

Foreign Minister Has Placed a Premium on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Saying It Can Play a Vital Role in Strengthening Multilateralism and Safeguarding the Security and Political Interests of States

IRAN NEWS

Iran's ambassador to Oman Wrote on His Personal Page on the Social Media Platform X That Soon Sayyid Badr Al-Busaidi, Oman's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Visit to Tehran

2 DOMESTIC



Iran-Eurasia Trade Sees 20% Growth in Nine Months

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

At Least 62 Dead, Two Crew Rescued in Fiery South Korea Airliner Crash



> SEE PAGE 3

Iran's Exports to the European Union Increase by 6%



TEHRAN - According to statistics released by Eurostat, the European Customs Agency, trade between Iran and the European Union totaled €3.77 billion from January to October 2024. This represents a 1% decrease compared to the same period in 2023. While European exports during this period amounted to slightly over €3 billion—a 2% decline from the previous year—Iran's exports to Europe saw a 6% increase, rising from €654 million in 2023 to €695 million in 2024.

In October 2024 alone, the volume of trade stood at €300 million, marking a 19% decrease compared to €369 million in October 2023. This figure represents the lowest monthly trade volume since January 2021. Out of the €300 million, Iran's exports accounted for €65 million, reflecting a 9% growth, while European exports to Iran reached €235 million, showing a 24% decline.

Germany remains Iran's top European trade partner with a trade volume of €1.23 billion. Italy follows in second place with €585 million, the Netherlands with €512 million, Belgium with €281 million, and France with €234 million, rounding out the top five European trade partners with Iran.

Iran in Talks With Neighboring States to Boost Transit Development



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Farzaneh Sadegh, Minister of Roads and Urban Development, emphasized the strategic importance of increasing transit capacity by 40 million tons. She highlighted the need for a significant leap in both transportation corridors and fleets, identifying international corridors—stretching from Jolfa and Sarakhs to Bandar Abbas and Astara—as key priorities for the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

Citing directives from the Supreme Leader and President, Sadegh underscored the urgency of completing transit corridors, along with freeway, highway, and rural road networks. She acknowledged resource constraints, emphasizing the importance of prioritization amid growing demands for both infrastructure completion and operation.

Sadegh stated that the ministry is exploring investment opportunities within the logistics sector to accelerate freeway development. She also outlined plans to enhance logistics infrastructure, integrating industries like mining and agriculture with transportation networks.

The official pointed to Iran's diplomacy with neighboring nations as a critical factor in increasing transit capacity. Over the past three months, substantial negotiations have taken place in joint commissions with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey to foster cooperation in this area.

Discussing rail corridors, Sadegh noted that only 10% of the country's goods are currently transported via rail—a figure that must rise. Achieving this goal hinges on equipping and expanding the rail fleet, a top priority for the government.

Sadegh highlighted the Supreme Leader's emphasis on a maritime-focused economy, describing extensive planning efforts aimed at realizing this vision. She argued that the country's development will accelerate when maritime-focused strategies are prioritized across transportation and other sectors.

The minister also detailed agreements between the Ports and Maritime Organization and the private sector, amounting to 93 trillion tomans. Initiatives include the construction of 26 service vessels in collaboration with the Navy, the IRGC, and private enterprises, fostering economic growth for coastal residents.

Gov't Pledges Completion of 30-Year Highway Project



TEHRAN - Mohammadreza Aref, Iran's First Vice President, announced the government's commitment to completing the long-delayed Tehran-North Freeway project, emphasizing it as a top priority of the administration.

In a meeting held on Sunday, with investors and operators of the country's freeway network, Aref expressed determination to conclude a project that has been ongoing for 30 years. The meeting was also attended by key officials, including the Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Head of the Plan and Budget Organization, and the Governor of the Central Bank.

During the meeting, Aref highlighted the significant strides made in Iran's infrastructure over the past three decades. "The progress in our freeway network demonstrates the country's capabilities in designing and executing such projects, especially with private sector participation," he stated. The Tehran-North Freeway, featuring complex tunnels and modern roads, was hailed as a source of national pride.

He acknowledged the consistent support governments have provided to infrastructure projects. "In every international meeting I've attended, topics like dam construction, bridge building, and road development have always been points of discussion, showcasing Iran's expertise," Aref noted.

The Vice President shared anecdotes showcasing the dedication of private contractors, despite financial challenges. Recalling a visit to a partially constructed freeway, Aref described encountering a contractor personally distributing fresh bread to workers. Despite being owed money by the government, the contractor continued the work with passion and commitment, embodying a deep love for his country.

In another instance, a contractor on a road project in Isfahan dismissed financial grievances, stating, "It's my duty to deliver high-quality work." Aref praised such attitudes, calling them "inspirational examples of patriotism."

The Vice President reaffirmed the government's unwavering support for the private sector, especially in instances where competition arises between public and private entities. "We will always side with the private sector," Aref declared, emphasizing the sector's crucial role in

reducing road fatalities, conserving fuel, and mitigating environmental impacts.

Acknowledging the limitations of government resources, Aref stressed the need for private-sector involvement in infrastructure projects. "Building freeways is not just economically beneficial but also essential for saving lives and reducing costs for citizens," he said.

Aref reiterated the administration's focus on completing the Tehran-North Freeway. "This project has been ongoing for three decades. Our goal is to finish it during this government's tenure," he affirmed.

Addressing the challenges faced by the contractors present at the meeting, Aref acknowledged their sacrifices and encouraged them to focus on the broader impact of their work. "Reducing traffic fatalities by 15-20% is an invaluable contribution. You are not just executing economic projects; you are serving your nation."

Despite acknowledging financial constraints and recurring issues, Aref assured attendees of the government's commitment to resolving these challenges. "We don't need new laws in this area. What we need is effective collaboration, and the government is fully prepared to provide that support," he said.

One contractor at the meeting highlighted long-standing grievances, mentioning that over 15 recurring issues had been raised repeatedly over the years. However, the participant expressed optimism following recent discussions with the Minister of Roads and Urban Development, where six key problems were reportedly resolved.

Concluding the meeting, Aref urged the participants to remain steadfast in their mission. He expressed confidence that several major freeway projects would reach completion by the end of the current administration. "Despite financial constraints, let us focus on the magnitude of our achievements and the invaluable service we are providing to our country," he said.

The Tehran-North Freeway, once completed, will stand as a testament to the resilience and dedication of both the public and private sectors, leaving an enduring mark on Iran's transportation infrastructure.

West Asia Not a Scene for Destructive Foreign Interference

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The foreign ministers of Iran and China say that West Asia should not be a scene for "destructive" interference by external powers to promote their geopolitical goals.

Abbas Araqchi of Iran, who is on an official visit to Beijing, met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on Saturday.

During the meeting, Araqchi and Wang discussed the latest security and political developments in West Asia, emphasizing that the region belongs to its nations.

They expressed concern over the dangers of chaos and insecurity in Syria and stressed the need to preserve the country's national unity and territorial integrity and a calm and secure transition to a government that would meet the demands of all spectrums of the society.

The Iran-China strategic partnership is ironclad because it's underpinned by cultural & civilizational bonds and rooted in shared values & interests.

The Iranian and Chinese foreign ministers also called for improving bilateral cooperation to combat terrorism.

They also exchanged views about the nuclear issue, the lifting of sanctions against Tehran, and expanding cooperation within the framework of institutions such as the BRICS group of emerging economies and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Araqchi said Iran would spare no effort to utilize numerous capacities to boost cooperation with China, adding that a landmark 25-year partnership agreement signed between the two countries in March 2021 is a strong basis for developing relations in various fields.

The Chinese foreign minister also said Iran is an active and important power in West Asia that possesses natural, geographical and human capacities.

He added that his country is determined to further develop relations with Iran.

Wang, whose country is a signatory to the 2015 nuclear agreement—officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), said Beijing "firmly supports the Iranian side in safeguarding its legitimate rights and interests."

China is Iran's largest trade partner. Both states are subject to different levels of illegal



sanctions imposed by the US.

The two countries signed the long-term strategic partnership deal to reinforce their long-standing economic and political alliance.

The top Iranian and Chinese diplomats reached a common understanding on the latest developments in mutual relations and regional issues.

Araqchi and Wang hailed positive progress made by Tehran and Beijing in implementing the strategic

agreement in recent years and said they would make efforts to implement a plan for bilateral comprehensive cooperation in various fields.

The two sides agreed that West Asia is not a battleground for the big powers and should not be a victim of geopolitical competition and conflicts among countries from outside the region.

They said only the peoples in West Asia should determine the future and destiny of the countries in the region.

The Iranian and Chinese foreign ministers said the international community should seriously respect the sovereignty, security, stability, unity and territorial integrity of the countries in West Asia.

They also said the international community needed to heed the logical demands of the West Asian countries, respect the independent decisions of regional nations and play a constructive role in promoting peace and stability.

The two ministers added that stability and peace would be established in the region only through adherence to a political principle based on international law without any foreign interference.

They threw their countries' weight behind the further expansion of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the continuation of consultations among the regional countries.

Araqchi and Wang agreed that the settlement of the Palestinian issue requires respect for the legal right of the people of Palestine and cessation of occupation.

They underscored the need to establish an immediate ceasefire, fully evacuate the armed forces from Gaza, and send humanitarian aid to the Strip.

Today's Wars are Fought Softly with Smart Power



TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf emphasized the growing reliance on "soft war" and smart power in modern conflicts, underscoring the enemy's efforts to undermine the Islamic Revolution by targeting influential individuals within society.

Speaking at the closing ceremony of the Fifth Shahid Modarres Festival, Qalibaf remarked on the significance of Baqir Insight Day (commemorated on December 30) and reiterated the Supreme Leader's call for "jihad of explanation." He noted the increasing need for vigilance as adversaries use all tools at their disposal in a hybrid and cognitive war to distance Iranians and the Islamic Ummah from their beliefs and values.

Reflecting on past decades, Qalibaf stated that while enemies once sought to exploit Iran's resources through traditional warfare, today's conflicts are waged through subtler, smarter means. "This war now relies on soft power and intellectual influence rather than brute force," he said, warning that this shift demands renewed efforts to counter such strategies.

He further highlighted that adversaries focus on isolating key societal figures from the principles of the Islamic Revolution. "The nature of soft war requires approaches vastly different from those in the past. Today, we must exert more effort to remain steadfast," he added.

He urged individuals to dedicate themselves wholly to God, recalling Quranic teachings that underscore divine reward for those who fight for righteous causes. "If we sell ourselves to anything or anyone besides God, we've undervalued our worth," he stated, encouraging introspection and spiritual focus each day.

He reminded attendees of the challenges inherent in life's material and spiritual dimensions but echoed Imam Khomeini's guidance that work done for God is never discouraging. "When exhaustion or difficulty arises, remember that divine work carries both worldly and eternal rewards," he said.

The Speaker also stressed the vital role of trust as a foundation for societal and institutional success, from family dynamics to national governance. He cited trust as the key to Iran's resilience during the Sacred Defense era.

UN Urged to Halt Israel's Raids on Gaza Medical Centers



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Health Minister Mohammad Reza Zafarghandi says the United Nations should swiftly take serious action to put an end to the Israeli regime's repeated raids on medical centers and staff in the Gaza Strip.

Zafarghandi made the plea in a letter to Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres on Saturday following the Israeli regime's raid on Kamal Adwan Hospital, which put the last major health facility in North Gaza out of service.

The Israeli military on Friday stormed Kamal Adwan Hospital, torching large sections and ordering hundreds of people to leave. The attacks continued on Saturday.

Gaza's Ministry of Health said on Friday that contact had been lost with staff inside the hospital in Beit Lahiyah, which has been under siege and heavy pressure from Israeli forces for weeks.

On Saturday, it announced that Israeli forces arrested Hussam Abu Safiya, the director of the hospital, and other staffers.

In his letter, the Iranian health minister condemned Israel's savage raids on the hospital in recent days and also the regime's airstrike on Sana'a International Airport at a time when Director General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and his entourage were waiting for a flight at the airport.

Zafarghandi said the attacks were a continuation of the Israeli regime's blatant violence and an indication of its total disobedience to international rules and treaties.

He said the world has witnessed the Israeli regime's frequent deadly attacks on medical facilities, healthcare personnel, and aid workers in Gaza in violation of all international regulations since it launched the war on the besieged Palestinian territory in October 2023.

IRAN NEWS



Iran Withdraws From Participation in Japan Expo

TEHRAN - The Deputy of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization announced that due to certain restrictions, the Iranian government has ultimately decided to withdraw from participating in the Japan Expo.

Mohammad Sadeq Ghanadzadeh explained the reason behind Iran's withdrawal from the Expo. He stated, "Iran initially intended to participate in the Japan Expo but decided to withdraw due to certain limitations."

He further mentioned that Japan had invited Iran to attend the Expo six months ago.

Fatemeh Mohajerani, spokesperson for the government, stated today, "After comprehensive internal evaluations regarding the conditions for participation in the Japan Expo and the associated restrictions, the decision to withdraw was finalized based on the recommendation of the relevant authorities."

Iranian Islands Represent National Identity



TEHRAN - In a visit to Kish Island, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, emphasized the importance of Iranian islands as symbols of national identity. During his trip, he toured Hendurabi Island and participated in a meeting with local and national officials to discuss the island's tourism development project.

Local authorities and Hendurabi Island administrators presented detailed plans for tourism growth, and the minister issued necessary recommendations and directives to support the island's development in southern Iran.

Salehi Amiri highlighted the importance of collaboration and synergy in implementing the Hendurabi Island development plan. He stated that the broader development of the Persian Gulf islands should be prioritized, with specific attention given to Hendurabi under the strategic initiatives established for island development.

He also stressed the need for maritime-focused development, aligning with the Supreme Leader's emphasis on this approach. "The development of Hendurabi Island and related projects will be pursued through the designated task forces led by the President. Maritime economic development, particularly in the tourism sector, is a key focus," he said.

The minister underlined the significance of leveraging Hendurabi Island's unique capacities and building its brand identity to achieve impactful and sustainable development.

Salehi Amiri concluded by reiterating that the development of Iranian islands is intrinsically linked to the country's national identity, making their advancement a matter of heightened importance.

The Hendurabi tourism development project, executed by Makan Company with an investment of 3 trillion toman, is currently underway.

Hormozgan to Establish Sisterhood Agreement With a Kazakh Province



TEHRAN - In a recent development aimed at fostering international cooperation, the Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Tehran announced plans for a sisterhood agreement between Hormozgan Province and a Kazakh province with similar characteristics. The initiative, he stated, is a priority for both nations, and with the cooperation of the Bandar Abbas Chamber of Commerce, it could elevate bilateral relations to new heights.

Ontalap Onalbayev, the Kazakh Ambassador, emphasized the shared determination of the presidents of Iran and Kazakhstan to significantly increase the volume of trade between the two countries during a meeting with the representatives of the Bandar Abbas Chamber of Commerce.

Onalbayev expressed optimism about enhancing ties between Kazakhstan and Iran, particularly Hormozgan Province. He highlighted Kazakhstan's political will to pursue comprehensive relations with Iran, suggesting collaboration in technology transfer and scientific exchanges.

"We are well aware of Hormozgan's economic potential and are committed to expanding our commercial interactions with the province," said Onalbayev. He reiterated that a sisterhood agreement with a Kazakh province resembling Hormozgan in characteristics is a key objective. With support from the Bandar Abbas Chamber, this partnership could achieve unprecedented levels of cooperation.

Describing Hormozgan as a significant and strategic province, Onalbayev revealed that Kazakhstan's Minister of Commerce, accompanied by a trade delegation, is set to visit Iran next month. The itinerary includes exploring Hormozgan's economic capabilities.

During the meeting, Mohammad Ashineh, Vice President of the Bandar Abbas Chamber of Commerce, introduced Hormozgan's economic opportunities to the Kazakh ambassador. "Hormozgan's capacities will undoubtedly be of great interest to Kazakh economic players," he said. Ashineh underscored the mutual potential for comprehensive collaboration between Iran and Kazakhstan, emphasizing the need to leverage opportunities to expand relations across various economic and commercial sectors.



Iran-Eurasia Trade Sees 20% Growth in Nine Months

TEHRAN - The President of the Iranian Confederation of Exports announced a significant 20% growth in Iran's trade with Eurasian countries over the past nine months. This development follows Iran's observer membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a step aimed at strengthening economic ties in the region.

Mohammad Lahooti highlighted that the agreement granting Iran observer status in the EAEU was signed on Thursday, December 27, by the heads of the five member states of the union. Lahooti stated that Iran's export volume to Eurasian countries reached \$1.5 billion during this period, while imports amounted to \$1.6 billion, showcasing a balanced and growing trade relationship.

Lahooti emphasized the significance of regional trade agreements in today's global economy, describing them as vital tools for fostering international trade. He pointed out that such agreements act as two-way bridges between countries, enabling smoother and more advantageous trade exchanges.

He noted Iran's recent strides in regional cooperation, including joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) two years ago and now becoming an observer in the EAEU. These developments, Lahooti asserted, are instrumental in expanding export markets for Iranian goods and services.

Expanding trade with neighboring markets remains a top priority for the Iranian government, particularly under its 14th administration. Lahooti praised the government's proactive measures to enhance trade relations with neighboring countries but stressed that reducing tariffs is a crucial factor in maximizing trade benefits.

"Our main exports consist of raw and semi-processed materials, particularly in petrochemicals and cement, which have relatively low added value. However, if our trading partners export high-value-added goods, it could pose

challenges for our domestic industries," Lahooti cautioned.

He stressed the importance of balancing tariff reductions to avoid turning Iran into an import-driven market. Instead, he advocated for strengthening domestic production capacities and leveraging the EAEU framework to boost exports.

Lahooti underlined the necessity for Iranian businesses to understand global markets better. "Traders must identify products suited to target markets and comply with international standards to enhance export potential," he said. He added that effective market presence requires a deep understanding of the target country's trade laws, consumer behavior, and cultural preferences.

Exporters, he noted, must be equipped with language proficiency and knowledge of trade regulations to navigate foreign markets successfully.

Iran's observer status in the EAEU was formalized during the organization's Supreme Council meeting in Saint Petersburg, attended by Seyed Mohammad Atabak, Iran's Minister of Industry, Mining, and Trade. The agreement was signed along with 17 other documents aimed at enhancing cooperation among member states.

This strategic move is expected to strengthen Iran's position in the Eurasian economic landscape, paving the way for broader trade opportunities and increased regional influence.

The 20% growth in Iran-Eurasia trade marks a promising trend, reflecting Iran's determination to integrate more deeply into regional economic frameworks. By capitalizing on such agreements, the country aims to diversify its trade portfolio, strengthen its industrial base, and foster sustainable economic growth. However, the success of these efforts will depend on careful policy implementation, including tariff management and robust market research by Iranian exporters.

18% Growth in Non-Oil Exports and 5% Increase in Imports Reported



TEHRAN - According to the Public Relations Department of Iran Customs Administration, Faroud Asgari, Deputy Minister of Economy and Head of Iran Customs Administration, announced that non-oil exports during the reported period reached \$43.14 billion, reflecting an 18% increase compared to the same period last year. Meanwhile, the country's imports, including gold ingots, amounted to \$50.889 billion.

Asgari noted that the weight of imports during this period decreased by 3.16% to 27.941 million tons.

In the first nine months of the year, the weight of non-oil exports was recorded at 116.348 million tons, marking a 13.77% increase compared to the same period last year.

The average customs value of each ton of exported goods rose by 3.74% during the nine-month period, reaching \$371.

He also highlighted that 50.7 million tons of petrochemical products worth \$19.7 billion were exported during this time, representing a 33.25% increase in weight and a 32% rise in value.

The Deputy Minister listed the major destinations for Iran's exports in the first nine months of the year: China: \$11 billion; Iraq: \$9.4 billion; United Arab Emirates: \$5.3 billion; Turkey:

\$5.2 billion; Afghanistan: \$1.7 billion; Pakistan: \$1.7 billion; and India: \$1.4 billion.

These seven countries accounted for 82.40% of the total weight and 82.85% of the total value of Iran's non-oil exports.

Regarding imports, Asgari stated that the highest volume of imported goods came from the following countries: United Arab Emirates: \$15.3 billion; China: \$13 billion; Turkey: \$8.9 billion; Germany: \$1.8 billion; India: \$1.1 billion; Russia: \$1.1 billion; and Hong Kong: \$1 billion.

These seven countries contributed 75% of the total weight and 83% of the total value of Iran's imports during this period.

The average customs value of each ton of imported goods was \$1,821, reflecting an 8.4% increase compared to the previous year.

Asgari identified the top three export items as liquefied natural gas (\$6 billion), liquefied propane (\$2.5 billion), and methanol (\$1.9 billion).

The top three imported items during this period were raw gold (\$5.6 billion), animal feed corn (\$2.1 billion), and smartphones (\$1.7 billion).

Iran Drafts Tourism Roadmap for Member States of ACD



TEHRAN - Iran has drafted a tourism roadmap for the member countries of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), as reported by the Public Relations Office of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts.

In a virtual meeting of senior ACD experts, Moslem Shojaei, Head of the Tourism and Culture Committee of the ACD, emphasized the close cultural and historical ties among member states. He highlighted the vast potential for collaboration in various sectors, including tourism, which plays a pivotal role in fostering mutual cooperation.

Shojaei underscored Iran's active participation in ACD's tourism initiatives, citing significant achievements such as the designation of Hamedan as the ACD Tourism Capital in 2018, hosting the Tourism Ministers' Meeting in Tabriz in 2016, and another meeting in Hamedan in 2018. These events, aimed at promoting economic exchanges and encouraging private sector engagement, have strengthened partnerships among tourism stakeholders across member countries.

The Director-General for Foreign Tourism Marketing and Development noted that a key objective for this year is to organize and streamline ACD documentation for the next five years. To this end, Iran has prepared a draft roadmap for tourism development in ACD member states. This draft was finalized during a specialized online meeting on September 16, 2024, with the participation of representatives from over 30 member countries.

The ACD Tourism Roadmap comprises seven primary pillars: Expanding tourism cooperation; Facilitating easy access for tourists; Promoting tourism; Leveraging innovative technologies in tourism services; Empowering human resources in the tourism sector; Ensuring sustainable tourism; and establishing tourism business networks.

Azerbaijan to Reach Nakhchivan via Aras Corridor Sooner



TEHRAN - Mohammadreza Kodkhodazadeh, Deputy Director of the Construction and Development of Transport Infrastructure Company, discussed the latest developments in the Aras Corridor project. He explained that the project, known as the Kalleh to Jolfa route, is part of the broader Aras Corridor. While the term "Aras Corridor" serves as a general description, the official contract refers to the Kalleh-Jolfa route, which is the main focus of the project.

The project spans approximately 107 kilometers, and work is actively underway along this route, with the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters involved in the Aras Corridor. The construction will include 19 tunnels, totaling 8 kilometers in length.

Kodkhodazadeh highlighted one significant challenge in the project: land acquisition and clearance. Since the corridor is the only available route, all land-related facilities and properties must be dealt with, including agricultural lands, orchards, gas and water pipelines, and power poles. The main focus of the work is securing and clearing these lands for the project.

On Azerbaijan's role in the corridor, Kodkhodazadeh mentioned that the Azerbaijani side is responsible for building a bridge connecting Kalleh in Iran and Aq Band in Azerbaijan. The bridge, funded and built by Azerbaijani contractors, will connect to a terminal in Kalleh, which is under construction by Iranian contractors. Once the bridge is completed, vehicles will be able to directly enter the terminal. The terminal covers 8 hectares of land, which has been cleared and handed over to the Road Maintenance Organization for construction.

Operations on the Aras Corridor began nine months ago, and the contract for building the corridor is set for 36 months. So far, there has been over 25% physical progress on the project. Kodkhodazadeh emphasized that the project would be completed on schedule if financial resources are secured. To date, 40 kilometers of the 107-kilometer corridor have been cleared and handed over to the contractor, and by the end of the year, 20 kilometers of the route will be asphalted.

North Korea Launches Toughest U.S. Strategy in Key Party Meeting

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un held a key policy-setting meeting of the country's ruling party last week ahead of the new year, state media KCNA reported on Sunday.

The meeting of party and government officials decided that North Korea would launch the "toughest" strategy to counteract the United States for its security and national interests, the report said, without elaborating. The alliance between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan has expanded to a "nuclear military bloc" and South Korea has become an "anti-communist outpost" for the U.S., the KCNA report added.

"This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how."



Thousands in Georgia Join Human Chains in Anti-Gov't Protests



TBILISI (Dispatches) - Thousands of Georgians formed human chains across the country on Saturday, in support of the European Union membership, marking second month of their daily pro-Europe rallies.

Mass street protests gripped Georgia since November 28, when the ruling Georgian Dream party's increasingly authoritarian government said it will not seek the opening of EU accession talks until 2028.

The protest came a day before a controversial inauguration of Georgian Dream loyalist Mikheil Kavelashvili as the country's new president, after his election was declared "illegitimate" by the current leader Salome Zurbishvili and the pro-Western opposition.

On Saturday afternoon, thousands of demonstrators, waving Georgian and EU flags, lined the Mtkvari River embankment and several bridges in the capital, Tbilisi, forming a kilometres-long human chain, an AFP reporter saw.

"I Want to Hold Your Hand," a hit song by the English rock band the Beatles, echoed from speakers mounted on a car as it drove along the human chain.

Zurbishvili -- at loggerheads with the ruling party -- has joined the demonstrators at Tbilisi's Dry Bridge.

Similar rallies were held across Georgia, including in the cities of Batumi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Poti, Samtredia, Rustavi, Gori, Khashuri, Telavi and Gurjaani, local media reported.

On the Metekhi Bridge in Tbilisi's historic district, protesters displayed a banner reading "Freedom for political prisoners."

"We demand fresh elections," read another banner at Tbilisi's modernist Peace Bridge.

"Everyone must understand that the protests will not stop until all the demands are met," one demonstrator, a 23-year-old international relations student Teimuraz Tsiklauri, told AFP.

Protesters then marched to their usual gathering spot outside parliament. In the first 10 days of protests, riot police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse demonstrators -- some of whom threw fireworks and stones.

Trump Sides With Elon Musk in H-1B Visa Debate



WEST PALM BEACH (Dispatches) - President-elect Donald Trump on Saturday sided with key supporter and billionaire tech CEO Elon Musk in a public dispute over the use of the H-1B visa, saying he fully backs the program for foreign tech workers opposed by some of his supporters.

Trump's remarks followed a series of social media posts from Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, who vowed late Friday to go to "war" to defend the visa program for foreign tech workers.

Trump, who moved to limit the visas' use during his first presidency, told The New York Post on Saturday he was likewise in favor of the visa program.

"I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B. I have used it many times. It's a great program," he was quoted as saying.

Musk, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in South Africa, has held an H-1B visa, and his electric-car company Tesla obtained 724 of the visas this year. H-1B visas are typically for three-year periods, though holders can extend them or apply for green cards.

The altercation was set off earlier this week by far-right activists who criticized Trump's selection of Sriram Krishnan, an Indian American venture capitalist, to be an adviser on artificial intelligence, saying he would have influence on the Trump administration's immigration policies.

At Least 62 Dead, Two Crew Rescued in Fiery South Korea Airliner Crash



SEOUL (Dispatches) - At least 62 people were killed when an airliner veered off the runway and erupted into a fireball as it slammed into a wall at South Korea's Muan International Airport on Sunday, the national fire agency said.

Two people were rescued, the agency said.

The crash occurred as Jeju Air flight 7C2216, carrying 175 passengers and six crew on a flight from the Thai capital Bangkok, was landing shortly after 9 a.m. (0000 GMT) at the airport in the south of the country, South Korea's transport ministry said.

The ministry did not confirm the reports of casualties.

At least 58 bodies have been recovered but that number is not final, another fire official told Reuters.

Two people were found alive and rescue operations were under way, a Muan fire official said. Yonhap news agency said three people had been rescued.

Authorities were working to rescue people in the tail section, an airport official told Reuters shortly after the crash.

Video shared by local media showed the twin-engine aircraft skidding down the runway with no apparent landing gear before slamming into a wall in an explosion of flame and debris. Other photos showed smoke and fire engulfing parts of the plane.

Yonhap cited airport authorities as saying the landing gear may have malfunctioned due to a bird strike.

A passenger texted a relative to say a bird was stuck in the wing, agency News1 reported. The person's final message was, "Should I say my last words?"

Bird strike is among several theories that have not been verified, an official from the transport ministry's aviation department said, adding that the investigation was ongoing.

The passengers included two Thai nationals and the rest are believed to be South Koreans, according to the transportation ministry.

The plane was a Boeing 737-800 jet operated by Jeju Air, which was seeking details of the accident, including its casualties and cause, an airline spokesperson said.

Boeing and the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

All domestic and international flights at Muan airport had been cancelled, Yonhap reported.

South Korean acting President Choi Sang-mok, who was named interim leader of the country on Friday after the previous acting president was impeached amid an ongoing political crisis, ordered all-out rescue efforts, his office said. His chief of staff convened an emergency meeting.

Israel Detains 240 Palestinians Including Medics After Gaza Hospital Raid

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israeli forces detained more than 240 Palestinians including dozens of medical staff from a north Gaza hospital they raided on Friday, including its director, according to the Health Ministry in the enclave and Israel's military.

The Health Ministry said it was concerned for the wellbeing of Hussam Abu Safiya, director of the Kamal Adwan Hospital, as some staff freed by the Israeli military late on Friday said he had been beaten up by soldiers.

The Israeli military said the hospital was being used as a command centre for Hamas military operations and those arrested were suspected militants. It said Abu Safiya had been taken for questioning as he was suspected of being a Hamas operative.

On Friday, Hamas dismissed Israel's assertion that its fighters had operated from the hospital throughout the 15-month-old Gaza war, saying no fighters had been in the hospital. The group had not yet commented on the 240 arrests.

In its statement on Saturday, Hamas urged the U.N. and relevant international agencies to intervene urgently to protect the remaining hospitals and medical facilities in northern Gaza and supply them.

The group also called for U.N. observers to be sent to medical facilities in Gaza to refute the Israeli allegations that they were being used for military purposes.

The raid on the hospital, one of three medical facilities on the northern edge of Gaza, put the last major health facility in the area out of service, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in a post on X.

"WHO is appalled by yesterday's raid. The systematic dismantling of the health system and a siege for over 80 days on



North Gaza puts the lives of the 75,000 Palestinians remaining in the area at risk," it said.

Some patients were evacuated from Kamal Adwan to the Indonesian Hospital, which is not in service, and medics were prevented from joining them there, the Health Ministry said. Other patients and staff were taken to other medical facilities.

The Israeli military said 350 patients and medical personnel had been evacuated prior to the Kamal Adwan operation, while another 95 had been evacuated to the Indonesian Hospital during the operation, in coordination with local health authorities.

Separately, the Gaza Health Ministry said Israeli strikes across the enclave had killed 18 Palestinians on Saturday, at least nine of them in a house in Maghazi camp in central Gaza.

The Israeli military had no immediate comment on the strikes and fatalities.

In the past few months, Israeli forces have pushed people out and razed much of the area around the northern Gaza towns of Jabalia, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya.

Palestinians have accused Israel of carrying out ethnic cleansing by depopulating those areas to create a buffer zone. Israel denies it is doing this, saying it aims to prevent Hamas fighters from regrouping in the areas.

The Israeli military said on Saturday it had begun operating overnight against targets in the Beit Hanoun area, adding that "troops are enabling civilians still in the area to move away for their own safety".

It then ordered residents to leave and head towards southern parts of the Strip, saying rockets had been fired from the area.

It said two rockets fired from north Gaza, including one towards Jerusalem, had been intercepted.

Putin Apologizes to Azerbaijani President for Tragic Plane Crash

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin apologized to his Azerbaijani counterpart for what he called a "tragic incident" following the crash of an Azerbaijani airliner in Kazakhstan that killed 38 people, but stopped short of acknowledging that Moscow was responsible.

Putin's apology came as allegations mounted that the plane had been shot down by Russian air defenses attempting to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya.

An official Kremlin statement issued Saturday said that air defense systems were firing near Grozny airport as the airliner "repeatedly" attempted to land there on Wednesday. It did not explicitly say one of these hit the plane.

The statement said Putin apologized to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev "for the fact that the tragic incident occurred in Russian airspace."

The readout said Russia has launched a criminal probe into the incident, and Azerbaijani state prosecutors have arrived in Grozny to participate. The Kremlin also said that "relevant services" from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are jointly investigating the crash site near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan.

The plane was flying from Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, to Grozny when it turned toward Kazakhstan, hundreds of kilometers (miles) across the Caspian Sea from its intended destination, and crashed while making an attempt to land. There were 29



survivors.

According to a readout of the call provided by Aliyev's press office, the Azerbaijani president told Putin that the plane was subject to "external physical and technical interference," although he also stopped short of blaming Russian air defenses.

Aliyev noted that the plane had multiple holes in its fuselage and that the occupants had sustained injuries "due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight."

He said that a team of international experts had begun probing the incident at Azerbaijan's initiative, but provided no details. Earlier this week, the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General's office confirmed that investigators from Azerbaijan are working in Grozny.

On Friday, a U.S. official and an Azerbaijani minister made separate statements blaming the crash on an external weapon, echoing those made by aviation experts who blamed the crash on Russian air defense systems responding to a Ukrainian attack.

Passengers and crew who survived the crash told Azerbaijani media that they heard loud noises on the aircraft as it was circling over Grozny.

Dmitry Yarov, head of Russia's civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia, said Friday that as the plane was preparing to land in Grozny in deep fog, Ukrainian drones were targeting the city, prompting authorities to close the area to air traffic.

Bulls Hold Off Rival Bucks, End Modest Skid



CHICAGO (Dispatches) - Josh Giddey returned from a four-game absence to record a 23-point, 15-rebound, 10-assist triple-double, and his go-ahead 3-pointer with 1:11 remaining in regulation helped the Chicago Bulls beat the visiting Milwaukee Bucks 116-111 on Saturday.

Giddey had been sidelined by a sprained right ankle but came out strong and did not slow down in his 29 minutes of action. He became the first Bull to register two triple-doubles in a season since Jimmy Butler had a pair during the 2016-17 campaign.

Giddey's 3-pointer with 71 seconds to go gave Chicago a 109-108 lead, with Patrick Williams quickly extending the margin to 111-108 when he swiped the ball from Khriston Middleton on a drive and went coast to coast for a layup.

Brook Lopez responded with a game-tying 3-pointer, capping his 22-point night for Milwaukee, but Coby White put the Bulls ahead for good with a pullup jumper on the ensuing possession. Giddey came up with a rebound on a Middleton miss Milwaukee's next time down, and his subsequent free throws put the game away.

White finished with 22 points and Nikola Vucevic added 23 points, 13 rebounds and five assists to help Chicago snap a three-game losing streak. The Bulls also got 15 points, seven assists and six rebounds from Zach LaVine.

Milwaukee, playing without superstar Giannis Antetokounmpo (illness), welcomed Damian Lillard back to the lineup following a four-game absence.

Lillard scored a game-high 29 points and dished out 12 assists without committing a turnover but went scoreless in the game's final 7:15.

Middleton scored 21 points for the Bucks and went 4-for-6 from 3-point range, while Bobby Portis

finished with 14 points and nine rebounds.

Chicago held a 62-60 edge at the break despite letting Middleton go off for 17 points through the first 24 minutes of action. The Bulls scored the first five points of the third quarter, but Milwaukee later moved in front on a Portis triple with 5:57 remaining in the period.

That was the most either team would lead by for the rest of the third, which ended with the Bucks ahead 84-83.

Meanwhile Jalen Brunson scored nine of his season-high 55 points in overtime and the visiting New York Knicks extended their season-best winning streak to seven games, beating the Washington Wizards 136-132.

Brunson hit two foul shots in overtime to put the Knicks ahead 134-131 with 4.2 seconds left. Malcolm Brogdon made 1 of 2 free throws on the other end before Josh Hart's two foul shots sealed the victory for New York.

Karl-Anthony Towns added 30 points and 14 rebounds for the Knicks, who rallied from an eight-point deficit that they faced at the start of the fourth quarter. Mikal Bridges scored 21 points, and Hart finished with 13 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists.

The Wizards led 119-114 with 1:07 left in regulation before Brunson converted a three-point play. After Washington missed a pair of field-goal attempts, Brunson's floater tied the game at 119 with 11.8 seconds remaining.

The contest went to overtime after Bilal Coulibaly's jumper fell short on Washington's final possession of the fourth quarter and Towns missed a buzzer-beater at the basket.

Bencic Inspires Switzerland to United Cup Win Over France



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Former Olympic champion Belinda Bencic sparked on her return to the elite circuit after her maternity break, leading Switzerland to a 2-1 win over France in the United Cup mixed team tournament.

The 27-year-old beat Chloe Paquet 6-3 6-1 in her first WTA Tour level match since giving birth to daughter Bella in April. She later combined with Dominic Stricker to defeat Elixane Lechemia and Edouard Roger-Vasselin 6-1 7-6(4).

Bencic, who will compete in the Jan. 12-26 Australian Open with a protected ranking, said she was playing at a higher level than she expected.

"The whole comeback went much faster than I anticipated and expected. It's great," said Bencic, who first returned to action in October and played in the Billie Jean King Cup, apart from lower level tournaments.

"I didn't rush things. I was super careful with starting again. I didn't really want to put time pressure on my comeback. I just wanted to see how it goes every day.

"I think I was ready. There's no point in practising more. It's boring, right? It's better to play competitive matches."

Ugo Humbert had earlier pulled France level at 1-1 with a 6-3 7-5 win over Stricker in the Group D contest, battling back from 2-5 down in the second set to prevail and force a mixed doubles rubber at the Ken Rosewall Arena.

In the evening session, Argentina beat Australia 2-1 in Group F as Nadia Podoroska beat Olivia Gadecki 6-2 6-4 before Maria Lourdes Carle and Tomas Martin Etcheverry downed Ellen Perez and Matt Ebden 6-2 6-4.

Alex De Minaur had powered past Etcheverry 6-1 6-4 to make it 1-1 in front of a raucous home crowd.

Canada were also victorious in Group A of the 10 million tournament that features 18 countries, as they defeated Croatia 2-1 in Perth's RAC Arena.

Atalanta Snatch Late Draw at Lazio to Hold Serie A Lead

ROME (Dispatches) - Atalanta kept hold of top spot in Serie A after escaping Lazio with a 1-1 draw which kept Inter Milan at bay but ended their club-record league winning streak at 11 matches.

Marco Brescianini tapped home into an open goal with two minutes remaining to snatch a point from the Stadio Olimpico in Rome, where a passionate crowd thought a big win was coming their way.

Instead Atalanta will end a historic year a point ahead of Inter, who have a game in hand, after the champions briefly drew level on points with a 3-0 win earlier at Cagliari.

Europa League holders Atalanta will lead the league even if Napoli beat Venezia today and draw level on 41 points with Gian Piero Gasperini's side who have a significantly better goal difference than the 2023 champions.

Should two teams finish level at the top of Serie



A come the end of the season they will face off in a single match to decide the destination of the Scudetto, which Atalanta have never won.

"We struggled for long periods in the first half, but we were much better in the second," said Atalanta coach Gasperini.

"This year has been the best year in Atalanta's history, let's hope we can make 2025 the same."

Atalanta showed great character to battle back from Fisayo Dele-Bashiru's 27th-minute goal which came in an intense opening period from Lazio.

The away side were initially blitzed by Lazio, with Marco Carnesecchi making two sensational stops before Matteo Guendouzi curled a great strike off the post in the 11th minute.

Man City's Poor Run Has Made Guardiola Realize How Good They Were



MANCHESTER (Reuters) - Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola said it had sunk in during his team's shocking run of results, the worst stretch in his mostly glittering managerial career, how good they were after winning an unprecedented four straight Premier League titles.

City's 1-1 home draw with Everton on Boxing Day left them down in seventh place, five points off the top four and 14 adrift of leaders Liverpool, who have a game in hand. They have won once in their last 13 games in all competitions.

"That makes me remember how good was the past," he said after Thursday's match. "That's the truth, that has made me realise now what we have done, because sometimes you have injuries, and how many years we were incredibly, incredibly consistent.

"But, yeah, you expect a little bit down. We didn't expect (this) much, and the main reason is having seven, eight important injured players.

"But I see the team, the spirit in training, how focused they are. And we saw (progress in Saturday's) game, we saw it, but unfortunately we could not get the result that we wanted."

Guardiola said this week that City were at risk of missing out on Champions League qualification this season in what would be a shocking turn of events for the reigning champions.

The 53-year-old, who signed a two-year contract extension last month, said frustration over poor results has not affected his desire to steer City back to their previous top form.

"I will not give up. I want to do it. And with the situations that we have, we have to do it," Guardiola said.

"Of course I want it. Everybody wants it. I don't want to disappoint my people, in terms of the club, in terms of the fans, or the people who love this club."

Guardiola shook his head when asked whether his team's slump had made him even more determined to please people.

Djokovic, Kyrgios Relishing Partnership in Brisbane Doubles

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic said teaming up with Nick Kyrgios in the Brisbane International was going to be a fun experience as the 24-times Grand Slam winner arrived in the city on Saturday ahead of the Australian Open tune-up tournament.

The duo had locked horns in the past when Kyrgios labelled Djokovic "boneheaded" and a "tool" but they have since developed a close friendship after the latest of their three meetings, in the 2022 Wimbledon final.

"It's going to be fun," said Djokovic, who is using the tournament to gear up for a tilt at a record-extending 11th Australian Open trophy.

"We texted about it and we spoke earlier in Wimbledon (this year) about playing together when he's back on tour. We've got the first chance right away in the first week of the season."

Kyrgios, who has played only one singles tour match in the last two years due to knee, foot and wrist injuries, joked that it was only natural for the 37-year-old Djokovic to be excited about their partnership.

"Everyone thinks that it's a pleasure playing with him (but) it's actually a pleasure playing with me ... Let's be real," the maverick Australian joked.



"No, look we wanted to play one time at least before either his career ends or mine finishes.

"Whenever you have a team like this it's important that the fans get that. Because that's what tennis is about, having two great personalities and trying to have some fun out there."

The Brisbane event main draw will run from Sunday to Jan. 5 before the Australian Open begins on Jan. 12.

Meanwhile Kyrgios said the recent doping incidents involving Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek were "disgusting" for the sport, as the

Australian slammed authorities on Saturday over what he saw as lenient treatment in their cases.

World number one Sinner failed two drug tests in March for trace amounts of the anabolic androgenic steroid clostebol but was cleared of any wrongdoing by an independent tribunal that accepted his explanation of unintentional contamination.

World number two 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.

"I just think that it's been handled horrifically in our sport. Two world number ones both getting done for doping is disgusting for our sport. It's a horrible look," Kyrgios told reporters in Brisbane, where he is making his injury return.

"The tennis integrity right now, and everyone knows it, but no one wants to speak about it, is awful. It's not okay.

"I know that people don't like when I just speak out about things, be honest about things. For a kid that grew up playing tennis, I enjoyed the competition, I enjoyed playing.

"I can get emotional, I can throw a racket, but that's nothing compared to cheating and taking performance-enhancing drugs. That's ridiculous in my opinion."