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U.S. Hostage-Taking of Iranian Nationals Violation of Int'l Law



TEHRAN - A senior Iranian diplomat condemned the U.S. move to take Iranian nationals hostage under the guise of circumvention of illegal and unilateral sanctions.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular, Parliamentary, and Expatriate Affairs Vahid Jalalzadeh, in a post on X (formerly Twitter) on Sunday, said the move is "in breach of international law."

"Unilateral and inhumane U.S. sanctions, along with any actions stemming from these illegal measures such as hostage-taking of Iranian nationals under pretenses like circumventing illegal and illegitimate sanctions, constitute a violation of international law," he wrote.

"It is our duty to pursue the rights of Iranians in every part of the world," Jalalzadeh emphasized.

Jalalzadeh's comments came in response to the recent arrests of two Iranian nationals in the United States and Italy, allegedly for their involvement in equipping drones used in attacks on American forces.

According to reports, the arrests are allegedly linked to a January 28 drone attack carried out by Iraqi armed groups against a U.S. military outpost in Jordan known as Tower 22.

Mohammad Abedini Najafabadi, 38, a mechanical engineering graduate from Sharif University of Technology, was detained on December 16 by Italian police at Milan Airport while preparing to travel to Switzerland.

The arrest, carried out at the United States' request, has cut off all direct contact with him.

Through its consulate in Italy, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched extensive efforts to secure Abedini's release or at least obtain information about his condition.

A university colleague of Abedini informed Tasnim News Agency that Abedini is an Iranian national and the CEO of Sanat Danesh Rahpooayan Afkaf (SDRA), an Iranian company specializing in precision measurement equipment.

The company's products have a wide range of applications, encompassing medical and sports technologies.

Abedini also served as the head of Illumove SA, a Switzerland-based company focused on manufacturing motion capture equipment. All activities of these companies were conducted under the legal and financial oversight of the Swiss government.



Resistance Front Strengthened by Self-Reliance; Iran's Global Influence Grows

TEHRAN - In a significant address, Major General Hossein Salami, Commander-in-Chief of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), emphasized the independence and resilience of the Resistance Front, a coalition of groups supported by Iran. Speaking during a ceremony aboard the Shahid Roudaki ocean-going vessel, Salami highlighted that these groups produce their own weapons, underscoring Iran's strategic role in providing spiritual and political support while expanding its influence globally.

The address was part of the closing ceremony of the IRGC's second National Prayer Conference, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Hazrat Fatimah Zahra (PBUH). General Salami expressed pride in the IRGC's role as a guardian of Iran's independence and identity, particularly in the strategically critical Persian Gulf. He described the IRGC as an unmatched force, essential for upholding the dignity of the Muslim world and the Iranian nation.

General Salami lauded the bravery of IRGC forces, who remain resolute in defending Iran's sovereignty. He also commended their unwavering faith and dedication to prayer, which he described as integral to the organization's philosophy and success.

The Commander linked the IRGC's strength to its spiritual foundation, portraying its members as humble believers who exhibit uncompromising resolve against adversaries. He referenced the spirit of Ashura, a defining moment in Islamic history, as the driving force behind their resilience, emphasizing the role of faith and struggle in achieving purpose.

Salami underlined the transformative power of prayer in sustaining the IRGC and other

resistance movements. He pointed to the example of Gaza, where Palestinians and Hezbollah have turned adversity into victories. He credited their spiritual connection and determination for leaving Israel in disarray, describing the Israeli regime as beset by crises.

Salami described Israel's actions, including attacks on unarmed civilians, as signs of desperation. He argued that the Israeli regime faces an unprecedented lack of direction, with its leaders unable to chart a clear path forward. He predicted ongoing setbacks and instability for Israel in the face of growing resistance movements.

Reaffirming Iran's commitment to the Resistance Front, General Salami highlighted the country's support for groups in Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen. While these groups have become self-sufficient in producing their own weapons, Salami stressed that Iran offers maximum spiritual and political backing. He described this support as a cornerstone of Iran's strategy to strengthen resistance forces.

Concluding his speech, Salami emphasized Iran's expanding global influence and warned adversaries against underestimating its capabilities. "Our power is limitless," he declared, adding that any miscalculation by Iran's enemies could result in severe consequences. He praised the nation's youth as the heroes of "jihad and victory," committed to upholding Iran's ideals.

With its combination of spiritual dedication and military strength, the IRGC continues to project Iran's influence beyond its borders, presenting both a challenge and a warning to its adversaries.

FM Warns Against American-Israeli Plot to Weaken Muslims, Dominate Region



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has warned that the United States and Israeli regime are conspiring to undermine Muslim countries and dominate the region.

In a phone conversation with Yemeni Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Jamal Ahmed Ali Amer on Sunday, Araqchi condemned joint attacks by the U.S., Britain and the Israeli regime on Yemen.

He added that the U.S. is blatantly violating the principles and rules of international law on behalf of the Zionist regime and within the framework of a joint plan to destroy and weaken Muslim countries and dominate the region.

The top Iranian diplomat hailed the Yemeni people's resistance in the face of the Israeli regime and their support for the oppressed people of Palestine.

Araqchi emphasized that the Israeli regime has failed to achieve its malicious goals, despite carrying out numerous acts of crime and aggression with full support from the US and some Western countries.

Yemenis have declared their open support for Palestine's struggle against the Israeli occupation since the regime launched a devastating war on Gaza on October 7, 2023, after the territory's resistance movements carried out Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against the occupying entity.

The Yemeni Ansarullah resistance movement maintains that it targets ships linked to Israel, the United States, or the United Kingdom to force an end to the Tel Aviv regime's genocidal war on Gaza.

The Yemeni armed forces have said they will not stop their attacks until Israel's ground and aerial offensives in Gaza end.

The Gaza Health Ministry said on Sunday that at least 45,259 people have been killed and 107,627 injured during more than 14 months of the Israeli regime's genocidal war.

The Yemeni foreign minister, for his part, expressed appreciation for Iran's support for the Yemeni government and nation in the face of the enemies' acts of aggression.

He said the U.S. and Israel are striving to dominate the region, urging Muslim countries and nations to utilize their enormous capacities to prevent them from achieving their goals.

Report Blames Gasoil Exports for Shortage at Iranian Power Plants



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's parliament says the country's largest refinery sold large volumes of gasoil this summer.

A report by the Iranian parliament has blamed gasoil sales by Iran's largest oil refinery this summer for a current fuel shortage in the country's power plants that has led to scheduled power cuts in many towns and cities.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly's Research Center said in its report, published by the semi-official ISNA agency on Sunday, that Iran's Abadan Refinery had supplied some 1.3 billion liters of gasoil for sales at Iran's Energy Exchange in July and August.

It said the sales, which were meant to generate hard currency revenues for the government, came at a time when the refinery was supposed to supply gasoil to Iranian power plants for their use during cold winter months when they are normally disconnected from the country's gas grid.

The report described the decision to export gasoil, rather than supplying it to power plants, as strange, saying it has definitely been a reason why power plants are currently struggling with low fuel inventories.

The report said that gasoil storage at Iranian power plants had reached 1.81 billion liters in August, down from 3.175 billion liters in August 2023.

Total fuel storage at 146 power plants across Iran, including their storage of mazut, had declined by 36% over the same period, the report said.

The Iranian Oil Ministry said earlier this week that it was ramping up its production and supply of fuels to power plants, adding that the country's total fuel production had reached an all-time high of 320 million liters per day.

The Ministry said that refineries in Iran had produced more than 150 million liters per day of gasoil in the early days of December, delivering more than 52 million liters of it to power plants in the country.

Oxfam Says Only 12 Trucks Delivered Aid in North Gaza



GAZA (Dispatches) - The charity group Oxfam says only 12 trucks were able to distribute aid to trapped people in the besieged North Gaza governorate in the past two and a half months, amid Israel's "deliberate delays and systematic obstructions."

"Of the meager 34 trucks of food and water given permission to enter the North Gaza Governorate over the last 2.5 months, deliberate delays and systematic obstructions by the Israeli military meant that just twelve managed to distribute aid to starving Palestinian civilians," Oxfam said.

The group noted that the aid distributed by three of the trucks was destroyed by the Israeli forces.

"For three of these, once the food and water had been delivered to the school where people were sheltering, it was then cleared and shelled within hours."

Israel's restrictions on humanitarian aid for the North Gaza governorate have escalated since October when Israel imposed a siege on the area.

North Gaza has been under an all-out siege since October 6 and people there have been ordered to evacuate. Despite evacuation orders, the Palestinians trying to go south have been targeted by Israeli snipers and drones.

With 30% Inflation, Exchange Rates Cannot Remain Fixed

TEHRAN - The Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance emphasized that the Central Bank must have limited intervention in the currency market, warning that fixing exchange rates leads to corruption and is unsustainable under current 30% inflation conditions.

Speaking at a parliamentary economic commission meeting on Monday, where Central Bank Governor Mohammadreza Farzin was also present, Minister Abdolnaser Hemmati stated that it is estimated the public holds between \$20 billion and \$40 billion in cash currency. He noted that people are keeping these funds to safeguard their assets against inflation.

Hemmati highlighted that the rising value of the dollar has not compensated for the country's trade deficit. "Iran's non-oil trade deficit last year reached \$17 billion, an unprecedented figure," he said.

He further explained that while the official exchange rate in the NIMA system remained stable last year, the country experienced inflation rates of 42% to 52%. "We cannot operate with four different exchange rates. Exchange rates must be managed based on a floating system as per parliamentary law, with the Central Bank allowing for a 3% fluctuation to regulate the market," he stated.

The minister noted discrepancies between the NIMA rate and the open market, where the former was approximately 40,000 toman last year, while the latter climbed to 68,000 toman in April before stabilizing. "The gap between these rates is about 20,000 toman. Last year, NIMA facilitated \$50 billion worth of imports, equating to 1 trillion toman in rent distribution," Hemmati said.

He criticized the current system for enabling corruption. "We sell dollars at 40,000 toman, but many goods are traded in the market at 70,000 to 80,000 toman. This currency rent reduces exports while increasing imports, leading to a decline in foreign currency earnings and



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exports," he explained.

Hemmati pointed out that a significant portion of export-derived currency does not return to the country. Despite the Central Bank's efforts, liquidity growth is at 30%, and with inflation exceeding 30%, maintaining a fixed exchange rate is impossible.

The minister expressed support for the Central Bank's recent move to establish a currency agreement market, stating that fixing exchange rates leads to decreased exports, higher import demand, and widespread corruption.

Citing Central Bank data, he noted that from the start of 2022 until December 2023, price indices have increased 2.8-fold. Adjusting for U.S. inflation affecting the dollar, Iran's price index has risen 2.7-fold over 33 months. "This means the dollar, valued

at 27,000 toman in early 2022, should now be around 73,000 toman under normal economic and political conditions," Hemmati explained.

However, he acknowledged the complexities of the current economic climate, citing regional and international developments, such as events in Syria, former U.S. President Trump's actions, threats from the EU Troika regarding the snapback mechanism, and Israeli threats. These factors, combined with inflationary expectations and the Central Bank's limited resources, have exacerbated market challenges.

While urging greater efforts to combat inflation, Hemmati defended the government's performance. He stated that the Central Bank is striving to align the open market rate with a stabilized official rate through exchange centers.

The minister also called on parliament to support the government in boosting production. "In a year designated by the Supreme Leader for production growth, we cannot afford to stifle production. Fixing exchange rates and exerting liquidity pressure would lead to economic stagnation. The reported 2.9% GDP growth is a warning sign," he concluded.

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Telecom Exhibition Opens With Participation of 148 Domestic and Int'l Companies

TEHRAN -The 25th Telecom Exhibition, featuring 148 domestic and international companies along with a 30-member delegation from regional countries, was inaugurated under the theme "Sustainable Telecommunications in the Era of Artificial Intelligence." The event opened this morning (Monday) with the presence of the First Vice President, the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, and the CEO of Iran Telecommunication Company.

This year's exhibition brings together key players from both the public and private sectors with a focus on maximum participation. Organized by the Iran International Exhibitions Company, the event follows policy council meetings that outlined strategic goals and mapped the exhibition's framework.

Annual Inflation Rate Reaches 32.5% in December



TEHRAN - According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Iranian households reached 285.1 in December 2024, marking a 2.0% increase compared to the previous month, a 31.4% rise compared to December 2023, and a 32.5% annual increase over the past 12 months.

Year-on-year inflation reflects the percentage change in the CPI compared to the same month of the previous year. In December 2024, this figure stood at 31.4%, indicating that households spent, on average, 31.4% more than in December 2023 to purchase a consistent basket of goods and services. This is a 1.1 percentage point decrease from the previous month.

Monthly inflation, defined as the percentage change in the CPI compared to the preceding month, was 2.0% in December 2024. For major categories, inflation was 1.8% for "Food, Beverages, and Tobacco" and 2.1% for "Non-Food Items and Services."

The annual inflation rate, indicating the percentage change in the average CPI over the past year compared to the previous year, reached 32.5% in December 2024. This represents a 0.6 percentage point decline from the previous month.

The annual inflation rate for December 2024 was 32.5%, with variations across income deciles ranging from 30.0% for the lowest-income group (first decile) to 32.9% for the ninth decile. The inflation gap between deciles narrowed to 2.9 percentage points from 3.2 percentage points in the previous month, reflecting a 0.3 percentage point decrease.

Population Growth Remains Critically Low



TEHRAN - The Interior Minister has raised concerns about the extremely low population growth rate, warning that if the current trend continues, the population of Iran could drop below 40 million by the year 1480 (2101). He described this potential decline as a significant crisis.

Eskandar Momeni made these remarks during the nationwide inauguration of electronic birth certificates and the launch of the central office for electronic certificate issuance within the Civil Registration Organization. Highlighting the necessity of digital transformation, he stated:

"Given today's societal conditions in Iran and globally, digitalizing processes and systems is no longer a choice but an inevitable necessity. Services cannot continue without embracing smart technologies."

Momeni emphasized that, starting today, birth certificates in Iran will be digitalized, thanks to the collaboration between the Civil Registration Organization and the Ministry of Health. "This marks a significant step toward the full digitalization of identity-related processes and issues," he noted.

He added that digital transformation brings efficiency, precision, and accuracy, reducing the need for physical resources such as paper while saving time and improving quality of life.

Turning to population trends, Momeni pointed out the alarming decline in birth and population growth rates. "If this trend continues, by 1480 (2101), the country's population will fall below 40 million, which is a serious catastrophe. We all need to work together to implement the Family Support and Youthful Population Law. This declining trend is a significant loss, and all governmental agencies must strive to raise public awareness. We must first halt the decline and then move toward population growth."

He further stressed that experts and the Ministry of Health have repeatedly warned that this trajectory could lead to a severe future crisis. "The Youthful Population Law is inherently a good law. However, its success requires coordinated efforts across all institutions and active public participation," Momeni explained.

Momeni acknowledged that the current measures have not been sufficiently effective, as the declining trend continues. He called for further analysis and a united approach, emphasizing that population decline is not a localized issue but a national crisis requiring cooperation from all sectors of society.

Addressing concerns about the Civil Registration Organization's role in managing data, Momeni clarified that the organization is responsible for providing necessary information to government agencies and research institutions while safeguarding citizens' privacy. "We must ensure a balance between protecting private data and fulfilling lawful requirements for sharing information," he said.



Turkish Capital Markets Regulator Welcomes Expanded Cooperation With Iranian Exchanges

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TEHRAN - During the sidelines of the "GEM Committee" meeting in Turkey, the Iranian delegation, led by the representative of Iran's Securities and Exchange Organization (SEO), presented an official letter from Hojjatollah Seyedi, the head of Iran's SEO, to his Turkish counterpart. This letter emphasized Iran's readiness for bilateral cooperation in areas of mutual interest, which was warmly received by the Turkish side.

The GEM Committee meeting, organized by the International Organization of Securities Commissions (IOSCO), was hosted by the Capital Markets Board of Turkey (CMB) over three days in Ankara. The gathering included panel discussions, specialized workshops, and a review of the latest global developments and experiences in capital markets.

Key speakers at the meeting included Ibrahim Ömer Gönül, Chairman of the CMB, the Secretary-General of IOSCO, and the head of Egypt's securities regulator, who chaired the GEM Committee.

The first panel, moderated by Makbule Asli Kucukgöngör, CMB's Director of Strategy and Development, explored financial literacy, market resilience, and inclusivity. Panelists included senior representatives from the securities regulators of Morocco, Brazil, and Turkey, as well as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

A central topic was the regulation of crypto and digital assets, a complex and pressing issue for global markets. The second panel was chaired by Ali İhsan Gungor, Vice Chair of the CMB, and included experts from IOSCO, the World Bank, and Turkey's capital markets association.

Advancing Sustainability Reporting Sustainability reporting was the focus of the third panel, moderated by Ali Erdurmuş, Deputy Executive Chair of the CMB. Discussions involved senior officials from Turkey's Public Oversight Authority, corporate finance leaders, and GEM Committee representatives.

On the second day, IOSCO leaders presented a detailed report on

sustainability disclosures, a priority under the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB). This initiative, initially proposed in 2017, has now garnered participation from 20 out of 92 GEM Committee members.

The committee also addressed ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) integration and combating "greenwashing" through targeted standards and guidelines.

SupTech Innovations: The final day featured three educational workshops. The first focused on Supervisory Technology (SupTech), with Francesca Hopwood Road of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) presenting virtually on advancements and challenges in regulatory technology for emerging markets.

Capital Market Development: The second workshop, moderated by IOSCO policy advisor Josafat Martinez, discussed strategies to attract global investments, diversify market offerings, and introduce innovative financial instruments, including REITs, pension hedge funds, and new investment funds.

Green Finance: The third workshop emphasized enhancing green finance and diversifying investment tools. Panelists included senior representatives from Thailand, China, India, and Mauritius.

As IOSCO's largest committee, representing over 75% of its ordinary members, the GEM Committee aims to enhance the efficiency of emerging securities and derivatives markets. Through setting minimum standards, providing technical assistance, and facilitating knowledge transfer, the committee seeks to empower its members to meet global financial challenges.

The meeting underscored the importance of cross-border collaboration, with Turkey and Iran expressing a shared commitment to advancing their capital markets. This marks a significant step towards strengthening financial ties between the two nations and fostering a resilient and inclusive global financial ecosystem.

Malaysian Embassy in Tehran Hosts "Durian Reception" to Promote the King of Fruits

TEHRAN - The Malaysian Embassy in Tehran hosted a vibrant reception on Sunday evening, December 22, to promote one of Malaysia's most iconic exports: the Musang King durian. Dubbed the "Durian Reception," the event highlighted the fruit's cultural significance, global appeal, and economic value, drawing an audience of dignitaries, food enthusiasts, and business representatives.

Malaysia's Ambassador to Iran, H.E. Khairi Omer, welcomed attendees with a warm speech that celebrated the Musang King durian as more than just a fruit but a symbol of Malaysia's agricultural ingenuity and culinary excellence.

"Selamat Datang, Khosh Amadid, and welcome to an evening dedicated to a true treasure of Malaysia—the Musang King Durian. Tonight, we celebrate not just a fruit, but a legacy of innovation and excellence," the ambassador remarked.

Known as the "King of Fruits," the Musang King durian is renowned for its creamy texture, bittersweet flavor, and distinctive golden-yellow flesh. The event spotlighted its status as a premium export, with the ambassador emphasizing Malaysia's commitment to promoting fresh, high-quality durian to international markets.

As part of his address, Ambassador Omer shared fascinating insights about the Musang King's unique qualities and its journey from Malaysia's orchards to tables worldwide.

The Musang King, or Raja Kunyit, is prized for its distinctive appearance, featuring a star-shaped base and pyramid-like spikes. Its mild, refined aroma makes it an accessible choice for both seasoned durian lovers and newcomers. With global markets like China referring to it as the "Hermes of Durians," the fruit has become a symbol of prestige and luxury, commanding prices as high as \$105 per piece.

The ambassador also highlighted Malaysia's leadership in durian cultivation. Over 73,000 hectares of land are dedicated to durian farming, with Musang King accounting for 36% of total production. In 2022 alone, Malaysia exported RM1.14 billion worth of durian, with China contributing RM887 million to that figure.

In a significant milestone for Malaysia-China trade relations, the ambassador noted that Malaysia began exporting fresh, non-frozen



By: F. Taherpoor

durians to China in 2024. The inaugural shipment included 20 tonnes of premium varieties, signaling growing international demand for Malaysian durians.

The event also highlighted the durian's versatility in cuisine. Guests sampled dishes and desserts made from Musang King durian, including ice cream, cakes, and even savory dishes like curries, showcasing the fruit's adaptability and culinary appeal.

The reception served as an opportunity to delve into the Musang King's cultural and scientific importance. First discovered in the 1980s in Gua Musang, Kelantan, the fruit was officially registered

in Malaysia's national crop registry as "D197" in 1993. Its reputation has since skyrocketed, solidifying its position as one of the world's most sought-after durian varieties.

The event also touched on the scientific breakthroughs surrounding the durian. In 2017, researchers successfully sequenced the genome of the Musang King, unlocking insights into the genes responsible for its signature aroma and flavor.

As the evening concluded, Ambassador Omer reflected on the cultural and economic significance of the Musang King durian.

"This extraordinary fruit stands as a testament to Malaysia's vibrant culture, our dedication to quality, and our warm hospitality. It is a bridge that connects tradition with innovation and brings people together across borders," he said.

The "Durian Reception" was more than a celebration of a beloved fruit—it was a showcase of Malaysia's agricultural excellence, a testament to its global outreach, and a reminder of the shared joy that food can bring.

With increasing demand and continued innovation in durian cultivation, Malaysia remains at the forefront of the global durian market. Events like the "Durian Reception" not only promote this iconic fruit but also strengthen international ties and foster appreciation for Malaysia's unique contributions to global cuisine.

As guests left the reception, many carried with them not only the taste of the Musang King durian but also a deeper understanding of the stories and traditions it embodies—a true representation of Malaysia's rich heritage and global vision.

Structural Reforms Needed in Oil Refining Sector



TEHRAN - The First Vice President of Iran emphasized the need for structural reforms in the oil refining sector, calling for the adoption of high-tech solutions and the talents of the country's skilled youth.

Mohammad Reza Aref made these remarks during the "Performance Review and Strategic Development Plans for the Oil Refining and Distribution Sector" meeting held on Sunday night. The session was attended by senior government officials and representatives from the country's top 10 refineries.

Commending the efforts of managers and workers in this field, Aref described their work as a "major achievement" and noted that the oil industry, alongside its upstream sectors such as refineries, plays a strategic role in the country's economy.

After hearing the senior managers' proposals for enhancing the industry and addressing existing gaps, Aref stressed the importance of prioritizing the expansion of existing refineries and completing ongoing projects over building new ones.

Addressing the refinery managers, Aref urged them to take ambitious steps by utilizing advanced technologies and leveraging the potential of young Iranian talent. He also highlighted a nostalgic era when top high school students viewed the petroleum engineering field as a top career choice, urging a return to such conditions to attract elite university graduates to the industry.

The Vice President assured managers of the government's full cooperation in resolving customs-related issues for upgrading and modernizing refineries. However, he also emphasized the need to adhere strictly to environmental regulations to ensure that development projects do not harm the environment.

He further stated that increasing refinery efficiency—targeted at a 2.8% annual growth under current laws—requires leveraging modern technologies. He lamented that misjudged priorities in the past had led to missed opportunities, such as delaying sulfur removal from refineries, which could have been accomplished for \$1 billion decades ago but now requires several times that amount.

Aref also highlighted the significant blow that energy imbalances have dealt to the industry. He warned that such disruptions ripple across interconnected sectors, compounding challenges throughout the economy.

Concluding his remarks, Aref underscored the necessity of structural reforms in the oil refining sector, which he said would reduce dependence on imports and create export opportunities. He also stressed that refinery development must align with territorial planning policies, as outlined in the Seventh Development Plan.

NTBFs Could Lead Petrochemical Industry Innovation



TEHRAN (Shana) - The head of the Innovation and Prosperity Fund emphasized that new technology-based firms (NTBFs) can utilize tax incentives to become a driving force for innovation in major industries like petrochemicals.

Mohammad-Sadeq Khayatyan made these remarks on Sunday during the opening ceremony of the "Petrofan 1403" conference.

He noted significant developments in the tech-based sector in the country, stating that in recent years, there was a lack of awareness regarding innovation and technology among NTBFs.

"Today, we witness a mature and dynamic ecosystem that can effectively align with the development of various industries, including the petrochemical sector," the official said.

Khayatyan highlighted the growth of the technology-based culture in Iran, mentioning that over 10,000 NTBFs are currently active in the country, with 30 to 40 percent of them producing high-tech products that are competitive on a global scale.

He also referred to the recent approval of the "NTBFs Growth Law," which complements the initial legislation by providing incentives for larger companies to enable NTBFs to thrive, especially in major industries.

The official explained that attractive tax incentives in various countries greatly enhance the appeal for knowledge-based companies, and noted that Iran has also paved the way for these companies through supportive legislation.

Ukraine's Air Defense Downs 52 out of 103 Russian Drones

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine's air defences downed 52 of the 103 Russian drones launched overnight, the Ukrainian military said on Sunday.

The military said on Telegram that it had lost track of 44 drones, and another had left the territory of Ukraine to Belarus.

The military gave no information on the fate of the remaining drones.

However, they said that in Kherson, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Zhytomyr and Kyiv regions, private businesses and apartment buildings have been damaged by the Russian attack. "Tentatively, without casualties," the military added.



Israeli Strikes Across Gaza Kill at Least 28 People



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Gaza's civil defence agency said Israeli strikes overnight and early Sunday killed at least 28 Palestinians, including at one family's home and at a school building the military said was used by Hamas.

There was no let-up in the violence in the Gaza Strip more than 14 months into the Israel-Hamas war, even as Palestinian groups involved in the fighting said a ceasefire deal was "closer than ever".

Civil agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal said in a statement that at least 13 people were killed in an air strike on a house in central Gaza's Deir el-Balah belonging to the Abu Samra family.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military, which has confirmed a separate strike further north, on a school in Gaza City.

Bassal said that eight people including four children were killed in the attack on the school, which had been repurposed as a shelter for Palestinians displaced by the war.

The Israeli military said it had carried out a "precise strike" overnight targeting Hamas militants operating there.

A military statement said that a Hamas "command and control centre... was embedded inside" the school compound in the city's east, adding that it was used "to plan and execute terrorist attacks" against Israeli forces.

Contacted by AFP, an Israeli military spokesperson said they were unable to immediately comment on other reported strikes elsewhere in Gaza.

Bassal said an overnight strike killed three people in Rafah, in the south.

And a drone strike early on Sunday hit a car in Gaza City, killing four people, Bassal said.

Hamas and two other Palestinian armed groups said on Saturday in a rare joint statement that an agreement to end the bloodshed was "closer than ever".

The groups, which include Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, said that a truce in Gaza and hostage release deal was possible provided Israel does not impose new conditions in negotiations.



Putin Welcomes Slovak PM to Moscow, a Rare Visit by EU Leader

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday hosted Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, in a rare visit to the Kremlin by an EU leader since Moscow's all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Fico arrived in Russia on a "working visit" and met with Putin one-on-one on Sunday evening, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russia's RIA news agency. According to Peskov, the talks were expected to focus on "the international situation" and Russian natural gas deliveries.

Russian natural gas still flows to some European countries, including Slovakia, through Ukraine under a five-year agreement signed before the war that is due to expire at the end of this year. At a summit in Brussels on Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told EU leaders that Kyiv has no intention of renewing the deal, something Fico insisted will harm his country's interests.

Fico said on Facebook after meeting with Putin that he informed European Union leaders about his trip on Friday.

He said the talks in Moscow were a reaction to what Zelenskyy told him on Thursday in Brussels, that he is against any gas transit to Slovakia through Ukraine. Fico also said that Zelenskyy is in favor of sanctions against Russia's nuclear program, which he said was unacceptable and against the interest of his country that relies on nuclear energy.

Fico said Putin confirmed to him that Russia is still ready to deliver gas to the West. He said the two also discussed the military situation in Ukraine, chances for a peaceful solution to the war and the bilateral relations between their two countries which Fico said they will seek to "standardize."

His trip was condemned by the major Slovak opposition parties.

Slovakia last month signed a short-term pilot contract to buy natural gas from Azerbaijan, as it prepares for a possible halt to Russian supplies through Ukraine. Earlier this year, it struck a deal to import U.S. liquefied natural gas through a pipeline from Poland.

The country can also receive gas through Austrian, Hungarian and Czech networks, enabling imports from Germany among other potential suppliers.

Visits and phone calls from European leaders to Putin have been rare since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine, although Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited Russia in July, and Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer met with the Russian leader just weeks into the full-scale war. Both trips drew condemnation from Kyiv and European leaders.

Orbán, widely seen as having the warmest relations with Putin among EU leaders, has routinely blocked, delayed or watered down EU efforts to assist Kyiv and impose sanctions on Moscow for its actions in Ukraine. He has long argued for a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine but without outlining what that might mean for the country's territorial integrity or future security.

Fico's views on Russia's war on Ukraine differ sharply from most other European leaders. The Slovakian PM returned to power last year after his leftist party Smer (Direction) won parliamentary elections on a pro-Russia and anti-American platform. Since then, he has ended his country's military aid for Ukraine, lashed out at EU sanctions on Russia, and vowed to block Ukraine from joining NATO.

Fico has also been a rare senior EU politician to appear on Russian state TV following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. In an interview with the Rossiya-1 channel in October, he contended the West has "prolonged the war" by supporting Ukraine, adding that sanctions against Russia were ineffective. He declared that he was ready to negotiate with Putin.

Fico also vowed to attend a military parade in Moscow next May that will mark the 80th anniversary of Nazi Germany's defeat in World War II. The Kremlin has used the annual "Victory Day" celebrations to tout its battlefield prowess, and Putin hailed Russian troops fighting in Ukraine as "heroes" at this year's event.

Tens of Thousands Gather in Anti-Gov't Protest in Belgrade



BELGRADE (Reuters) - Tens of thousands of people gathered in central Belgrade on Sunday to protest against President Aleksandar Vucic and his ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), whom they blame for a railway station roof collapse last month that killed 15 people.

The concrete awning of the recently renovated roof of Novi Sad station caved in on Nov. 1, killing 14 and injuring three. One of the injured died later.

Opposition leaders and the public have taken to the streets repeatedly, blaming the accident on shoddy construction resulting from government corruption and nepotism.

The ruling coalition denies those charges, and Vucic has said those responsible must be held to account.

The protesters on Sunday evening switched on the lights of their mobile phones and stood in silence for 15 minutes to commemorate the victims.

Some shouted "Vucic, thief!". Others held up banners reading "You have blood on your hands".

"We came here to say 'Stop' to everything that has been happening since 2012 [when Vucic's party took power]," said Aleksa, 30, an IT expert from Novi Sad.

Turkish FM Says No Room for Kurdish Militants in Syria's Future

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's foreign minister said after meeting Syria's de facto leader in Damascus that there was no room for Kurdish militants in Syria's future, calling for the YPG militia to disband.

Turkey regards the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants who have fought an insurgency against the Turkish state for 40 years and are deemed terrorists by Ankara, Washington and the European Union.

Sunday's visit to Damascus by Hakan Fidan, the first foreign minister to visit Damascus since Bashar al-Assad's overthrow two weeks ago, came amid hostilities in northeast Syria between Turkish-backed Syrian fighters and the YPG, which spearheads the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast.

Speaking alongside Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, Fidan said he had discussed the YPG presence with the new Syrian administration and believed Damascus would take steps to ensure Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

"In the coming period, the YPG must come to a point where it is no longer a threat to Syria's national unity," Fidan said, adding the YPG should disband.

The SDF played a key role defeating Islamic State militants in 2014-2017 with U.S. air support, and still guards Islamic State fighters in prison camps. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that the Islamist group would try to re-establish capabilities in this period.



Fidan said the international community was "turning a blind eye" to the "illegality" of the SDF and YPG's actions in Syria, but added that he believed U.S. President-elect Donald Trump would take a different approach.

He said the new Syrian administration had told him during their talks that they could manage the Islamic State prison camps, if needed.

In a Reuters interview on Thursday, SDF commander Mazloum Abdi acknowledged the presence of PKK fighters in Syria for the first time, saying they had helped battle Islamic State and would return home if a total

ceasefire was agreed with Turkey. He denied any organisational ties with the PKK.

The SDF has been on the back foot since Assad's fall, with the threat of advances from Ankara and Turkey-backed groups as it looks to preserve political gains made in the last 13 years, and with Syria's new rulers being friendly to Ankara.

Earlier, Turkey's defence minister said Ankara believed Syria's new leadership, including the Syrian National Army (SNA) armed group which Ankara backs, will drive YPG fighters from all of the territory they occupy in the northeast.

Ankara, alongside Syrian allies, has mounted several cross-border offensives against the Kurdish faction in northern Syria and controls swathes of Syrian territory along the border, while repeatedly demanding that its NATO ally Washington halt support for the Kurdish fighters.

Ankara had for years backed rebels looking to oust Assad and welcomed the end of his family's brutal five-decade rule after a 13-year civil war. Turkey also hosts millions of Syrian migrants it hopes will start returning home after Assad's fall, and has vowed to help rebuild Syria.

Fidan said all international sanctions imposed against Assad must be lifted as soon as possible to help Syria start rebuilding, offering Ankara's assistance on matters such as infrastructure development.

Sharaa told Sunday's press conference his administration would announce the new structure of the defence ministry and military within days.

Panama Rejects Trump's Threat to Take Control of Canal

PANAMA CITY (Dispatches) - Panama's president Jose Raul Mulino dismissed recent threats made by US President-elect Donald Trump to retake control of the Panama Canal over complaints of "unfair" treatment of American ships.

"Every square meter of the Panama Canal and its adjacent areas belongs to Panama and will continue belonging to Panama," Mulino said in a video posted to X.

Mulino's public comments, though never mentioning Trump by name, come a day after the president-elect complained about the canal on his Truth Social platform.

"Our Navy and Commerce have been treated in a very unfair and injudicious way. The fees being charged by Panama are ridiculous," he said.

Trump also complained of China's growing influence around the canal, a worrying trend for American interests as US businesses depend on the channel to move goods between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

"It was solely for Panama to manage, not China, or anyone else," Trump said. "We would and will NEVER let it fall into the wrong



hands!"

The Panama Canal, which was completed by the United States in 1914, was returned to the Central American country under a 1977 deal signed by Democratic president Jimmy Carter.

Panama took full control in 1999.

Trump said that if Panama could not ensure "the secure, efficient and reliable operation" of the channel, "then we will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to us, in full, and without question."

Mulino rejected Trump's claims in his video message, though he also said he hopes to have "a good and respectful relationship" with the incoming administration.

"The canal has no direct or indirect control from China, nor the European Union, nor the United States or any other power," Mulino said. "As a Panamanian, I reject any manifestation that misrepresents this reality."

Later, Trump responded to Mulino's dismissal, writing on Truth Social: "We'll see about that!"



Jalen Hurts Injured as Eagles Fall to Commanders

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jayden Daniels threw a 9-yard touchdown pass to Jamison Crowder with six seconds remaining and the Washington Commanders beat the visiting Philadelphia Eagles 36-33. Philadelphia's Jake Elliott hit a pair of late field goals to give the Eagles -- who lost quarterback Jalen Hurts to a concussion in the first quarter -- a 33-28 lead with 1:58 remaining. Washington (10-5) then went 57 yards in nine plays and added the two-point conversion, a run by Jeremy McNichols. Daniels finished 24-of-39 passing for 258 yards, a career-high five touchdowns and two interceptions. He ran nine times for 81 yards. Olamide Zaccheus had five catches for 70 yards and two scores as Washington won despite five turnovers. Saquon Barkley had 29 carries for 150 yards and two scores for the Eagles (12-3), who had won 10 straight. Kenny Pickett was 14-of-24 for 143 yards, one touchdown and one interception in relief of Hurts, and A.J. Brown caught eight passes for 97 yards and a score. Vikings 27, Seahawks 24: Sam Darnold threw a 39-yard touchdown pass down the left sideline to Justin Jefferson with 3:51 remaining as Minnesota rallied to defeat host Seattle. The pass capped a four-play, 70-yard drive that took just 30 seconds after Seattle's Geno Smith threw a 4-yard scoring pass to backup tight end AJ Barner to give the Seahawks their first lead of the afternoon. Darnold completed 22 of 35 passes for 246 yards and three touchdowns, two to Jefferson -- who had 10 catches for 144 yards. The Vikings (13-2) won their eighth game in a row and remained tied with Detroit atop the NFC North. The Seahawks (8-7) lost their second straight and dropped a game behind the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC West. Smith completed 31 of 43 passes for 314 yards with three touchdowns and two interceptions, with Jaxon Smith-Njigba making eight catches for 95 yards and a TD.

Lions 34, Bears 17: Jared Goff passed for 336 yards and three touchdowns and Jahmyr Gibbs rushed for 109 yards and a score to boost visiting Detroit to a victory against skidding Chicago. Detroit (13-2) stayed atop the NFC standings and established a franchise record for victories while outgaining Chicago 475-382. The Bears (4-11) lost their ninth in a row despite Caleb Williams' 334 passing yards and two touchdowns. Lions receiver Jameson Williams had five catches for 143 yards and a score while Keenan Allen led Chicago with nine catches for 141 yards and a TD. Detroit scored the first 20 points of the game, including 10 that capitalized off Chicago turnovers. Dolphins 29, 49ers 17: Jason Sanders kicked five field goals and DeVon Achane accounted for 190 total yards from scrimmage and the clinching touchdown in Miami's win over visiting San Francisco in Miami Gardens, Fla. Tua Tagovailoa completed 22 of 34 passes for 215 yards and a score for Miami (7-8). Achane rushed for 120 yards on 17 carries, including a 50-yard touchdown run with 1:36 left, and caught six passes for 70 yards. The Dolphins must win their last two games, hope for two losses from the Los Angeles Chargers and get other help to perhaps earn the final AFC wild-card spot. Bills 27, Patriots 24: James Cook finished with 126 yards from scrimmage and two touchdowns, and Buffalo Bills escaped with a win over New England in Orchard Park, N.Y. Josh Allen completed 16 of 29 passes for 154 yards, one touchdown and one interception for Buffalo (12-3). Allen also carried the ball six times for 30 yards as the Bills won for the ninth time in their past 10 games.

Atalanta Fight Back to Take Top Spot in Serie A



MILAN (Dispatches) - Atalanta surged back to the top of the Serie A standings with a Charles De Ketelaere-inspired 3-2 win at home to Empoli, while inconsistent Roma thrashed Parma 5-0. De Ketelaere was twice on target for Atalanta in the topsy-turvy encounter -- his second goal proving to be the winner with just four minutes left on the clock. Ademola Lookman was also on the scoresheet to ensure Gian Piero Gasperini's side leapfrogged Napoli back into top spot for the Christmas period. "It's been a wonderful year, we're sorry it's ending, let's hope that 2025 will be just as good," said Gasperini. "It won't be easy, but beyond the results I'm very happy with the spirit that there is in this team." The reigning Europa League champions restored their two-point buffer over Napoli, who had moved a point ahead of them following their 2-1 win at Genoa on Saturday. Lorenzo Colombo gave 11th-placed Empoli the lead at the Gewiss Stadium on 13 minutes. But De Ketelaere hit back to level for the Bergamo-based outfit four minutes after the half-hour. Recently crowned African player of the year, Lookman got his 12th goal of the season in all competitions to put Atalanta in front in first-half added time. Sebastiano Esposito pegged back Atalanta on 57 minutes, converting from the penalty spot. As the game crept towards a disappointing draw that would have still sent Atalanta back top on goal difference, Belgian midfielder De Ketelaere popped up with his fifth league goal this term in the 86th minute. The 23-year-old showed skill and composure to glide along the edge of the box until a chance presented itself, and he then fired off a disguised left-footed shot which flashed past the goalkeeper.

Salah Stars as Rampant Liverpool Hit Spurs for Six

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool swept four points clear at the top of the Premier League as Mohamed Salah's masterclass inspired a memorable 6-3 rout of Tottenham. Salah delivered a sublime performance featuring two goals and a pair of assists as Arne Slot's side ran riot in north London. Liverpool took advantage of second-placed Chelsea's 0-0 draw at Everton earlier in the day to cement their status as title favorites heading into the Christmas period. Hapless Tottenham had no answer to Liverpool's intelligent pressing and supreme passing and movement, with Egypt star Salah at the heart of their lethal attack. Salah is the only Premier League player to reach double figures in goals (15) and assists (11) this season. The 32-year-old is now Liverpool's fourth top scorer ever with 229 goals. His brace took him past Billy Liddell, with only Ian Rush (346), Roger Hunt (285) and Gordon Hodgson (241) ahead of him. Salah's latest heroics only underlined the urgency to get his future resolved, with the forward's current deal due to expire at the end of the season. He is free to sign a pre-contract agreement with foreign clubs from January and has hinted several times that this could be his last season at Anfield. With Salah scoring 18 times in all competitions, Liverpool have been on fire since Slot arrived from Feyenoord to replace Jurgen Klopp in the close-season.



Klopp delivered Liverpool's last Premier League title in 2020 and it looks increasingly likely Slot will emulate that success in his maiden campaign. The Reds have won 21 of their 25 matches in all competitions under Slot and have a game in hand on Chelsea to strengthen their lead in the title race. This was a remarkable display of Liverpool's firepower as Luis Diaz and Alexis Mac Allister scored to put them in command. Dominik Szoboszlai grabbed Liverpool's third just before the interval and Salah took over after the break before Diaz netted again. Punished for Ange Postecoglou's insistence on sticking to his high

defensive line, it was the first time in 10 years that Tottenham had conceded five or more at home in a Premier League game. An eighth league defeat this season leaves Tottenham languishing in 11th place as the pressure mounts on Postecoglou. Meanwhile Manchester United crashed to a humiliating 3-0 home defeat to Bournemouth as Ruben Amorim admitted his "nervous" team would have to "suffer" before they can get back on track. It was a second successive flop for Amorim's side following their 4-3 League Cup quarter-final exit at Tottenham on Thursday. Bournemouth took a first-half lead through Dean Huijsen before Justin Kluivert and Antoine Semenyo netted after the interval to complete a dismal afternoon for Amorim, who replaced the sacked Erik ten Hag in November. A year after securing their first ever victory at Old Trafford, Andoni Iraola's Cherries triumphed by the same scoreline as they inflicted the biggest blow of Amorim's short reign. Huijsen became the latest player to capitalise on United's woeful set-piece defending, before a Kluivert penalty and a Semenyo strike sealed a stunning win that brought boos from the home fans at full-time. The result leaves United marooned in 13th over Christmas and marked an alarming fall from grace after last Sunday's 2-1 derby win at Manchester City.

Jokic Lifts Nuggets in OT



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Nikola Jokic overcame a slow start to finish with a triple-double and the visiting Denver Nuggets rebounded from a 17-point deficit to defeat the New Orleans Pelicans 132-129 in overtime. Jokic was scoreless until late in the second quarter but finished with 27 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists, his NBA-best 11th triple-double of the season. He scored 21 of his 27 points in the second half and overtime. Jamal Murray also scored 27 while Russell Westbrook had 21. Reserve Jordan Hawkins scored a season-high 25 points and CJ McCollum had 24 to pace the Pelicans. Jokic scored the Nuggets' first three baskets of overtime then assisted on Gordon's tiebreaking basket before Jamal Murray added a layup. New Orleans got within two points twice after that but could get no closer. Rockets 114, Raptors 110: Dillon Brooks scored 27 points, Jalen Green added 22 and Houston rallied past host Toronto, sending the Raptors to their seventh straight loss. Alperen Sengun contributed 17 points, 10 rebounds and five assists for the Rockets, who have won two straight. Toronto's Ja'Kobe Walter scored 14 of his career-best 27 points in the first quarter before fouling out with 2:40 left in the game. Houston outscored Toronto by 18 at the free-throw line, making 27 of 33 attempts compared to 9 of 13 for the Raptors, as well as in the paint (62-50) and in second-chance points (21-10). Pacers 122, Kings 95: Pascal Siakam led a balanced attack with 19 points, Tyrese Haliburton enjoyed his first triumphant homecoming and visiting Indiana rolled past struggling Sacramento. Playing in Sacramento for just the second time since being dealt from the Kings to the Pacers in February 2022, Haliburton contributed 14 points, eight assists and five rebounds to Indiana's fourth consecutive win. Siakam complemented his team-high point total with a team-high 10 rebounds, giving him his second consecutive double-double and fourth of the season. Myles Turner (15 points), Ben Sheppard (14), Nembhard (12), T.J. McConnell (12) and Obi Toppin (11) also scored in double figures. De'Aaron Fox was the game's top scorer with 23 points for the Kings, who shot just 36.5 percent. He added seven assists. Domantas Sabonis, who went from Indiana to Sacramento in the six-player Haliburton trade, snatched a game-high 21 rebounds to go with 17

Fonseca Keen to Emulate Sinner With Next Gen Title

LONDON (Dispatches) - Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca is hoping to follow in the footsteps of his idol and world number one Jannik Sinner by winning the Next Gen ATP Finals title in Sunday's final at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Should the 18-year-old triumph at the \$2.05 million prize money tournament for players aged 20 and under, he will be its second-youngest champion behind Sinner, who hoisted the trophy in 2019. "It would be amazing to replicate Sinner," said Fonseca, a hitting partner for Sinner at last year's ATP Finals, where he was convinced by the Italian to turn professional. "It shows I'm on the right track and would be special." Fonseca faces American Learner Tien next with a victory set to make him wealthier by \$526,480 as the unbeaten champion, and the Rio de Janeiro native is high on confidence. "I'm playing a high level. I'm just proud of myself and the way I've been with my routine this week, so focused," he said. "With my family here, with my three coaches, it's really nice and I hope I can go for the title." The 19-year-old Tien has grown in leaps and bounds this season, climbing from outside the top 450 to number 122 in the world rankings. "I'm happy with where my game is at," said Tien, ahead of the pair's second meeting. "The crowd has been great all week and it's always great to play in



these environments." This year's edition of the hardcourt event is the second to be held in Saudi Arabia and apart from handing out a huge amount as prize money also serves as a barometer to identify the game's next big stars. Past winners of the event, which was previously held in Milan, include Carlos Alcaraz and Stefanos Tsitsipas, who have both had tremendous success at the senior level. Innovation has also been at the heart of the tournament, with singles matches decided through a best of five sets format and each set the first to four games. Meanwhile Australian Open runner-up Zheng Qinwen will kick off her 2025 season at the Grand Slam next month after deciding to skip the United Cup mixed team tournament starting this week, the 22-year-old said. Zheng was beaten in the final of the year's first major by Aryna Sabalenka in January but enjoyed a successful campaign, claiming the Paris Olympics gold medal and WTA Tour titles in Tokyo and Palermo. The Chinese player, who was runner-up at the Wuhan Open and the WTA Finals, competed in 68 matches this season. "After the long season that 2024 was for me, I need a few extra weeks of rest, recovery, and good training to get ready for the new season," Zheng said on Instagram.