

Iran Has Strongly Condemned the Terrorist Explosion in Afghanistan That Claimed the Lives of Several People, Including Khalil Ur-Rahman Haqqani, the Taliban's Acting Minister for Refugees and Repatriation

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi and Turkmenistan's Vice President and Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov in Ashgabat Talked About the Ways to Promote Cooperation Between the Two Neighbors in Various Fields

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IRGC Navy's New Drone to Surprise the World



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy has announced pending integration of a groundbreaking and uniquely advanced unmanned aerial vehicle into the force.

Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri made the remarks on Wednesday on the sidelines of the 12th edition of the Islamic Republic's International Aerospace Exhibition on the Kish Island in the country's southern waters.

The aircraft "will surprise the world," he said of the drone that has been developed in cooperation between the force's and Iran's Defense Ministry.

"The horizon of joint cooperation between the IRGC Navy and the ministry will change" upon integration of the aircraft into the force, Tangsiri noted, asserting that the drone would not serve as the last instance of collaboration between the two sides.

"We will, in fact, change the horizon [of the bilateral cooperation]" through unveiling of the aircraft, the commander noted.

Back in January, the IRGC and the Iranian Army fielded numerous drones and other defensive hardware in a set of 20 countrywide military exercises.

A month later, the Corps' Ground Force took delivery of sophisticated homegrown kamikaze and combat unmanned aerial vehicles featuring state-of-the-art technologies.

In March, the commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force (IRIADF) said the Army branch was to unveil its new generation of missile and drone systems by the end of the current Persian calendar year.

In September, the country paraded an unprecedented number of ballistic missiles and unveiled of a new kamikaze drone with a range of more than 4,000 kilometers (2,485 miles).

Earlier this month, the commander of the Iranian Navy hailed the force's comprehensive surveillance over the American warships that sail across the regional waters.

IAEA Chief's Admission of Israeli Nuclear Weapons Important



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A senior Iranian official says head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi's admission of Israeli nuclear weapons tasks him and the agency with a heavy responsibility.

Grossi should now push for the destruction of these weapons and the Zionist regime's membership in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran's Deputy Foreign minister for legal and international affairs Kazem Gharibabadi wrote on X Thursday.

"The fact that the IAEA director general has admitted for the first time to the existence of nuclear weapons in the Zionist regime is a significant and important issue. Of course, this confession makes his and the agency's duty very heavy," he said.

"Mere confession is not enough, he must condemn the existence of such weapons in the hands of this criminal regime and demand their destruction and also the regime's accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty," he added.

Gharibabadi also described the IAEA chief's allegations about the possibility of nuclear proliferation by Tehran as completely unprofessional and politically motivated.

He said Grossi cannot utter whatever he wishes on the basis of possibilities and speculations, just like political figures with political motives.

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK



Iran Allocating Over \$10b 's Annually to Support Afghan Immigrants

TEHRAN - Iran's Ambassador to the United Nations, Amir Saad Iravani, revealed during a UN Security Council briefing that the country allocates over \$10 billion annually to support more than six million Afghan immigrants residing in Iran. This alarming figure underscores the financial strain on Iran while noting a troubling lack of support from the international community amidst the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

In his address to the council, Iravani emphasized Iran's role as a neighbor directly impacted by the Afghan crisis, particularly following the United States' withdrawal in August 2021. He stated, "As a neighbor, Iran has borne a disproportionate share of the burden of the Afghan crisis, which has significantly increased pressure on our limited resources."

According to Iravani, the UN reports that as of November 2024, 23.7 million Afghans require assistance. Less than 40% of the \$3.06 billion Humanitarian Plan has been funded, highlighting a troubling decline in international aid. Iravani stressed the urgency of addressing this situation, citing the detrimental effects on women and children, who are particularly vulnerable.

"Humanitarian assistance must be impartial, unconditional, and free from politicization," he asserted, calling for the release of frozen Afghan assets and urging that international sanctions not hinder Afghanistan's economic recovery.

The security landscape in Afghanistan has worsened, with rising threats from extremist groups such as ISIL-K and Al-Qaeda. Iravani condemned a recent terrorist attack in Kabul that resulted in significant casualties, including the Afghan Minister of Refugees, and condemned the escalating violence against minority communities, notably the Shia and Hazara populations.

"The rise in synthetic drug production and the narcotics trade also demands urgent action," he added, signifying Iran's support for ongoing United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) initiatives aimed at providing economic opportunities to curb drug dependency within affected regions.

IRGC Forces Were the Last to Leave Syria After Militant Blitz

TEHRAN - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has praised the sacrifices of the force in Syria, underlining that its members were the last group to leave the Arab country after the resurgence of foreign-backed militants.

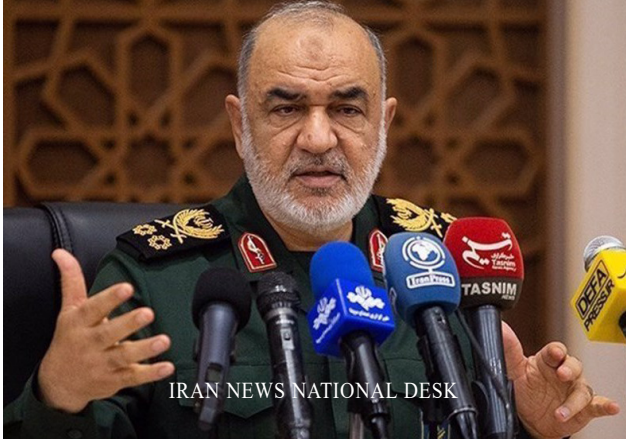
Major General Hossein Salami made the remarks on Thursday as he pointed to the recent political and military developments in Syria that culminated in the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's government following a shock attack by armed militants, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

"Some expect us to go and fight instead of the Syrian army. Is it logical for us to engage all the IRGC and Basij [volunteer forces] in fighting in another country while the army of that country is merely watching? On the other hand, all the ways for us to get to Syria were closed. The Islamic Republic was really trying day and night to do whatever it could to help," Salami said.

Stressing that the Islamic Republic takes into account the realities on the ground in Syria and acts based on facts, the IRGC chief said, "Of course, I proudly inform you that the last ones who left the resistance line in Syria were the IRGC forces and the last person who left the battlefield was an IRGC soldier."

Salami said strategies must change according to the circumstances, adding, "We cannot solve numerous global and regional issues with fixed, unchanging strategies."

Dismissing reports about Iran's strategic clout diminishing in the region after the collapse of the Assad government and Israel's relentless strikes on the resistance front, Salami said, "We have a strong political logic to fight and enjoy conclusive legitimacy to defend [our country]." The IRGC chief stressed, "We have a great nation to stand up to [bullies]. We have a great



leader to provide guidance and inspiration. We have strong armed forces. If we had been weakened, we would not have conducted True Promise operations."

Salami also emphasized that Syria was the only country that did not acquiesce to compromise or normalization deals, and was invariably in a state of confrontation, defense, resistance in the face of the United States and the Israeli regime.

Salami said the IRGC had earlier been cognizant of the plots by the armed militants in Syria and warned the Damascus government about them, "but because the will to change, fight, and resilience in its true sense did not exist, unfortunately you saw what came to pass there."

Meanwhile the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says the US and Israel are using Syria's instability after the fall of the country to foreign-backed militants to destroy its infrastructure.

In a statement Thursday, the force strongly condemned attacks on Syria's territorial integrity, marked by "intense and intensive aggression and bombing of residential and military areas, the destruction of infrastructure and vital centers, and the occupation of areas of Syrian territory".

It also condemned the "astounding silence of international communities in the face of this blatant aggression and assault".

"As stated in the fundamental policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, preserving the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and creating conditions for determining the fate and future political system of the country through the will and choice of its people is an indisputable, legitimate and legal right which must be respected and internationally supported," it said.

Iran and Qatar Aim to Boost Trade Volume to \$1b



TEHRAN - The Iranian Minister of Energy announced plans to significantly increase bilateral trade between Iran and Qatar, currently valued at approximately \$200 million, to \$1 billion annually in the near future. This statement was made during the concluding ceremony of the 10th session of the Joint Commission for Economic, Social, Cultural, and Trade Cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Qatar held today, December 13, 2023.

In the presence of Sheikh Faisal bin Thani bin Faisal Al Thani, Qatar's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Abbas Ali Abadi expressed his confidence that this session would strengthen and solidify relations across various sectors including the economy, commerce, energy, transportation, and other mutually beneficial areas between the two nations.

Ali Abadi stressed the need for a strategic approach to enhance economic relations between Iran and Qatar. He affirmed that the current trade volume encompasses technical services, engineering, goods, and equipment, and underscored a strong ambition to increase this figure significantly in the coming years.

Expressing readiness to welcome Qatari traders and economic activists, Ali Abadi emphasized the potential for investment opportunities in various fields of mutual interest in Iran. He expressed hope for achieving a minimum annual investment of \$1 billion from Qatari parties into the Iranian market.

Highlighting the importance of operationalizing trade interactions, Ali Abadi reiterated the necessity of implementing agreements and policies set forth by the leadership of both countries. He outlined plans to enter a new phase of comprehensive cooperation across all economic sectors, which include energy, transportation, media, special economic zones, tourism, historical and cultural heritage, health, customs, standards, banking, agricultural trade, education and capacity-building, insurance, environmental initiatives, sports, and industry.

Iran, UAE Call for Stop to Israeli Aggression Against Syria



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have strongly called for safeguarding Syria's national sovereignty and territorial integrity and stopping Israel aggression against the country.

During a telephone conversation on Thursday afternoon, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan reviewed recent developments in Syria following the fall of President Bashar al-Assad.

Araghchi and Al Nahyan discussed the importance of protecting regional peace and stability and avoiding any provocative action that disturbs the atmosphere of friendship and cooperation among the countries of the region in the current sensitive situation.

Since the fall of the Assad government, the Israeli regime has carried out almost 500 airstrikes across Syria, targeting critical civilian and military infrastructures. The regime has also pushed its forces into a buffer zone in violation of the 1974 disengagement agreement with Syria.

Israel has also sent troops into a buffer zone east of the occupied Golan Heights. Still, the regime denies advancing towards Damascus, insisting that its forces were stationed within the zone.

Both ministers also addressed the importance of preserving regional peace and stability and avoiding provocative actions that could disrupt the atmosphere of friendship and cooperation among regional countries in the current sensitive circumstances.

Armed militants, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) stormed the Syrian capital of Damascus early on Sunday after scoring major gains in the Arab country's north following their resurgence in two weeks.

Amid the militants' attempts to stage a comeback in the country, reports pointed to their receiving strong support on the part of the Israeli regime, Turkey, and some Western states, which have been acting as the main backers of anti-Damascus outfits since the outbreak of foreign-backed militancy in Syria in 2011.

IRAN NEWS



Anti-Iran Network Dismantled in Qazvin Province

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has said that its intelligence forces dismantled a network in the northwestern province of Qazvin, which had been involved in sabotage acts against Iranian national security.

The IRGC unit in Qazvin Province said in an announcement on Thursday that the network was affiliated with hostile and anti-Iran movements, which had formed groups engaged in sabotage acts against national security.

According to the announcement, the network was affiliated to the movements seeking to restore the toppled Pahlavi regime in Iran. The network was involved in spreading false news against the Islamic Republic of Iran, and was active in several provinces, the IRGC announcement further said.

Preconditions for European Companies' Investment in Iran Not Met



TEHRAN - The head of the Iran-Switzerland Joint Chamber of Commerce, Shariati Mafi, has stated that despite the private sector's strong enthusiasm for the outcome of Iran's negotiations with three European countries, the country's economic infrastructure and bureaucratic hurdles have turned it into a very challenging market for investment.

In an interview with "Iran Online", Mafi emphasized that Iran has significant commercial problems and that if these restrictions are lifted, European companies are only interested in exporting their goods to Iran, but have no interest in investing in the country.

He attributed this lack of interest to numerous problems, including foreign investment laws, banking issues, and FATF requirements, as well as various restrictions on business licenses. Mafi noted that it takes less than a week for a foreign company to obtain all necessary government permits to start operating in Dubai, but Iran's infrastructure does not allow for such flexibility.

Mafi suggested that the government should immediately delegate the issue to the private sector, including trade chambers, to provide proposals for removing commercial obstacles and obstacles to trade. He emphasized that the presence of complex laws and bureaucracy hinders economic growth.

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Iran Needs to Strengthen Maritime Transport to Gain Greater Access to the Russian Market



TEHRAN - The Deputy Chairman of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce, Rouhollah Yousefian, has stated that strengthening Iran's maritime transport is a crucial step towards increasing its presence in the Russian market.

Yousefian emphasized that Iran needs to develop its logistics system by using various types of ships, including Ro-Ro, liner, and refrigerated containers, as well as air cargo services, in order to stay competitive with rivals such as Azerbaijan and Turkey. However, the current situation regarding ship traffic and freight rates is plagued by significant problems.

Yousefian noted that Azerbaijan has been creating obstacles for Iranian exporters in the Russian market for several years. Azerbaijan is a competitor to Iran in the Russian market, particularly in agricultural exports, and has now become a major transshipment route for goods destined for Russia.

He added that Turkey is also a competitor to Iran in the Russian market, but with the added dimension that Turkey has a strategic economic and political partnership with Azerbaijan. This has led to Azerbaijan's discriminatory behavior towards its neighbors, which has even been acknowledged by Russia itself, and has seriously impacted Iran's trade with Russia.

Yousefian highlighted that Russia's trade with the world is worth approximately \$700 billion annually, while Iran's exports to Russia account for only around \$1 billion. In this context, it is necessary to work together and utilize executive experts to expand this trade. Unfortunately, some relevant organizations are not utilizing the private sector's capacity effectively, and cooperation between managers in these organizations and members of joint chambers is not satisfactory.

The Deputy Chairman of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce emphasized that due to multiple exchange rates, Iranian businessmen face numerous problems in their trade with Russia, including difficulties in receiving currency and obtaining necessary approvals from the Central Bank and other related organizations.



TEHRAN - The commercial cooperation agreement between Iran and Turkey was signed by the Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development and the Turkish Minister of Commerce, with both sides emphasizing the development of bilateral trade to reach \$30 billion by 2025.

The 29th meeting of the Joint Economic Commission between Iran and Turkey was held in Tehran, with a Turkish delegation attending. The meeting was chaired by the Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development and the Turkish Minister of Commerce.

The agreement covers various areas, including trade, transportation, customs, transit, investment, banking, electricity, agriculture, culture, tourism, and cooperation. The agreement aims to promote economic relations between the two countries and prepare for the 30th meeting of the Joint Economic Commission.

The 29th joint economic commission meeting between Iran and Turkey was held in Tehran, with the two countries agreeing to increase their trade volume to \$30 billion over the next five years.

According to Amin Tarfi, the head of international affairs at Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, the meeting was attended by Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh Malekjavard, and Turkish Minister of Commerce, Ömer Büyükatlı. The two ministers signed a memorandum of understanding to increase trade between the two countries.

Currently, the volume of foreign trade between Iran and Turkey stands at \$12 billion. However, the two countries have set a target of increasing this amount to \$30 billion over the next five years.

Tarfi emphasized that the agreement includes a plan of action for increasing exchanges between the two countries, as well as agreements on trade, customs, transportation, investment, and agricultural issues.

The meeting also focused on transportation agreements between the two countries, with a major portion of their trade being conducted via road transportation. According to Tarfi, an average of 400,000 commercial trucks travel between Iran and Turkey every year.

The agreement also aims to increase transit trade between the two countries, which has been growing steadily. Tarfi noted that the agreements are expected

to lead to new developments in trade, customs, transportation, investment, and agricultural issues in the coming year.

Meanwhile according to the President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, Samad Hassanzadeh, establishing free and preferential trade between Iran and Turkey should be discussed during this round of the Joint Economic Commission meeting between the two countries.

Hassanzadeh stated that one of the key factors in developing cooperation is establishing a customs and tariff system based on mutual benefits, which we are currently lacking. He added that he hopes that during this round of the Joint Economic Commission, a bilateral committee will be formed to negotiate and resolve this issue operationally. Reforming preferential trade regulations, lifting restrictions, and announcing a list of goods with suitable tariffs is necessary for developing cooperation.

Hassanzadeh emphasized that another important issue in developing trade relations between the two countries is reducing transportation time and costs, as well as reforming supervisory programs at customs and expanding TIR cooperation. Iran has taken good steps in this regard and hopes that Turkish officials will also pay sufficient attention to these efforts.

He stated that the Iran Chamber is trying to create a suitable environment for developing relations between the two countries by applying innovative approaches, which can increase the volume of trade between the two countries. In the past year, trade between Iran and Turkey exceeded \$10 billion, which is still far from their capacities.

Hassanzadeh added that Iran has many capacities in fields such as mining, agricultural products, food industries, petrochemicals, handicrafts, carpets, technical services, and telecommunications technology, providing a good ground for cooperation between the two countries.

He stated that the private sector is ready to invest in infrastructure development to improve logistical infrastructure and announces its readiness to invest in joint mega-projects in Iran. Hassanzadeh said that Iranian and Turkish chambers are ready to develop relations through any form of cooperation. He expects traders and merchants attending this conference to study Iran's capacities and create more opportunities for cooperation.

Golestan Province Exports \$81m Worth of Goods to Kazakhstan in 8 Months



TEHRAN - The head of the Gorgan Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture stated that the province of Golestan, with 650,000 hectares of agricultural land, annually produces 5 million tons of various agricultural and horticultural products, including wheat, barley, cotton, rapeseed, soybeans, tobacco, rice, potatoes, tomatoes, saffron, citrus fruits, kiwis, plums, peaches, and strawberries.

Amir Yousefi, during a B2B webinar between the Gorgan Chamber and the Mangystau Chamber of Kazakhstan, mentioned that this province has the highest capacity for flour production in Iran, with 34 factories currently producing over one million tons of flour annually.

He added that in the livestock sector, there are approximately 3 million livestock units in this province, yielding 36 thousand tons of red meat annually, as well as 300 thousand tons of chicken meat, 60 thousand tons of eggs, and 150 million one-day-old chicks produced in 1000 poultry farms.

Yousefi highlighted that Golestan province has 346 fish farming units that produce 18 thousand tons of fish annually, in addition to the largest shrimp farming site in the country where 5 thousand tons of shrimp are produced annually.

He also mentioned that the province of Golestan has 1170 industrial units operating in various industries such as steel, UPVC, iodine, petrochemicals, cable, dairy, electrical switches, pharmaceuticals,

medical supplies, food, edible oils, cellulose, automotive parts, cement, plastic containers, various pesticides, disinfectants, water desalination devices, bags, threads, building materials, calcium carbonate, organic fertilizers, sorting, and packaging.

The head of the Gorgan Chamber stated that Golestan province is a leader in technical and engineering services, especially in steel structures and construction, with 12 technical-engineering companies currently active in the province.

He also mentioned that the province offers 11 specialized medical centers in internal medicine, cardiology, obstetrics, pediatrics, ophthalmology, beauty, dermatology, dentistry, urology, endocrinology, and neurology.

Yousefi expressed that Golestan province has over 1500 historical and cultural sites, as well as 400 natural tourist attractions including the Golestan National Park, the largest natural park in Iran, and the tallest brick tower in the world, the Gonbad-e Qabus.

He emphasized that due to the presence of various ethnic groups in Golestan province, 43 types of handicrafts such as carpets, kilims, jajims, Turkmen jewelry, marquetry, wooden items, silk fabrics, traditional clothing, and leather goods are produced.

Yousefi stressed that Kazakhstan is one of the most important trading partners of Golestan province.

Iran's Exports to Iraq Increase Amid Syrian Crisis



TEHRAN - The head of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce, Jahangir Sanjabi Shirazi, spoke with Ilna News Agency about the latest status of transit operations through Iraq. He stated that Iraq was not a signatory to the TIR Convention and did not have the necessary regulations in place for customs clearance. However, two years ago, Iraq requested to join the convention and was accepted. After joining, Iraq was required to implement necessary measures, including training customs officials and establishing a guarantee institution. With Iran's assistance, Iraq has completed these steps.

Iraq has designated seven border crossings as transit routes and has begun operations. Three of these borders are shared with Iran, while the others are shared with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria.

Regarding the possibility of establishing a transit route from Iran to Kuwait through Iraq, Sanjabi said that while the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border is not yet a transit route, it is possible that it could become one as Iraq's transit operations continue to develop.

Sanjabi also discussed the latest situation of transit operations from Iran to Syria through Iraq. He noted that there are three common border points between Syria and Iraq, including one unofficial border with Kurdistan Region that is often used for Iranian exports to Syria. With the increase in energy prices and people's need for basic goods, there may be an increase in Iranian exports to Syria through Iraq in the short term. This could lead to increased exports from Iran to Iraq and then on to Syria.

In response to a question about the impact of Iraq's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) on trade between Iran and Iraq, Sanjabi explained that Iraq has requested membership and implemented necessary regulations. Iraq's economy is based on free trade, and with its membership in the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council, it is likely to join the WTO soon.

When trade liberalization measures are implemented in Iraq, the country will need to eliminate non-tariff barriers based on international trade rules. This could lead to increased competition and threaten Iran's market share in Iraq.

However, Sanjabi noted that Iran has advantages in its trade with Iraq, such as multiple borders, shared culture and consumer habits, regional interactions, cheap energy, and low labor costs. The elimination of non-tariff barriers could lead to increased competition between Iran and other countries.

Iran's Automotive Parts Exports to Russia



TEHRAN - The Deputy Chairman of the Iranian Auto Parts Manufacturers Association, in an interview with ILNA, highlighted the current state of Iran's automotive and parts manufacturing industries. He emphasized the industry's growth since the 1990s, positioning it as one of the most capable sectors in the country, with the capacity to supply components for nearly two million vehicles annually.

The official outlined numerous challenges, including: Currency Allocation: Complexities in accessing foreign exchange; Infrastructure Issues: Power and gas supply disruptions; Economic Factors: Inflation and inadequate financial support; Regulatory Constraints: Import restrictions on machinery and state-imposed pricing policies; Global Sanctions: Hurdles imposed by international restrictions.

These issues have hindered growth, leading to stagnation rather than development.

Despite these challenges, Iranian automotive parts are being exported, including to Russia. However, sanctions have significantly limited the potential for expanded exports. The Deputy Chairman suggested that a stronger emphasis on exporting competitive automotive products could lead to greater integration with global supply chains. He cited the halted partnership with Renault as a lost opportunity for Iranian manufacturers to play a larger role internationally.

The expert criticized the government's continued involvement in the automotive sector, attributing inefficiencies and mismanagement to political interests. He argued that privatizing the industry could enhance competitiveness and reduce corruption. However, political resistance and vested interests have prevented such reforms.

Brazil's Lula Has Head Drain Removed After Second Surgery

SAO PAULO (Dispatches) - Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had a drain removed from his head on Thursday evening, his doctors said, as he recovers from emergency surgery earlier this week to relieve bleeding in his skull.

Lula remains "lucid and speaking normally", the doctors said in a new medical note, adding the drain was removed without complications.

Lula's condition has raised doubts about the president's intention to run for re-election in 2026, but a senior aide said on Thursday he will be the ruling Workers Party candidate.

Lula, 79, is expected to be discharged from Sao Paulo's Sirio-Libanes Hospital early next week, when he might resume his presidential activities, his personal doctor, Roberto Kalil Filho, told reporters earlier in the day.



Macron, Tusk Debate Foreign Peacekeepers for Ukraine



WARSSAW (Dispatches) - Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said he discussed with French President Emmanuel Macron the possibility of stationing foreign troops in Ukraine in case of a ceasefire, but that Warsaw was not currently "planning any such actions".

Macron for his part called for a path out of Russia's war in Ukraine — which has been raging for nearly three years — that takes into account the interests of both Kyiv and the European Union, saying the former's sovereignty and the latter's security were at stake.

Macron's visit to Warsaw came days after he met in Paris with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US President-elect Donald Trump, who has said that solving the crisis would be his top priority when he takes office next month.

Washington is racing to bolster Kyiv amid fears Trump could try to force concessions on Ukraine to clinch a ceasefire, announcing yesterday a new US\$500 million package of military aid for Ukraine.

Addressing speculation about peacekeepers, Tusk said he discussed the matter with Macron.

"Any decision on Polish actions will be taken in Warsaw and only in Warsaw. For the moment, we are not planning any such actions," he added.

In Warsaw, Macron did not publicly mention the possibility of foreign peacekeepers, but in February he floated the idea of Western troops in Ukraine.

Asked about the proposal on Monday, Zelensky said: "Frankly, we can think and work on Emmanuel (Macron)'s position".

"He proposed that some troops of some state should be present on the territory of Ukraine to guarantee our security while Ukraine is not in Nato," he added.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas yesterday said, "we need peace in Ukraine in order to have peacekeeping missions".

"For that we need Russia to stop shelling, which they are not doing," she said before a meeting of foreign ministers in Berlin.

South Korea Opposition Leader Lee Says Impeaching Yoon Best Way to Restore Order



SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung said on Friday the best way to restore order in the country is to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol, a day ahead of a planned parliamentary vote over Yoon's short-lived imposition of martial law.

Yoon's move to impose military rule on Dec. 3 was rescinded barely six hours later but it plunged the country into a constitutional crisis and widespread calls for him to step down for breaking the law.

Yoon on Thursday vowed to "fight to the end," blaming the opposition party for paralyzing the government and claiming a North Korean hack into the election commission made his party's crushing defeat in an April parliamentary election questionable.

Democratic Party leader Lee called Yoon's remarks "a declaration of war" against the people. "It proved that impeachment is the fastest and the most effective way to end the confusion," he said.

Yoon survived the first attempt to impeach him last Saturday when most of his ruling People Power Party (PPP) boycotted the vote. Since then at least seven PPP members have publicly supported a vote to impeach him.

Opposition parties, which control the single-chamber parliament, have introduced another impeachment bill and plan to hold a vote at 5 p.m. (0800 GMT) on Saturday. They need at least eight PPP members to pass the bill with the two-third majority required.

Israel Kills at Least 66 Palestinians in Gaza, Strikes Post Office Used as Shelter



CAIRO (Dispatches) - An Israeli strike killed at least 30 Palestinians and wounded 50 others who were sheltering in a post office in central Gaza Strip, bringing the death toll on Thursday in the enclave to 66.

With no sign of let-up in the 14-month-old conflict, the strike hit a postal facility in Nuseirat camp where displaced families had sought refuge and also damaged several nearby houses, medics told Reuters.

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Nuseirat is one of the Gaza Strip's eight historic camps originally for Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war around the establishment of Israel. Today, it is part of a dense urban area crowded with displaced people from throughout the enclave.

Earlier on Thursday, two Israeli strikes in southern Gaza killed 13 Palestinians who Gaza medics and Hamas said were part of a force protecting humanitarian aid trucks. Israel's military said they were Hamas militants trying to hijack the shipment.

Many of those killed in the attacks on Rafah and Khan Younis had links to Hamas, according to sources close to the group.

The Israeli military said in a statement the two airstrikes aimed to ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid and accused Hamas members of planning to prevent the aid from reaching Gaza civilians who need it.

The statement said the Hamas members aimed to hijack the aid "in support of continuing terrorist activity".

Armed gangs have repeatedly hijacked aid trucks, and Hamas has formed a task force to confront them. The Hamas-led forces have killed over two dozen members of the gangs in recent months, Hamas sources and medics said.

Hamas said Israeli military strikes have killed at least 700 police tasked with securing aid trucks in Gaza since the war began on Oct. 7, 2023. It has accused Israel of trying to protect looting and "creating anarchy and chaos to prevent aid from reaching the people of Gaza".

Separately, the Israeli military on Thursday ordered residents of several districts in the heart of Gaza City to evacuate, saying it would

respond to rockets launched from those areas.

"This is a pre-warning before an attack," read a military statement posted on X that some residents also received as text and audio alerts on their mobile phones.

The evacuation orders caused a new wave of displacement. At nightfall, dozens of families streamed out of the areas heading toward the centre of the city.

Israeli bombings of a residential building in Gaza City's al-Jalaa Street and a house west of Nuseirat killed 22 people, medics and the Palestinian news agency Wafa said.

In the northern Gaza refugee camp of Jabalia, where the army has operated since October, health officials said an orthopaedic doctor, Saeed Judeh, was shot dead by Israeli forces while on his way to Al-Awda Hospital where he usually treated patients.

The health ministry said his death raised to 1,057 the number of healthcare workers killed since the war began.

Months of ceasefire efforts by Arab mediators, Egypt and Qatar, backed by the United States, have failed to conclude a deal between the two warring sides.

On Wednesday, the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to demand an immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire and the immediate release of all hostages seized in Israel in October 2023 and held by Hamas in Gaza.

The war in the Palestinian enclave began after Hamas gunmen stormed into Israeli communities, killing around 1,200 people and taking about 250 hostages back to Hamas-run Gaza, according to Israeli tallies.

Since then, Israel's military has levelled swathes of Gaza, driving nearly all of its 2.3 million people from their homes, giving rise to deadly hunger and disease and killing more than 44,800 people, according to Palestinian health authorities.

Georgian Protests Enter Third Week as New Far-Right President Set to Be Appointed

TBILISI (Dispatches) - Georgia's pro-EU protests entered their third week Thursday, amid fears the post-electoral crisis could further escalate with the ruling party set to appoint a loyalist as the country's next president.

The Black Sea nation has been in turmoil since the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in October's parliamentary elections, and the government's decision last month to delay EU accession talks ignited a fresh wave of mass rallies.

More unrest is expected on Saturday, when Georgian Dream is scheduled to strengthen its grip on power by appointing far-right former footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili as a successor to pro-Western President Salome Zurbishvili, who has refused to step down.

Despite windy weather on Thursday evening, several thousand people rallied outside Georgia's parliament, marking a third week of daily protests that began on November 28.

Many waved EU and Georgian flags while demonstrators blocked traffic on Tbilisi's main avenue.

"Our protest will last as long as it takes for Georgian Dream to be removed from power," protester Rusiko Dolidze, 42, told AFP.

"We won't let a handful of Russian lackeys steal our European future."

Anti-government rallies were also held in several cities across Georgia, including in the western cities of Batumi, Kutaisi and Zugdidi, local media reported.

A protest is scheduled for Saturday morning outside parliament, where an electoral college controlled by Georgian Dream is expected to elect Kavelashvili



as the country's new figurehead president in an indirect vote boycotted by the opposition.

Kavelashvili will see his legitimacy undermined from the onset, with constitutional law experts — including an author of Georgia's constitution, Vakhtang Khmaladze — saying the vote will be "illegitimate".

The new parliament had ratified its own credentials in violation of a legal requirement to await a court decision on Zurbishvili's bid to annul the earlier election results.

Zurbishvili has backed the opposition's allegations of election rigging, declared the newly elected parliament and the government "illegitimate" and vowed to remain in office until Georgian Dream organises a new parliamentary election.

It remains unclear how the government will react to Zurbishvili's refusal to step down after her successor is inaugurated on December 29.

Zurbishvili is a hugely popular figure among the protesters, who view her as a beacon of Georgia's European aspirations. Many have expressed their readiness to defend her against any attempted eviction from the presidential palace.

"Let them try to kick Salome out of the presidential palace — we will all stand up to defend her," said protester Otar Turmava, 23.

"She is the only legitimate leader we have had since Georgian Dream stole the election, and she will lead us into the EU."

Triggering outrage at home and mounting international condemnation, police have used tear gas and water cannons to disperse previous rallies, arresting more than 400 demonstrators.

The country's rights ombudsman has accused security forces of "torturing" those detained.

Police have raided opposition party offices and detained their leaders, while masked men have brutally assaulted opposition figures and journalists near the protest venue.

On Wednesday, French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the "intimidation" of civil society as well as police violence "against peaceful demonstrators and journalists", the Elysee said after talks with Georgian Dream's honorary chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Macron expressed regret that Georgia had "diverged from its European path" and said that "the relationship between the European Union and Georgia would necessarily be affected."

Ivanishvili, Georgia's richest man, is widely believed to be pulling the strings of power despite holding no official post.

Macron's decision to call informal leader Ivanishvili — rather than Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze — is indicative of the West's hesitancy to recognise the legitimacy of Georgian Dream's new government.

U.S. Unveils \$500m Weapons Package to Bolster Ukraine

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The administration of Democratic U.S. President Joe Biden announced another package of weapons aid for Ukraine today, valued at US\$500 million, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

White House spokesperson John Kirby said earlier the US would continue to provide additional packages for Ukraine "right up to the end of this administration."

Washington said 10 days ago it would send Ukraine US\$725 million worth of missiles, ammunition, anti-personnel mines and other weapons.

Biden's outgoing administration is seeking to bolster Ukraine in tackling Russia's invasion, before Biden's term ends in January when Republican President-elect Donald Trump would take office.

Thursday's package worth about US\$500 million included ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and High-speed Anti-radiation missiles (HARMS), among other assistance, according to Blinken.

After Thursday, about US\$5.6 billion worth of Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) to rush weapons from US stocks to the front lines remains available to Biden without requiring congressional approval.

Meanwhile Russian forces are just 1.5 km (1 mile) outside the Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk after Russian units pushed up from the south towards the road and rail hub which had a pre-war population of 60,000 people, a prominent pro-Russian blogger said



on Friday.

Russia controls a chunk of Ukraine about the size of the American state of Virginia and is advancing at the fastest pace since the early days of the 2022 invasion, according to open source maps.

Yuri Podolyaka, a prominent Ukrainian-born, pro-Russian military blogger, said Russian forces were now just 1.5 km from the city after a push from the south.

Podolyaka said members of Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups, special forces which penetrate the front ahead of the advance, were already in the city.

Reuters was unable to verify battlefield accounts from either side due to reporting restrictions.

Ukraine's military said in recent days that Russian troops destroyed or captured several Ukrainian positions near the city.

The fall of Pokrovsk, an important logistics centre for the Ukrainian military, would be one of Ukraine's biggest military losses in months.

Control of the city, which the Russian media call "the gateway to Donetsk", would allow Moscow to severely disrupt Ukrainian supply lines along the eastern front and boost its campaign to capture the city of Chasiv Yar, which sits on higher ground offering potential control of a wider area.



Juve Deepen Man City Crisis After 2-0 Loss

PARIS (Dispatches) - Manchester City's crisis continued with a 2-0 defeat away to Juventus in the Champions League yesterday, while Pep Guardiola's old club Barcelona beat Borussia Dortmund to clinch a spot in the knockout stage of Europe's elite club competition.

Arsenal, AC Milan, Atletico Madrid, Lille, Feyenoord and Stuttgart were also victorious, but City's latest loss in a miserable run will dominate the headlines.

The 2023 European champions succumbed in Turin as Dusan Vlahovic put Juventus ahead early in the second half when goalkeeper Ederson was unable to keep out his header.

Ilkay Gundogan was denied an equaliser by a fine Michele Di Gregorio save, before Weston McKennie made it 2-0 with a fine acrobatic finish in the 75th minute.

The result leaves Juventus on 11 points with two games left, a tally that is expected to be enough to guarantee them at least a place in the knockout phase play-offs.

City, meanwhile, have now won just once in 10 in all competitions, with seven defeats in that time.

With just eight points, they currently sit 22nd in the standings, in which the top 24 advance to the knockouts. Their next game will be crucial, as they travel to a Paris Saint-Germain side who sit a point beneath Guardiola's men.

"We have to get points, we'll go to Paris to try and do that and the same goes for the final match at home (to Club Brugge)," Guardiola told Amazon Prime in Italy.

Barcelona are second in the standings with 15 points, behind only Liverpool, after beating Dortmund 3-2 in a thriller in Germany, with Ferran Torres their hero.

Raphinha fired Barca ahead with his 17th goal of the season, early in a remarkable second half.

Serhou Guirassy equalised with a penalty on the hour mark, but substitute Torres put Barca back in front on 75 minutes, converting the loose ball after Fermin Lopez's shot was saved.

Guirassy scored again for a quick equaliser, only for Torres to strike once more and win the game for

Barca with five minutes left.

Barcelona's tally leaves them, like Liverpool, ideally placed to finish in the top eight, which means direct progress to the last 16 without having to go through the play-offs.

Arsenal are third in the standings on 13 points after easing to a 3-0 win over Monaco in London.

Bukayo Saka scored twice, putting the Gunners ahead in the first half and making it 2-0 on 78 minutes as the hosts pounced on disastrous Monaco defending.

Saka then turned provider for the late third, with substitute Kai Havertz credited with the final touch.

Mikel Arteta's team are one of six sides on 13 points, with Lille also on that tally after edging Sturm Graz 3-2 in France thanks to a fine late winner from Hakon Haraldsson.

Lille were 2-0 up through Osame Sahraoui and Mitchel Bakker, only for goals by Otar Kiteishvili and Mika Biereth to bring the Austrian champions back level.

However, Icelandic midfielder Haraldsson secured Lille's fourth win of the campaign.

Atletico eased to a 3-1 victory over Slovan Bratislava, with Antoine Griezmann scoring twice after Julian Alvarez had opened the scoring with an excellent strike.

David Strelec pulled one back for the Slovaks, who are one of three teams already eliminated having lost six games out of six. The others are RB Leipzig and Young Boys.

Milan defeated Red Star Belgrade 2-1 at San Siro with Tammy Abraham grabbing the winner three minutes from time.

Rafael Leao had put Milan ahead only for Nemanja Radonjic to equalise for the Serbian side, who have lost five of their six games and are surely heading out.

Benfica edged closer to a play-off spot with a 0-0 draw at home to Bologna of Italy, who have scored just one goal in six games and will go no further.

Man United Edge Plzen, Spurs Held by Rangers in Glasgow



PARIS (Dispatches) - Rasmus Hojlund fired Manchester United to a late 2-1 win at Viktoria Plzen in the Europa League, while Tottenham were held to a stalemate at Rangers.

Ruben Amorim's United side came from behind to best the Czech side thanks to a second-half brace by Danish striker Hojlund, they now sit seventh in the league phase standings.

"The win is important at the moment and it's good to prepare for the next game," United manager Amorim told TNT Sports.

A top-eight finish will see United qualify automatically for the round of 16, while finishing ninth to 24th will earn them a play-off tie to reach that stage.

Matej Vydra opened the scoring three minutes after half-time to stun United, before substitute Hojlund scored twice in the last half-hour to seize a vital three points for the English club.

The winner came two minutes from time when Bruno Fernandes cleverly slipped a free-kick into the 21-year-old's feet and he held off a defender before slipping home.

Elsewhere in the Europa League, Spurs drew 1-1 with Rangers in Glasgow.

The hosts sit in the final automatic qualification spot with Spurs one place below them, but both level on 11 points.

"We took the challenge with both hands, grabbed it and showed what we wanted them to show," said Rangers manager Philippe Clement.

"We deserved to win the game, but I think it was a very good advertisement for Scottish football to compete with a Premier League team at full strength."

A draw somewhat eases the pressure on Spurs boss Ange Postecoglou, after his side went into the match with just one win in their last seven outings in all competitions.

Rangers took the lead two minutes after the interval when Moroccan striker Hamza Igamane continued his fine start to life in Glasgow by netting his fourth goal in as many European outings this season.

Captain James Tavernier bent an excellent inswinging pass from the right flank beyond the Spurs defence and into the path of Igamane who finished unerringly at the far post.

Teen Chess Prodigy Gukesh Dethrones Ding to Become Youngest Chess World Champion

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Newly crowned world chess king Gukesh Dommaraju said becoming a champion was a dream that was more than a decade in the making, as he underlined his ambition to strive for "greatness".

Gukesh was just seven when he watched compatriot Viswanathan Anand lose the world chess title in November 2013 to challenger Magnus Carlsen of Norway — a match that fired up his dream to bring the crown back to India.

Eleven years later in Singapore yesterday, the 18-year-old beat China's Ding Liren after a gruelling tournament of 14 match days to become the youngest undisputed world chess champion.

Speaking to reporters after the match, Gukesh cited the 2013 game as a defining episode for his success.

"I was in the stands and I was looking inside the glass box (where the players were) and I thought it will be so cool to be inside one day," he said of the tournament in his hometown of Chennai.



"When Magnus won, I thought I really want to be the one to bring back the title to India. And this dream that I had more than 10 years ago has been the most important thing in my life so far," he added.

"I've been dreaming about... living this moment for like more than 10 years."

And this is just the beginning, Gukesh said, underlining his plan to be more than a one-hit wonder.

He wants to stay at the top "for the longest time possible", to ultimately attain Carlsen's eminence as the highest rated chess player in history.

The teenager said he felt the jitters in the opening game in Singapore on November 25 which his more experienced opponent won.

But as the tournament wore on, he gained more confidence, winning a total three matches, including the dramatic final game, and settling for a draw in nine.

Wawrinka Accepts Wildcard for Australian Open



LONDON (Dispatches) - Three-times Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka was among nine players handed wildcards to compete at next month's Australian Open, tournament organizers announced on Friday.

The 39-year-old Swiss claimed the first of his three major titles at Melbourne Park in 2014, with that triumph earning him a career-high world ranking of number three.

"I'm incredibly grateful to receive a wildcard into the Australian Open in 2025," said Wawrinka, whose last appearance in a major quarter-final came at Melbourne four years ago.

"Melbourne holds such a special place in my heart. It's where I won my first Grand Slam and is one of the greatest milestones of my career.

"The city, the people, the loud fans and the electric atmosphere make the Australian Open so special to me and I'm really looking forward to getting back on the court in Melbourne."

Wawrinka, who won the French Open in 2015 and the U.S. Open a year later, crashed out of the opening round of the Australian Open earlier in 2024.

He has slipped to 161 in the world rankings amid injury issues in recent seasons.

Local hopes including Ajla Tomljanovic, Daria Saville, Tristan Schoolkate, Li Tu, James McCabe, Emerson Jones, Talia Gibson and Maya Joint were also given wildcards, with more recipients to be announced soon.

China's Zhang Shuai and Kasidit Samrej of Thailand have been granted wildcards earlier.

The 2025 Australian Open runs Jan. 12-26.

FIFA Confirms Saudi Arabia as 2034 World Cup Host

LAUSANNE (Dispatches) - FIFA confirmed that Saudi Arabia will host the 2034 World Cup, underlining the Persian Gulf kingdom's growing influence in world sport despite criticism of the country's human rights record.

At the same time, a virtual Congress of world football's governing body confirmed that Morocco, Spain and Portugal will be joint hosts of the 2030 World Cup, in which three games will also be played in South America.

The Saudi bid was waved through by acclamation during the meeting of FIFA's 211 national member associations, with no rivals standing in its way.

"It is a proud day, a day of celebration, a day that we invite the entire world to Saudi Arabia," said Abdulaziz bin Turki bin Faisal al Saud, the Saudi Minister of Sports.

"We intend to have an extraordinary version of the World Cup in our kingdom."

However, there was immediate condemnation from rights groups who insisted that handing the organization of the tournament to the country puts the lives of construction workers at risk and "marks a moment of great danger".

FIFA had invoked its principle of rotating the World Cup between continents, which meant only bids from Asia or Oceania were welcome for 2034.



The unprecedented organization of the 2030 tournament will involve three continental confederations in Europe, Africa and South America, while the next World Cup in 2026 — the first involving 48 teams — will take place across North America.

Controversially, the body gave potential bidders barely a month last year to submit candidacies, and Australia and Indonesia abandoned their interest.

That left Saudi Arabia as the sole candidate, clearing the way for

the World Cup to return to the Persian Gulf region so soon after Qatar hosted in 2022.

The kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has been using sport for some time to amass influence and improve its global image — critics say he is effectively "sportswashing" by diverting attention from Saudi Arabia's rights record.

The awarding of the World Cup to Saudi will make the issue of human rights a major talking point again, just as it was two years ago.

"We are inclusive and we are non-discriminatory, and we want to obtain positive social impact," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in closing remarks.

"We are of course aware of critics and fears, and I fully trust our hosts to address all open points from this process and deliver a FIFA World Cup which meets expectations."

He added that "social improvements and positive human rights impacts" are "responsibilities of hosting a World Cup."

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