

Iranian Foreign Ministry's Spokesperson Says a Fresh Round of Negotiations Between Iran and the European Troika About Regional Issues and Tehran's Nuclear Program Will Be Held in Mid-January

IRAN NEWS

An Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Lashed Out at the U.S. for Taking Iranian Nationals Hostage on the Allegation of Violation of "Illegitimate Sanctions" After Two Iranians Were Arrested in the U.S. and Italy

2 DOMESTIC

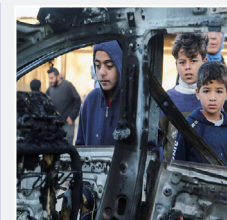


Iran Suspends Flights to Syria Until January 22

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Some Gaps Have Narrowed in Elusive Gaza Ceasefire Deal



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Iran to Begin Land Trade With Kuwait and Saudi Arabia



TEHRAN - Amin Fartousi, a board member of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber of Commerce, announced Iraq's initial approval for Iranian goods to transit through its territory to Kuwait. He elaborated on the details, stating that Iranian exports to Kuwait traditionally rely on sea routes. However, land transport offers a significant advantage: goods can now enter Iraq through the Shalamchah border, proceed to the Safwan border, and enter Kuwait. The journey between Shalamchah and Safwan takes roughly an hour, significantly reducing the transport time compared to sea routes.

Fartousi highlighted additional benefits of land transport, explaining that goods are loaded onto trucks at the point of origin and unloaded directly at their destination, eliminating the need for reloading at ports. This reduces transportation costs, ultimately making trade with Kuwait more affordable. Additionally, this could enhance the feasibility of re-exporting Iranian goods from Kuwait to other countries.

Despite these advantages, Iraq has historically prohibited Iranian vehicles from transiting its territory to Kuwait. However, approximately a month ago, Iraq indicated that under the TIR Convention, transiting goods through its territory to other countries is permissible. Iranian exports to Kuwait fall under this authorization.

While this approval represents a significant step, Fartousi noted that it remains preliminary and has not yet been implemented. No goods have been transported via the Iraqi transit route to Kuwait thus far. Should this plan come to fruition, it could mark a transformative development in Iran-Kuwait trade relations.

Fartousi also pointed out Kuwait's demand for Iranian goods such as minerals (gypsum, cement, and stone), fruits, vegetables, and seafood. Traditionally, these products are shipped via sea routes. However, land transport through Iraq would drastically reduce delivery times, to the extent that even refrigerated trucks for some perishable goods might no longer be necessary.

Iran Calls for Executing Iran-Pakistan Security Agreement



TEHRAN - Iran's Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni stressed the implementation of security agreement between Iran and Pakistan.

A delegation from Pakistan headed by Mohammad Khorram Agha, Deputy Interior Minister of Pakistan, met with Iran's Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni on Monday.

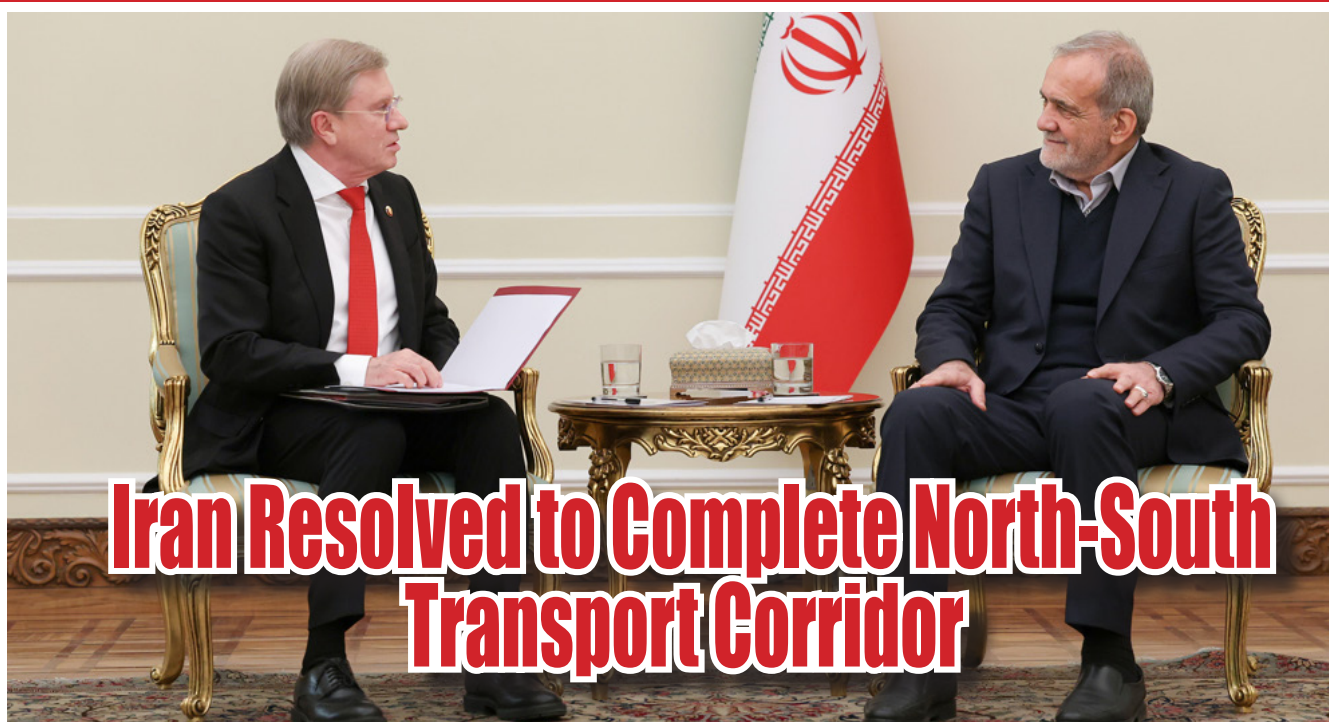
During this meeting, Momeni, while welcoming the Deputy Interior Minister of Pakistan and the accompanying delegation, said that the two nations of Iran and Pakistan have very common historical roots in religious, cultural and neighboring dimensions.

Stating that the process of cooperation is good, he emphasized on the follow-up and implementation of the security agreement between the two friendly and neighboring countries.

Iran's interior minister expressed hope that the recent effective meetings between the two countries will continue in the future and that this security and border cooperation will lead to the development of trade between the two countries.

Mohammad Khorram Agha, Deputy Interior Minister of Pakistan, while appreciating Iran's hospitality, said: "We are witnessing a determination in the fields of combating drug trafficking and terrorism."

"The borders of the two countries have always been the borders of friendship, peace and security, and I hope we will see an increase in trade between the two countries to the amount of 10 billion dollars," he added.



Iran Resolved to Complete North-South Transport Corridor

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says Iran is determined to implement an agreement with Russia to complete the North-South Transport Corridor.

Pezeshkian made the remarks in a meeting with a Russian delegation, headed by Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Transport Vasily Gennadyevich Savelyev, in Tehran.

He said the implementation of the Rasht-Astara railway section under the North-South international transport corridor project is among Iran's priorities.

"Iran is committed to the provisions of this agreement and the Russian side can begin mapping the route and prepare the implementation of the project as soon as possible."

He said the Iranian government puts emphasis on the implementation of the agreement and the country's minister of roads and urban development is pursuing the issue.

The 162-kilometer Rasht-Astara railway is a strategic transport corridor that will connect the Iranian city of Rasht, near the Caspian Sea, to Astara on the border with Azerbaijan.

The project, which is aimed at integrating the transport and information routes of Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran and India, is carried out within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Savelyev, for his part, said Russia is resolute on implementing the Rasht-Astara railway and has granted the necessary credit line.

Russia is cooperating with Azerbaijan to complete the North-South Corridor and calls on Iran to implement it, he added.

He noted that Russia and Azerbaijan have agreed to modernize the part of this railway located on their territory and also ask Iran to help make the necessary arrangements to update and renovate the project inside the country.

The Russian official hailed his country's growing cooperation with Iran in the transport section. It is expected that the two countries would transfer 15 million tonnes of goods with the implementation of the Rasht-Astara railway, he noted.

Savelyev also invited the Iranian president to travel to Russia early in 2025 and said Russia is making the arrangements for the trip and the agreements that would be signed between the two

sides.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, Savelyev said the talks during the Russian delegation's visit to Tehran are expected to enable each of the two sides to take the next step in mutual development.

"Iran is our strategic partner, above all else, and we undoubtedly have a lot of joint issues that we are going to discuss: in the sphere of sea transport, in the sphere of motor transport, railway transport, and air communication."

He expressed hope that the two countries "can find solutions and will continue solving those issues that were signed in 2023 - an agreement, an intergovernmental agreement."

According to earlier reports, Russia will provide an interstate loan of 1.3 billion euros for the railway construction. The total value of the project was estimated at 1.6 billion euros at the moment the agreement was signed.

"The loan is ready, there are issues we need to discuss with the Iranian side. The financing has been opened de facto; everything has been agreed upon, the question is when we will begin. We will discuss this," Savelyev said.

Earlier in meeting with Savelyev, Iran's Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref, said that fortunately, there is a serious determination by the senior officials of both countries to develop relations at the highest level.

"It is important to use the existing capacities in the relations between Iran and Russia as much as possible, and we are sure that the expansion of relations is in the interest of the region in addition to the interests of the two countries," Aref said during the meeting on Monday.

He pointed out that in addition to bilateral relations, Iran and Russia cooperate in organizations such as the Eurasian Union, BRICS and Shanghai, and there is a possibility of expanding these cooperations.

Aref also emphasized the importance of implementing agreements between the two countries.

Referring to Iran's privileged geographical location and capabilities, the Russian side emphasized Moscow's determination to strengthen cooperation in various fields.

Tehran, Damascus in Talks for Reopening Embassies

TEHRAN - In her weekly press conference, Government Spokesperson Fatemeh Mahajerani addressed multiple national issues, including energy supply challenges, economic reforms, and Iran's diplomatic efforts regarding Syria and Egypt.

Mahajerani began by reiterating apologies to the public and industrial sectors for the difficulties caused by recent energy shortages. She stressed that the government is working hard to help the nation overcome these challenges. She also highlighted the success of the "Two Degrees Less" campaign, initiated by the President, aimed at energy conservation.

Mahajerani acknowledged that such efforts are difficult, especially in the winter and summer months, but emphasized that the support from citizens has been commendable. She also mentioned ongoing energy infrastructure improvements, such as the completion of 150 kilometers of new highways by the spring of 2025, and plans to enhance gas and electricity distribution to prevent further shortages. The government is working to ensure that the economic hardships do not further reduce the purchasing power of citizens.

Mahajerani discussed the painful reality of needing to urge citizens to conserve energy during the extreme seasons, especially given the shortages of both electricity and gas. She explained that these energy limitations are negatively impacting industries, and the government is working to mitigate the effects. Notably, recent power outages have saved about 5% of gas consumption and 3% of electricity use, although the government hopes to achieve a 10% reduction in energy consumption through continued public cooperation.

The spokesperson also addressed the economic concerns of the public, acknowledging that Iran's economy has long caused hardship for the population. Mahajerani shared that



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

the government has proposed a 20% increase in salaries, as well as tax exemptions, to alleviate the financial strain on citizens. Additionally, the government is focusing on producing more sustainable energy, such as solar power, and is working towards a goal of generating 30,000 megawatts of solar energy.

Regarding Iran's diplomatic ties, Mahajerani confirmed that the government is in talks with Syria about reopening their embassies. This move is part of broader

diplomatic efforts aimed at promoting peace and countering terrorism in the region. She added that Iran and Syria share a strong commitment to safeguarding Syria's territorial integrity and political stability.

In relation to Egypt, Mahajerani highlighted President Pezeshkian's recent participation in the D-8 summit in Egypt, which provided an opportunity for dialogue with leaders of developing Muslim-majority countries. She emphasized that Iran and Egypt can play a crucial role in establishing peace and stability in the region, benefiting all nations.

Responding to concerns about the currency situation, Mahajerani acknowledged the public's worries but stressed that these economic reforms, including currency unification, are necessary to address the structural issues in the economy. These changes aim to reduce corruption, promote domestic production, and stabilize the currency. The spokesperson also reaffirmed the government's commitment to long-term economic reforms, including increased transparency and bolstered infrastructure.

In conclusion, Mahajerani emphasized that the government is working on several national projects, including a comprehensive plan to tackle inflation and create jobs, with the aim of improving the country's economic outlook over time.

Enemy's Maximum Pressure Policies All Failed Miserably



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - A senior Iranian official describes the Islamic Republic's capabilities as extensive, noting how the United States and the country's other enemies' "maximum pressure" policies have failed in the face of its power.

"Our capabilities are vast, and our adversaries are well aware of our potential, both latent and active," Kamal Kharrazi, head of the Islamic Republic's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, told Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television network on Monday.

"These 'maximum pressure' campaigns have all failed miserably," he said, referring to how the former US administration of Donald Trump would try to force the country into doing Washington's bidding under duress by taking it under sanctions and other coercive measures.

Kharrazi underlined the importance of strength and deterrence as essential components of Iran's response to such conspiracies, noting, "Since the [country's Islamic] Revolution's inception, our path has always been one of resistance and empowerment."

The official, meanwhile, pointed to the Israeli regime's actions targeting the Islamic Republic simultaneously with the US as a means of Tel Aviv's trying to adversely affect the country's nuclear energy activities and supposedly curtail its regional influence.

Alongside Washington, Tel Aviv has long been trying to "overthrow" the Islamic Republic, including through threatening the country's nuclear energy program and territory, he said.

Kharrazi was also asked if Tehran viewed the threats seriously, to which he said the concept of a joint American-Zionist plot aimed at targeting Iran was neither new nor surprising.

"These threats remain consistent, and we must resist them. We possess the capability to confront and respond to such threats, as we have done before," he underscored.

Yemeni Missile Strikes Chaos, Mayhem Into Central Tel Aviv



SANAA (Dispatches) - A missile flown from the direction of Yemen towards the heart of Tel Aviv in the occupied Palestinian territories stirs up a bedlam in the city and results in a dangerous stampede.

The projectile caused missile sirens to ring out throughout several areas in the central part of the territories on Tuesday, the regime's "Home Front" reported.

The regime's ambulance service said as many as 20 people were injured during a stampede that was created as illegal settlers crammed Tel Aviv's streets while running for shelter.

The Israeli military, meanwhile, alleged that it had "intercepted" the projectile "before" its entering the territories' skies.

The military almost routinely comes up with the claim in all such cases, only to be refuted by Yemen's Armed Forces.

The forces have markedly intensified their pro-Palestinian strikes against the territories and other Israeli targets. The operations began following the Israeli regime's launch of a war of genocide against the Gaza Strip last October.

The brutal military onslaught has so far claimed the lives of more than 45,300 Palestinians, mostly women and children.

The Yemeni strikes have shifted their focus towards Tel Aviv, the Israeli regime's economic heart, over the past several weeks, with the country's Armed Forces recurrently announcing successfully hitting the city with ballistic and hypersonic missiles.

As a means of trying to stop the pro-Palestinian Yemeni operations, the regime and the United States, its closest and most supportive ally, have been conducting many aerial assaults against Yemen, prompting the latter to also start targeting the American military assets that are deployed off the Yemeni coastline.

IRAN NEWS



Iran's Economy Grows 2.9% in H1 Fiscal Year

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) expanded by 2.9% year-on-year in the first half of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20 - September 21), according to a new report from the country's central bank.

The GDP at base prices for the period amounted to 40,360.2 trillion rials (\$51.58 billion) including oil revenues, suggesting a 29% growth in Iranian economy.

With oil revenues excluded, the country's GDP stood at 37,034.1 trillion rials (\$47.33 billion), indicating a 2.4% year-on-year growth. The positive economic growth sustained through the first and second quarters of the fiscal year follows consistent growth throughout all quarters of the preceding year, signaling a continued recovery in economic activity across the country.

Development of the Country Depends on the Sea



TEHRAN - The Minister of Roads and Urban Development emphasized that the development of the country relies on its maritime capabilities, describing maritime expansion as the driving engine of the nation's economy. He stated the ministry's readiness to listen to the private sector's challenges and resolve them.

Speaking at the National Transport Day ceremony on Monday night at the Homa Hotel in Tehran, Farzaneh Sadegh highlighted recent positive developments in investment within the transportation sector despite ongoing sanctions and challenges.

Sadegh noted that Iran's Islamic civilization has always been intertwined with water and land, with some of the nation's ports dating back thousands of years. She stressed that Iran's access to open waters has historically linked the country to water and prosperity.

"If development is to occur in this country, it will happen through the sea," the minister asserted. "For our industry, trade, and economy to thrive, the focus must be on the maritime sector."

She added that President Raisi strongly supports maritime-oriented policies and economic strategies. Biweekly meetings are held, including sessions with Dr. Pezeshkian, to discuss how to implement maritime development strategies effectively.

The minister also mentioned ongoing reviews of comprehensive plans for coastal areas and maritime projects, utilizing global experiences and international consultations to create a roadmap for advancing Iran's progress.

Sadegh emphasized that any government plans or strategies require the backing of the private sector for successful implementation. "We need to address the barriers facing the private sector effectively. This is only possible through mutual dialogue."

The government's policy, according to Sadegh, is to foster a two-way conversation with the private sector. She underlined the importance of reducing restrictions on private sector activities, revisiting certain decisions, and delegating many responsibilities to private enterprises.



Iran Suspends Flights to Syria Until January 22

TEHRAN - In a press briefing on Tuesday, Hossein Pourfarzaneh, head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization (CAO), shed light on the state of the country's aviation industry, its challenges, and developments under the current administration.

Pourfarzaneh emphasized the importance of the Chicago Convention, an international agreement aimed at enabling countries to benefit from global aviation. As a long-standing signatory, Iran remains committed to this treaty, which mandates member states to prioritize flight safety and security. To achieve these standards, Iran focuses on both software and hardware aspects, encompassing personnel training, fleet maintenance, and modernization.

The CAO head underlined the role of a specialized unit in ensuring flight security. This unit handles inspections and quality control, which are integral to maintaining operational standards. Pourfarzaneh acknowledged that political challenges have added unique responsibilities for Iran, including fostering domestic design and manufacturing capabilities—a stark contrast to many countries that rely on international giants like Boeing and Airbus.

Pourfarzaneh lamented the financial constraints facing Iran's aviation sector, particularly the inability to access global financing and insurance models. He warned that neglecting this industry could lead to its collapse, as aviation is not merely a luxury but a cornerstone of national development. Each decommissioned aircraft, he noted, disrupts connectivity within the country and to the rest of the world.

In response to these challenges, the CAO has prioritized localized production and repair. While international collaborations were robust before the revolution, sanctions have compelled Iran to address these issues domestically. Despite these hurdles, Pourfarzaneh reaffirmed the commitment to maintaining safe and secure flights.

Sanctions imposed on Iran, particularly by the European Union, have

severely impacted the aviation sector. Pourfarzaneh criticized these measures for hindering access to critical supplies like medicines, calling them a violation of human rights and the Chicago Convention. Following these sanctions, Iran filed formal complaints against the entities responsible.

He highlighted that over 400 knowledge-based companies are now actively working in aircraft maintenance and parts manufacturing within Iran. While the CAO aims to upgrade its fleet with modern aircraft from global manufacturers, domestic production remains a contingency plan should international avenues remain blocked.

Pourfarzaneh addressed questions about the government's claim to have imported 100 aircraft during the current administration's three years in office. He clarified that while 100 airframes, including light planes, heavy aircraft, and helicopters, were acquired, 75 of these were passenger planes. Out of these, 45 are currently operational. Some were procured for spare parts, while others require several months of checks before becoming flight-ready.

Discussing international flight routes, Pourfarzaneh announced that flights to Syria have been suspended until January 22, pending approval from Syrian authorities. However, flights to Lebanon have resumed, and discussions are ongoing regarding potential routes to Egypt, which would require mutual agreements between the two nations.

Pourfarzaneh also noted that during periods of heightened tensions in Syria, Iranian flights continued under special permits, demonstrating the country's commitment to maintaining connectivity despite challenges.

Despite facing numerous obstacles, Pourfarzaneh concluded that Iran remains steadfast in its efforts to preserve and grow its aviation industry. The priority is to procure aircraft from reputable international companies while simultaneously strengthening domestic capabilities to ensure the industry's sustainability.

Iran Consumes 3.3 Times More Energy Than the Global Average



TEHRAN - Gholamabbas Hosseini, during a press tour of the South Pars Gas Complex, shared updates on energy consumption and gas production in Iran.

Hosseini stated, "In the first eight months of this year, we injected 130 billion cubic meters of gas into the national network, marking an increase of 1.2 billion cubic meters compared to the same period last year."

He highlighted that gas accounts for nearly 90% of the country's energy mix, with the Persian Gulf Star Refinery being a major consumer of gas feedstock for gasoline production.

The Managing Director of South Pars Gas Complex emphasized the need for better gas consumption management. "Currently, Iran's energy consumption intensity is 3.3 times the global average. This high consumption is the main reason for the country's gas imbalance. It is astonishing to many that our daily gas consumption of 850 million cubic meters is often mistaken for an annual figure."

Regarding flare gas emissions, Hosseini announced ongoing efforts to reduce waste. "Currently, 7.8 million cubic meters of gas are burned daily in the South Pars gas flares. Plans are in place to reduce this figure to 3 million cubic meters per day by the end of 2025."

He also mentioned improvements in refinery maintenance schedules, stating, "This year, we reduced the duration of major maintenance operations from 45 days to 18-25 days. For next year, we have already planned the maintenance schedules."

Hosseini assured that the South Pars Gas Complex is fully prepared for gas production and refining. "With this level of readiness, we hope to get through the winter without any issues," he concluded.

Iran-Eurasia Free Trade Agreement Likely to Be Implemented in Early 2025



TEHRAN - In a significant development, Iran's negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are expected to culminate in its implementation at the beginning of 2025, according to a senior official.

Mirhadi Seyyedi, Iran's lead negotiator for the agreement, highlighted the substantial benefits of free trade. "Over half of global exports operate under free trade agreements. These agreements eliminate customs tariffs on goods, serving as a crucial facilitator for international trade," he explained.

Seyyedi emphasized that while the concept of free trade agreements (FTAs) has become widespread over the past three decades, a limited portion of Iran's exports—roughly 5%—currently benefit from such agreements. This gap, he noted, underscores the need for expanding FTAs to bolster Iran's export potential.

The proposed agreement, recently approved by Iran's Parliament, must now receive the endorsement of the Guardian Council. Following this, the agreement is set to be implemented within two months. Seyyedi expressed optimism that the deal would come into effect in early 2025.

Despite the agreement's promising framework, Seyyedi cautioned that realizing its full potential will take time. "Customs tariffs are a key element, and their removal facilitates trade. However, other factors such as transportation, logistics, and financial exchanges must also align with this new trade dynamic," he said.

He further noted that the gradual growth of trade under the agreement would depend on the evolution of supporting infrastructure and the emergence of new trade capacities.

The Iran-Eurasia Free Trade Agreement represents a strategic move to integrate Iran into the global trading system more effectively. The EAEU, comprising Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, is a significant regional bloc with extensive economic potential. The agreement is expected to enhance Iran's trade ties with these countries, providing a substantial boost to its non-oil exports and economic diversification efforts.

While the exact timeline for maximizing the agreement's benefits remains uncertain, its phased implementation marks a critical step towards strengthening Iran's trade position on the global stage.

\$400m Export Potential in Iran's Printing Industry



TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of General Industries at the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade has announced that Iran's printing and related industries have an annual export capacity of \$400 million. He emphasized the importance of offering export incentives to support the growth of this sector.

Ebrahim Sheikh, speaking at the 31st Printing, Packaging, and Related Industries Exhibition, highlighted the significant potential of the printing industry. He stressed the need to incorporate modern designs and prioritize environmental considerations to ensure sustainable growth in this sector.

Sheikh added that the adoption of advanced technologies could propel the industry forward, improving its global competitiveness.

He described the exhibition as one of the most significant trade events in the country, where discussions with industry players revealed several challenges that need addressing.

Sheikh identified energy supply, especially electricity, as one of the critical challenges for the printing industry. He called on the Ministry of Energy to collaborate with industrial sectors to ensure uninterrupted power supply, essential for maintaining production levels.

The Deputy Minister also pointed out the delays in importing machinery and raw materials, citing the long queues and bureaucratic hurdles as a major grievance among industry stakeholders. He assured that the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade is following up with the Central Bank to expedite foreign currency allocations to enable faster imports.

Highlighting the industry's role in Iran's 7th Development Plan, Sheikh underscored the importance of export incentives, such as participation in international exhibitions, to foster growth. Referring to Turkey's significant advancements in its printing industry, he emphasized the need for Iran to adopt similar measures to enhance its global presence.

Sheikh stated that 1,500 production units and 150,000 small businesses are active in Iran's printing sector, providing substantial employment opportunities. He noted that the global printing industry generates an estimated \$1 trillion in revenue annually.

The 31st International Printing, Packaging, and Related Industries Exhibition opened today (Monday) at Tehran's Permanent International Fairground, featuring 450 domestic and international companies. The event includes 50 leading companies from China and over 20 prominent participants from other countries, promoting knowledge exchange, experience sharing, and international collaborations.

India Begins Operations at Phase 1 of Chabahar Port

TEHRAN - The Managing Director of the Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran announced that a contract with Indian partners for Chabahar Port has been signed and finalized, and the Indian side has begun operations at Phase 1 of the port.

Speaking to reporters on Monday evening during the National Transportation Day celebration, Ali Akbar Safaei stated that the contract is valued at \$120 million, of which \$85 million is currently being transferred. He added that agreements for the transfer of construction equipment to the port are also underway.

Safaei mentioned the recent visit of Russian officials to Tehran and their meetings with Iran's president, noting that detailed discussions were held on the North-South Corridor project.

The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development emphasized the government's commitment to maximizing the potential of the private sector. He noted that 30 agreements and contracts, worth 930 trillion rials, were signed on Monday with domestic and international private sector entities. These projects are set to commence soon across seven Iranian ports, with signed agreements expected to turn into formal contracts in the near future.

Last year, the private sector signed contracts worth 550 trillion rials for port projects, most of which are currently being implemented.

Safaei highlighted plans to adopt a new model for port-related contracts. Previously, the government provided the infrastructure, while private companies managed superstructure projects. This year, large-scale logistics centers are being handed over to private companies, which will also manage operations.

He stressed that private sector investment in maritime development



will undoubtedly generate added value and create job opportunities in port areas.

Meanwhile Safaei stated: "An evaluation of the Ports and Maritime Organization's budget, considering the overall policies for maritime-focused development, revealed that achieving the necessary development goals was not possible with the organization's budget alone."

He added: "With the chosen path and the support of the Minister of Roads and Urban Development, our strategy has been defined as leveraging the capabilities and potential of the private

sector."

The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development emphasized: "With the measures taken, the incentives provided, and the conditions created at the ports, today, over 93 trillion tomans of private sector investment is being implemented through signed contracts or agreements of understanding."

He continued: "Another approximately 15 trillion tomans worth of contracts with the private sector are in the process of being signed, although they are still on paper. These include investments in oil storage facilities with the participation of Iranian and foreign private sectors, with even the winning bidder already determined."

Safaei stressed: "We warmly welcome and honor the genuine private sector that has trusted us, the government, and the parliament. We take pride in having managed to establish at least a basic level of trust in the ports sector, enabling the private sector to invest in it."

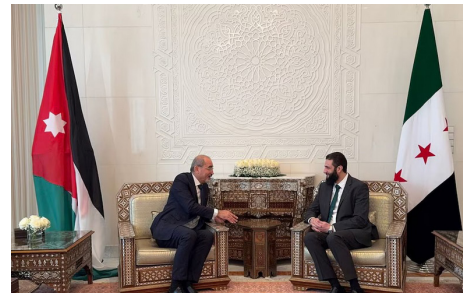
He reminded: "Last year, the total private sector investment in ports was 55 trillion tomans, but this year, the figure will exceed 93 trillion tomans."

Qatar and Jordan Pledge Support to Syria

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Qatar is ready to invest in Syria's energy sector and ports, the de facto Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa said after meeting a senior Qatari official in Damascus on Monday, as his new Islamist-led administration widened contacts with Arab states.

Sharaa also received Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safadi, the first Arab foreign minister to visit Damascus since the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) toppled Bashar al-Assad two weeks ago. Safadi said Jordan was ready to help Syria rebuild.

The meetings further widen the diplomatic contacts of the new administration established after Sharaa's HTS, a former Al Qaeda affiliate, led a decisive rebel offensive that overthrew Assad after more than 13 years of war.



Greenland PM Claps Back at Trump: 'We Are Not For Sale'



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President-elect Donald Trump's renewed interest in Greenland is not going over well with the autonomous territory's government.

The island's prime minister was defiant in the face of the president-elect's demands Sunday that owning the island was an "absolute necessity" for the United States.

"Greenland is ours," Greenland's Prime Minister Múte Egede said in a statement Monday. "We are not for sale and will never be for sale. We must not lose our long struggle for freedom."

The arctic island is an autonomous territory of Denmark, and has held the right to declare independence since 2009.

Trump signaled his renewed interest in the territory when he announced his intention to nominate Ken Hovewy as the ambassador to Denmark. "For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World, the United States of America feels that ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity," the president-elect wrote after touting Hovewy's credentials.

Hovewy, who previously served as ambassador to Sweden during Trump's first term in office, did not immediately comment on the shift in priorities.

"I look forward to working with the dedicated teams at U.S. Embassy Copenhagen and U.S. Consulate Nuuk in Greenland to deepen the bonds between our countries," he said in a post on X thanking the president-elect.

Sources close to the president-elect told the New York Post on Monday that he is "100% serious" about acquiring Greenland, as well as reasserting control over the Panama Canal Zone—an idea he also floated over the weekend, accusing the Central American nation of charging American ships "exorbitant" fees to use the passage.

Trump first floated the idea of purchasing Greenland in 2019. The idea was roundly rejected by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at the time, who called the sale of the self-governing island "absurd." The incident led to minor diplomatic spat between the two NATO allies, and the Trump administration ended up canceling a diplomatic visit to Copenhagen.

Sudan Drops Out of Hunger-Monitor System on Eve of Famine Report



KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - The Sudanese government has suspended its participation in the global hunger-monitoring system on the eve of a report that's expected to show famine spreading across the country, a step likely to undercut efforts to address one of the world's largest hunger crises.

In a letter dated Dec. 23, the government's agriculture minister said the government is halting its participation in the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system. The letter accused the IPC of "issuing unreliable reports that undermine Sudan's sovereignty and dignity."

On Tuesday, the IPC is expected to publish a report finding that famine has spread to five areas in Sudan and could expand to 10 by May, according to a briefing document seen by Reuters. "This marks an unprecedented deepening and widening of the food and nutrition crisis, driven by the devastating conflict and poor humanitarian access," the document stated.

A spokesperson for the Rome-based IPC declined to comment. Sudan's withdrawal from the IPC system could undermine humanitarian efforts to help millions of Sudanese suffering from extreme hunger, said the leader of a non-governmental organization operating there, speaking on condition of anonymity.



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Gaps between Israel and Hamas over a possible Gaza ceasefire have narrowed, according to Israeli and Palestinian officials' remarks on Monday, though crucial differences have yet to be resolved.

A fresh bid by mediators Egypt, Qatar and the United States to end the fighting and release Israeli and foreign hostages has gained momentum this month, though no breakthrough has yet been reported.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday said progress had been made in hostage negotiations with Hamas in Gaza but that he did not know how much longer it would take to see the results.

During a speech in Israel's Knesset, Netanyahu said Israel had made "great achievements" militarily on several fronts and that military pressure on Hamas had led its leaders to soften their previous demands.

A Palestinian official familiar with the talks said while some sticking points had been resolved, the identity of some of the Palestinian prisoners to be released by Israel in return for hostages had yet to be agreed, along with the precise deployment of Israeli troops in Gaza.

His remarks corresponded with comments by the Israeli diaspora minister, Amichai Chikli, who said both issues were still being negotiated. Nonetheless, he said, the sides were far closer to reaching agreement than they have been for months.

"This ceasefire can last six months or it can last 10 years, it depends on the dynamics that will form on the ground," Chikli told Israel's Kan radio. Much hinged on what powers would be running and rehabilitating Gaza once fighting stopped, he said.

The duration of the ceasefire has been a fundamental sticking point throughout several rounds of failed negotiations. Hamas wants an end to the war, while Israel wants an end to Hamas' rule of Gaza first.

"The issue of ending the war completely hasn't yet been resolved," said the Palestinian official. Israeli minister Zeev Elkin, a member of Netanyahu's security cabinet, told Israel's Army Radio that the aim was to find an agreed framework that would resolve that difference during a second stage of the ceasefire deal.

Chikli said the first stage would be a humanitarian phase that will last 42 days and include a hostage release. The war was triggered by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack on southern Israel, in which 1,200 people were killed and 251 taken hostage to Gaza, according to Israeli tallies.

Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza has since killed more than 45,200 Palestinians, according to health officials in the Hamas-run enclave. Most of the population of 2.3 million has been displaced and much of Gaza is in ruins.

At least 24 Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes on Monday, medics said. Among the dead were four Palestinians killed when an Israeli airstrike hit a group of Palestinians tasked with protecting aid trucks into Gaza, medics said.

Later on Monday, the Israeli military published evacuation orders to residents of several districts in the Shejaia neighbourhood of Gaza City, citing rocket firing from the area.

One of Gaza's few still partially functioning hospitals, on its northern edge, an area under intense Israeli military pressure for nearly three months, sought urgent help after being hit by Israeli fire.

"We are facing a continuous daily threat," said Hussam Abu Safiya, director of the Kamal Adwan Hospital. "The bombing continues from all directions, affecting the building, the departments, and the staff."

The Israeli military did not immediately comment. On Sunday it said it was supplying fuel and food to the hospital and helping evacuate some patients and staff to safer areas.

Palestinians accuse Israel of seeking to permanently depopulate northern Gaza to create a buffer zone, which Israel denies. Israel says its operation around the three communities on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip - Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Jabalia - is targeting Hamas militants.

On Monday, the United Nations' aid chief, Tom Fletcher, said Israeli forces had hampered efforts to deliver much-needed aid in northern Gaza.

"North Gaza has been under a near-total siege for more than two months, raising the spectre of famine," he said. "South Gaza is extremely overcrowded, creating horrific living conditions and even greater humanitarian needs as winter sets in."

Zelensky Says North Korean Troop Casualties Exceed 3,000

KYIV (Dispatches) - The North Korean troops killed and injured while fighting alongside Russian forces have surpassed 3,000, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky as he warned about greater military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang.

"There are risks of North Korea sending additional soldiers and military equipment to the Russian army, and we will have tangible responses to this," Zelensky said in a statement on Telegram yesterday.

It comes amid claims that North Korean soldiers fighting in Russia are using fake identification documents to hide the fact that Moscow is employing foreign forces in its war.

Ukrainian special forces said in a statement that they had recovered documents from three North Korean soldiers killed in the Russian border region of Kursk, which they said ID'd them as being Russian.

Meanwhile, Zelensky also blasted Slovak prime minister Robert Fico for his reluctance to end his country's dependency on Russian gas, calling it a "big security issue" for Europe and saying that Fico declined compensation.

Zelensky made the comments after Mr Fico met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Sunday. Mr Fico had accused Mr Zelensky of opposing any gas transit through Ukraine to Slovakia, which is dependent on gas supplies piped in via its neighbour.



Meanwhile Italy's cabinet on Monday passed a law decree that allows it to continue supplying until the end of 2025 "means, materials and equipment" to Ukraine to support its war effort against Russia, a government statement said. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Italy has approved 10

packages of military aid for Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's government, including two Franco-Italian air defence systems known as SAMP/T.

Giorgia Meloni has been a supporter of Kyiv since taking office in late 2022 and has vowed to back Ukraine until the war ends, amid uncertainty over the future attitude of the United States once president-elect Donald Trump takes office in January.

Meanwhile Zelensky on Monday criticised Slovak prime minister Robert Fico for his reluctance to end Slovakia's dependence on Russian gas, describing it as a "big security issue" for Europe and noting that Mr Fico had rejected compensation.

Zelensky made the comments after the Slovak prime minister met with Russian president Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Sunday. Fico had accused Zelensky of opposing any gas transit through Ukraine to Slovakia, which is dependent on gas supplies piped in via its neighbour.

Ukraine has repeatedly said it will not extend an existing transit deal for gas flows from Russia to Europe, which expires on 1 January. Payments for the gas have helped Russia to wage its almost three-year war in Ukraine, Kyiv says.

The Ukrainian leader said Fico had been offered possible compensation for Slovakia for losses resulting from the expiry, as well as transit alternatives for non-Russian gas.

Putin Vows Destruction on Ukraine After Kazan Drone Attack

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed to bring more "destruction" to Ukraine in retaliation for a drone attack on the central Russian city of Kazan a day earlier.

Russia accused Ukraine of a "massive" drone attack that hit a luxury apartment block in the city, some 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) from the frontier.

Videos on Russian social media networks showed drones hitting a high-rise glass building and setting off fireballs, though there were no reported casualties as a result of the strike.

"Whoever, and however much they try to destroy, they will face many times more destruction themselves and will regret what they are trying to do in our country," Putin said during a televised government meeting on Sunday.

Putin was addressing the local leader of Tatarstan, the region where Kazan is located, in a road-opening ceremony via video link.

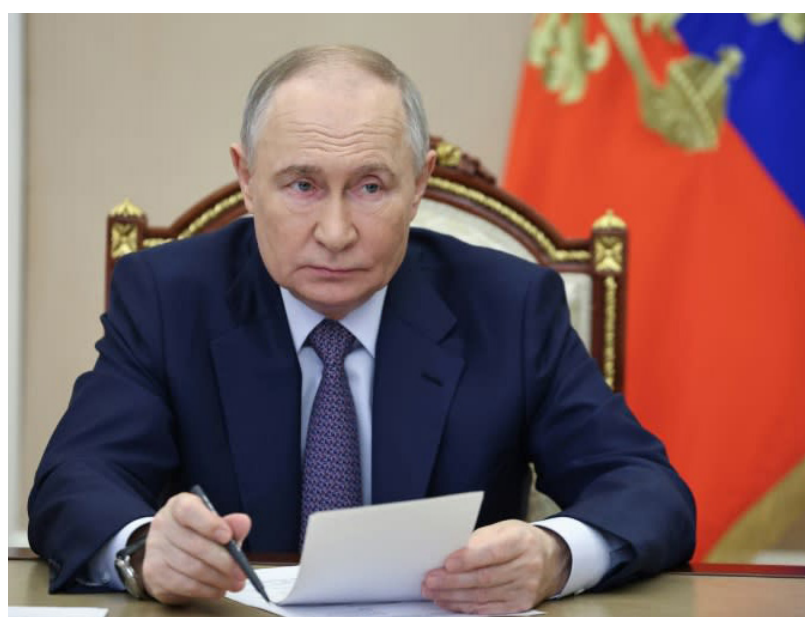
The strike on Kazan was the latest in a series of escalating aerial attacks in the nearly three-year conflict.

Ukraine has not commented on the strike.

Putin has previously threatened to target the centre of Kyiv with a hypersonic ballistic missile in response to Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory.

And the defence ministry has called Russian strikes on Ukrainian energy facilities over recent weeks retaliatory hits for Kyiv using Western-supplied missiles to hit Russian air bases and arms factories.

The latest threat comes as Russia claimed fresh advances on the battlefield in east Ukraine.



The defence ministry said on Telegram that its troops had "liberated" the villages of Lozova in the northeastern Kharkiv region and Krasnoye -- called Sontsvivka in Ukraine. The latter is close to the resource hub of Kurakhove, which Russia has almost encircled and would be a key prize in Moscow's attempt to capture the entire Donetsk region.

Russia has accelerated its advance across eastern Ukraine in recent months, looking to secure as much territory as possible before US President-elect Donald Trump comes to power in January.

The Republican has promised to bring a swift end to the nearly three-year-long conflict, without proposing any concrete terms for a ceasefire or peace deal.

Moscow's army claims to have seized more than 190 Ukrainian settlements this year, with Kyiv struggling to hold the line in the face of manpower and ammunition shortages.

Kyiv also accused Russian forces of killing captured Ukrainian soldiers -- an alleged war crimes violation.

A video posted by Ukraine's 110th separate mechanised brigade showed "the shooting of soldiers who surrendered," Kyiv's human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said in a post on Telegram.

He said the video -- aerial footage from a drone of an apparent confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian soldiers -- showed Russians shooting the Ukrainians at point-blank range after they had already surrendered.

AFP could not verify the footage.

It is the latest in a string of similar allegations lodged by Ukraine throughout the nearly three-year conflict.



Strong Finish Helps Clippers End Grizzlies' Home Win Streak

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Norman Powell scored 29 points, including four in the final minute, and Ivica Zubac had 20 points and 20 rebounds to lead the Los Angeles Clippers to a 114-110 victory at Memphis, snapping the Grizzlies' eight-game home winning streak.

Powell's 15-footer with 25.4 seconds left broke a 110-all tie. He added two game-clinching free throws with 5.7 seconds to go.

Zubac's 20-20 game was the second of his career. James Harden added 21 points, nine assists and eight rebounds for Los Angeles, which won for the third time in four games.

Jaren Jackson Jr. led the Grizzlies with 24 points. Ja Morant added 23 and Desmond Bane finished with 21 points, nine rebounds and seven assists. Rookie big man Zach Edey grabbed a career-high 14 rebounds as Memphis fell for just the second time in eight games overall.

The Grizzlies put together a 10-0 run midway through the fourth quarter to take a 103-101 lead before Harden stepped up. Harden scored seven straight -- including his only 3-pointer on six attempts in the game -- during a personal run for a 108-103 advantage. The Clippers never trailed again.

Los Angeles held the Grizzlies to 38 percent shooting and forced 19 turnovers, which the Clippers turned into 31 points.

The Grizzlies dropped to 13-4 at home this season.

Memphis went up 63-53 early in the third quarter on a spinning, 360-degree layup by Morant against Zubac. However, the Clippers followed with a 17-3 run that included two put-backs from Zubac for a 70-66 lead. The Clippers led by as many as seven points (88-81) late in the quarter after two free throws

by Kevin Porter Jr.

Los Angeles took advantage of Grizzlies miscues to lead 91-90 entering the final period.

Jackson had 16 first-half points, most coming on strong drives in the paint, to help the Grizzlies to a 58-51 advantage. Bane had 12 points and four assists before halftime.

Powell scored 12 points to top the Clippers before the break. Harden had 11 points and Zubac 10.

Meanwhile Shai Gilgeous-Alexander overcame a slow start to score 41 points as the Oklahoma City Thunder powered to a 123-105 home win over the Washington Wizards.

The Thunder extended their regular-season winning streak to eight, their longest winning streak since January 2018.

Oklahoma City hasn't had a longer streak since the 2013-14 season.

Though the Monday game featured the Thunder, with the top record in the Western Conference, against the team with the worst record in the NBA, it was far from a cake walk.

Gilgeous-Alexander had just two points in the first quarter, when he attempted just three shots.

However, Gilgeous-Alexander got going in the second quarter, including kicking off a 15-0 Oklahoma City run with a 3-pointer. The surge turned the Wizards' eight-point lead into a seven-point margin for the Thunder.

It was a lead Oklahoma City would not relinquish, though Washington kept it close deep into the third quarter.

Title-Chasing Inter Grind Out 2-0 Home Win Over Como



MILAN (Dispatches) - Inter Milan toiled to a 2-0 victory over lowly Como thanks to second-half goals from Carlos Augusto and Marcus Thuram on Monday to remain within touching distance of the Serie A summit.

The win lifted third-placed Inter to 37 points, leaving them three points off leaders Atalanta, who beat Empoli 3-2 on Sunday, and one behind second-placed Napoli, after they won 2-1 at Genoa on Saturday. Inter have a game in hand on the top two.

Defending champions Inter dominated the first half but squandered a number of chances, with the unmarked Denzel Dumfries firing over from close range and Federico Dimarco shooting straight at Como's veteran goalkeeper Pepe Reina.

Inter finally scored with Augusto's towering far-post header from a Hakan Calhanoglu corner three minutes after the break.

"Happy for the goal, but more important is the victory. We knew it was a tough game but we got three points," left back Augusto told Sky Italia.

"We knew it was a different league last year, this year there are many strong teams. But I have confidence in my team mates who are the best in the world. We'll see at the end."

The visitors looked more dangerous after going behind, with man of the match Augusto making a crucial interception to deny Edoardo Gollaniga an equaliser and Yann Sommer pulling off a great save to keep out an effort from Nico Paz.

Inter kept pushing to extend their lead but captain Lautaro Martinez saw his 68th-minute effort disallowed for offside, extending his goal drought that has lasted more than a month.

Thuram sealed the win two minutes into stoppage time with a powerful shot past Reina to reach 12 league goals, level with Atalanta's Mateo Retegui in the Serie A scoring chart.

"Even in matches in which we are not 100% brilliant, it's important to win," said Inter centre-back Alessandro Bastoni. "Especially because the others had already played and won, so we had to give a positive response."

Inter Milan coach Simone Inzaghi hailed his side's 2-0 Serie A home win over Como and said he was not worried about hard-working captain Lautaro Martinez's goal drought.

Despite the defending champions lacking the firepower from last week's 6-0 thrashing of Lazio, Inzaghi stressed his team were up to the challenge posed by battling Como.

FIFA Amends Transfer Regulations Following Diarra Ruling

ZURICH (Dispatches) - FIFA has adopted an interim framework concerning the Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players, world soccer's governing body said, following a Court of Justice of the European Union ruling.

In October, the EU's top court said some of FIFA's rules on player transfers went against European Union laws and free movement principles in a case linked to former Chelsea, Arsenal and Real Madrid player Lassana Diarra.

The interim regulatory framework affects the calculation of compensation payable if there is a breach of contract and the burden of proof in relation to both compensation payable and an inducement to breach a contract.

The framework adds a general definition of 'just cause' which says it "shall exist in any circumstance in which a party can no longer reasonably and in good faith be expected to continue a contractual relationship".

The interim regulatory framework is no longer based on the specific calculation criteria deemed problematic by the court.

Instead, compensation will be calculated in an objective and transparent way at a level required to restore the party that suffered damage due to a breach of contract to the position in which they



would have been had the breach not occurred.

FIFA requested talks with all key stakeholders before making their interim amendments, which take effect on Jan. 1 2025, but players' union FIFPRO declined to take part in discussions.

FIFPRO has issued a statement criticising FIFA's decision, and said it was unable to reach a consensus under which it could negotiate

amendments to the regulations to reflect the ruling.

"We do not agree with the temporary measures announced by FIFA which have been introduced without a proper collective bargaining process," FIFPRO said.

"The measures do not provide legal certainty to professional footballers and do not reflect the judgement by the European Court of Justice."

In 2014, Diarra left Lokomotiv Moscow one year into a four-year deal and the Russian club took the matter to FIFA's Dispute Resolution Chamber, arguing he had breached the rules when his contract was terminated after the player decided to leave without just cause following a pay cut.

Diarra received an offer to join Belgian club Charleroi but the club backed out after FIFA refused to sign the International Transfer Certificate, preventing the midfielder being registered with the Belgian federation.

According to the CJEU ruling, it is unlawful to refuse to sign the ITC.

Players on Edge After Sinner, Swiatek Doping Cases

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - As Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek prepare for the new season after a year in which they fell foul of doping rules, positive drug tests due to contamination are a genuine fear for many of their fellow professionals.

The star duo spent small fortunes on quickly proving how the banned substances had entered their systems but other players, many of whom do not have huge financial resources at their disposal, are understandably jittery.

"A lot of the players I know are quite apprehensive," former U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu told British media this month.

"Everything we take, we're aware of the situation and how easily things can be contaminated. There are certain supplements that I may want to take, but I can't take them because they're sold over the counter and not batch tested."

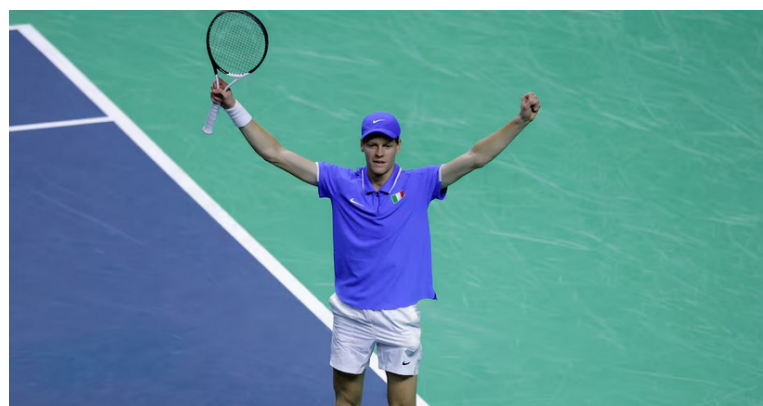
Raducanu said it costs over \$1,000 to batch test supplements.

Russian former world number five Andrey Rublev echoed Raducanu's comments, saying he was "super afraid" to ingest anything he was not absolutely sure about.

London-based academic Andrea Petroczi, who is involved in research on anti-doping, said surveys showed increasing concerns among elite athletes around the world about doping violations caused by contamination.

"(They) expressed fear and anxiety about unintentionally violating anti-doping rules that could have grave consequences on their reputation, careers and livelihoods," Petroczi told Reuters via email.

Many athletes take precautions, Petroczi said, including meticulously checking medications, avoiding any unnecessary treatments, relying on third-party tested supplements and recording batch numbers of



supplements and medicines.

Some go as far as maintaining logs and avoiding certain foods in specific countries, but they understand that even the highest levels of vigilance cannot completely eliminate the risk of contamination or environmental exposure.

"Importantly, it's also crucial to acknowledge that the resources and strategies required for this level of vigilance aren't universally accessible," added Petroczi, a professor of public health at Kingston University.

"There is a clear 'Global North'/'Global South' divide, with disparities in education, resources and support systems, leaving many athletes more vulnerable."

Sinner was cleared of wrongdoing after he was able to satisfy doping authorities that trace amounts of the anabolic androgenic steroid clostebol in his system came from his physiotherapist during massages.

An appeal against that verdict by the World Anti-Doping Agency, however, means that Australian Open and U.S. Open champion Sinner still has a potential ban of up to two years hanging over his head.

Swiatek accepted a one-month ban after a positive test for hormone and metabolic modulator trimetazidine, which she said was the result of contamination of her sleep medication.

The world number two told Polish television station TVN24 that she had spent \$70,000 on a lawyer and just over \$15,000 on expert opinions in her defence of the case.

The speed with which Sinner and Swiatek's cases were dealt with also cast a harsh spotlight on the anti-doping system after former world number one Simona Halep and Briton Tara Moore criticised officials for lengthy delays in their own cases.

The tennis anti-doping programme was previously overseen by the International Tennis Federation before the seven governing bodies of the sport formed the independent International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) in 2021 after a comprehensive review.

Since the ITIA began handling anti-doping in addition to anti-corruption from 2022, Sinner and Swiatek's cases are the highest profile players to be investigated by the agency, as both were world number ones when they failed tests.

The ITIA maintains that all doping cases are dealt with based on facts and evidence and not a player's name, ranking or nationality but it has not been able to completely see off allegations of a two-tier system.

Being unable to access legal representation and advanced analytical testing would impact an athlete's ability to fight a doping case, Petroczi added, and sports federations and anti-doping organisations had to address this disparity in resources.

Man Utd Boss Amorim Questions Choices of Rashford's Entourage



LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim has questioned the "choices" of those close to forward Marcus Rashford, whose time at Old Trafford could be coming to an end.

The 27-year-old England international sat out a third straight game on Sunday as United slumped to a 3-0 home loss to Bournemouth.

Rashford was also omitted from the squad for the derby win at Manchester City earlier this month and Thursday's League Cup quarter-final defeat by Tottenham.

Two days before the Spurs loss, Rashford said in an interview that he was "ready for a new challenge and the next steps" of a career that began in the United academy.

"It is a hard situation but I understand that this kind of player have a lot of people around them, and making some choices that sometimes is not the first idea from the player," Amorim told Sky Sports on yesterday.

"They chose to do that interview because it's not just Marcus. I understand that so for me as a coach I'm just focused on the performance, the way he trains."

"The rest, I think, is better for me and the club to deal with that when the times comes."

Amorim also expressed his support for Rashford, who is under contract until 2028, and is keen for the player to stay at United.

The Portuguese said he can "separate" his relationship with Rashford from the decisions of the people advising him.

"At the moment I'm just focused on improving Marcus," added Amorim.

"We need a lot in this moment, (from a) talented guy like Marcus, and I forget for now the interview. I just see what I see on the pitch."

United's defeat by Bournemouth left them 13th in the Premier League, their lowest position in the top flight at Christmas since 1986.

Amorim's side return to action at Wolves on Boxing Day before hosting Newcastle next Monday.