

A Top Russian Lawmaker Has Called for Admitting Iran in a Eurasian Security Bloc Known as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Saying the Issue Will Be Examined

The Minority Rights Research Center Has Been Opened at Shahid Beheshti University (SBU) in Tehran, With Members of the Iranian Parliament and University Researchers in Attendance

2 DOMESTIC



President Calls for Administrative Reforms and Smart Government to Combat Corruption, Inefficiency

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Syria's New PM Calls for Stability as Assad's Reign Ends

> SEE PAGE 3



Iran Urges E3 to Abandon Pressure Policy, Work to Salvage JCPOA



TEHRAN - Iran has rejected Western allegations of non-compliance with its JCPOA commitments as "disingenuous and hypocritical," urging the European parties to the 2015 nuclear accord to abandon their campaign of pressure against Iran and make real efforts to revive the deal.

The call was made by Iran's UN envoy, Amir-Saeid Irvani, in a letter addressed to the UN Security Council and UN Chief Antonio Guterres.

The letter was responding to a joint statement by France, Germany, and the UK that accused Iran of failing to honor its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal and UNSC Resolution 2231, urging the country to halt what they termed as "nuclear escalation."

The European statement came after a report by the UN nuclear watchdog indicating that Tehran had stepped up uranium enrichment activity, fulfilling its pledge to respond to a Western-sponsored censure resolution criticizing the country for what was described as a lack of cooperation with the IAEA.

Iran has reduced its commitments under the JCPOA over the past years following the re-imposition of sanctions lifted under the accord and the failure of European parties to compensate for the losses incurred by Iran.

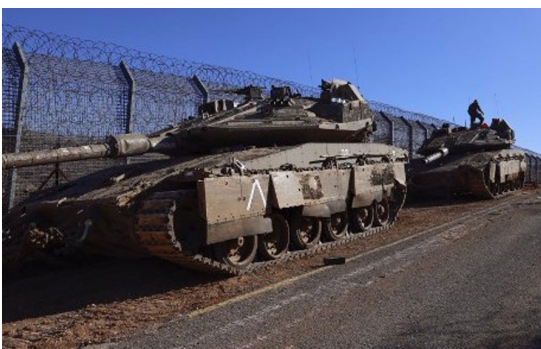
Irvani's statement asserted that the E3 claims ignore the context of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the subsequent failure of the E3 to fulfill their commitments.

It stated that Iran has made significant efforts to salvage the accord despite these challenges.

"Any allegation regarding Iran's implementation of its JCPOA commitments is fundamentally flawed when divorced from the full context of the U.S. withdrawal. Such a claim ignores Iran's sustained efforts to uphold the deal despite persistent provocations and violations by the U.S. and E3/EU, rendering it arbitrary and devoid of substantive validity."

The statement emphasized that the root cause of the situation stems from the US withdrawal from the deal and the failure of the E3 to fulfill their own commitments.

Israeli Tanks Reach Outskirts of Damascus Amid Intense Strikes on Syria



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - The Israeli military has occupied several villages south of Damascus, with its tanks now being stationed around 20 kilometers from the outskirts of the Syrian capital, a new report says.

Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television network reported on Tuesday that the Israeli tanks have moved past the southwestern Syrian city of Quneitra and reached 3 kilometers away from the town of Qatana, near Damascus.

Israel started the push to expand its occupation of Syria on Sunday, after foreign-backed militants, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), announced the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government following a rapid two-week offensive that led to the capture of Damascus.

Israeli forces seized the buffer zone that separates the occupied Golan Heights from the rest of Syria in violation of a 1974 disengagement agreement between the Tel Aviv regime and Syria.

They also captured the strategic Mount Hermon in Golan, which provides high ground for the entire area.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the Syrian Golan Heights will remain part of the occupied territories "for eternity."

Israel's exploitation of the current chaotic situation to deploy its occupation forces to Syria has drawn condemnations from regional countries.

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



What Happened in Syria Plotted by U.S., Israel

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says what happened in Syria was a "joint American and Zionist plot", even though a neighboring country played a role.

"There should be no doubt that what happened in Syria was plotted in the command rooms of the United States and Israel. We have evidence for this," Ayatollah Khamenei told a group of people in Tehran Wednesday.

"One of the neighboring countries of Syria also played a role, but the primary planners are the US and the Zionist regime," the Leader added, apparently referring to Turkey.

Ayatollah Khamenei quashed speculations about the weakening of the resistance front after militants and Takfiri terrorists overran the Syrian capital, assuring that it will become stronger.

"This is what the resistance is, this is what the resistance front is. The more you push, the stronger it becomes; the more you commit crimes, the more motivated it becomes. The more you fight with them, the more widespread it will be, and I tell you, by the Divine Power, the domain of resistance will cover the entire region more than before."

The Leader also dismissed some analysis that a weakened resistance front would amount to Iran's weakening.

"That ignorant analyst, unaware of the meaning of resistance, imagines that when the resistance becomes weak, Islamic Iran will also become weak, and I say that by God's will and power and with the permission of God Almighty, Iran is strong and powerful and will only grow more powerful."

Ayatollah Khamenei touched on divisions among the militant groups in Syria, saying each group has its own agenda and all seek to stake out their own turf.

Ultimately, the Leader said, they will be evicted from Syria by the "zealous Syrian youth, so will the Americans who seek to strengthen their foothold in the country."

"Each of these attackers has their own agenda and their goals are different. Some of them are seeking to seize land in the north of Syria or in the south. The US is looking to strengthen its foothold in the region."

Iran's Home-Made Plane Flies Over Persian Gulf

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's domestically-developed plane Simorgh has been unveiled to the public at an aviation show being held in southern Iran.

Simorgh carried out its maiden flight in the Persian Gulf skies on Wednesday. The aircraft, which had undergone its test flight on May 30, 2023, was unveiled during an airshow being held on Kish Island.

Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh also attended the airshow, dubbed the 12th International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition of Iran.

Nasirzadeh said on the sidelines of the event that Simorgh has been designed and manufactured by the Defense Ministry in collaboration with domestic knowledge-based companies, adding that the aircraft meets international standards and



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

regulations.

The minister added that the presence of various companies and aviation professionals at the airshows fosters synergy between various sections of the Iranian aviation industry.

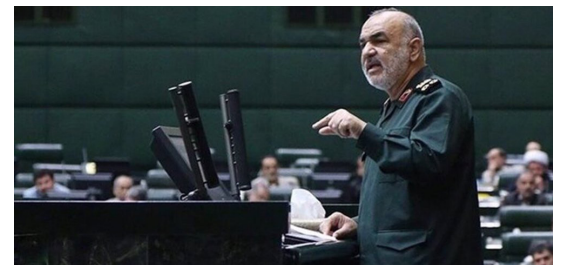
Meanwhile, Commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi also said during the event that Iran had achieved self-sufficiency in the aviation sector.

He asserted that sanctions have failed to diminish the nation's resolve for progress or its capabilities.

The general noted that the aircraft displayed at the ongoing airshow in Kish are home-made and have been manufactured as part of a partnership between the Defense Ministry's industrial companies and the IRIAF.

The Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition in Kish will run from December 10 to 13, 2024.

Iran Pursuing Israel's Collapse; Tehran's Power Impervious to Syria Situation



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says Iran is vigorously pursuing the downfall of the occupying Zionist regime, stressing that Iranian Armed Forces have the enemies' strategic and vital interests in West Asia in the crosshairs.

Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks on Tuesday as he attended a closed-door briefing session at the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) on Tuesday over the situation in Syria, after militants, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), seized the capital Damascus and declared the end of President Bashar al-Assad's 24-year rule.

Briefing reporters after the session, the spokesperson for the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Ebrahim Rezaei, said the IRGC chief provided an in-depth analysis of the status quo in West Asia, stating, "Our sphere of power and influence has not shrunk, and our military might has not suffered a setback at all."

Salami also stressed that attempts aimed at the downfall of the Zionist regime remain high on the Islamic Republic's agenda, praising the influential role of the late top Iranian anti-terror commander, Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, in the elimination of the Takfiri Daesh terrorist group, Rezaei added.

The IRGC chief also underscored that forces within the Axis of Resistance have gained self-sufficiency in developing various types of munitions and military hardware, the Iranian legislator pointed out.

Moreover, Ahmad Naderi, a member of the Presiding Board of Iran's Parliament, said the closed-door briefing session mainly touched upon Iran's military strategies in the region, Israeli offensives and how to confront them, as well as the security, intelligence and military status of West Asia.

The session also dealt with the collapse of Assad's government, possible regional developments in the future. It was underscored that Iranian military advisors were present in Syria until the last moments of the former government, but none is current deployed to the Arab nation now, Naderi said.

Tehran Rejects Latest E3 Allegations About Its Peaceful Nuclear Program



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has rejected the latest allegations about its peaceful nuclear program by three European countries, saying it will give an appropriate response to any confrontational move.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei made the remarks on Tuesday while responding to a joint statement by France, Germany, and the UK that accused Iran of failing to honor its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal and UNSC Resolution 2231, urging Iran to halt what they termed as "nuclear escalation."

The European statement came after a report by the UN nuclear watchdog indicating that Tehran had stepped up uranium enrichment activity, fulfilling its pledge to respond to a Western-sponsored censure resolution criticizing the country for what was described as a lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran has reduced its commitments under the JCPOA over the past years following the re-imposition of sanctions lifted under the accord and the failure of European parties to compensate for the losses incurred by Iran.

Baghaei said the recent decision of the Iranian government was to activate more advanced centrifuges, within the framework of specific rights given under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and with due notification and under the supervision of the IAEA.

"As a responsible member of the IAEA, the Islamic Republic of Iran has proven its commitment to cooperation with this institution, and the understandings reached during the visit of the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency to Tehran on 14-15 November," he said.

The spokesman added that "it is regrettable that the three European countries, regardless of the achievements of the Director General's visit, which could have been a basis for strengthening cooperation in the future, insisted on their unconstructive approach and proceeded to pass a resolution against Iran."

IRAN NEWS



Iran Assumes Rotating Presidency of OPEC for 2025

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad was appointed as Rotating President of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Conference for 2025 by alphabetical order during a ministerial meeting on Tuesday which was held via videoconference and chaired by Marcel Abeke, the Gabonese petroleum minister and OPEC conference president for 2024. Iran has assumed the rotating presidency of the OPEC for 2025, a sign the country is still a major player in the bloc despite US sanctions seeking to restrict its oil exports. The ministerial meeting convenes twice a year to review the general affairs of the 12-member OPEC and discuss its key internal matters. Paknejad said in the meeting that it was an honor for him and Iran as a founding member of the OPEC to assume its presidency at a time when the organization needs more unity to deal with "sensitive and complicated" issues in the global energy market.

Russian Cruise Ships to Dock at Bandar Anzali



TEHRAN - During his visit to the Anzali Port Complex, Ali Akbar Safaei, Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development, emphasized efforts to promote passenger and tourism sea transportation in the Caspian Sea, particularly in the Gilan Province, with Bandar Anzali as a focal point.

Highlighting a recent meeting with the Governor of Gilan and the province's strategic focus on tourism and maritime travel, Safaei expressed hope for launching tourism and cruise services in the Caspian Sea through detailed planning and feasibility studies.

Safaei mentioned ongoing discussions with Russian officials to facilitate the entry of large cruise ships from Russia to Bandar Anzali. He stated that necessary arrangements have been made, and the arrival of these cruise ships could significantly boost maritime tourism for both domestic and international visitors.

Regarding local tourism, Safaei noted the efforts to dredge channels within the Anzali Lagoon to ensure safe and smooth navigation for passenger boats, allowing tourists to explore the lagoon's natural beauty.

The head of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization highlighted plans to establish passenger and tourism sea lines within Gilan's ports, including Anzali, Caspian, and Chamkhaleh, as the first phase of a broader initiative. These lines are expected to start operations either this year or next, depending on the progress of preparations.

Safaei also affirmed the organization's commitment to supporting investors in the maritime tourism and passenger transportation sectors. Financial incentives, including loans for purchasing passenger vessels, are being offered, with long-term plans to manufacture these vessels domestically. This initiative aims to stimulate economic growth and create jobs in northern Iran.

President Calls for Administrative Reforms and Smart Government to Combat Corruption, Inefficiency



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian stated that despite the large number of oversight organizations, the country's administrative health remains unsatisfactory. He emphasized the need for the Administrative and Recruitment Organization of Iran to become the central hub for managing the country and called for the recruitment of the most qualified specialists to enhance the efficiency of governance. He argued that strengthening this organization would lead to a more efficient management system for the country.

In a surprise visit on Tuesday, Pezeshkian attended a meeting with the head, deputies, and staff of the Administrative and Recruitment Organization. During the meeting, he listened to a performance report by Aladdin Rafiee-Zadeh, who has been in office for two months, and addressed his key expectations for reforming the country's administrative structure.

The president acknowledged the efforts made so far but noted that the outcomes did not meet expectations. He used examples from various administrative and service sectors to highlight the challenges. Pezeshkian emphasized the importance of defining the scope, process, and cost of every task, stating that administrative functions should be conducted within a clear framework. He stressed that if a task was performed without following this framework, the associated costs should not be borne.

He called for a standardized approach to defining the volume and process of work at all levels, which would link costs to the completion and quality of the work. He warned against creating additional organizations for performance-based payments, which would only add to inefficiency.

Pezeshkian also underlined the significance of collecting successful experiences and global best practices in a structured manner. This would help in improving administrative costs, office space, and human resources. He stressed that the integration of these practices into digital systems would help eliminate corruption and facilitate the efficient management of resources.

The president also pointed out that despite having numerous oversight bodies, Iran's administrative health remains poor, and this issue could be addressed through the accurate and effective implementation of a smart government system. He emphasized that this system would be instrumental in reducing corruption and inefficiency.

The president reiterated the importance of leveraging global expertise and experiences to reform the administrative system. He urged the country's experts to collaborate with successful international models and suggested that it is crucial to select competent, motivated, and skilled managers to implement these changes effectively. The process of reform, according to Pezeshkian, requires individuals who are both knowledgeable and committed to improving the

system.

He also called for the involvement of the country's universities in reform efforts and stressed the need to change the current mindset in administrative structures. Instead of defining positions and then selecting individuals for them, Pezeshkian proposed that organizations should first define roles based on the best methods for completing tasks and providing services, and then select the right individuals for these positions.

The president highlighted the importance of continuous training for employees to improve teamwork, problem-solving skills, and the capacity to address issues rather than avoid them. He argued that when human resources are not placed in the right positions, it leads to poor performance, dissatisfaction from the public, and frustration among employees.

Pezeshkian urged the Administrative and Recruitment Organization to finalize its operational plans quickly and suggested using the opportunity of the Ramadan month for pilot projects in specific geographic or administrative areas. He emphasized that true self-improvement and service to the public could be achieved by implementing these reform models.

The president also emphasized that the country's organizations must have clear strategic plans that align with their missions. He expressed concern that many managers lack a clear vision for the future of their organizations and do not know how to implement long-term strategies, which hampers the country's progress.

On a practical level, the president proposed a national identification system integrating national ID numbers and postal codes across all sectors. He argued that this system could help eliminate economic crimes and tax evasion by creating a unified record for every individual's activities, particularly in financial and business sectors.

Pezeshkian concluded by stressing the importance of public involvement in the reform process. He stated that reforming the inefficient administrative system requires a nationwide mobilization effort, with government institutions working together to implement these changes effectively.

Aladdin Rafiee-Zadeh, the head of the Administrative and Recruitment Organization, provided a report on the two months of work since his appointment. He acknowledged the difficulties of implementing such reforms, noting that in all countries, such changes require strong presidential support and cooperation from the entire government. He also highlighted the issue of illegal administrative organizations in Iran, which need to be reorganized urgently.

Signs of Revival in the Capital Market and Gradual Return of Confidence

TEHRAN - The Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance announced a noticeable revival in the capital market and a gradual restoration of public trust. He expressed confidence that with the upcoming economic stability, the market, which is inherently linked to risk-related issues, will experience significant growth.

Speaking at the inauguration of silver bullion trading on the Commodity Exchange on Tuesday evening, Minister Abdolnaser Hemmati emphasized that his primary focus in the administration is achieving economic growth, which he considers the foundation of the country's progress. "We cannot neglect this critical goal," he stated.

Hemmati highlighted the importance of utilizing all available tools to achieve economic growth. "These tools can be found in both the monetary market and the capital market," he said, adding that the government is placing special emphasis on the capital market to ensure its role in financing the country's needs.

The minister expressed satisfaction with the expansion of derivative markets during his tenure, stating, "Derivatives markets have the potential to issue securities worth hundreds of times the assets registered as certificates in these markets, reducing risks for the market, producers, and traders alike."

He described the development as a significant and noble step for the country, particularly benefiting producers. Hemmati also reflected on his time at the Central Bank, mentioning previous challenges in selling domestically mined gold due to strict valuation and regulatory



standards. "We have now overcome those hurdles in the gold sector, ensuring proper financing for the industry," he said.

The minister suggested similar measures could be applied to other sectors, including silver, copper, petrochemicals, and more. He praised the recent steps taken in the capital market, indicating the Ministry of Economy's readiness to deepen market operations

further. "Claims of money laundering or irregularities in these transactions can no longer hold ground," he asserted.

Hemmati highlighted two significant initiatives undertaken in recent months, describing them as pivotal despite their initial small scale. "What matters is the nature of these initiatives, which aim to provide financial resources for economic growth," he explained. He noted that industries like gold, copper, and silver manufacturing could now channel their surplus production into the capital market, helping individuals protect their wealth against inflation and economic fluctuations through valuable commodities.

Regarding currency futures and bonds, Hemmati stressed the importance of coordination with the Central Bank, noting the sensitive nature of currency-backed instruments. "This issue requires careful attention to facilitate progress in the market," he said.

Hemmati also underscored the challenges of fighting corruption, stating, "Rent-seeking has deeply rooted itself in various aspects of the country. However, we are striving for transparency in transactions, pushing the economy toward competitiveness, and eliminating price controls."

Tehran, Belgrade Explore Ways to Strengthen Economic Cooperation



TEHRAN - In a meeting between the Serbian Ambassador and Iran's Minister of Economy, both sides emphasized the need to enhance economic collaboration between Tehran and Belgrade.

According to a report by the Iranian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, Demir Kovacevic, Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia, met with Abdolnasser Hemmati, Iran's Minister of Economy. The meeting, held at the Ministry's headquarters, highlighted the commitment of the political leaders of Iran and Serbia to fostering bilateral economic ties.

Ambassador Kovacevic reiterated Serbia's strong political will to develop economic relations with Iran. He extended an invitation for Iran's President and Parliament Speaker to visit Serbia, underlining Belgrade's readiness for deeper cooperation.

Referring to the bilateral agreements on avoiding double taxation and mutual investment protection signed in recent years, Kovacevic expressed Serbia's eagerness to implement these agreements. He also called for holding a joint commission between the two countries before the end of the Persian calendar year 1403 (March 2025).

Iran's Minister of Economy, Abdolnasser Hemmati, highlighted Iran's significant potential for investment, citing the country's vast mineral and energy resources, along with a skilled and educated workforce. Hemmati described Iran as an attractive destination for Serbian investors and assured that during the 14th administration, there are no obstacles to enhancing bilateral relations between the governments and peoples of Iran and Serbia.

Target Set to Increase Rail Transport Between Iran, Turkey by 400,000 Tons



TABRIZ - The Director General of the Azerbaijan Railway Department announced that the current annual rail transit volume between Iran and Turkey stands at 600,000 tons, with plans in place to increase this figure to one million tons per year.

Speaking on the sidelines of the 46th joint border meeting between Azerbaijan Railways and Malatya Railways of Turkey in Tabriz on Tuesday, Alireza Soleimani said: "The primary goal of this meeting is to address the technical and commercial issues related to rail transport between the two countries, aiming to increase rail trade volumes."

He continued: "Iran is working to enhance the East-West corridor, thereby increasing the commercial exchanges between the two countries, whether in terms of transit or imports and exports. The initial goal is to raise the annual volume of freight to one million tons."

Soleimani emphasized that both rail networks have the capacity to handle more freight, and efforts are underway to reach the target based on the decisions made during these discussions.

He added: "Freight transport is managed by private companies in Iran and the Turkish transport companies. We have the necessary wagon and logistics capacity to achieve this goal, and the development of trade exchanges between the two countries depends on demand in both directions, in terms of cargo volume."

"The aim is to attract more traders and businesses to rail transport, especially for goods suitable for rail shipment," he concluded.

Ali Karabi, the Director of Region 5 of Malatya Railways in Turkey, also spoke on the objectives of these meetings, stating: "In these sessions, we aim to assess and resolve the mutual problems. So far, we have found good solutions to many of these issues."

He mentioned that these annual meetings, held twice a year in both countries, have been taking place for the past 23 years. "The goal is to further develop rail transport between Iran and Turkey and increase the exchange to at least one million tons per year," Karabi said.

He added that achieving this target is not out of reach, considering the capacities of both sides, and expressed hope that the goal will be met in the coming years.

Abdulkader Tash, the regional director of Tashmajelk Transport Company, also participated in the discussions. He emphasized that addressing existing challenges and expanding rail freight transport are key objectives of these bilateral meetings.

Export Platform for Visual Arts to European Market Unveiled



TEHRAN - A new export platform for Iranian visual arts to the European market was unveiled, initiated by the Iran Trade Center in Poland and Norway.

According to the Iran Trade Promotion Organization (ITPO), Ahmad Firouzi, Director General of Europe and America at the organization, remarked at the event: "The ITPO is the primary body responsible for developing Iran's foreign trade. It strives to assist in the export of various products, including creative industries, using diverse tools."

He continued, "The Visual Arts Department, in collaboration with the Trade Center in Poland and Norway, is being launched. This year, we are celebrating the 550th anniversary of Iran-Poland relations, and the field of culture and art can serve as a beacon for our cooperation."

The head of the Iran Trade Center in Poland and Norway also spoke during the event, highlighting the organization's global presence. "We have nearly 50 trade centers around the world, and the Iran Trade Center in Poland has been tasked with establishing the Visual Arts Department," said Ali Reza Moghaddam.

He added, "Art, handicrafts, and culture have no borders. The Visual Arts Department encourages veteran artists to assist younger generations in entering the international stage."

Moghaddam further mentioned that the department was launched after eight months of effort, and the Iran Trade Center in Poland is requesting that other Iranian trade centers worldwide support the development of this initiative.

Additionally, the Economic Advisor to the Norwegian Embassy expressed support for the Visual Arts Department during the unveiling ceremony. "Art brings people and cultures closer together, and when that happens, the path for economic activities becomes smoother," said Mahmoud Karimi. "The Norwegian Embassy is willing to collaborate with Iranian artists."

Reza Khodadadi, a painter and faculty member at the University of Art, also attended the event, expressing his joy at the cross-border cultural and artistic initiative. "UNESCO has long emphasized the importance of art, and it is likely that many modern technologies will be discarded in the years ahead, but art will remain," he said.

Human Trafficking Rises Sharply After Dropping During Pandemic

VIENNA (Dispatches) - Human trafficking has risen sharply due to conflicts, climate-induced disasters and global crises, according to a United Nations report published on Wednesday.

In 2022, the latest year for which data is widely available, the number of known victims worldwide rose to 25% above 2019's pre-pandemic levels, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons said. A sharp fall in 2020 had largely disappeared by the following year.

"Criminals are increasingly trafficking people into forced labour, including to coerce them into running sophisticated online scams and cyberfraud, while women and girls face the risk of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence," the report said, adding that organised crime was mainly responsible.



China Open to Dialogue as No Winners in Trade War With U.S.



BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that there would be "no winners" in a trade war with the United States and vowed the country would hit its growth goals for the year.

Former US president Donald Trump - who returns to the White House next month - unleashed a gruelling trade war with China during his first term in office, lambasting alleged intellectual property theft and other "unfair" practices.

He has pledged to impose even higher tariffs on China after taking office on January 20, as Beijing is grappling with a shaky post-pandemic economic recovery.

"Tariff wars, trade wars, and technology wars go against historical trends and economic rules, and there will be no winners," Xi said of China-US relations while meeting several heads of multilateral financial institutions in Beijing, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

"China is willing to maintain dialogue with the US government, expand cooperation, manage differences and promote the development of China-US relations in a stable, healthy and sustainable direction," said Xi.

Beijing is targeting annual growth this year of around five percent, despite sluggish domestic consumption, high unemployment and a prolonged crisis in the vast property sector.

Xi also said during Tuesday's meeting that China had "full confidence" in achieving its 2024 growth goal, state media reported.

His remarks came as official data showed the country's exports rose last month at a slower rate than expected while imports shrunk further, underscoring the challenges China is still facing.

The latest reading reinforced the need for more support a day after top officials pledged to bolster stuttering growth.

Overseas shipments this year have represented a rare bright spot in the Chinese economy, with domestic spending mired in a slump and persistent woes in the property sector spooking investors.

French Party Leaders Meet With Macron



PARIS (Dispatches) - French President Emmanuel Macron aims to name a new Prime Minister "within 48 hours", party chiefs who met him on Tuesday told AFP, after premier Michel Barnier was toppled last week.

Macron had gathered leaders of major political parties at his Élysée Palace office in a bid to thrash out the conditions for a new government that could escape losing a no-confidence vote in France's hung parliament.

Shutting out the far-right National Rally (RN) and hard-left France Unbowed (LFI), Macron's initiative came as caretaker ministers scramble to clarify France's 2025 finances, after the last administration fell over its cost-cutting budget.

People close to Macron said he would propose "a method" to find a new government despite France's hung parliament.

Barnier had been supported by the conservative Les Républicains and Macron's centrist camp. But the alliance was far short of a majority in a National Assembly and was brought down by a left-wing alliance, including LFI, and the far-right National Rally (RN).

It was unclear how a broader base of support could be built for any new government.

Most leaders are unwilling to compromise on issues such as last year's unpopular pension reform, or to tarnish their electoral image by co-operating with the unpopular president.



Syria's New PM Calls for Stability as Assad's Reign Ends

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria's new transitional prime minister said it was time for "stability and calm" in the country, two days after longtime president Bashar al-Assad was toppled by rebels in a lightning offensive.

The rebels appointed Mohammad al-Bashir as the transitional head of government to run the country until March 1, a statement said.

"Now it is time for these people to enjoy stability and calm," Bashir told Qatar's Al Jazeera television in his first interview since being appointed.

Assad fled Syria as an Islamist-led opposition alliance swept into the capital Damascus over the weekend, bringing to an end five decades of brutal rule by his clan. A senior official told US broadcaster NBC that the ousted Syrian leader was now in Moscow.

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the Islamist leader who headed the rebel offensive, had previously announced talks on a transfer of power and vowed to pursue former senior officials responsible for torture and war crimes.

He sought to allay fears over how Syria would be ruled, telling British broadcaster Sky News the country was "exhausted" by war and would not be heading back into one.

"Syria will be rebuilt... The country is moving towards development and reconstruction. It's going towards stability," he said. "People are exhausted from war. So the country isn't ready for another one, and it's not going to get into another one."

His group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is rooted in Syria's Al-Qaeda branch and is proscribed by many Western governments as a terrorist organisation, though it has sought to moderate its image.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged all nations to support an "inclusive" political process in Syria, saying the United States would eventually recognise a government if it meets such standards.

Blinken said the future government of Syria should be "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian".

Laying out US priorities, Blinken said the new government must "uphold clear commitments to fully respect the rights of minorities" and allow the flow of humanitarian assistance.

The United States wanted the next government to "prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism", he added. Although they no longer hold any territory in Syria, the jihadists of the Islamic State group remain active.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said IS fighters killed 54 government troops after capturing them as they fled across the vast Syrian desert.

The UN envoy for Syria said the groups that forced Assad to flee must transform their "good messages" into actions on the ground.

"They have been sending messages of unity, of inclusiveness," Geir Pedersen said. "What we need not to see is... that this is not followed up in practice in the days and the weeks ahead of us," he added.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas warned of the risks of sectarian violence and a resurgence of extremism. "We must avoid a repeat of the horrific scenarios in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan," she said.

Syria's nearly 14-year civil war killed 500,000 people and forced half the country to flee their homes, millions of them finding refuge abroad.

The fall of Assad has sparked a frantic search by families of the tens of thousands of people held in his security services' jails and detention centres.

As they advanced towards Damascus, the rebels released thousands of detainees, but many more remain missing.

Syria's White Helmet rescuers called on Russia to pressure Assad into providing maps of secret jails and lists of detainees as they race against time to release prisoners.

A large crowd gathered Monday outside Saydnaya jail, synonymous with the worst atrocities of Assad's rule, to search for relatives, many of whom had spent years in captivity, AFP correspondents reported.

"I'm looking for my brother, who has been missing since 2013. We've looked everywhere for him, we think he's here, in Saydnaya," said 52-year-old Umm Walid.

Crowds of freed prisoners wandered the streets of Damascus, many maimed by torture, weakened by illness and emaciated by hunger.

The United Nations said whoever ended up in power in Syria must hold Assad and his lieutenants to account.

UN investigators who for years have been gathering evidence of horrific crimes called Assad's ouster a "game-changer" because they will now be able to access "the crime scene".

Jolani, who now uses his real name Ahmed al-Sharaa, vowed: "We will not hesitate to hold accountable the criminals, murderers, security and army officers involved in torturing the Syrian people."

While Syrians were celebrating Assad's ouster, the Israeli military said it had conducted hundreds of strikes on Syria over the past two days.

Pedersen, the UN special envoy, called on Israel to stop. "We are continuing to see Israeli movements and bombardments into Syrian territory. This needs to stop," he said.

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Syria's new rulers that he would respond "forcefully" if they allow "Iran to re-establish itself in Syria, or permits the transfer of Iranian weapons or any other weapons to Hezbollah".

Lebanon's Hezbollah meanwhile said it hoped that Syria's new rulers would "take a firm stand against Israeli occupation, while preventing foreign interference in its affairs".

The Britain-based Observatory said Israeli strikes had "destroyed the most important military sites in Syria". The monitor said the strikes targeted weapons depots, naval vessels and a research center that Western governments suspected of having links to chemical weapons production.

Israel, which borders Syria, also sent troops into the UN-patrolled buffer zone east of the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights.

The UN official in New York told AFP that Israeli forces were occupying seven locations in the buffer zone. Israel backer the United States said the incursion must be "temporary", after the United Nations said Israel was violating the 1974 armistice.

The Israeli defence minister said the military had orders to "establish a sterile defence zone free of weapons and terrorist threats in southern Syria, without a permanent Israeli presence."

Fighting also continued in the north of the country, where battles between Turkish-backed and Kurdish-led forces left 218 people dead over the last three days, according to the Observatory.

At Least 127 Killed in Two Days in Sudan Bombardments

CAIRO (Dispatches) - At least 127 people, mostly civilians, were killed in Sudan on Monday and Tuesday by barrel bombs and shelling from the warring sides, rights activists said.

The 20-month-old war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has been turning increasingly bloody as ceasefire efforts have stalled, and crises elsewhere have dominated world attention.

The army has stepped up airstrikes in the half of the country that the RSF controls, while the RSF has staged raids on villages and intense artillery strikes. Both have targeted densely populated civilian areas.

More than eight barrel bombs hit the market in the North Darfur town of Kabkabiya on Monday, the pro-democracy Al-Fashir Resistance Committee said. Emergency Lawyers, a human rights group, said more than 100 had been killed and hundreds wounded.

The army has frequently targeted towns in North Darfur with airstrikes as it fights the RSF for control of the state capital, al-Fashir, its last foothold in the region.



It denied responsibility for the attack on Kabkabiya, while insisting that it had the right to target any location used by the RSF for military purposes. The RSF did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

An image shared by Emergency Lawyers showed shrouded bodies in a mass grave.

Video verified by Reuters showed bloodied bodies strewn around the market. It also showed fires burning and people being carried from the

wreckage of stores and fruit stalls.

People can be heard crying and screaming in the footage, while others pray for those who were killed. One man is heard saying "People are dying wholesale".

The video also shows armed men in the headwraps typically worn by RSF soldiers on motorcycles.

An activist from Kabkabiya said that, while there were typically a few soldiers in the market and other parts of the town, the vast majority of those present were civilians.

He said 87 bodies had been identified, but that some were too charred or mutilated to identify.

On Tuesday, the RSF aimed heavy artillery fire at an army-controlled sector of Omdurman, part of Khartoum state, residents said.

Emergency Lawyers said at least 20 people had been killed, including at least 14 who were riding on a bus that was hit. The state government, controlled by the army, said 65 people had been killed, and that other casualties had been transferred to nearby Al-Naw Hospital.

Images circulating on social media not verified by Reuters showed shrouded bodies on the street amid vehicle wreckage.

Police Raid South Korean President's Office in Martial Law Investigation

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean police said Wednesday that they raided President Yoon Suk Yeol's office, as the investigation into his declaration of martial law gathers pace.

"The Special Investigation Team has conducted a raid on the presidential office, the National Police Agency, the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency, and the National Assembly Security Service," the unit stated in a message sent to AFP.

Yoon is already under a travel ban as part of an "insurrection" probe into his inner circle after his short-lived suspension of civilian rule on December 3.

Former defence minister Kim Yong-hyun was formally arrested late Tuesday on charges of "engaging in critical duties during an insurrection" and "abuse of authority to obstruct the exercise of rights".

On Wednesday, Yonhap reported that Kim had attempted to kill himself shortly before the arrest.

A spokesperson for the Seoul Central District Court told AFP earlier in the day that Kim had been arrested amid concerns that evidence might be destroyed.

Kim said through his lawyers that "all responsibility for this situation lies solely with me" and that subordinates were "merely following my orders and fulfilling their assigned duties".

Kim, who was detained Sunday, has been slapped with a travel ban along with the former interior minister and the general in charge of the martial law operation.



The operation saw troops and helicopters sent to parliament in an apparent -- but failed -- attempt to prevent lawmakers from voting down Yoon's martial law declaration.

Cho Ji-ho, commissioner general of the Korean National Police Agency, and Kim Bong-sik, head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency, were also arrested early Wednesday, police said.

North Korean state media Wednesday made its first comments on what it called "chaos" in the South.

"The shocking incident of the puppet Yoon Suk Yeol, who is facing impeachment and a governance crisis, suddenly declaring a martial law decree and unhesitatingly wielding the guns and knives of its fascist dictatorship wrought chaos across South Korea," a commentary said.

Yoon had said his declaration of martial law was intended, in part, to safeguard South Korea "from the threats posed by North Korea's communist forces and eliminate anti-state elements plundering people's freedom and happiness".

Relations between the two Koreas have been at one of their lowest points in years, with the North launching a flurry of ballistic missiles in violation of UN sanctions.

Former defence minister Kim had been accused by opposition lawmakers of calling for strikes on sites from which North Korea was launching trash-carrying balloons, an order reportedly refused by his subordinates.



Liverpool Stay Perfect; Real Madrid, PSG Revive Champions League Hopes

PARIS (Dispatches) - Mohamed Salah helped maintain Liverpool's perfect record in the Champions League yesterday while holders Real Madrid bounced back from their defeat at Anfield to topple in-form Italians Atalanta.

Elsewhere, struggling Paris Saint-Germain gained a vital win at Salzburg, while Bayer Leverkusen edged Inter Milan to move second.

Aston Villa, in their first appearance in the continent's elite club competition for 41 years, maintained their bright progress beating Leipzig 3-2 to sit third.

The first eight teams qualify directly for the last 16 with those placed ninth to 24 entering a play-off round.

In Spain, Salah's 63rd-minute penalty proved decisive against dogged debutants Girona to extend the Premier League leaders' record to six from six in the revamped format of Europe's flagship club competition.

Under new coach Arne Slot Liverpool are virtually assured a place in the last 16.

"If you ask me about all six games, I'm really pleased with all the results... (but) I'm far from pleased about the performance tonight," Slot told reporters in Girona.

"(We had) hardly any control at all over the game, maybe the second half was a bit better but then I'm trying to be positive."

Salah sent Paulo Gazzaniga the wrong way to net his 50th Champions League goal, pulling the Egyptian level with Filippo Inzaghi as the 10th highest goalscorer of all-time in the competition.

The winger is out of contract at the end of the season but his 16 goals across all competitions have been essential in Liverpool's superb first half of the season.

While Liverpool are sitting pretty with two league phase rounds to come early next year, kings of Europe Real Madrid, beaten 2-0 by Liverpool last time out, have work to do to ensure their progress into the knockout phase.

Kylian Mbappe gave Real a 10th minute lead before hobbling off injured in Atalanta, his strike was cancelled out by Charles de Ketelaere's penalty in first-half additional time.

Real coach Carlo Ancelotti started Vinicius Junior for the first time since a hamstring problem last month. The Brazilian had Real back on top before the hour, with Jude Bellingham also on the scoresheet for a 3-2 win over the Serie A leaders.

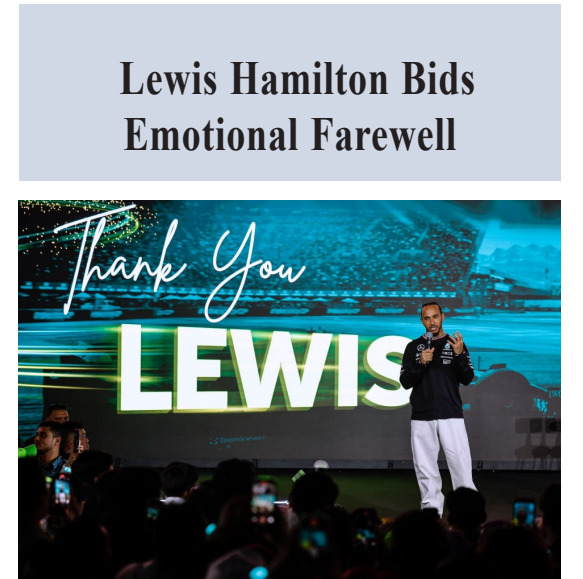
The hard-fought victory moved Real up to 18th on nine points and will have helped to settle any nerves at the 15-time European champions ahead of games against Salzburg and Brest in January.

PSG put the wheels back on their stuttering campaign with a much needed 3-0 defeat on the road at Salzburg.

The French champions went into this encounter in 25th with just four points and three goals scored after five matches.

They approach their last two league outings in provisional 24th - the final berth for the play-offs ahead of Wednesday's games.

Bayern swept aside Ukraine side Shakhtar Donetsk in Gelsenkirchen 5-1. Fellow Bundesliga giants Leverkusen became the first team to score against Inter in this year's competition in a 1-0 win that lifted them five points adrift of Liverpool at the top of the league.



Lewis Hamilton Bids Emotional Farewell

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Seven-time Formula One (F1) world champion Lewis Hamilton who's preparing to bid an emotional farewell to the Mercedes AMG Petronas team will deeply miss his Malaysian fans and the comforting taste of 'roti canai' — a dish that has become a heartfelt tradition during his visits to this vibrant Southeast Asian country.

The 39-year-old British driver however, remains positive and expressed that he would undoubtedly return to Malaysia if the Malaysian Grand Prix (GP) ever returns to the Sepang International Circuit (SIC) in the future.

"Firstly, I'm going to miss them. Obviously, one of the perks or the good parts of the relationship was that Petronas would bring me out here and I'd get to engage with people here in Kuala Lumpur and that's something I'm going to miss.

"And I hope that the GP maybe one day comes back here in the time that I'm still racing. I'll always remember Roti Canai. This is my favorite dish here since the beginning. I'll try and have it tonight," he said when met during an Exclusive Group Media Interview at Petronas Twin Towers, here yesterday.

In another session, a meet-and-greet with fans at Hall 6A-6C, KLCC saw 3,000 lucky winners of the Petronas campaign getting the opportunity to interact with the Greatest of All Time (GOAT) in F1.

Hamilton, who joined Mercedes in 2013 to win six world championships, will be leaving the once-dominating Silver Arrows at the end of this season, which has a 24-race format, to join Ferrari in 2025.

The seven-time world champion (2008, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020), sharing the honour of most F1 world championship title victories with the sport's great Michael Schumacher is also determined to go for a record eighth world championship.

On stage, Hamilton expressed that Malaysian fans have always been warm and supportive while encouraging them not to let anyone discourage their goals, as only they know what is best for themselves.

Meanwhile, one of the fans, Har Gobind Singh, 22, who tries to attend every event involving Hamilton and is willing to spend money to watch the F1 if it's held in Singapore with seven other friends said it was a historic moment before Hamilton bids farewell and change to another team.

"It's always the eight of us. It started from 2015, we always tried to be there for Hamilton and for us we hope the best for him after these," he said.

Antetokounmpo, Bucks Edge Magic, Advance in NBA Cup

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Giannis Antetokounmpo dropped 37 points to lead Milwaukee to a 114-109 win over the visiting Orlando Magic, advancing the Bucks to the NBA Cup semifinals in Las Vegas.

Damian Lillard tied the game at 106 with a step-back 3-pointer with 52.2 seconds to go, then gave Milwaukee the lead with a layup and four free throws in the final seconds. He finished with 28 points while teammate Bobby Portis added 22 points and 10 rebounds off the bench.

Jalen Suggs led Orlando with 32 points while Anthony Black added 17. Goga Bitadze scored 12 and pulled down a game-high 14 boards.

The visitors started strong as they held a 33-25 lead at the end of the first quarter. However, Milwaukee rallied in the second quarter and moved on top 49-47 when Lillard's layup capped a 6-0 run.

The end of the quarter went back and forth, and Milwaukee took a 60-59 lead into halftime thanks to a last-second Lillard-to-Antetokounmpo alley-oop dunk to cap off a 7-0 surge.

Antetokounmpo scored 20 in the half while Portis had 16. Moritz



Wagner led Orlando with 13 on 6-of-6 shooting, while Black had 10. Wagner wound up scoreless in the second half.

In the third, the Magic powered to a six-point lead, but the Bucks went on an 18-4 run to close the quarter and take an 80-72 lead.

Orlando started the fourth strong after scoring just 13 in the third, as a 9-2 stretch pulled the Magic within one. The visitors pulled level twice before Suggs hit a shot that gave Orlando a 104-103 edge with 1:45 to go.

Lillard's clutch shooting then gave Milwaukee the lead before the Bucks sealed it on defense, forcing Suggs to miss what would have been a game-tying 3-pointer with five seconds to play.

Milwaukee improved to 5-0 in NBA Cup play and will play on Saturday night in Las Vegas against the winner of the game between the Atlanta Hawks and the New York Knicks.

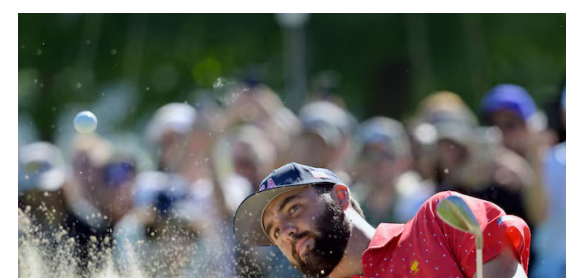
The Bucks posted their ninth straight home win against Orlando and their 17th victory in the teams' past 19 matchups overall.

Meanwhile it's not a complete revenge for their elimination from last year's NBA playoffs elimination, but the Oklahoma City Thunder got the better of the Dallas Mavericks on Tuesday.

The Thunder advanced to the semifinals of the NBA Cup by stifling the Dallas Mavericks in a 118-104 home win. They will face the winner of the Wednesday's quarterfinal between the Golden State Warriors and Houston Rockets.

The win started and ended as a mostly miserable day at the gym for Mavericks star Luka Dončić, which has become a recurring story for the Thunder, owners of the league's top defensive rating.

Scheffler Voted PGA Tour Player of the Year for Third Straight Time



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Scottie Scheffler has been voted the PGA Tour Player of the Year for a third consecutive season, making him the first player to win the award three years in a row since Tiger Woods won three straight from 2005-2007, the U.S.-based circuit said on Tuesday.

The world number one won seven PGA Tour events in 2024 including the Masters, defended his Players Championship, took home the gold medal at the Paris Olympics and won the season-long FedExCup title.

He maintained his number one ranking for the entire season, recorded a PGA Tour-best 16 top-10 finishes in 19 starts and did not miss a cut.

"On behalf of the PGA Tour, congratulations to Scottie Scheffler on a truly historic season, capped off with his first FedExCup title and today a third consecutive Jack Nicklaus Award as PGA Tour Player of the Year," said PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan.

"Scottie took on challenges from the best players in the world on the biggest stages all season, and being honored as PGA Tour Player of the Year is the ultimate sign of respect from his peers."

The award recipient is determined by members and Scheffler received 91% of the votes, beating out two other nominees, Xander Schauffele and Rory McIlroy, the PGA Tour said.

Woods (11 times, most recent 2013) and McIlroy (2012, 2014, 2019) are the only players beside Scheffler to win the award three or more times.

The 28-year-old American and his wife Meredith also welcomed their first child in May, a son named Bennett.

Morocco Set to Host 2030 World Cup With Spain and Portugal

RABAT (Dispatches) - After decades of unsuccessful bids, Morocco will finally achieve its long-cherished dream of hosting the football World Cup in 2030, along with Spain and Portugal, in what the North African country hopes will boost its international image and economy.

FIFA is set to formally ratify the trio's candidacy tomorrow with Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay hosting a game each to mark a century since the first World Cup was staged in South America.

It will have taken over 40 years since Morocco became the first African nation in 1987 to bid for the World Cup, aiming to host the 1994 edition.

Rabat has made five failed bids in total, including one for 2026 but also 2010, when it narrowly lost out to South Africa for the right to host the first World Cup on the continent.

"This is a unique opportunity to accelerate national economic growth, create jobs, and boost the country's tourism," said Fouzi Lekjaa, head of Morocco's 2030 World Cup Committee.

Speaking after a cabinet meeting chaired by King Mohammed VI, Lekjaa emphasised the transformational potential of hosting the world's biggest sporting event.

The Moroccan government has unveiled ambitious plans to modernise infrastructure in six host cities: Rabat, Casablanca, Fes, Tangier, Marrakesh and Agadir.

This includes expanding airports, roads and transportation



networks, as well as boosting hotel and commercial services, according to an official statement.

Six stadiums in the host cities are already undergoing renovation work, said the statement.

Additionally, a new 115,000-seat stadium near Casablanca, costing 480 million euros (\$507 million), is also in the works as the kingdom banks on the state-of-the-art venue to host the final.

"These projects will leave a lasting legacy for future generations," said Moncef El Yazghi, a researcher specialising in sports policy.

Morocco's interest in hosting the World Cup dates back to its groundbreaking performance at the 1986 tournament in Mexico, where it became the first African and Arab nation to reach the knockout stage.

The success sparked the idea of using football as a platform to enhance the nation's reputation.

For sociologist Abderrahim Bourquia, the infrastructure improvements for the tournament offer economic benefits while also granting Morocco global confidence.

Spectators from all over the world "will associate Morocco with the sport's positive values", he said.

The project also aligns with Morocco's ambition to cultivate stronger ties continentally.