

Iran's Civil Aviation Chief Says the Country Has Mastered the Technology Needed to Manufacture Spare Parts for the Engines of Boeing and Airbus Jets

Iranian Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Has Emphasized That the Cultural Sector Is the Most Effective Way to Enhance Relations Between Governments and Nations

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Iran and Belarus Committed to Continuing Cooperation

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK



TEHRAN - The Deputy Foreign Minister stated that Iran and Belarus are determined to continue their cooperation in the interests of the people of both countries and to maintain regional and international peace and security.

Majid Takht Ravanchi, the political deputy of Iran's Foreign Minister, noted in a post on his official Twitter account that he had a friendly and constructive meeting in Tehran with his Belarusian counterpart, Sergei Lukashevich, as part of political consultations between the deputy foreign ministers of Iran and Belarus.

He emphasized that various aspects of bilateral relations were discussed, with a primary focus on economic cooperation.

Takht Ravanchi reiterated that Iran and Belarus are committed to working together for the benefit of their peoples while maintaining regional and international peace and security.

Lukashevich, who visited Tehran recently, also met with Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araqchi for discussions.

During this meeting, Lukashevich highlighted the friendly relations between Iran and Belarus and stressed the importance of ongoing bilateral consultations to enhance relations and assist in resolving regional and international issues.

The Iranian Foreign Minister, in turn, deemed the political consultations between Iran and Belarus critical for addressing bilateral relations and regional and international challenges, emphasizing the importance of joint and multilateral efforts to strengthen global stability and security.

Meanwhile Mohammad al-Hassan, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq and "Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq" (UNAMI), met and discussed with Araqchi.

In this meeting, the Special Representative presented a report on the key activities of UNAMI.

During the meeting, the regional situation and developments were emphasized, along with the necessity for cooperation and coordination among regional countries to prevent the spread of insecurity and instability.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of our country highlighted the friendly and close relations between Iran and Iraq, emphasizing the continuation of joint efforts to safeguard stability and security in the region and underscoring the important role and position of UNAMI in aiding Iraq's national development.

Protecting Political Borders of Regional Countries Iran's Red Line



TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says protecting political borders and the national sovereignty of regional countries is Tehran's red line and topmost concern.

Araqchi made the remarks in an article published in Lebanon's Al-Nahar newspaper on Tuesday.

He stressed that Iran's presence in Syria was at the official request of the country's government and was aimed at combating the Daesh terrorist group.

Araqchi said, that unlike Iran, the US presence in Syria lacks any legal basis and has led to the occupation of large swathes of the country.

He also reaffirmed Iran's commitment to supporting all Muslim and Arab forces that make up the resistance front against the Israeli regime.

He emphasized that resistance against occupation and expansionism is not merely an ideological matter, but is the most important tool to protect the security and stability of the entire West Asia region.

On Monday, the spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry Esmail Baqaei said that the deployment of Iranian military advisers to Syria was fundamental and anchored in certain principles, while their departure was also a responsible move.



Iran Warns E3 Against Misusing JCPOA Snapback Mechanism

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has warned that invoking the so-called snapback by three European members of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will be reciprocated by a firm and proportionate response.

Amir Saied Iravani warned that such an action by the E3 will be both unlawful and counterproductive.

Iravani was addressing a UN Security Council meeting on the JCPOA. "Iran categorically rejects any threats of invoking the so-called 'snapback,' by E3 an action that would be both unlawful and counterproductive," he said.

"Let's make it clear once and for all: the so-called 'Snapback' is not a tool in your hand to be abused for threatening Iran. Iran has made it very clear that such a provocative move will be reciprocated by a firm and proportionate response," he said.

The so-called snapback mechanism allows for the return of anti-Iran sanctions suspended under the deal.

He reiterated Iran's position that the root cause of the impasse facing the JCPOA is the unilateral withdrawal of the US, and the E3's failure to honor their commitments under the accord.

"Iran has consistently acted in good faith to uphold the environment for the revival of the JCPOA, even after the United States' withdrawal and E3's persistence of violating their commitments," he said.

"Iran engaged in the Vienna talks in good faith, showing utmost flexibility to achieve a balanced and mutually beneficial agreement. Unfortunately, the unrealistic demands of the E3 and the

United States, their lack of political will, domestic political considerations, and attempts to tie the negotiations to unrelated issues ultimately failed the efforts to revive the deal. Blaming Iran for the failure to conclude the negotiations is both unjust and factually incorrect," he added.

Iravani said that Iran also rejects attempts to link Iran's JCPOA commitments to unrelated regional or geopolitical issues.

"Instead of diverting attention to fabricated threats, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, as permanent members of the Security Council must allow this Council to live up to its responsibility and address and confront the genuine sources of insecurity and instability in our region: the Israeli regime's illicit nuclear weapons arsenal, its decades of aggression and occupation, and its ongoing campaign of systematic war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts of genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza," he said.

"Further, Israel's relentless aggression and atrocious crimes against Syria and Lebanon underscore its role as the primary driver of violence and instability in the region."

Iravani added that Iran's decision to walk back on some of its JCPOA commitments was a response to the West's bad promises.

He stressed that Iran is committed to continuing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency according to its obligations.

The Iranian diplomat urged the E3 and the US to abandon confrontational approaches and demonstrate a true commitment to diplomacy.

Iran Urges IAEA to Uphold Impartiality, Refrain From Provocations

TEHRAN - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) urges the United Nations nuclear agency's Director General Rafael Grossi to preserve the body's impartiality by taking other parties' non-commitment to their obligations towards the Islamic Republic into account.

"This international institution has to preserve its impartiality and adopt a professional behavior," Mohammad Eslami said in Tehran on Wednesday following a weekly meeting of the Iranian cabinet, referring to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"It is not acceptable for an international institution to address just one aspect of the issue, in a provocative manner at that, and refuse to point to the main aspect, which is the obligated parties' non-commitment," he said.

"We expect the agency's director-general, who is a veteran diplomat, to observe these matters," Eslami noted.

The remarks came after Grossi told the Italian news agency ANSA that Iran had "developed much stronger capabilities" regarding various aspects of its nuclear energy program, alleging, "It (the Islamic Republic) has uranium at 60% - 90% is military grade."

He went as far as claiming that the Islamic Republic "is thus practically at the same level as nuclear-armed states."

Back in 2018, the Islamic Republic resorted to a number of legitimate retaliatory measures



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

in line with its entitlement under its 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers.

The steps came in response to the United States' unilateral and illegal withdrawal from the deal and its Western allies' refusal to restore the deal to its former glory by bringing Washington back into the accord.

Tehran took the measures after a drawn-out hiatus, during which it allowed the parties to the deal to walk back their unconstructive steps.

Last month, the US and its allies pushed the IAEA's Board of Governors into passing a resolution, which

repeated the Western countries' unfounded accusation against the Islamic Republic of insufficient cooperation with the IAEA. The accusation comes although Tehran's cooperation with the body has increased in frequency and quality over the past years.

Grossi also said, "The philosophy of the original accord with Iran can be used, but that agreement is no longer useful."

Eslami concluded his remarks by noting that the UN Security Council was about to carry out its biannual examination of its Resolution 2231 that endorsed the nuclear deal in 2015.

"This resolution is of two parts, which address acceptance of [certain] restrictions on the part of Iran towards building up trust in exchange for elimination of the [illegal] sanctions [that have been imposed on the country] and implementation of the other parties' commitments."

The official urged the parties to live up to their contractual commitments and remove the sanctions.

Iran's Nuclear Enrichment Program Has No Military Objectives



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs says the Islamic Republic's nuclear enrichment program has no military objectives and the development of its nuclear program is in line with technical needs.

Kazem Gharibabadi made the remarks in a tweet he posted on X on Tuesday in response to an interview by Rafael Mariano Grossi, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency who said, "Iran is enriching uranium close to military levels and is rapidly moving towards becoming a nuclear state."

"The JCPOA is no longer relevant and a new understanding is needed to take into account the realities of Iran's nuclear program," Grossi added.

In response, Gharibabadi said, "First, the Director General of a specialized organization is expected to speak based on facts and technical reports from the Agency's inspectors. Reading intentions based on hypothetical scenarios is not part of the Director General's duties and is contrary to the letter and spirit of the Agency's statute."

"Second, the development of Iran's nuclear program is in line with technical needs and is being carried out fully under the Agency's safeguards supervision," he stated.

"Third, respect for the decisions and policies of countries in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, including the fuel cycle (enrichment), is recognized in relevant international documents, and these statements by the Director General, which are tinged with political flavor, cannot ignore these facts," he stated.

"Fourth, Iran's enrichment program has no military objectives. Regarding the level of enrichment, it should also be noted that enrichment is not restricted under the Non-Proliferation Treaty as long as it is under the supervision of the Agency and does not deviate from peaceful purposes," Gharibabadi said.

"The Director General's statements are a clear violation of the rights of countries in creating an artificial threshold in the level of enrichment for peaceful purposes, deepening other discriminations in the non-proliferation regime," he said.

World Power Shifting From West to East



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - A top military adviser to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says the emerging new world order shows power is shifting from the West to the East.

"Today's world is in a geopolitical transitional stage, and the geometry of a new world order is emerging on the global and regional scale," Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi said.

"In this geopolitical transitional process, on the global scale, the power system is...slowly moving from the West to the East of this world," he noted.

Safavi said that the world is moving towards "multilateralism and multipolarity", saying "the Asian power or Eurasian power", composed of China, India, Russia and Iran, is "emerging" in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS in order to "confront the unilateralism of the United States and the US-led NATO military alliance", reducing the power of American dollar in global trade.

Noting that "we are living in a chaos-inflicted world and region," Safavi said the main reason behind conflicts and wars over the past 200 years is the regional and global powers' rivalry to gain "political, cultural and economic dominance over the world's strategic regions."

He stressed that the "convergence and unity" among Muslim nations and "the formation of a Muslim power pole" in the world is "the only way to save Muslim nations from the dominance of the global arrogance, particularly the US and Israel, which are "the main causes of insecurity, war and genocide in our region and the world."

This pole of power in the Muslim world can be achieved through Muslim countries' recognition of the need for achieving sustainable security, regional peace and the progress and independence of the Muslim nations, Safavi said.

IRAN NEWS

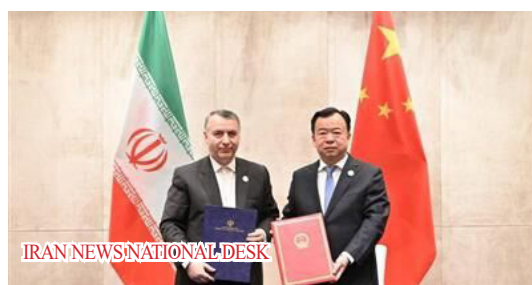


130 Active Airplanes Ready for Flight

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Hossein Pourfarzaneh, head of the Civil Aviation Organization, discussed the impact of rising fuel prices on airline ticket costs. He stated that the reality is an increase in the dollar rate affects ticket prices by approximately two to three dollars per seat. However, he emphasized that rising fuel costs do not lead to significant increases in ticket prices, and the public does not feel these changes.

He further highlighted that during this period, when airlines are allowed to set their own prices, they are offering tickets for various routes at about 50% below the permitted price.

Iran and China Sign Cooperation Agreement on Development Projects



TEHRAN - Iran and China have signed a memorandum of understanding for developmental cooperation on the sidelines of the third Development Cooperation Forum of Indian Ocean Rim countries held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.

The forum took place on December 16 and 17, 2023, and was attended by officials from over 20 countries bordering the Indian Ocean.

Abolfazl Koodei, Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Head of the Organization for Investment, Economic and Technical Assistance of Iran, led Iran's delegation at the conference.

During the forum, Koodei met with the Deputy Director of the Chinese International Development Cooperation Agency to discuss enhancing economic exchanges, particularly the implementation of projects in Iran through the South-South Cooperation Fund and China's Global Development Initiative.

The discussions led to the announcement of the approval of two projects in Iran, accompanied by the signing of the cooperation memorandum between the two countries. Given the financing possibilities available through the South-South Fund and China's development initiatives, it was agreed that these two projects would be funded and executed through the respective resources, initiating their implementation process with the signing of the memorandum.

Furthermore, Koodei, as an invited speaker at the forum, highlighted the frameworks for bilateral and multilateral cooperation among Indian Ocean Rim countries. He proposed ideas for joint investment, focusing on marine economy, blue economy potential, and new technologies, to better harness collaboration opportunities and enhance regional exchanges.

The Global Development Initiative, along with other recent initiatives from the Chinese government such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Digital Silk Road, the Health Silk Road, and the Global Security Initiative, has created a conducive environment for regional engagement and the definition of shared interests and projects between Iran and regional countries, including China.

During the forum, several bilateral meetings were also held, involving deputy ministers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Thailand, as well as representatives from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, where the potential for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the Pacific partnership was explored.

Indian Cranes Activate at Chabahar Port



TEHRAN - Qasem Askari Nasab, the Director General of Ports and Maritime Affairs of Sistan and Baluchestan, informed reporters that all six cranes at Shahid Beheshti Port in Chabahar, supplied by the Indian operator, are now operational. He pointed out that several of these cranes, initially suitable for unloading and loading bulk cargo, required additional equipment to facilitate container operations. For the first time, companies focused on knowledge-based solutions in Iran were able to synchronize these necessary components, which resolved the issue and significantly increased the speed of loading and unloading processes.

Currently, there are 15 trillion IRR worth of projects underway at Shahid Beheshti Port, with 8 trillion IRR being executed by the private sector.

In response to a question regarding the latest status of Indian investments in Chabahar, Nasab stated that the Indian investment contract for Chabahar Port operates on a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) basis, which has increased to 370 million USD in the final agreement. Under this contract, the Indians are set to bring in 110 port equipment units within 10 years. At present, 70 hectares of the port are under the control of the Indian operator, who is a significant business partner. In terms of revenue sharing, Iran holds a 70% stake in import revenues, while the Indian counterpart has 30%. For transit, both sides share an equal 50%, and in exports, Iran maintains a 60% share compared to the Indians' 40%.

He emphasized that as of now, India has invested 20 million USD out of the planned 370 million USD to secure equipment, with 140 million USD earmarked for equipment procurement.

Additionally, the Director General noted that the United States has exempted the transfer of aid cargo from Chabahar Port to Afghanistan from its sanctions. Currently, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines is operating as a joint venture with the Indian partners.



Fertility Rate Remains Below Replacement Level in Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The head of the National Population Research Institute has announced that Iran's total fertility rate has dramatically declined from 6.4 children per woman in 1986 to approximately 1.6 children per woman in 2023. This decline is the steepest in the country's history and was originally projected to reach a rate of 4 by 2011, according to population development programs initiated over the years.

In October 2021, the Iranian parliament passed the Family Support and Population Growth Law, comprising 73 articles and 81 notes, aimed at promoting higher birth rates. Following its trial approval for a seven-year implementation period, this legislation was endorsed by the Guardian Council. Now, nearly three years into this law's enactment, experts across various fields—including demographers, sociologists, economists, healthcare professionals, and civil society activists—have provided differing analyses on its effectiveness and implications.

To explore the policies of different countries encouraging young couples to have children, as well as the effectiveness of incentives included in Iran's population growth law, IRNA's social affairs correspondent turned to Mohammad Javad Mahmoudi, the head of the National Population Research Institute. His insights reflect considerable research in demographic studies.

In the first segment of a detailed conversation, Mahmoudi discussed the improvement of the national fertility rate and the halt of the downward trend in birth rates over the past two years. He noted that the expansion of childbearing in the country should be analyzed through various student incentives and support mechanisms that other nations have established. Specific results linked to monetary incentives impacting population age structure were also reviewed.

A second section compared public expenditure to support families in Iran to expenditures in OECD countries, examining the implementation of population growth policies employed by over 55% of countries worldwide.

In the third part of this interview, Mahmoudi outlined the current state of births in Iran, examining the fluctuations in marriage and divorce rates

alongside changes in fertility rates. The following are key takeaways from this discussion:

According to Mahmoudi, the first development program aimed for a decrease in the total fertility rate from 6.4 births in 1986 to 4 by 2011, along with a reduction in population growth rates from 3.2% to 2.3%. However, recent censuses revealed that the actual demographic changes have deviated significantly from these goals. The census data from 2011 and 2016 showed population growth rates of 1.29% and 1.24%, respectively, which have now dwindled to around 0.7% by 2023.

He remarked that the set objectives from 2010 have indeed been achieved, though many critics have overlooked this point. The reduction in the total fertility rate, which plummeted to an unprecedented level of 1.6 children per woman in 2023, has raised significant concerns about Iran's demographic structure and its future challenges.

Mahmoudi emphasized that research into Iran's future fertility trends paints a concerning picture: the population born in the 1980s and 1990s—the peak birth decades—are now transitioning into marriage and parenthood. This shift forebodes a decreasing intrinsic population capacity. If effective policy interventions are not established promptly, it is anticipated that Iran's fertility rate may stabilize below the replacement level.

He warned that the ongoing reduction in birth rates, viewed by some as beneficial, carries negative implications. The country currently faces a fertility rate significantly below the replacement threshold, which has grave consequences for the demographic transition, pushing the population structure towards an aging society.

In light of these challenges, Mahmoudi expressed concern regarding the labor-age population, projecting a potential dramatic decrease in the workforce within the next thirty years. This prediction suggests that the nation may soon grapple with an aging population, intensifying pressure on retirement systems and healthcare for senior citizens—issues that critics have yet to address comprehensively.

Start of Construction and Development of Faw Port by Iraq 20 Years Ago



TEHRAN - Ali Akbar Safaei stated at the eighth transportation, logistics, and related industries exhibition that there are currently 280 ongoing construction projects valued at 122 trillion tomans, and 64 projects involving private sector participation with an investment of 72 trillion tomans are also underway. Next week, 34 memorandums of understanding worth 90 trillion tomans will be signed at a special ceremony attended by the Minister of Road and Urban Development and representatives from the coastal provinces.

He emphasized that since the victory of the revolution, port capacities, as well as maritime, rail, and road sectors, have seen considerable growth. This achievement has occurred during a period of sanctions. He added that development policies centered around maritime zones are being seriously pursued by the President, his First Deputy, and the Minister of Road and Urban Development, including the preparation of a comprehensive development plan for Makran with a focus on coastal development which has led to the formation of a national council for this purpose.

Safaei referred to the performance of the maritime and port sectors over the past 10 months, noting that during this period, 2 million 225 thousand TEUs of container operations saw an 11% increase, with

nearly 172 million tons of unloading and loading operations. In the non-oil goods sector, there was a 3% growth in transit performance, which amounted to 9 million 400 thousand tons, showing a 37% increase compared to the same period last year.

The Managing Director of the Ports and Maritime Organization mentioned the modernization of port equipment, stating that 48 vessels are under construction, and 125 ships and port equipment are being repaired, with 71 already operational. Additionally, the construction of 36 new vessels is set to commence, with over 30 other units ready for operation.

He emphasized that the development of the maritime fleet in the Caspian Sea has significantly progressed, and our fleet's capacity in terms of tonnage is now equal to that of Russia's fleet. The fleet in the southern regions is also in a very favorable position. Despite some of our vessels not operating under the Iranian flag, we remain among the top five major fleets in the world.

Regarding the thriving maritime and port business sector, he noted that interested parties can obtain operational licenses in 32 specialized fields without the need for authorization from the Ports and Maritime Organization.

Iran Ready for Joint Research with Armenia



TEHRAN - ehran - IRNA - In a recent meeting with Armenia's Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports, the Iranian Minister of Cultural Heritage emphasized the importance of deepening cultural relations, stating that the Islamic Republic of Iran is prepared for joint research and excavations with Armenia.

Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri highlighted the longstanding relationship between Iran and Armenia, which he characterized as an inherent security partnership. He pointed out that the Iranian government's policy is to enhance relations with Armenia. "Given the significance of culture and its impact, deepening cultural ties will also catalyze growth in other areas," he stated.

Salehi Amiri noted that the relationship between the two nations dates back 500 years, and Armenians are regarded as a noble people in Iranian culture. He added that Armenians also played a significant role during the Iran-Iraq War.

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts stated, "There is no reason for us to avoid cooperation with Armenia. In the area of cultural heritage, we have not only registered the Armenian churches in northwestern Iran as UNESCO World Heritage sites but have also nationally registered, protected, and restored many other churches in the country. We regard these sites as sacred. One of the oldest churches in the world is in Iran, and these sites serve as both places of worship and tourist destinations."

Salehi Amiri proposed several avenues for collaboration between Iran and Armenia, emphasizing that joint research and excavations could be a key focus area. He mentioned that the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts has research facilities that offer good potential for cooperation and expressed readiness for joint excavations with Armenia. He also suggested conducting educational workshops in various fields such as excavation and restoration, as well as developing joint files for registering churches and intangible heritage, which could enhance cooperation between the two nations.

He further proposed the organization of joint exhibitions, drawing attention to the current exhibition of Iranian cultural artifacts in China, which has received a positive response.

The Minister concluded by stating that international relations are bolstered through intellectual dialogue, urging that elites from both countries engage in discussions in shared spaces. He extended an invitation for Andrasian to visit Tehran to operationalize these proposals.

Megaterminal Project Launched at Imam Khomeini Airport



TEHRAN - Saeed Chalendari, CEO of Imam Khomeini Airport City Company, announced that significant investments are being made at Imam Khomeini Airport under the 14th government. "A favorable environment has been created, attracting numerous domestic and foreign investors to Imam Khomeini Airport City," he stated.

Chalendari revealed that a large cargo terminal project, with a foreign investment of \$240 million, is ready to begin construction, and contract signing is currently underway.

He mentioned that there are 42 investment projects, valued at 28 trillion IRR, that are ready for inauguration at Imam Khomeini Airport City. Due to the recent unfortunate demise of the President, progress on Phase 2 of the airport's development was slowed for approximately four months. However, he confirmed that the current progress of the project stands at 52%, with expectations to complete these projects by September of next year.

The CEO also noted that between 700 kilograms to one ton of gold is imported daily through Imam Khomeini Airport.

Regarding the return of foreign airlines to Iran, Chalendari reported that most foreign airlines have resumed service, with the exception of Austrian Airlines and Lufthansa. Currently, the average daily flights over Iranian airspace range from 150 to 160, but as the year progresses toward its end, a significant increase in daily flights is anticipated, potentially reaching 340 flights per day, similar to previous years.

Conflict in Syria Has Not Ended Yet

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - A UN envoy warned on Tuesday that Syria's protracted conflict "has not ended yet", even as the country's victorious Islamist-led rebels stepped up contacts with governments that deemed ousted president Bashar al-Assad a pariah. Assad fled Syria just over a week ago following a lightning offensive spearheaded by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), more than 13 years after his crackdown on democracy protests precipitated one of the deadliest wars of the century. But the United Nations' special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said: "There have been significant hostilities in the last two weeks, before a ceasefire was brokered... A five-day ceasefire has now expired and I am seriously concerned about reports of military escalation. Such an escalation could be catastrophic."



Ukraine Claims Russia Used North Korean Troops in Kursk Region



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia has used North Korean troops at the heart of an "intensive offensive" in its western Kursk region seeking to push out Ukrainian forces, Ukraine's commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky said Tuesday.

Kyiv has been occupying part of the border region since August when it launched a shock cross-border incursion to seize Russian territory.

"For three days in a row, the enemy has been conducting intensive offensive operations in the Kursk region, actively using North Korean army units," Syrsky said in an address to local officials.

Intelligence agencies in Ukraine, the United States and South Korea have all said Pyongyang has deployed around 10,000 troops to Russia to fight alongside its army.

"North Korean mercenaries have already suffered heavy losses. The Ukrainian defenders are steadfastly holding the defence, destroying enemy personnel and equipment," Syrsky said, without providing further details.

Ukraine said Monday its forces had killed or wounded at least 30 North Korean troops in Kursk. At least 10,000 North Korean forces have been deployed to help the Russian army, according to western estimates.

The reports of a fresh Russian counter-offensive in Kursk come with Moscow's forces advancing in eastern Ukraine.

Russia's army early on Tuesday claimed to have seized another small village in the eastern Donetsk region, around 10 kilometres (six miles) south of the resource-rich hub of Kurakhove, which Moscow is also on the brink of capturing.

Syrsky said the "most difficult situation" is currently around Kurakhove and the mining city of Pokrovsk - two areas Russia is aiming to seize.

He said the "operational and strategic situation remains difficult" across the 1,170-kilometre (730-mile) front line, a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia's troops had seized "the strategic initiative" across the front.

Gaza Ceasefire Talks Gain Momentum as Officials Push for Deal

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - An agreement to halt the 14-month-old war in Gaza and free hostages held in the Palestinian enclave could be signed in the coming days with talks in Cairo making progress, sources briefed on the meeting said on Tuesday.

The U.S. administration, joined by mediators from Egypt and Qatar, has made intensive efforts in recent days to advance the talks before President Joe Biden leaves office next month.

"We believe - and the Israelis have said this - that we're getting closer, and no doubt about it, we believe that, but we also are cautious in our optimism," White House spokesperson John Kirby said in an interview with Fox News.

"We've been in this position before where we weren't able to get it over the finish line."

The sources said a ceasefire deal could be days away that would stop the fighting and return hostages held by the Islamist movement Hamas in Gaza in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

CIA Director William Burns, a key U.S. negotiator, was due in Doha on Wednesday for talks with Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani on bridging remaining gaps between Israel and Hamas, other knowledgeable sources told Reuters.

The CIA declined to comment.

Hamas said in a statement a deal was possible if Israel stopped setting new conditions. A Palestinian official close to the mediation efforts said negotiations were serious, with discussions under way about every word.

Sources briefed on the meeting said Netanyahu was on his way to Cairo, but a statement from Netanyahu's office said he had a meeting on Tuesday with senior military and security officials on Mount Hermon, a strategic plateau just inside Syria.

Separately, his spokesperson messaged Israeli correspondents to say: "The prime minister is not in Cairo."

Two Egyptian security sources said that Netanyahu was not in Cairo "at this moment" but that a meeting was under way to work through the remaining points, chief among them a Hamas demand for guarantees that any immediate deal would lead to a comprehensive agreement later.

The Egyptian sources said they were making progress and felt that Tuesday night could be decisive in setting the next steps. Netanyahu had been excused on Tuesday from giving previously scheduled testimony at his corruption trial. He met in Israel on Monday with Adam Boehler, designated by U.S. President-elect Donald Trump to be his special envoy for hostage affairs. At a press conference in Florida on Monday, Trump reiterated his threat that "all hell is going to break out" if Hamas does not release its hostages by Jan. 20, the day he takes office.

Later, Trump said that if no ceasefire deal is reached by the time he takes office, "It's not going to be pleasant." He did not elaborate.

U.S. and Israeli officials have expressed growing optimism that negotiations brokered by Egypt and Qatar could produce a deal by the end of the month but have also cautioned that the talks could fall through.

Israeli negotiators were in Doha on Monday looking to bridge gaps between Israel and Hamas on a deal Biden outlined in May.

There have been repeated rounds of talks over the past year, all of which have ended in failure, with Israel insisting on retaining a military presence in Gaza and Hamas refusing to release hostages until the troops pulled out.

The war in Gaza, triggered by a Hamas-led attack on communities in southern Israel that killed some 1,200 people and saw more than 250 abducted as hostages, has sent shockwaves across the Middle East and left Israel isolated internationally.

Israel's campaign has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, displaced most of the 2.3 million population and reduced much of the coastal enclave to ruins.

Israeli airstrikes killed extended families in homes in two parts of the northern Gaza Strip on Tuesday, medics said.

At least 10 people were confirmed killed in an airstrike on a house in Gaza City that destroyed the building, while further north in the town of Beit Lahiya at least 15 people were believed to be dead or missing under the rubble of a house hit around dawn.

Argentine President Demands Release of Soldier Arrested in Venezuela



BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Argentine President Javier Milei on Tuesday demanded that Venezuelan authorities immediately free an Argentine soldier arrested earlier this month who Milei said entered Venezuela to visit family, in the latest flare-up between the two South American nations.

At a military school event, President Javier Milei said security forces under the command of the "criminal dictator Nicolas Maduro" arrested Nahuel Gallo, a soldier with the Argentine national force known as the Gendarmeria. Milei said the "only crime" Gallo committed while in Venezuela was to visit his wife and son.

Later on Tuesday, Venezuela's top diplomat shrugged off Milei's comments and instead accused him and his security minister of taking part in a "terrorist plan."

Milei's government, including Security Minister Patricia Bullrich, has previously called for the release of Gallo, who was arrested on Dec. 8 after entering Venezuela's western state of Tachira from neighboring Colombia.

"We demand his immediate release and we'll exhaust all diplomatic paths to return him safely to Argentina," said Milei.

Although the two nations have not formally cut diplomatic ties, Argentine diplomats were expelled from Caracas last August following Venezuela's July presidential election that Milei's government forcefully rejected as fraudulent.

Ukraine Kills Russian Chemical Weapons Chief Igor Kirillov in Moscow

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - A top Russian general accused by Ukraine of being responsible for the use of chemical weapons against Ukrainian troops was assassinated in Moscow by Ukraine's SBU intelligence service on Tuesday morning in the most high-profile killing of its kind.

Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, who was chief of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, was killed outside an apartment building along with his assistant when a bomb hidden in an electric scooter went off, Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said.

An SBU source confirmed to Reuters that the Ukrainian intelligence agency had been behind the hit. "The liquidation of the chief of the radiation and chemical protection troops of the Russian Federation is the work of the SBU," the source said.

The source said that a scooter containing explosives was detonated, killing both Kirillov and his aide, as they stepped out of a building on Ryazansky Prospekt in Moscow.

Unverified video footage of the attack circulating on social media showed two men exiting the building to get into a car followed by a large explosion as the two men remained on the pavement. Reuters could not independently verify the footage.

Kirillov, 54, is the most senior Russian military officer to be assassinated inside Russia by Ukraine and his murder is likely to prompt the Russian authorities to review security protocols for the army's top brass.

Former President Dmitry Medvedev, now a senior Russian security official, told a meeting shown on state TV that Moscow would avenge what he called an act of terrorism.

"Law enforcement agencies must find the killers in Russia," said Medvedev. "Everything must be done to destroy the masterminds (of the killing) who are in Kyiv. We know who these masterminds are. They are the military and political leadership of Ukraine," he said.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, speaking to Russian news agencies, dismissed a comment from the U.S. State Department that



Washington had no connection to the killing or any prior knowledge of it.

The United States, she said, "created the Kyiv regime, sponsors it, provides money and sends weapons endlessly. The proof is clear: Washington has not once condemned a single terrorist act or planned murder committed by the Kyiv regime."

There was no immediate comment from President Vladimir Putin.

Moscow holds Ukraine responsible for a string of high-profile assassinations on its soil designed to weaken morale and punish those Kyiv regards guilty of war crimes. Ukraine, which says Russia's war against it poses an existential threat to the Ukrainian state, has made clear it regards such targeted killings as a legitimate tool.

Reuters photographs and video from the scene showed a shattered entrance to an apartment building with bomb-blackened bricks and the doors hanging off their hinges and what looked like two bodies lying beneath black plastic sheets on the snow.

Russia denies Ukrainian allegations it uses chemical weapons on the battlefield and Kirillov, who was married with two sons, was himself sometimes shown on state TV giving briefings at the Defence Ministry in which he accused

Ukraine of violating nuclear safety protocols or the West of various alleged crimes.

Britain in October imposed sanctions on Kirillov and his nuclear defence forces for using riot control agents and over multiple reports of the use of the toxic choking agent chloropicrin on the battlefield.

Such agents, Ukraine has alleged, are used to disorient its troops, leaving them unable to defend themselves against Russian attacks.

Sergei Sitnikov, a regional Russian governor, said Kirillov was his friend and had told him he was aware of a threat against him.

"Some time ago, he told me that he had already been warned that the hunt for him had begun," Sitnikov said in a statement, saying he believed Kyiv wanted to kill Kirillov for various reasons, including his involvement in the development and use of a heavy flamethrower system.

Kirillov was murdered a day after Ukrainian state prosecutors charged him in absentia with the alleged use of banned chemical weapons, the Kyiv Independent cited the SBU as saying.

The lieutenant general was also listed in a sprawling unofficial Ukrainian database of people considered to be enemies of the country called Myrotvorets (Peacemaker). A photograph of Kirillov on the website was overwritten with the word "Liquidated" in red letters on Tuesday morning.

Russia says Ukraine has carried out a string of targeted assassinations since the start of Moscow's full-scale war on Ukraine in February 2022.

The most high-profile cases include the 2022 killing of Darya Dugina, the daughter of Russian nationalist ideologue Alexander Dugin, the murder of pro-war blogger Vladlen Tatarkov in a 2023 cafe bombing, and the shooting last year of a Russian submarine commander accused of war crimes by Kyiv.

Russia's radioactive, chemical and biological defence troops, which Kirillov commanded, are special forces who operate under conditions of radioactive, chemical and biological contamination and who are tasked with protecting ground forces operating in extreme conditions.

Canada Pledges Beefed-Up Border, Immigration Restrictions to Appease Trump

TORONTO (Dispatches) - Four Canadian ministers publicly unveiled on Tuesday a border security plan they had privately presented to U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's incoming administration, with an emphasis on surveillance, intelligence and technology.

Canadian ministers had an "encouraging" meeting with Trump's border czar Tom Homan, Public Safety, Finance and Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Dominic LeBlanc told reporters.

"I went through with Mr. Homan the information that we're sharing with you today... I'm encouraged by that conversation and by conversations I've had with the incoming Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick," LeBlanc said.

LeBlanc and his colleagues announced Tuesday a plan to beef up the U.S.-Canada border with helicopters, drones, surveillance towers and sniffer dogs, as well as a "joint strike force" to target transnational organized crime.

The embattled minority government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says it will invest C\$1.3 billion (\$909 million) toward border security over six years. The plan focuses on fentanyl, irregular migration and organized crime.

Canada has been under pressure to beef up its border with the U.S.



since Trump threatened Canada and Mexico with sweeping 25% tariffs if they did not stem the movement of migrants and drugs into the United States.

U.S. authorities apprehended more than 23,000 people near the U.S.-Canada border in the 12 months ending in October, more than double the previous year but a tiny fraction of the 1.5 million people apprehended near the U.S.-Mexico border during that time.

Canadian police say they have installed more cameras and sensors over the most-traversed section of the border over the past four years.

Yet they acknowledge there is little they can do to stop southbound crossers. Experts told Reuters the flurry of attention to the U.S.-Canada border is as much about perception as reality.

They said a more effective mode of interdiction may be to stop people from coming to Canada in the first place.

As Reuters has reported, Canada is already attempting that - granting fewer visas and turning away visa-holders.

Canada also plans to amend its immigration law to allow authorities to "cancel, suspend, or vary immigration documents for reasons deemed in the public interest."

This might take place, Immigration Minister Marc Miller said Tuesday, "for example, in cases of mass fraud."



Vinicius Jr Crowned FIFA Player of 2024

DOHA (Dispatches) - Brazil and Real Madrid forward Vinicius Jr was named FIFA men's player of the year in Doha on Tuesday, with Spain and Barcelona midfielder Aitana Bonmati winning the women's award for the second year in a row.

Vinicius scored 24 goals in 39 appearances across all competitions to help Real Madrid clinch the LaLiga and Champions League double, and he also netted in their Champions League final win over Borussia Dortmund.

The Brazilian won the award ahead of Spain and Manchester City midfielder Rodri and his teammate at Real, England's Jude Bellingham.

The 24-year-old, who narrowly missed out on the Ballon d'Or to Rodri in October, was in Doha to collect the award, with Real in Qatar for Wednesday's IFA Intercontinental Cup final against Mexico's Pachuca.

"It seemed impossible when I played barefoot in the streets of Sao Goncalo and now I'm here," Vinicius said.

Bonmati retained the FIFA women's player of the year award ahead of Zambia's Barbra Banda and Norway's Caroline Graham Hansen, having also won the women's Ballon d'Or for the second consecutive year in October.

The 26-year-old helped her club to a domestic treble last season in a campaign in which Barca also retained the Champions League, and Bonmati scored in the semi-final and final when Spain won the

Nations League in February.

"I'm very grateful for this award, but I always say that this is a team effort, with a Barca that won everything and the national team," Bonmati said.

Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti won the best men's coach award, after the Italian led his club to the league and Champions League double last season.

"I want to share this with the club, with my president and with my players, those of the best club in the world," Ancelotti said.

Emma Hayes won the best women's coach award, after taking the US to the gold medal at this year's Olympic Games having taken Chelsea to the WSL title last season, her fifth successive league win with the club.

Alejandro Garnacho won the Puskas Award, for best goal of the year for the Argentine winger's strike for Manchester United against Everton in the Premier League in November last year.

Brazil's Marta won the inaugural Marta Award, for the best goal in women's football, taking the prize named in her honor for her goal against Jamaica in June of this year.

The best women's goalkeeper award went to American Alyssa Naeher of the Chicago Red Stars while Emiliano Martinez of Argentina and Aston Villa took the men's award.

A Super League by Any Other Name Would Bid Again for FIFA Recognition



PARIS (Dispatches) - Super League promoters on Tuesday revealed they have asked FIFA and UEFA for "official recognition" of their proposed competition, renamed the "Unify League", leaning on a ruling from Europe's top court.

A22 Sports Management said it sent the proposal after discussions with various leagues, clubs and other stakeholders, revising its qualification system to base participation on annual domestic performances.

It has submitted plans for competitions featuring 96 teams divided into four leagues, running from September to April, followed by a knockout phase starting with the quarter-finals.

In a statement, A22 argued last year's European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling meant that "any competition where qualification is inclusive and meritocratic, and which complies with the overall match calendar can be officially established".

Promoters also said matches would be shown live for free via a streaming platform.

"Our extensive engagement with key stakeholders revealed a number of pressing challenges facing the sport including increasing subscription costs for fans, an overloaded player calendar, insufficient investment in women's football, and dissatisfaction with the format and governance of the current pan-European competitions," said A22 CEO Bernd Reichart said.

"Our proposal is designed to directly address these challenges."

European football was hit with a bombshell in early 2021, when 12 of its biggest clubs announced they had signed up to the planned Super League, triggering a furious backlash from fans and a stark warning from UEFA that clubs and players who took parts would be barred from competitions like the World Cup.

Within 48 hours nine of the 12 rebel clubs — including six from the English Premier League — backed down and the project collapsed, but Real Madrid and Barcelona remain strong supporters of it.

Last year the ECJ ruled that UEFA had broken EU law by abusing its "dominant position" in European football to stifle an upstart breakaway league of elite clubs.

Mavericks, Warriors Combine for NBA-Record 48 3-Pointers

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The Dallas Mavericks and Golden State Warriors combined for an NBA-record 48 3-pointers.

Golden State hit 27 and Dallas made 21 in the Mavericks' 143-133 victory at Chase Center.

Klay Thompson connected for seven of the Mavs' 3-pointers facing his former team for the second time in just more than a month, and longtime Splash Brother Stephen Curry also hit seven. Dallas star Luka Doncic shot 6 for 11 from deep on the way to his 80th career triple-double that featured a season-high 45 points.

"The shot making was at a high, both teams shot the ball extremely well from 3," Mavericks coach Jason Kidd said. "It was a fun game to watch, a fun game to participate in and making shots, and both teams did that at a high level tonight."

In addition, Draymond Green had season highs of five 3s and 21 points and teammate Andrew Wiggins also hit five from long range.

Doncic shot 16 for 23, making 9 of his first 11 shots with four 3-pointers on the way to 28 points by halftime.

At 2,549 career 3s, Thompson moved within 11 of tying Reggie Miller for fifth on the career list with 2,560. Damian Lillard will be the next person for Thompson to chase — Lillard is in fourth place with 2,683.

"I love shooting at Chase Center," Thompson said. "I've been lucky enough to set records here and have incredible memories."



Curry is the career leader with 3,832, followed by James Harden (3,010) and Ray Allen (2,973).

Meanwhile the NBA's All-Star Game is going to be an All-Star tournament this season, with the league announcing on Tuesday that it has finalized plans to use a different format for the upcoming midseason showcase in San Francisco.

And scoring is sure to be down — way, way, way down.

This season's format is a four-team, three-game, one-night tournament, three teams of eight All-Stars apiece and the fourth team being the winner of the Rising Stars challenge for first- and second-year players. The winning team in all games will be the first to score

40 points.

It'll happen Feb. 16 at the home of the Golden State Warriors. The Rising Stars event is there Feb. 14, headlining All-Star Friday.

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver has wanted a more competitive All-Star event for some time, and this change comes after the teams combined to score a record 397 points — 211-186 was the final — in last season's game at Indianapolis.

The teams combined to take 289 shot attempts in last year's game, 94% of those being either inside the paint or beyond the 3-point line.

"Obviously, with the elephant in the room being us competing, them trying to shake things up is expected and makes sense," said Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, a likely All-Star selection this season for the third time.

"At the end of the day, it's going to come down to whether the players want to go at it, and I would love to see that. Love to be a part of that for sure, and hopefully it happens."

There have been other All-Star format shakeups in recent years. After the first 66 All-Star Games were basically played like a normal game — Eastern Conference vs. Western Conference, four quarters, 12 minutes apiece — the league switched to a format where the leading vote-getters from each conference served as captains who got to draft their teams.

Rashford Ready for a New Challenge Amid Manchester United Exit Rumors



LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United forward Marcus Rashford is ready for a new challenge, he told football writer Henry Winter on Tuesday, as he continues to be linked with a move away from the Premier League club.

On Sunday, United beat Manchester City 2-1, but Rashford, along with Alejandro Garnacho, was left out of the trip to the Etihad, with new manager Ruben Amorim saying his decision was about holding his players to high standards.

This led to media reports that United were looking to sell the England forward, who has been at United since the age of seven, and the 27-year-old spoke on the subject while visiting his old school to hand out Christmas presents.

"For me, personally, I think I'm ready for a new challenge and the next steps," Rashford told Winter when asked if he was staying or leaving United.

"When I leave it's going to be 'no hard feelings'. You're not going to have any negative comments from me about Manchester United. That's me as a person.

"If I know that a situation is already bad I'm not going to make it worse. I've seen how other players have left in the past and I don't want to be that person.

"When I leave I'll make a statement and it will be from me."

Rashford has scored three goals since Amorim took over last month, but was taken off in the 56th minute of last week's 2-1 Europa League victory over Viktoria Plzen, with supporters booing the striker as he left the pitch.

The player has yet to rediscover the form that saw him score 30 goals across all competitions in the 2022-23 season, but he still believes the best is yet to come.

"I'm halfway through my career. I don't expect my peak to be now," Rashford said.

"I've had nine years so far in the Premier League and that's taught me a lot, that's helped me grow as a player and as a person.

"So I don't have any regrets from the last nine years. I won't have any regrets going forward because I take things day by day and sometimes bad things happen, sometimes good things happen."

Juventus Ease Into Coppa Italia Quarters

TURIN (Dispatches) - Holders Juventus reached the quarter-finals of the Coppa Italia with a comfortable 4-0 home win over Cagliari on Tuesday, thanks to goals from Dusan Vlahovic, Teun Koopmeiners, Francisco Conceicao and Nicolas Gonzalez.

Juventus, the most successful side in the competition's history with 15 trophies, host Empoli in the next round, while Cagliari will return their focus to the Serie A relegation battle.

Vlahovic, the focus of Juventus supporters' anger after Saturday's 2-2 draw with Venezia, soaked up the applause this time, scoring a minute before the break.

Koopmeiners added a second direct from a free kick eight minutes into the second half, Conceicao netted 10 minutes from time before Gonzalez wrapped up the win in the 89th minute.

Cagliari were quickest out of the blocks with Gianluca Lapadula forcing Juve keeper Michele Di Gregorio into a point-blank save in the opening minute, but after that it was the home side who took control.

Vlahovic fired over from a tight angle at the edge of the six-yard box before Kenan Yildiz had an acrobatic volley blocked by defender Mateusz Wieteska.



Conceicao then curled a shot just wide of the far post from outside the area and he had a similar effort on target minutes later which Cagliari keeper Simone Scuffet denied with a diving save.

Cagliari almost held out until halftime, but when Vlahovic received a pass from Yildiz in the box with his back to goal, he controlled the ball and turned and struck his effort through the legs of Wieteska and in off the far post.

Juventus doubled their lead when Koopmeiners whipped his free kick from well outside the area over the wall and into the top corner, and had little trouble seeing out the win.

Vlahovic twice had the ball in the net in the second half, both ruled out for offside but Conceicao finally got the goal his performance deserved, cutting inside from the right and bending his finish into the far bottom corner.

Substitute Gonzalez went on a solo run before lobbing the keeper as Juventus, who have drawn their last four league games, continue to enjoy success in cup competitions having also beaten Manchester City in the Champions League last week.