

IRGC Chief Reassured Lawmakers That Iran Remains a Regional Power Despite the Fall of the Syrian Government, Saying That the Elimination of the Zionist Regime Is Still a Priority

# IRAN NEWS

Heads of the Plan and Budget Organization (PBO) Said That the PBO Aims to Expand Its Cooperation With the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Navy and the Governor of Hormozgan Province as Part of Projects to Develop Bu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb islands in the Persian Gulf

## 2 DOMESTIC



### Lake Urmia: A Victim of Non-Standard Practices in Iran

> SEE PAGE 2

## 3 INTERNATIONAL

### Syria's Rebels Work to Form Gov't, Restore Order After Assad Ouster



> SEE PAGE 3

### Tehran and Bishkek Agree to Establish Joint Logistics Hub With Eurasia in Iranian Ports



TEHRAN - A high-level Kyrgyz economic delegation, led by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, met with the Managing Director of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) to discuss expanding port cooperation. Bishkek expressed readiness to invest in creating a joint logistics center with Eurasia in southern Iranian ports.

During the meeting, Deputy Foreign Minister Erkinov emphasized the strategic importance of gaining access to open waters through Iran's commercial ports. He noted that this is a key element of Kyrgyzstan's economic strategy for enhancing transit and maritime collaboration with Iran.

Erkinov highlighted that talks between Iran and Kyrgyzstan to facilitate transit and investment in Shahid Rajaei Port have been ongoing for some time. He stated that Kyrgyzstan is prepared to partner with Iran to implement the joint logistics zone project at the port.

He also stressed that Kyrgyzstan's investment in Shahid Rajaei Port, aimed at establishing a dedicated zone for exports, imports, and transit, will fully comply with Iranian laws and regulations. He noted that the joint trade and economic initiatives between the two countries are aligned with various multimodal transport and transit corridors.

In response, the Managing Director of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization reaffirmed that the Iranian government supports investments in free trade and special economic zones in its ports. He assured that Kyrgyz private sector investors will benefit from significant discounts and facilities when operating in Iran's northern and southern ports.

Mr. Safaei added that Kyrgyz traders could leverage Iran's port facilities and shipping routes to expand their global trade connections.

### Iran Responds to Unconstructive Measures, But Still Open to Cooperation With IAEA



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says Iran does not hesitate to respond to unconstructive measures targeting the country's nuclear energy program, but is still prepared to continue constructive cooperation with the United Nations nuclear watchdog.

The top diplomat made the remarks on Monday during a telephone conversation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s Director-General Rafael Grossi.

He strongly criticized some members of the IAEA's Board of Governors for taking "unconstructive measures" that prevented Grossi's November visit to the Islamic Republic from resulting in progress in the two sides' attempts to resolve outstanding issues concerning the agency's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.

The measures have featured, among other things, the United States and its European allies' accusing Iran of insufficient cooperation with the IAEA, although Tehran's cooperation with the body has increased in frequency and quality over the past years.

On November 21, the IAEA's Board of Governors passed a resolution, brought by Britain, France, and Germany, that repeated the claim and requested a "comprehensive" report on the Islamic Republic's nuclear activities "at the latest" by spring 2025.

In response, the country began activating its advanced domestically manufactured centrifuges.

Later that month, Araqchi said Iran was to activate several thousands of the devices in reprisal for ratification of the Western-backed resolution.



### First Vice President Reiterates Firm Stance on Nuclear Policy: "Action for Action"

TEHRAN - Iran's First Vice President, Mohammad Reza Aref, warned Western countries about Iran's firm policy of "action for action," emphasizing that while Iran values negotiation and engagement, it will not succumb to pressure or coercion.

Aref's remarks came during his visit to the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOL), where he toured an exhibition showcasing the latest advancements in nuclear technology. He was briefed by AEOL head Mohammad Eslami and senior officials on progress in various sectors, including medicine, agriculture, environmental sustainability, and power generation. Later, Aref participated in a discussion with senior AEOL officials.

Expressing gratitude to the dedicated scientists and experts in Iran's nuclear sector, Aref highlighted the government's approach of constructive engagement aimed at lifting "unjust sanctions" imposed by the West. He noted that Iran has consistently faced Western double standards regarding nuclear technology. "While they encourage their allied nations to advance nuclear technology, they penalize Iran for similar pursuits," he remarked.

Aref emphasized that despite decades of sanctions and external pressures, Iran has continued to achieve significant advancements in multiple fields, thanks to the expertise of its scientists. "Our nuclear energy program is the cornerstone of Iran's high-tech industry," he added.

On the nuclear issue, Aref reiterated that Iran remains committed to its peaceful nuclear activities and is firm in protecting its sovereignty. "We decide for ourselves and will not allow anyone to interfere in our domestic or nuclear affairs," he stated. Citing Iran's adherence to Islamic and humanitarian principles, Aref stressed the nation's unwavering respect for human life and justice.

He called on Western nations to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), emphasizing that Iran has remained committed to its obligations under the agreement. "We have consistently maintained transparency. However, sharing sensitive information with unverified entities is unacceptable. No country would allow such overreach, and neither will we," Aref said.

The Vice President criticized the misuse of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by Western nations to serve political agendas. He urged the IAEA to adhere to its principles and agreements with Iran. "We are always ready to cooperate with the IAEA as long as it maintains impartiality," Aref noted.

Addressing recent discussions about reactivating the "snapback mechanism," which could reinstate UN sanctions, Aref dismissed such threats as ineffective. "They've tried this approach countless times, particularly during the Trump administration, only to witness Iran's resilience. We are open to dialogue but will never submit to blackmail," he asserted.

Aref also highlighted Iran's regional strength, noting that even during the early years of the Islamic Revolution, when Iran had minimal resources, it resisted overwhelming international opposition. "Today, we are the leading power in the region, and our stance remains unchanged."

In his address, Aref emphasized the importance of national unity. "Regardless of political or ideological differences, when faced with national challenges, Iranians stand united. The massive turnout for the funeral of General Qassem Soleimani is a testament to this solidarity," he said.

He acknowledged internal errors that sometimes create divisions but stressed the need to prioritize the nation's collective strength. "As long as the people support the system, no external force can undermine us," Aref concluded.

Praising the achievements of the AEOL, Aref highlighted its critical role in health, agriculture, power generation, and desalination projects. He emphasized the need to educate the public about the safety and benefits of nuclear energy, particularly in medical applications.

The event concluded with the presentation of a commemorative plaque to mark the 50th anniversary of the AEOL. Aref lauded the organization's contributions to Iran's development and reiterated the government's commitment to advancing peaceful nuclear technology while safeguarding national interests.

### Iran Calls on UN to Condemn Attacks on Diplomatic Missions in Syria



TEHRAN - The Islamic Republic of Iran has urged the United Nations to take a decisive stance against recent attacks on its diplomatic missions in Syria, calling them violations of international law. Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, Amir-Saeid Irvani, submitted a formal letter to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Security Council, urging immediate action to ensure the safety of diplomatic personnel and premises.

In his letter, Irvani condemned two recent incidents that targeted Iranian diplomatic facilities. The first attack occurred on December 8, 2024, when armed groups stormed Iran's embassy in Damascus, causing significant damage. Footage from the scene reportedly shows gunfire directed at the embassy. A second attack on November 29, 2024, saw militants shelling the Iranian Consulate in Aleppo with short-range projectiles, forcing the evacuation of staff and resulting in the invasion and vandalism of the premises.

"These actions represent blatant violations of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963), which guarantee the safety and inviolability of diplomatic missions," Irvani stated.

The ambassador highlighted the importance of upholding the safety of diplomatic facilities as a cornerstone of international relations. "No individual, group, or state has the right to commit or facilitate such violations," he stressed, urging the UN to take necessary measures to prevent future incidents.

Iran's envoy emphasized the urgency of the matter, citing the escalating threats faced by diplomatic missions in conflict zones like Syria. The letter called on the UN Security Council to denounce these attacks unequivocally and to take concrete actions to ensure the protection of Iranian diplomats and facilities in Syria.

The letter was addressed not only to Secretary-General Guterres but also to Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the current president of the UN Security Council. Iran requested that the letter be circulated as an official Security Council document, underscoring the seriousness of its concerns.

### Only Syrian Nation Should Decide Their Country's Fate



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The deputy chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee says the Syrian people alone have the right to decide the future of their country, after militants seized the capital Damascus and declared the end of President Bashar al-Assad's 24-year rule.

Abbas Moqtadaei made the remarks at the 17th plenary session of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Parliamentary Assembly in the Russian capital Moscow on Monday.

He underlined that the United States and the Israeli regime must not interfere in Syria's domestic affairs, warning that any foreign intervention in the Arab nation's internal issues will create further instability and insecurity and prolong conflict there.

Armed groups, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militants, announced on Sunday that they had fully captured Damascus, and confirmed reports of the fall of Assad's government.

HTS leader Ahmed al-Shar'a, better known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has called on the Syrian people not to get close to government institutes and organizations until an official transfer of power takes place under the supervision of the prime minister.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazali said the government was ready to "extend its hand" to the opposition and hand over its functions to a transitional government.

Elsewhere in his remarks on Monday, Moqtadaei criticized the US and its European allies, including Britain, France and Germany, saying they are complicit in the Zionist regime's terrorism and massacre of civilians in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, as well as instability in West Asia.

"The need for self-belief, unity and fight against violence and state terrorism is felt more than ever. Progress and global security could be achieved through increased cooperation as well as regional cooperation and synergy," the senior Iranian lawmaker pointed out.

### Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq Condemn Israel's Seizure of Syrian Land After Assad's Fall

DOHA (Dispatches) - Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iraq have condemned Israel's seizure of Syrian land after the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's government.

After armed groups, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militants, captured the Syrian capital, which led to the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's government on Sunday, Israel swiftly moved in and seized the buffer zone separating the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from the rest of the Syrian land.

In a statement on Monday, Qatar's Foreign Ministry described the Israeli move as "a dangerous development and a blatant attack on Syria's sovereignty and unity as well as a flagrant violation of international law."

"The policy of imposing a fait accompli pursued by the Israeli occupation, including its attempts to occupy Syrian territories, will lead the region to further violence and tension," the ministry warned.

Also on Monday, the Saudi Foreign Ministry slammed the Israeli actions, saying they confirm "Israel's continued violation of the rules of international law and its determination to sabotage Syria's chances of restoring its security, stability and territorial integrity."

The kingdom urged the international community to condemn the Israeli moves, emphasizing that the Golan Heights is an occupied Arab territory.



Iraq also decried the Israeli aggression as a "grave violation under international law."

Baghdad "stresses the importance of maintaining Syria's sovereignty and integrity," read a statement by the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The ministry also urged the UN Security Council to "uphold its responsibility and condemn this aggression" and "put an end to it."

In 1967, Israel waged a full-scale war against Arab territories, during which it occupied a large swathe of Golan and

annexed it four years later - a move never recognized by the international community.

In 1973, another war broke out; and a year later, a UN-brokered ceasefire came into force, according to which Tel Aviv and Damascus agreed to separate their troops and create a buffer zone in the Heights.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's spokesman Stephane Dujarric has stressed that Israel's latest incursion constitutes "a violation" of the 1974 disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei has also said Tel Aviv's enlarging the areas under its occupation is "an indication of the occupying regime's expansionist and belligerent approach and its contempt for all the rules and norms of the international law."

Beyond the land incursion, Israel has been conducting dozens of airstrikes on Syria since Assad's fall.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran, Russia to Finalize Initiative to Establish Anti-Sanctions Union

TEHRAN (IRNA) - A member of the Majlis and the Iran-Russia Parliamentary Friendship Group has announced that Iran's initiative to form an international alliance with Moscow against U.S. sanctions is nearing completion.

Abbas Goudarzi made the remarks on Monday on the sidelines of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) hosted by Moscow, in the meeting with Anatoly Vyborny, the chairman of the Expert Advisory Council under the Council of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CSTO.

Goudarzi highlighted the importance of Iran and Russia ties for various reasons, including good neighborliness, the importance of the strategy of looking to the East and confronting the unilateralism of the United States in the international arena, he added.

## \$2.5b Credit Line Allocated for Transportation Development



TEHRAN - In a joint meeting attended by Farzaneh Sadeq Malvajerd, Minister of Roads and Urban Development, and Mehdi Ghazanfari, Chairman of the National Development Fund of Iran, a proposal to allocate a \$2.5 billion credit line for financing major transportation projects was presented. The meeting focused on assessing existing capacities and practical strategies to enhance the country's transportation infrastructure and improve its logistical capabilities.

Ghazanfari highlighted the critical role of transportation in advancing economic development. "To implement national projects, especially in the transportation sector, we need to design new and efficient financial instruments," he said. He pointed out that traditional investment models used in the past failed to yield the desired outcomes. "Today, we must adopt more sophisticated yet effective models to ensure the success of the country's infrastructure projects," he added.

Emphasizing the need for timely repayment of financial resources, Ghazanfari noted, "The National Development Fund has participated in projects such as the Mashhad Metro. However, unfortunately, the funds allocated to this project have not yet been repaid. This underscores the need to design financial models that guarantee both the economic viability of projects and the regular repayment of resources."

Ghazanfari praised the shipping industry for its successful financial management, saying, "Sectors such as shipping and oil tankers have demonstrated a solid ability to repay financial resources. This success can serve as a model for other sectors. The National Development Fund is prepared to allocate \$2.5 billion in the form of a credit line to the transportation sector, provided that repayment conditions are properly structured and assured."

The chairman also urged the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development to prioritize its projects in rail, road, and maritime sectors. "We expect the ministry to present its prioritized plans to the fund. These projects, once reviewed by experts, can be moved forward for financing," he stated.

## \$800m Spent Annually on Banana Imports from Iran



TEHRAN - According to the Ministry of Agriculture's information center, Iran spends \$700-800 million annually on banana imports. Minister of Agriculture, Gholamreza Nouri, highlighted this issue during a Student Day conference held at the Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Tehran, in Karaj.

In his remarks, Nouri emphasized the vital role of student organizations in monitoring government performance. He stated that the 14th government is committed to its promises and encouraged students to provide constructive feedback and oversight, ensuring accountability.

"The government welcomes students' enlightening approaches and ideas for the country's progress," Nouri said, stressing the importance of interaction between the government and students.

Addressing the government's slogan of "National Unity," Nouri clarified that this unity involves collective understanding and addressing national issues with capable individuals, rather than political favoritism.

On agriculture, Nouri reiterated the constitutional mandate for self-sufficiency and food security, noting that efforts are underway to improve Iran's agricultural trade balance. He emphasized leveraging science and technology to optimize water and soil resources.

Nouri pointed out that approximately \$1 billion is spent annually on importing tropical fruits, with bananas accounting for most of this expenditure. He proposed a solution: utilizing freshwater resources in southern Iran to cultivate bananas domestically within four years, reducing reliance on imports.

The minister also stressed the importance of protecting the environment and optimizing water use in agricultural activities. He acknowledged past mismanagement of water resources and called for better conservation practices.

Additionally, Nouri highlighted the Ministry of Agriculture's efforts to ensure the safety of agricultural products, monitor fertilizer and pesticide use, and promote organic farming. He noted that even in developed countries, organic product consumption remains below 2%.

Nouri urged agriculture students to contribute to initiatives such as land registration and product tracking, essential for achieving sustainable food security. He envisioned graduates joining the private sector and knowledge-based companies to drive innovation in agriculture.

The conference concluded with Nouri reaffirming the government's commitment to fostering national progress through collaboration with experts and students.



## Lake Urmia: A Victim of Non-Standard Practices in Iran

TEHRAN - The First Vice President of Iran emphasized that adherence to laws, regulations, and standards must remain the top priority for the National Standards Organization. He stated, "Lake Urmia is a victim of the non-standard practices prevalent in our country."

During a ceremony on Monday for the introduction of the new and outgoing heads of the National Standards Organization of Iran, Mohammad Reza Aref highlighted the organization's critical role alongside the Department of Environmental Protection. He underscored their shared responsibility to enforce strict oversight across their respective domains, noting that any leniency or inefficiency contributes to visible issues such as air pollution.

Aref stated, "The authority of the National Standards Organization reflects the authority of the President and the division of presidential responsibilities. This organization must execute its core duties without compromise."

Aref criticized the organization's history of leniency in decision-making, calling for an end to undue flexibility and hesitation. "Non-compliance with fundamental responsibilities effectively deprives citizens of their rights. Access to safe food and healthy living conditions is a basic entitlement of the people," he said.

He also stressed that the organization must provide solutions when facing challenges or disputes, emphasizing that merely ignoring issues or removing them from the agenda is unacceptable. Instead, the organization should act as a consultative body offering practical and well-informed recommendations.

Aref urged the National Standards Organization to embrace advanced technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. He questioned the success of the organization's limited outsourcing initiatives, particularly regarding cybersecurity and digital spaces. He cited instances where the organization transferred its responsibilities to other entities but failed to meet expectations.

He noted that private companies often outperform public institutions in managing sensitive tasks due to their vested interest in maintaining high performance. "The new industrial revolution demands that we integrate cutting-edge technologies and standards into our framework," Aref said.

The Vice President called for greater efficiency in the organization's oversight of imports and exports. He criticized the lengthy evaluation process for goods at customs, which often exceeds the lifespan of some equipment. Aref stressed the need for faster sampling and evaluation processes, particularly for essential items like telecommunications equipment.

He further emphasized the importance of cooperation and unity among industries and government agencies to avoid conflict and inefficiency. "The National Standards Organization must not work in isolation; it must collaborate with other entities to achieve common goals," he said.

Aref linked many of Iran's environmental challenges to the neglect of strict standards. "If environmental standards were pursued rigorously, we wouldn't

face today's severe soil, water, and air pollution," he said, warning of dire consequences if such negligence persists.

He urged the new head of the organization to conduct a thorough review of its performance, independent of political or personal biases, and implement an operational plan for reform. "Building public trust in this organization is essential," he added.

Aref called for the continuous updating of measurement standards to reflect global changes. He envisioned the National Standards Organization as a recognized leader in quality, both domestically and internationally. "Our standards should not only serve Iran but become a benchmark across the region and beyond," he said.

He also urged the organization to improve its laboratory infrastructure and streamline its bureaucratic processes. "We must compare our performance with the best global institutions and not limit ourselves to domestic consumption," Aref stated.

Aref criticized the lack of standardization in energy consumption, which has led to excessive waste. He pointed out that Iran's underground water reserves are in critical condition, largely due to unregulated usage and a failure to educate the public on sustainable practices.

He cited Lake Urmia as a stark example of the consequences of non-standard practices. "With proper standardization and public awareness, the current state of Lake Urmia could have been avoided," he said.

Aref called for immediate action to standardize water and energy consumption to mitigate future crises. He also highlighted the importance of the National Standards Organization's role in tackling broader issues, such as climate change and economic sustainability.

"The organization must engage with academic institutions and international bodies to harness global expertise and innovation," he said. He also emphasized the need for empowering young professionals and fostering international collaborations to strengthen Iran's presence in global markets.

Aref concluded by stressing that no compromise should be made when it comes to protecting citizens' rights. He gave the example of food safety, asserting that even a single violation should warrant shutting down the responsible factory.

He reiterated that the National Standards Organization must operate as a pillar of national trust and economic growth. "This organization plays a crucial role in achieving the goals of the Seventh Development Plan. Its strengthened position must not waver with changing political administrations," Aref emphasized.

By taking bold steps toward reform, innovation, and collaboration, Aref believes the National Standards Organization can pave the way for a more sustainable and equitable future for Iran.

## ECO to Become a Hub for Air and Ground Transport

TEHRAN - The Secretary-General of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Asad Majid Khan, shared updates at a recent press conference regarding the organization's progress and future plans. He highlighted the success of the 28th Ministerial Meeting held in Mashhad, Iran, and outlined the steps ECO is taking to foster regional economic integration and connectivity.

Strategic Direction for 2024: The Mashhad Declaration was endorsed by ministers, setting the roadmap for ECO's initiatives in 2024, with a focus on advancing sustainable transport and economic development.

New Leadership: Kazakhstan will take over ECO's presidency in 2025, under the theme "Advancing Sustainable Economy and Transport."

Reforms and Vision Update: Emphasis was placed on comprehensive reforms to increase ECO's effectiveness. A brainstorming session will refine the next strategic vision document, as the current one concludes in 2025.

Majid Khan underscored ECO's achievements under Iran's presidency, notably progress on an inter-member trade agreement. Member states were urged to ratify and finalize it, with discussions scheduled in Turkey early next year. The agreement aims to rationalize tariffs, facilitating easier trade across the region.

He also addressed challenges, including enhancing dialogue among member states' economic ministers to resolve financial issues, particularly for infrastructure projects like railways.

ECO has established seven transit corridors linking member states,



which include: Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (rail and road); Almaty-Tehran-Istanbul; Almaty-Tehran-Bandar Abbas; Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran; Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran; Tajikistan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey; and Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey.

The Secretary-General highlighted the need for efficient management systems to optimize these corridors, aiming to revive the historic Silk Road as a vital trade route.

ECO's trade volume with the global market stands at \$1.06 trillion, representing 4.3% of global trade, with only \$82 billion attributed to intra-regional trade. This is a modest share compared to the European Union's 30%. However, intra-regional trade has grown from \$56.87 billion in 2020 to \$91 billion in 2022, despite a slight decline this year.

Majid Khan emphasized ECO's ambition to transform into a hub for air and ground transportation. He lamented the logistical inefficiencies, such as the need for extended flights between Lahore and Tehran via third-party hubs like Dubai or Istanbul. He stressed that the integration of these corridors will boost regional connectivity and trade.

The Secretary-General called for stronger economic integration through reduced tariffs and improved infrastructure. He believes such efforts could double trade volumes within the region and align with ECO's vision for a unified economic bloc.

By reviving historical ties and building modern infrastructure, ECO aims to reinforce its position as a central player in global trade and connectivity.

## Not All BRICS Members Aim to Eliminate the Dollar



TEHRAN - Majidreza Hariri, head of the Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce, told ILNA in an interview that not all BRICS members share the goal of eliminating the dollar from financial transactions. While Iran, Russia, and to some extent China, pursue the removal of the dollar in BRICS trade, the bloc itself was not formed with the explicit aim of ending dollar dominance. The key question remains: Do other members like India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa share the same ambition? Hariri emphasized that independence from the dollar is not a universal priority among BRICS nations.

He explained that BRICS was established as a platform for emerging economies to challenge the current global order dominated by Western powers, particularly the United States. A significant initiative within this framework has been the discussion of a unified currency and payment system. However, ongoing global events—such as conflicts in Ukraine, South Korea, Georgia, and France—reflect the lack of a clear global order, making it difficult to predict the bloc's success in achieving its goals.

Hariri highlighted that BRICS members have the potential to question the existing global structure and shift the distribution of power worldwide. While Western countries are expected to resist such changes, Hariri noted that the dollar's share in international transactions is gradually declining. For instance, the Chinese yuan, which accounted for less than 1% of global trade five years ago, now holds a 4.5% share—though still less than 5%.

Regarding the visit of China's Deputy Prime Minister to Iran, Hariri stated that the Chinese official came to address the practical details of the 25-year Iran-China cooperation agreement. The visit reflects high-level coordination, where issues in implementation are handled by Iran's First Vice President and China's Deputy Prime Minister.

Hariri recalled that a prior meeting was held last December in Shanghai between Iranian Vice President Mohsen Rezaei and China's Prime Minister, covering both bilateral and regional developments. He emphasized that these discussions go beyond purely economic matters.

He also noted that the 25-year agreement between Iran and China is not merely a government-to-government initiative but a strategic pact supported by both nations' systems. Hariri underscored that Iran and China's economies complement each other, largely unaffected by political tensions. With Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia reliant on energy and raw material exports, China naturally becomes their top trading partner as the major buyer of such resources. In return, Iran depends on China for technology and industrial machinery, areas in which China plays a leading global role.

## Iran and Russia Launch Two Major Rail and River Transport Projects



TEHRAN - The implementation of two key transit-logistics projects along the "Ulyanovsk-Astara" railway route and the "Volga-Caspian Sea" river corridor has begun, aimed at enhancing transportation and transit efficiency. These initiatives are expected to reduce the current cargo transit time from 21 days to just seven.

The launch ceremony took place with the participation of the Governor of Ulyanovsk, Iran's Consul General in Kazan, and representatives from India, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Iraq, along with managers from logistics companies, including the Russian-Iranian Salian Port.

The projects aim to expand commercial fleet capacity and increase economic and transit exchanges between Iran and Russia.

The Governor of Ulyanovsk, Alexey Russkikh, highlighted that the "Ulyanovsk-Astara" railway project will simplify cargo exchanges, enhance transport speeds, and reduce transportation costs. He noted that the delivery time for goods will drop from 21 days to seven.

Russkikh announced a 76% increase in trade volume between Ulyanovsk Province and Iran in the first nine months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. Trade volume has grown from \$8.5 million to \$15 million, setting a new record in bilateral trade.

## Ghana Electoral Commission Declares Ex-President Mahama Election Winner

ACCRA (Dispatches) - Ghana's electoral commission on Monday declared ex-president and main opposition leader John Dramani Mahama winner of Saturday's presidential election with 56.55% of the vote, according to provisional results.

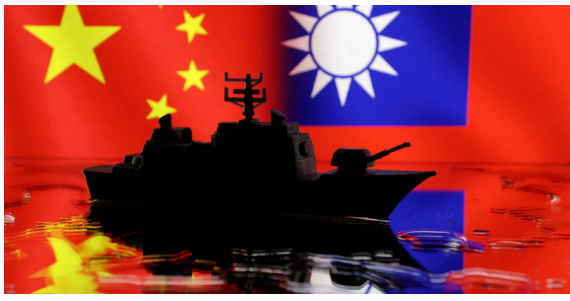
Mahama's main rival, vice president and ruling-party presidential candidate Mahamudu Bawumia, already conceded defeat on Sunday in both presidential and legislative elections to ease tensions.

The electoral commission said it had counted votes from 267 out of the West African country's 276 constituencies. Voter turnout was 60.9%.

Mahama, 66, is making a comeback after serving as Ghana's president from 2012 to 2016. He described Bawumia as representing a continuation of the policies that led to Ghana's worst economic crisis in a generation.



## China Sends Largest Naval Fleet in Decades to Region



TAIPEI (Reuters) - China is deploying its largest navy fleet in regional waters in nearly three decades, posing a threat to Taiwan that is more pronounced than previous Chinese war games, the Taiwanese defence ministry said on Tuesday.

Speaking in Taipei, defence ministry spokesperson Sun Li-fang said the scale of the current Chinese naval deployment in an area running from the southern Japanese islands down into the South China Sea was the largest since China held war games around Taiwan ahead of 1996 Taiwanese presidential elections.

China's military has yet to comment and has not confirmed it is carrying out any exercises.

China, which views democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory over the island's rejection, had been expected to launch drills to express its anger at President Lai Ching-te's tour of the Pacific that ended on Friday, which included stopovers in Hawaii and the U.S. territory of Guam.

Taiwan's military raised its alert on Monday after saying China had reserved airspace and deployed naval and coast guard vessels.

"The current scale is the largest compared to the previous four," Sun said. "Regardless of whether they have announced drills, they are posing a great threats to us."

Senior ministry intelligence officer Hsieh Jih-sheng told the same press conference there have so far been no live fire drills in China's seven "reserved" air space zones, two of which are in the Taiwan Strait, but there had been a significant increase in Chinese activity to the north of Taiwan over the last day.

The number of China navy and coast guard ships in the region, which a Taiwan security source told Reuters remained at around 90, was "very alarming", and China was taking aim at other countries in the region and not only Taiwan, he added.

China's deployment in the First Island Chain - which runs from Japan through Taiwan, the Philippines and on to Borneo, enclosing China's coastal seas - is aimed at area denial to prevent foreign forces from interfering, Hsieh said.

## Zelenskiy Seeks Diplomatic End to Russia's War, Floats Role for Foreign Troops

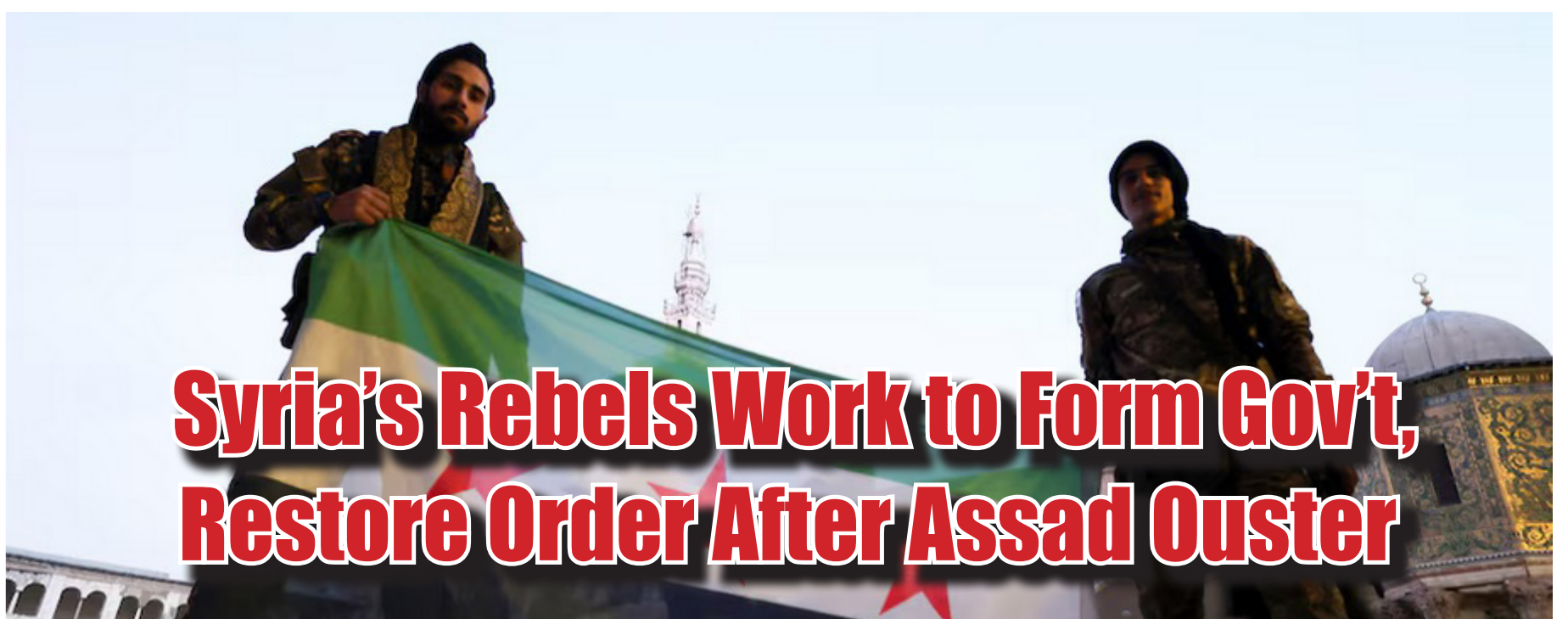


KYIV (Dispatches) - President Volodymyr Zelenskiy made the case on Monday for a diplomatic settlement to Russia's war in Ukraine and raised the idea of foreign troops being deployed in his country until it could join the NATO military alliance.

The remarks at a joint press conference with German opposition leader Friedrich Merz were the latest to signal Kyiv's increasing openness to war negotiations, with Donald Trump preparing to return to the White House on Jan. 20.

The U.S. president-elect, who has said he wants to end the war quickly, called on Sunday for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the "madness", after he met Zelenskiy and French President Emmanuel Macron for talks in Paris.

"Ukraine wants this war to end more than anyone else. No doubt, a diplomatic resolution would save more lives. We do seek it," Zelenskiy told reporters in Kyiv on Monday.



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - The lightning overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad left Syrians, countries in the region and world powers nervous on Tuesday about what comes next as the rebel alliance took its first steps in a government transition.

The United Nations Security Council met behind closed doors late on Monday, and diplomats said they were still in shock at how quickly Assad's overthrow unfolded over 12 days, after a 13-year civil war that was locked in stalemate for years.

"Everyone was taken by surprise, everyone, including the members of the council. So we have to wait and see and watch... and evaluate how the situation will develop," Russian U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told reporters after the body met.

Russia played a major role in supporting Assad's government and helping it fight the rebels. The Syrian leader fled Damascus for Moscow on Sunday, ending more than 50 years of brutal rule by his family.

With the mood in Damascus still celebratory, Assad's prime minister, Mohammed Jalali, on Monday agreed to hand power to the rebel-led Salvation Government, an administration based in rebel-held territory in northwest Syria.

The main rebel commander Ahmed al-Sharaa, better known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, met with Jalali and Vice President Faisal Mekdad to discuss the transitional government, a source familiar with the discussions told Reuters. Jalali said the handover could take days to carry out.

Al Jazeera television reported the transitional authority would be headed by Mohamed al-Bashir, who has headed the Salvation Government.

The steamroller advance of the militia alliance headed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate, was a generational turning point for the Middle East.

The civil war that began in 2011 killed hundreds of thousands, caused one of the biggest refugee crises of modern times and left cities bombed to rubble, countryside depopulated and the economy hollowed out by global sanctions.

But the rebel alliance has not communicated plans for Syria's future, and there is no template for such a transition in the fractious region.

Oil prices rose more than 1% on Monday, partly on concerns that instability in Syria, which is not a major oil producer, could raise regional tensions, analysts said.

"This is an incredible moment for the Syrian people," Deputy U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Robert Wood said in New York. "Now we're really focused right now on trying to see where the situation goes. Can there be a governing authority in Syria that

respects the rights and dignities of the Syrian population?"

The U.S. was seeking ways to engage with Syrian rebel groups and is reaching out to partners in the region such as Turkey to start informal diplomacy, Washington said.

Qatari diplomats spoke with HTS on Monday, an official briefed on the developments told Reuters, as regional states race to open contact with the group.

Some insurgent fighters who milled about the capital on Monday, clustering in the central Umayyad Square, expressed hope a civilian administration would soon be running the country.

"We want the state and security forces to be in charge," said Firdous Omar, a fighter who intends to resume farming in provincial Idlib.

Golani has vowed to rebuild Syria, and HTS has spent years trying to soften its image to reassure foreign nations and minority groups within Syria.

But fears of reprisals remained. HTS said it will not hesitate to hold security and army officers involved in torturing the Syrian people accountable, describing them as criminals and murderers.

"We will release a list that includes the names of the most senior officials involved in the torturing of the Syrian people," Golani said in a statement. "Rewards will be offered to those who will provide information about senior army and security officers involved in war crimes."

HTS is designated as a terrorist organisation by many states and the U.N., and its governing credentials are uncertain.

"Syrians are looking forward to establishing a state of freedom, equality, rule of law, democracy, and we will join efforts to rebuild our country, to rebuild what was destroyed, and to rebuild the future, better future of Syria," Syria's U.N. Ambassador Koussay Aldhahak told reporters.

There were tentative signs of a return to order. Syria's banks will reopen on Tuesday, and the oil ministry called on all employees in the sector to head to work on Tuesday, adding that protection would be provided to ensure their safety.

In one of many challenges facing Syria, Israel seized a buffer zone in the country's south, a move condemned by Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia said the move would "ruin Syria's chances of restoring security."

## China's Exports Slow Sharply, Imports Shrink Ahead of Trump Tariffs

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's exports grew at a slower pace in November than the bumper month before, while imports unexpectedly shrank, in a worrying sign for the world's No. 2 economy as Donald Trump's imminent return to the White House brings fresh trade risks.

U.S. President-elect Trump has pledged to slap an additional 10% tariff on Chinese goods in a bid to force Beijing to do more to stop the trafficking of chemicals used to make fentanyl.

Outbound shipments grew just 6.7% last month, customs data showed on Tuesday, missing an 8.5% increase in a Reuters poll of economists and a 12.7% rise in October.

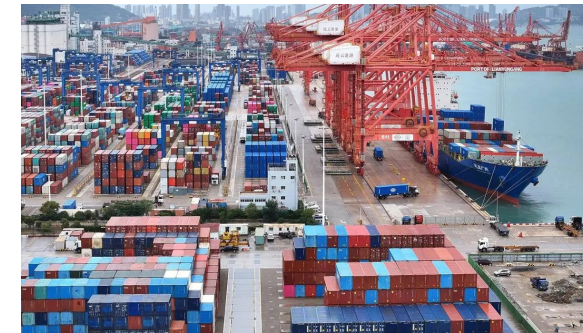
More worryingly, imports shrank 3.9%, their worst performance in nine months and dashing expectations for a 0.3% increase, keeping alive calls for more policy support to prop up domestic demand.

Trump has previously said he would introduce tariffs in excess of 60% on Chinese goods.

Meanwhile, unresolved tensions with the European Union over tariffs of up to 45.3% on China-made electric vehicles threaten to open a second front in Beijing's trade war with the West.

U.S. tariff hikes pose a bigger threat to China this time around as the \$19 trillion-dollar economy's exports are one of its main growth drivers, with household and business confidence dented by a prolonged property crisis.

Government advisors are recommending that Beijing keeps its growth target unchanged at around 5% next year and implements more forceful stimulus to mitigate the expected U.S. tariffs by leaning on the country's vast domestic



consumer market.

"Global demand is not super strong, data from other major exporters like South Korea and Vietnam point to different levels of slowdown too," said Xu Tianchen, senior economist at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"Early signs of trade frontloading in anticipation of Trump's tariffs next year have started to emerge, but the full impact will not be felt until the coming months, especially December and January," he added.

China's trade surplus grew to \$97.44 billion last month, up from \$95.72 billion in October.

Xing Zhaopeng, senior China strategist at ANZ, attributed the poor import figure to falling commodity prices.

The world's top crude buyer took in 48.52 million metric tons last month, up an annual 14.3%, as lower prices of Middle East supplies and stockpiling demand boosted buying.

China's coal imports rose 26% year-on-year in November, a record high, as imported supply was cheaper than domestic coal.

Meanwhile, copper imports hit a one-year high, fuelled by shipments from Africa and purchases to restock domestic inventories of the key construction material, in an encouraging nod to an improving property sector.

The economy had recently seen some signs of stimulus trickling through, with manufacturers reporting the best business conditions in seven months in a November factory survey.

Firms said they were still receiving fewer export orders, however, suggesting buyers remain hard to come by in a slowing global economy and exporters are moving stocks to warehouses abroad in anticipation of demand picking up again.

South Korea's exports, a leading indicator of China's imports, slowed to the weakest level in 14 months in November.

Outbound Korean shipments to China fell for the first time in eight months, pointing to Chinese manufacturers buying in fewer Korean components for re-export in finished electronics goods.

Top policymakers are expected to meet this week to set out their priorities for the coming year. Investors will be looking for fresh policy support to local governments and the property sector from the Politburo.

## European Countries Suspend Syrian Asylum Bids Following Assad's Fall

LONDON (Dispatches) - European countries put asylum applications from Syrians on hold until further notice on Monday after rebels seized the Syrian capital and President Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia following 13 years of civil war.

The decision, which affects tens of thousands of open claims, reflects the rapidly changing political situation in Syria as well as a resurgence of right-wing parties across Europe keen to restrict immigration.

Germany opened its doors wide to a surge of asylum seekers in 2015 at the height of Syria's civil war, and is now home to nearly a million Syrians, the largest community in Europe.

The Berlin interior ministry said on Monday it would not process asylum requests until there was more clarity on political developments in Syria. Britain paused decisions on asylum claims as well, with the interior ministry saying it was assessing the situation.

Under a British government scheme, a total of 20,319 Syrian refugees had been resettled in the country between March 2014 and February 2021, according to the Refugee Council.

Other countries including Norway and Austria also announced a suspension of Syrian requests, and France said it hoped to announce a similar decision shortly.

Syria was the top country of origin for asylum seekers in Germany this year, with 72,420 applications submitted by the end of November, data from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) shows. Some 47,270 remain undecided.

The pausing of applications does not affect those already granted, according to BAMF. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said assessments would depend on developments in



Syria, and that it was too soon to say whether the country was safe to return to.

Norwegian immigration authorities said Syrians' asylum applications would neither be denied nor approved for now.

Denmark also paused processing applications and said Syrians whose applications had already been rejected, and who had been given a deadline to leave, would be allowed to remain longer due to the current uncertainty.

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer instructed his interior minister to suspend all

current Syrian asylum applications and family reunifications, and said that cases in which asylum had been granted would also be reviewed.

Greece paused the asylum applications of about 9,000 Syrians, a senior Greek government source told Reuters. Officials have said the government will meet on Friday to finalise the move.

Sweden's immigration authority did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Germany is gearing up for a snap election set for February, with far-right and conservative parties topping opinion polls.

An Infratest survey published on Friday indicated that voters view migration as Germany's second biggest problem after the economy.

ProAsyl, a German group providing legal and practical assistance to asylum seekers, said it might take many months for clarity to emerge on Syria's security situation, potentially exceeding the six-month limit for a decision.

Updating the British parliament on the situation in Syria, foreign minister David Lammy warned that developments could potentially trigger more migration into European states.

"Seeing so many start to return to Syria is a positive sign for their hopes for a better future now that Assad is gone," Lammy told parliament.

"But a lot depends on what happens now. This flow into Syria could quickly become a flow back out and potentially increase the numbers using dangerous illegal migration routes to continental Europe and the United Kingdom."



## Rams Hold on to Edge Bills in High-Scoring Contest

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Puka Nacua finished with 178 yards from scrimmage and a pair of touchdowns, and the Los Angeles Rams held on for a 44-42 win over the visiting Buffalo Bills despite Josh Allen's record-setting six-touchdown performance.

Nacua caught 12 passes for 162 yards and a touchdown, and he rushed for 16 yards and another score for Los Angeles (7-6). Kyren Williams added 87 yards and two touchdowns on the ground, and Cooper Kupp finished with five catches for 92 yards and a score.

Allen became the first player in NFL history to pass for three touchdowns and rush for three touchdowns in a single game for Buffalo (10-3). Allen completed 22 of 37 passes for 342 yards and three touchdowns, and he carried the ball 10 times for 82 yards and three touchdowns.

Matthew Stafford completed 23 of 30 passes for 320 yards and two touchdowns for the Rams, who have won two games in a row and three of their past four.

Eagles 22, Panthers 16: Jalen Hurts threw 4 yards to Grant Calcaterra for Philadelphia's only second-half scoring drive as the Eagles held off visiting Carolina.

Hurts threw for two touchdowns and finished with 108 yards on 14-for-21 passing. He also ran for a score. Saquon Barkley rushed for 124 yards as the Eagles (11-2) won their ninth game in a row.

Bryce Young was 19-for-34 for 191 yards, a touchdown pass and an interception for Carolina. The Panthers (3-10), who outgained the Eagles 302-292, lost their third game in a row, including their previous two losses on game-ending field goals at home to Kansas City and Tampa Bay.

Chiefs 19, Chargers 17: Patrick Mahomes threw for 210 yards and a touchdown, Matthew Wright made a 31-yard field goal off the left upright as time expired and Kansas City clinched another AFC West title with a victory over visiting Los Angeles.

Mahomes guided a 14-play, 47-yard drive, which was capped by Wright's game-winning kick, as the Chiefs extended their NFL record to 15 consecutive one-score victories going back to last season, counting playoff games. Isiah Pacheco had 55 yards rushing and Travis Kelce finished with five receptions for 45 yards. Kansas City won its ninth consecutive division title.

Justin Herbert had 213 yards passing with a touchdown, and Joshua Palmer had six receptions for 78 yards for the Chargers. Quentin Johnston had five receptions for 48 yards and a TD for Los Angeles, which

lost for just the second time in its past seven games.

Steelers 27, Browns 14: Russell Wilson threw two touchdown passes to help Pittsburgh cruise to a victory over visiting Cleveland.

Najee Harris rushed for a touchdown and Van Jefferson and Pat Freiermuth caught scoring passes for Pittsburgh (10-3), which has won seven of its last eight games. Cameron Heyward had two sacks and Keanu Benton and James Pierre had interceptions for the Steelers. Wilson completed 15 of 26 passes for 158 yards.

Jameis Winston completed 24 of 41 passes for 212 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions for the Browns. Jerry Jeudy and David Njoku caught touchdown passes for Cleveland (3-10), which has lost two straight games and nine of its last 11. Myles Garrett recovered a fumble and registered a sack to raise his career total to 99.5.

Dolphins 32, Jets 26 (overtime): Tua Tagovailoa tossed a 10-yard touchdown pass to Jonnu Smith on the first possession of overtime as Miami defeated visiting New York. Tagovailoa passed for 331 yards and two touchdowns as Miami (6-7) kept its playoff hopes alive.

The game featured six lead changes, and it was the ninth straight year that the Dolphins beat the Jets at home. Tyreek Hill caught 10 passes for 115 yards and one TD. Jaylen Waddle caught nine passes for 99 yards and a two-point conversion.

Aaron Rodgers passed for 339 yards and one touchdown, but New York (3-10) still lost its fourth straight game.

Vikings 42, Falcons 21: Sam Darnold completed 22 of 28 passes for 347 yards and a career-high five touchdowns, and Minnesota pulled away to beat Atlanta in Minneapolis.

Jordan Addison had eight catches for 133 yards and a career-high three touchdowns for the Vikings (11-2), who won their sixth consecutive game. Justin Jefferson had seven catches for 132 yards and two touchdowns.

Tyler Allgeier (nine carries for 63 yards) and Bijan Robinson (22 attempts for 92 yards) rushed for one touchdown apiece for the Falcons (6-7).  
 01 yards.

## Messi Excluded as Bellingham and Real Dominate FIFPRO Honors



LONDON (Dispatches) - Six players from Champions League winners Real Madrid and four from Manchester City feature in this year's FIFPRO World 11 announced on Monday by the global players' association, with Lionel Messi absent for the first time in almost 20 years.

The 2024 FIFPRO World 11 is the first edition since 2006 to exclude Messi. The Argentinian, who holds the all-time record with 17 selections, was replaced in the front row by Erling Haaland, Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Jr.

Jude Bellingham topped the men's overall voting, with the Real Madrid and England midfielder receiving 11,176 selections from his peers.

Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk was the sole player outside of Real and City included in the men's team of the year.

English players led the 2024 Women's World 11 with five selected: Lucy Bronze, Mary Earp, Alex Greenwood, Lauren James, and Keira Walsh.

Bronze's seventh selection tied her with Wendie Renard for the women's appearance record. Zambian Barbara Banda became the first African player in the Women's World 11.

**MEN'S WORLD 11**  
 Goalkeeper: Ederson (Manchester City, Brazil)  
 Defenders: Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid, Spain), Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool, Netherlands), Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid, Germany)  
 Midfielders: Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid, England), Kevin De Bruyne (City, Belgium), Toni Kroos (Real Madrid, Germany), Rodri (City, Spain)  
 Forwards: Erling Haaland (City, Norway), Kylian Mbappe (Paris St Germain/Real Madrid, France), Vinicius Jr (Real Madrid, Brazil)

## Towns Takes Over Late, Knicks Top Raptors

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Karl-Anthony Towns scored the go-ahead layup in the final minute and had 24 points and 15 rebounds as the visiting New York Knicks defeated the Toronto Raptors 113-108 on Monday night.

Towns followed his key basket with a 3-pointer to clinch New York's fifth win in its past six games.

Mikal Bridges added 23 points for New York, Jalen Brunson had 20 points and 11 assists, Josh Hart scored 10 points, and former Raptor OG Anunoby had 14 points and three blocked shots.

Former Knick RJ Barrett scored 30 points for the Raptors. Scottie Barnes scored 15 points before leaving the game with an ankle injury in the third quarter. Jakob Poeltl had 10 points and 12 rebounds and Ja'Kobe Walter scored a career-best 19 points off the bench.

The Knicks led 34-27 after one quarter and used a 7-0 spurt to lead by 11 points with 7:18 to play in the second quarter. Toronto scored 13 straight points to take a 55-53 lead with 2:35 remaining. The Raptors led 61-60 at halftime after Brunson missed two free throws with six seconds remaining.

Barnes hit consecutive 3-pointers to give Toronto a five-point lead with 8:23 to play in the third quarter.

Barnes and Towns were both down on the floor after tangling feet with 6:47 to play in the third. Barnes, who was called for a foul on



the play, limped to the dressing room. Towns stayed on the court and made two free throws. Barnes (sprained right ankle) did not return. Toronto led 86-83 after three quarters.

New York took a two-point lead on a 3-pointer by Towns with 5:12 to go in the game. Barrett tied the game on a layup and Davion Mitchell's 3-pointer gave Toronto a 104-101 lead.

Brunson converted a four-point play to put New York ahead by one with 3:03 left. Toronto regained the lead on Mitchell's layup but

Bridges answered with a 3-pointer with 1:38 left. Barrett's layup tied the game with 42 seconds remaining, setting up the final sequence in which Towns put the game away.

Meanwhile Anthony Davis scored 30 points and had 11 rebounds, D'Angelo Russell added 28 points with 14 assists and the Los Angeles Lakers beat the Portland Trail Blazers 107-98 without LeBron James.

With James missing his first game of the season because of a left foot contusion, Max Christie started his second game for the Lakers and scored four points with four rebounds.

Rui Hachimura scored 23 points for Los Angeles, which ended a three-game losing streak. The Lakers had dropped seven of their previous nine games.

Deandre Ayton scored 14 points with 19 rebounds for the Trail Blazers, who lost their fourth consecutive game and have dropped six of their last seven. Shaedon Sharpe scored 19 points for Portland, which was coming off a 42-point loss to the Utah Jazz at home Friday.

Russell had a season high with his 14 assists and it came in a reserve role. Russell was the starting point guard for the first eight games before he was moved to the bench. He started two games last week with Austin Reaves nursing a pelvic injury.

## Sainz Bids Farewell to Ferrari With Bittersweet Podium Finish



ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Carlos Sainz bowed out of Ferrari with bittersweet feelings after one final appearance on the podium at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

The Spaniard, second to former McLaren teammate Lando Norris with Ferrari teammate Charles Leclerc third, will be testing with Williams on Tuesday as he starts a new chapter of his career.

"It hasn't been an easy weekend for me, obviously, knowing it was the last one," he told reporters, admitting to hiding his emotions.

"I did the best I could to stay focused and to do the maximum that the car could do today, I think.

"Maybe it was in the helmet. Maybe it was in the 10 minutes prior to a race when I was in the car. Maybe it was the in-lap. Maybe you'll never know," he said of where he really felt emotional.

Sainz leaves after four seasons as a four times race winner, two of them this year, to make way for seven times world champion Lewis Hamilton.

When he joined from McLaren he had two podiums. He leaves Ferrari with 27.

"I knew that was obviously going to be my last race with a group of people that I've enjoyed these last four years. The last time that I would jump in a Ferrari car, probably," he said.

"I tried to remind myself to try and enjoy the race as much as possible and to give the absolute maximum for this team. Jumping out of the car, I already had the bittersweet feeling."

Sainz said he had proven to himself and the world that he could fight for victories and podiums, given the right car, and his target now was to help former champions Williams get back to where they once were.

He recognized however that it might take time to adjust to his new surroundings, even if he was highly motivated by the challenge.

"I'm not going to lie, my last laps, as much as I was pushing like hell for this team... I was already starting to feel things in the car and trying to say 'remember how this feels.'

"Because tomorrow and Tuesday I need to remember why is this car quick in this corner and why does it feel good? I know probably what I'm going to find tomorrow and Tuesday needs some margin of improvement in the corners."

## Sabalenka Named WTA Player of the Year

LONDON (Dispatches) - Aryna Sabalenka has been voted the WTA Player of the Year for the first time after the Belarusian won two Grand Slam titles and secured the year-end world number one ranking, the governing body of women's tennis said.

After successfully defending her Australian Open trophy in January, Sabalenka won the U.S. Open crown in September for her third Grand Slam title and leapfrogged Iga Swiatek to top the world rankings a month later.

She also won tournaments in Cincinnati and Wuhan to end her 2024 campaign with four titles.

International tennis media also voted for Paris Olympics gold medalists Sara Errani and Jasmine Paolini as the year's top doubles team, while American Emma Navarro was named the season's most improved player.

Ranked 38th at the end of 2023, Navarro broke into the top 10 in September after winning her first title in Hobart and making six semifinal appearances, including at Flushing Meadows, during the season.

Lulu Sun won the Newcomer of the Year award following the New Zealander's run to the quarter-finals at Wimbledon as a qualifier,



which helped her climb to 40th in the world after being ranked outside the top 200 in January.

Former world number two Paula Badosa, who ended her 2023 season early due to a back problem that cast doubt about her future in the game, was named Comeback Player of the Year.

After returning to the tour this season, the Spaniard won the

Washington title and also matched her best Grand Slam performance by reaching the U.S. Open quarters to finish the year ranked 12th.

Meanwhile former Wimbledon finalist Nick Kyrgios and Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic will play their first Grand Slam after long absences at next month's Australian Open with protected rankings, tournament organizers said.

Kyrgios, who will play with a protected ranking of 21st, has not played in a Grand Slam since 2022 due to knee, foot and wrist injuries. Bencic, who gave birth to a daughter in April, will return with a special ranking of 15th.

"Kyrgios and Bencic are among six men and six women competing... using protected rankings, setting the main-draw entry ranking cut-off for both fields at world No. 98," the organizers said in a statement.

Former world number four Kei Nishikori will also play with a protected ranking, making his first appearance in the Australian Open men's singles since 2021, the statement added.

Defending champions Jannik Sinner and Aryna Sabalenka, who are at the top of the men's and women's rankings, will be the top seeds at Melbourne Park, with 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic eyeing a record 11th Australian Open title.