civil war, which erupted in 2011 as an uprising against Assad's rule, dragged in big outside powers, created space for jihadist militants to plot attacks around the world and sent millions of refugees into neighbouring states. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the strongest rebel group, is the former al Qaeda affiliate in Syria regarded by the U.S. and others as a terrorist organisation, and many Syrians remain fearful it will impose draconian Islamist rule. Golani has tried to reassure minorities that he will not interfere with them and the international community that he opposes Islamist attacks abroad. In Aleppo, which the rebels captured a week ago, there have not been reports of reprisals. When asked on Saturday whether he believed Golani, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov replied, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating". Assad long relied on allies to subdue the rebels. Russian warplanes conducted bombing while Iran sent allied forces including Hezbollah and Iraqi militia to reinforce the Syrian military and storm insurgent strongholds. But Russia has been focused on the war in Ukraine since 2022 and Hezbollah has suffered big losses in its own grueling war with Israel, significantly limiting its ability or that of Iran to bolster Assad. U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has said the U.S. should not be involved in the conflict and should "let it play out".

Macron, Trump, Zelensky Hold Trilateral on Sidelines of Notre-Dame Ceremony

PARIS (Dispatches) - Ahead of the Notre-Dame Cathedral reopening ceremony, French President Emmanuel Macron held a trilateral meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US president-elect Donald Trump in Paris on a day that mixed pageantry with attention to pressing global problems. Zelensky and European leaders have been concerned that Trump, who takes office next month, could withdraw US military aid to Ukraine at a crucial juncture in Kyiv's battle to repel Russia. The Ukrainian president said the trilateral meeting was "good and productive" and that the three leaders agreed to continue working together. "President Trump is, as always, resolute. I thank him," Zelensky wrote on social media platform X. "We all want this war to end as soon as possible and in a just way." To display this content from X (Twitter), you must enable advertisement tracking and audience measurement. In a message posted on X after the meeting, Macron called on Trump and Zelensky to "continue our joint efforts for peace and security". To display this content from X (Twitter), you must enable advertisement tracking and audience measurement. The trilateral on Saturday came shortly after Trump had a bilateral meeting with Macron at the Élysée presidential palace. The two men embraced and shook hands several times on the steps of the French presidential palace, with Trump given a full guard of honour. "It seems like the world is going a little crazy right now and we will be talking about that," Trump told reporters as he prepared to sit down for talks with



Macron.

Trump's visit to France, part of a global celebration of the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral five years after a devastating fire, came as Macron and other European leaders are trying to win Trump's favour and persuade him to maintain support for Ukraine in its defence against Russia's invasion. Despite tensions between the two men during his first term, Trump hailed his ties with Macron, saying: "We had a great relationship as everyone knows. We accomplished a lot." As Trump arrived at the official residence of the French president, Macron went out of his way to project an image of close ties, posing for multiple handshakes interspersed with plenty of back-patting. Trump said it was "a great honour" and talked about the "great relationship" they share. A grand red carpet was rolled in the same way the French welcome sitting US presidents.

Macron told Trump it was "a great honour for French people to welcome you" for the Notre-Dame reopening ceremony five years after a major fire destroyed the historic cathedral. "You were president at that time and I remember the solidarity and the immediate reaction," Macron added, speaking in English. When he first took office in 2017, Trump's ties with Macron - then also a fresh face on the world stage - began warmly despite their obvious political differences. Their long and muscular handshakes - which saw each man seek to assert his superiority - became a light-hearted focus of attention before ties cooled, then soured, following disputes about climate change, trade and defence. Zelensky arrived at the French presidential palace around 45 minutes after Trump. The French presidential office said the three-way meeting was proposed by Macron and arranged shortly before Trump's arrival. Trump has pledged to end the war in Ukraine swiftly but has not specified how, raising concerns in Kyiv about what terms may be laid out for any future negotiations. Trump was invited as president-elect of a "friendly nation," Macron's office said, adding, "This is in no way exceptional, we've done it before." The red carpet treatment, however, was a sign of how eager both Macron and other European leaders are to win Trump's favour and placate him even before he takes office. Trump is known to revel in pomp and circumstance. One of his first trips as president his first term was to Paris, where Macron made him the guest of honor at Bastille Day events. Trump later said he wanted to replicate the grand military parade back in the United States.

South Korean President Avoids Impeachment Vote as Tens of Thousands Join Protest

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol survived an impeachment motion Saturday for imposing martial law after his party's lawmakers boycotted the vote, despite mass protests outside parliament calling for his ouster. Yoon stunned the nation and the international community Tuesday night by suspending civilian rule, but was forced into a U-turn after lawmakers nixed his decree. Opposition parties, which hold 192 seats in the 300-seat parliament, filed the impeachment motion which needed 200 votes to pass. But all but one members of Yoon's People Power Party (PPP) on Saturday filed out of the chamber before the vote, live TV footage showed, meaning that the motion lacked the necessary quorum. "With a total of 195 votes, the number of members who voted did not reach the required two-thirds majority of the total members. Therefore, I declare that the vote on this matter is not valid," National Assembly speaker Woo Won-shik said. The outcome is likely to enrage the nearly 150,000 people demonstrating outside parliament calling for Yoon's ouster, according to news agency Yonhap.



People take part in a protest against South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol outside the National Assembly in Seoul on December 6, 2024. Before the vote, Yoon, 63, spoke for the first time in three days and apologised for the turmoil but stopped short of stepping down, saying he would leave it to his party to decide his fate. "I caused anxiety and inconvenience to the public. I sincerely apologise," he said in the televised address. He said he would "entrust the party with measures to stabilise the political situation, including my term in office". His PPP stuck to the official line that they would block impeachment, even after party head Han Dong-hoon said Yoon must go to avert more political chaos. "The normal performance of the president's duties is impossible under the (current) circumstances, and an early resignation of the president is inevitable," Han told reporters Saturday. If the motion had passed, Yoon would have been suspended from duties pending a ruling by the Constitutional Court.



Man United Crash to Forest as City's Title Hopes Take Another Hit

LONDON (Dispatches) - Ruben Amorim's Manchester United honeymoon is truly over after Nottingham Forest inflicted a second straight Premier League defeat on his side yesterday while Manchester City stumbled again.

Leaders Liverpool maintained their seven-point lead at the top of the table even though their match at Everton was postponed because of storms on Merseyside.

Amorim replaced the sacked Erik ten Hag at Old Trafford last month after a terrible start to the season. He began brightly, with a draw and two wins in his first three games.

But reality is starting to bite hard after a 2-0 Premier League defeat at Arsenal in midweek followed by Saturday's chastening 3-2 loss to high-flying Forest, who capitalised on United's defensive blunders.

United forward Rasmus Hojlund cancelled out Nikola Milenkovic's early goal at Old Trafford, but Morgan Gibbs-White and Chris Wood put the visitors in charge. Forest kept the home side at bay after Bruno Fernandes pulled one back.

United's Andre Onana was embarrassed by a swerving Gibbs-White strike for Forest's second while the goalkeeper, Lisandro Martinez and Matthijs De Ligt all failed to deal with a looping Wood header for the third.

The win lifts Forest to fifth in the Premier League table. United are languishing in 13th spot. "Tough game in a tough moment but we have to continue the job," a disappointed Amorim told the BBC.

"This is a long journey. We are improving in some aspects. We have to win games to help us improve the team.

"We are in the start of something so big that we pay attention to every detail. We already know it's a big job so we have to continue."

Forest boss Nuno Espirito Santo said "I'm very proud of the way we work together, build things together, from the owner to everyone else in the club.

"It's a moment to celebrate. But for me, I'm thinking about (next week's match against) Aston Villa." Manchester City failed to win for the eighth time in nine games in a 2-2 draw at Crystal Palace.

Pep Guardiola's men had the chance to go second in the table but failed to build on an encouraging 3-0 win over Forest in midweek.

Daniel Munoz fired the home team ahead early but Erling Haaland's towering header levelled the score. The visitors started the second half strongly but were hit with a sucker punch when Maxence Lacroix powered home Will Hughes' corner.

Rico Lewis found the top corner to level once more for City, but was then sent off six minutes from time. "We fought incredible. We came back twice," said Guardiola. "We gave everything and we take a point."

Fourth-placed City are eight points behind Liverpool and a fifth straight Premier League title is looking increasingly unlikely.

The final league derby between Everton and Liverpool at Goodison Park will be rescheduled after Storm Darragh battered western regions of England with high winds and heavy rain.

Brentford enjoy the best home record in the division and made it seven wins from eight games at the Gtech Community Stadium with a thrilling 4-2 victory over Newcastle.

Bryan Mbeumo, who has been linked with a move to the Magpies, opened the scoring with a sensational individual effort.

Newcastle quickly levelled twice in the first half through Alexander Isak and Harvey Barnes, either side of Yoane Wissa's second for Brentford.

But calamitous defending cost Newcastle in the second period when Nathan Collins prodded home from goalkeeper Mark Flekken's long ball forward.

Kevin Schade then sealed the points for the Bees. "The players are growing, a lot of the players here for a while have taken another step up," said Brentford boss Thomas Frank, whose team are seventh in the table.

"I would like to carry on this home form but some wins on the road would be welcome too."

Aston Villa beat bottom-of-the-table Southampton 1-0 thanks to Jhon Duran's goal in his first Premier League start of the season.

McLaren Dominates Abu Dhabi Qualifying



ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Lando Norris hailed "a perfect day" after securing pole ahead of teammate Oscar Piastri to move McLaren within reach of a first constructors' title since 1998 at the decisive season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

In an eventful Saturday qualifying session where seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton was unluckily eliminated in Q1 in his final weekend with Mercedes, Norris topped the times in one minute and 22.595 seconds to outpace Piastri by three-tenths of a second.

Carlos Sainz, in his final weekend with Ferrari before leaving to join Williams, was third, 0.020 seconds behind Piastri as McLaren reeled off their third front row lockout of the season.

Ferrari need to overhaul a 21-point deficit to take the constructors' title ahead of McLaren, but suffered a blow when Charles Leclerc was eliminated in Q2 and, with a 10-place grid penalty, he will start from the back of the grid.

Nico Hulkenberg qualified fourth for Haas — before being hit with a three-place penalty - ahead of newly-crowned four-time world champion Max Verstappen of Red Bull, Pierre Gasly of Alpine and Mercedes' George Russell.

Two-time champion Fernando Alonso was eighth for Aston Martin, 24 hours after describing his car as "the worst ever", ahead of Valtteri Bottas of Sauber and Sergio Perez in the second Red Bull.

"A perfect day for us," said Norris who secured his eighth pole of the season.

"Probably a little tougher than before as we've been strong all weekend. My lap was strong too so it was just what we wanted from today."

Lance Stroll was first out for Q1 in his Aston Martin as the sun set over the Yas Marina Circuit in clear conditions and temperatures of 25 (air) and (30) track, near perfect for the unprecedented 24th and final qualifying of the year.

After scrubbed laps for exceeding track limits by Perez and Franco Colapinto, Sainz went top as the Mexican's lap was reinstated and Bottas took command shortly before Hamilton, on a desperate late lap, failed to make it.

He was eliminated in Q1 for the third time in his final six races before leaving Mercedes for Ferrari and in his 246th and final outing for the 'Silver Arrows'.

"I messed that up big time guys," a crestfallen Hamilton conceded on the team radio. "That was bad," he added.

Hamilton's demise came after he picked up a bollard — flicked into his path by Kevin Magnussen's Haas - that was stuck under his car, creating imbalance and loss of pace.

Bellingham Shines as Real Madrid Cruise Past Girona

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Jude Bellingham guided champions Real Madrid to a comfortable 3-0 victory at Girona yesterday in La Liga, with Kylian Mbappe also on the scoresheet after two high-profile penalty misses in recent games.

Los Blancos cut the gap on league leaders Barcelona to two points after the Catalans drew 2-2 at Real Betis, with Madrid having played one fewer match.

Bellingham opened the scoring before half-time and set up Turkish playmaker Arda Guler for Madrid's second, before Mbappe produced a clinical finish for their third.

Both Bellingham and defender Ferland Mendy were replaced with apparent knocks in the second half ahead of Tuesday's Champions League clash at Atalanta.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti confirmed Bellingham was "available" for the game but said Mendy had suffered a muscular injury.

After Madrid's fifth defeat across all competitions in midweek against Athletic Bilbao, having lost just twice last season, Ancelotti pledged his team would improve and they were significantly better against Girona.

"Bellingham scored his fifth goal running (in La Liga), Mbappe scored, Brahim (Diaz) did good work, Arda scored a great goal," Ancelotti said.

"We have to bear the moment out and as I said, bit by bit we will come back (to form)."



With Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo sidelined, Ancelotti selected Bellingham and Diaz in support of Mbappe.

The French forward has been the focus of criticism in recent weeks after blowing penalties against Liverpool and Athletic Bilbao, and struggling to find the form which made him a star with Paris Saint-Germain and his country.

Girona, who ran Madrid close for the Spanish title for much of last season before eventually finishing third, started the stronger but Madrid soon clicked into gear.

Bellingham pounced after 36 minutes when Diaz's cross was blocked and the ball fell kindly to the England international to drill home.

It was Bellingham's fifth goal in his last five La Liga games, finding the form which powered Madrid to a Champions League and La Liga double last season.

Los Blancos got their second in the 55th minute when Bellingham threaded through a fine pass for Guler to finish.

Mbappe rattled in Madrid's third from a tight angle after Bellingham hobbled off with a knock after Luka Modric played him in down the right.

Ancelotti will hope Madrid can carry some momentum into the vital Champions League visit to Atalanta, for which Vinicius is expected to return from a hamstring problem.

Girona, eighth in La Liga, welcome Liverpool in the Champions League on Tuesday.

Earlier Real Betis twice came behind to stop Barcelona from triumphing in Seville.

Assane Diao levelled in the 94th minute to stun Barcelona, who opened the scoring after 39 minutes through Robert Lewandowski.

After Giovanni Lo Celso levelled for the mid-table hosts from the penalty spot, substitute Ferran Torres struck what seemed the winner before Diao's late intervention.

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said his team had to improve on the road, where most of their set-backs have come this season.

"We have the quality to win every match but we also have to show that," said Flick.

"(In) the away matches we have to be much stronger than we played here."

Real Betis started strongly, with Raphinha forced to clear Diego Llorente's header off his own goal-line.

Wizards Top Nuggets, End 16-Game Skid

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jordan Poole had 39 points to help the host Washington Wizards overcome Nikola Jokic's career-high 56 points and beat the Denver Nuggets 122-113 on Saturday to end their 16-game losing streak.

Poole hit a career-high nine 3-pointers and was one of four Wizards to score in double figures. Justin Champagnie had 23 points, Jonas Valanciunas finished with 20 points and 12 rebounds, Jared Butler scored 12 points and Carlton Carrington added 10 points in the win. Washington's 16-game skid tied a franchise record.

With Jamal Murray (hamstring) and Aaron Gordon (calf) out, the Nuggets leaned on Jokic. The three-time NBA MVP shot 22 for 38 from the floor and was 3-of-5 from three-point range. He added 16 rebounds and eight assists. Jokic's point total was second in franchise history, trailing only David Thompson's 73 in 1978.

Julian Strawther scored 18 points off the bench, Christian Braun added 14 points and Michael Porter Jr. added 11 for the Nuggets,



who have lost three of their past four games.

The Wizards, who shot 48.4 percent from the floor, earned their first win since October 30 despite not having No. 1 pick Alex Sarr, who missed the game with a sore back.

Washington, which led by as much as 15 points in the game, went on a 7-0 run to take a 30-19 lead with 3:26 left in the first

quarter. The Wizards had a season-high 69 points in the first half and led the Nuggets 69-57 at the break.

The Wizards pushed their lead to 78-63 after two free throws by Valanciunas with 9:15 left in the third. But the Nuggets cut their deficit to 81-77 after a three-point play by Jokic with 5:22 left in the quarter. Jokic hit another basket inside to trim Washington's lead to 91-88 with 2:08 left in the third. Butler's layup with 0.3 seconds left gave the Wizards a 99-93 lead entering the fourth.

Jokic scored 23 points on 9-of-20 shooting in the third. Poole led the Wizards with 14 points in the quarter.

The Wizards went on a 7-0 run to start the fourth quarter, pushing their lead to 106-93 on Carrington's floater with 9:56 left in the game. Strawther's basket inside cut the Nuggets' deficit to 116-111 with 1:29

left but Denver couldn't complete the comeback.

The Nuggets finished 5-of-24 from three-point range, while the Wizards were 16-of-41.

Odermatt Picks Up First Win of the Season in Super G



LONDON (Dispatches) - Swiss Marco Odermatt enjoyed his first World Cup win of the season in the men's Super G at Beaver Creek in Colorado on Saturday, speeding through the finish after settling for second spot on the podium in the men's downhill the previous day.

The three-times reigning World Cup overall champion crossed the line in one minute 9.41 seconds, 0.18 ahead of France's Cyprien Sarrazin, while Austrian Lukas Feurstein (1:09.88) was third.

The 15th skier out of the hut, Odermatt got off to a terrific start but slowed significantly during the penultimate section and looked to be on track for second place again after finishing runner-up in Friday's downhill.

The Olympic gold medalist found another gear, however, closing the gap to Sarrazin, who raced 12th, in the final moments of his run and pumping his fists after the gutsy performance.

It was a third win for Odermatt at Beaver Creek, where competitors enjoyed pristine conditions a year after adverse weather forced the competition's cancellation.

The 23-year-old Italian Giovanni Franzoni nearly snared a late podium spot but struggled on the final half of the course, tying for fourth with Norwegian Fredrik Moeller in 1:10.01.