

Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baghaei Dismissed Reports of the Evacuation of the Islamic Republic's Embassy Staff in Syria, Emphasizing That the Diplomatic Mission Is Continuing With Its Activities as Before

IRAN NEWS

Iran Has Rejected "Deceptive and Divisive" Remarks by British Foreign Secretary David Lammy Against the Islamic Republic, Saying the UK Tops the List of Countries Stoking Insecurity in the World

2 DOMESTIC



Iran's Trade with EAEU Rises by 11% Amid Observer Membership Prospects

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Syrian Rebels Seize Fourth City, Close in on Homs in Threat to Assad's Rule



> SEE PAGE 3

Central Bank Urged Not to Regulate Cryptocurrencies Due to Sanctions



TEHRAN - In a national event on digital currencies, Abdolnaser Hemmati, former governor of the Central Bank of Iran, stressed the importance of digital economies, highlighting the rapid advancements in neighboring countries. He lamented Iran's inability to keep pace with these developments, citing restrictive policies as a significant obstacle.

Economy Minister Hemmati criticized the negative perception of cryptocurrencies, saying it stifled growth instead of addressing potential threats. He likened this to the filtering of online platforms, a policy that has hindered economic activity. According to Hemmati, the current administration is determined to lift such restrictions, acknowledging the economic damage caused by internet censorship.

On cryptocurrency regulation, Hemmati explained that there is ongoing debate over which entity should oversee the sector—whether the Ministry of Economy or the Central Bank. He noted that while the Central Bank currently handles regulatory aspects of trading tokens, broader governance remains unresolved. He urged for structured management rather than imposing more restrictions, emphasizing that limitations have historically failed.

Hemmati underscored the potential of cryptocurrencies in countering economic sanctions. He described sanctions as unjust measures against Iran's economy, and suggested that digital currencies could help mitigate their impact. "Breaking sanctions through cryptocurrencies is a form of resistance against domination," he said, adding that ignoring their potential is not an option.

To address regulatory challenges, Hemmati proposed forming a national cryptocurrency union. He suggested that such a union could streamline discussions, replacing fragmented feedback from different agencies with a unified approach. Hemmati also expressed support for collaborative efforts to enhance the framework for digital currency use, including exploring their role in financial guarantees and addressing liquidity issues.

Acknowledging the volatility of cryptocurrencies, Hemmati called for transparent communication with the public about the risks involved. He noted that many young Iranians are actively trading in this domain and emphasized the need for proper guidance to avoid financial losses.

Israeli Warplanes Attack Southern Lebanon in Latest Violation of Ceasefire



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Israeli warplanes have flown above Beirut and bombed southern Lebanon in the latest violations of the ceasefire agreement with the Arab country.

Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) said Israeli drones also on Friday flew at a low altitude above Beirut's southern suburb.

The news agency added that Israeli warplanes struck an area near the Litani River between the towns of Yohmor al-Chaqif and Zawtar al-Sharqiyah in the Nabatieh district in southern Lebanon.

Israel bombed more buildings in the town of Odaisseh in the Marjayoun district in southern Lebanon.

On Wednesday, the Israeli regime violated the ceasefire agreement with Lebanon 12 times. It carried out various forms of aggression across the Arab country, including dozens of airstrikes and firing on civilians.

These violations were committed despite the ceasefire agreement with Lebanon that was established last week.

Since the ceasefire was implemented on November 27, Lebanon has documented dozens of violations, amid hopes of an end to the 14 months of aggression by Israel.

According to Lebanon's Health Ministry data, Israeli attacks have killed at least 14 people and left 13 others wounded since the agreement was implemented.



President Calls Students the "Hope of the Nation," Highlights Challenges and Reforms

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian addressed students and faculty at Tehran's Sharif University on Student Day, emphasizing the critical role of students as the nation's future and underscoring the importance of unity, scientific reasoning, and systemic reform to overcome national challenges.

In his address, Pezeshkian reflected on the values of justice and governance advocated in Nahj al-Balagha and by Imam Ali (AS), saying, "Had we adhered to these principles, we wouldn't face many of the crises we do today." He stressed the need for both scientific and faith-based approaches to solving Iran's issues, calling for collective dialogue and action.

Pezeshkian hailed students as key drivers of truth and accountability. "Students are not tied to positions of power; they are freer to speak out and demand justice. This independence allows them to champion truth more effectively," he remarked.

Criticizing a lack of student activism in Iran compared to global protests, particularly regarding injustices in Gaza and Lebanon, Pezeshkian urged Iranian universities to foster a culture of active dissent against oppression.

The president pointed to systemic inefficiencies, particularly in management and resource allocation. He lamented the frequent changes in leadership roles, which he attributed to unclear goals and inadequate long-term planning. "If our path were clear, changing managers wouldn't alter our direction. Unfortunately, every leadership shift disrupts the system, revealing a lack of strategy," he said.

Pezeshkian also criticized the excessive consumption of resources like electricity and gas, calling for reforms to promote fairness and efficiency. "Who benefits more from subsidies—wealthy urbanites or impoverished rural communities? If we seek justice, we must address this question."

The president highlighted the imbalance in energy consumption, particularly in electricity and gas, and called for sustainable solutions. "In no other country do you see such wasteful energy practices. For example, large chandeliers in public spaces are symbols of inefficient consumption," he said.

He argued for empowering the private sector, criticizing policies that disrupt production while sparing government operations. "If factories suffer gas cuts, why not impose the same restrictions on government facilities? We must strengthen production rather than stifle it," he said.

Responding to a student question on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Pezeshkian encouraged open discussion. "Those opposing FATF should explain their reasons. Without transparency and accountability in financial matters, we lose control over our economic resources," he said. He noted that international systems already monitor financial transactions rigorously, highlighting the need for internal reforms to prevent misuse.

The president called for universities to evolve from traditional institutions into centers of problem-solving and long-term vision. "Our universities must transition to third- and fourth-generation models that address societal challenges and anticipate future needs," he stated. He urged students to collaborate with faculty and policymakers to tackle pressing issues.

Pezeshkian emphasized the importance of appointing qualified leaders and creating a merit-based system to drive national progress. "We need leaders with experience, expertise, and public acceptance. It's not easy to find such individuals, but we've made progress and recently finalized key appointments," he said.

The president urged Iranians to embrace unity and reject partisanship. "Left or right, we all share a common goal: building a stronger Iran. Finger-pointing and political bickering won't solve our problems," he warned.

Encouraging students to remain hopeful, he said, "The future belongs to you. It's not for me to dictate what that future looks like; it's yours to shape. Together, we can build a proud, inspiring Iran."

Pezeshkian concluded with a plea for collective effort: "We have the talent and resources to overcome our challenges. With respect for experts, transparency, and shared purpose, we can create a prosperous nation."

IAEA Claims Iran Dramatically Accelerating Uranium Enrichment



LONDON (IRNA) - Iran is dramatically accelerating its enrichment of uranium to up to 60% purity, Reuters news agency has cited Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi.

"Today the agency is announcing that the production capacity is increasing dramatically of the 60% inventory," Reuters quoted Grossi who was speaking on the sidelines of the Manama Dialogue security conference in Bahrain.

He said that Iran's production capacity was set to rise to seven, eight times more, maybe, or even more than the current level of 5-7 kg of uranium enriched to up to 60% purity a month.

Reuters also claimed to have seen a confidential report to IAEA member states, which said Iran had increased enriching uranium to up to 60% at its Natanz and Fordow sites.

The report claimed that Iran had increased the enrichment rate of the material to feed them into two interconnected cascades of advanced IR-6 centrifuges at Fordow.

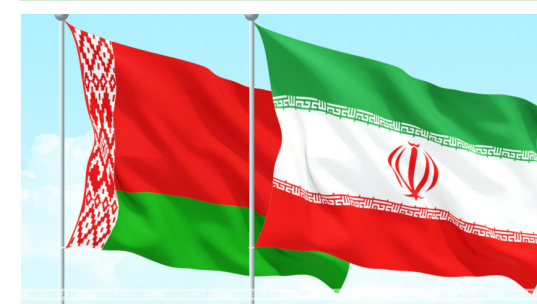
Western countries accuse Iran of trying to build nuclear weapons. Iran rejects that, saying it wants nuclear energy to meet its domestic needs.

In response to a recent anti-Tehran resolution by the IAEA's Board of Governors, Iran has started the activation of the advanced centrifuges.

In a related development, Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), has said that the country's nuclear program is fully transparent and for peaceful purposes.

The Islamic Republic has always demonstrated that it is willing to engage in interaction; meanwhile, the country will not forfeit its rights in the face of pressure, illegitimate behavior, and bullying, the AEOI head said.

Iran Opens Trade Center in Belarus to Boost Bilateral Ties



TEHRAN - In a significant move to enhance trade relations, the Director-General of the Central Asia, Caucasus, and Russia Office at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization announced the opening of an Iranian trade center in Belarus during the Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade's visit to the country.

Speaking on Saturday, Akbar Ghodari highlighted the importance of trade with Belarus, a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. He noted that Iran's pending Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian bloc, soon to be ratified by the Iranian Parliament, will create substantial competitive advantages for Iranian businesses. The geopolitical shifts following the Russia-Ukraine war, including sanctions on Belarus, have also opened new opportunities for Iranian companies.

Ghodari shared that Iran exported approximately \$20 million worth of goods to Belarus in the past year, while imports from Belarus amounted to \$60 million. Key Iranian exports included advanced polymers, powdered paints, light oils, flooring, and agricultural products such as pistachios and kiwis. In return, Belarus supplied Iran with potash fertilizers, lightweight fibers, optical lenses, and polyamide yarns.

He acknowledged that Iran's trade balance with Belarus is currently negative but pointed out the high value-added nature of Iranian exports, with an average value of \$900 per ton compared to the general export average of \$250-300 per ton.

Ghodari announced that the 17th Joint Commission Meeting between Iran and Belarus, chaired by Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade Seyed Mohammad Atabak, will be held from December 10-12 in Belarus. The Iranian delegation will include representatives from parliament, trade organizations, and industries, accompanied by private-sector businesses actively trading with Belarus.

The Iranian trade delegation plans to negotiate further trade agreements and strengthen partnerships in sectors such as petrochemicals, automotive, and agricultural products. Ghodari emphasized the inclusion of private-sector representatives in state visits as a key approach of the current administration.

Iran Warns Threat of Armed Groups Not Limited to Syria

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says the threat of armed groups active in Syria will not be limited to the country and will spread to Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey.

Araqchi was speaking in a joint press conference with his Iraqi and Syrian counterparts Fuad Hussein and Bassam Sabbagh in Baghdad on Friday.

If Syria becomes a safe haven for terrorists and the ground is prepared for the return of terrorist groups, including Daesh, this will pose a major threat to the entire region, he warned.

Pointing to three messages of the tripartite meeting in Baghdad, he said, "The first message is to support the Syrian government and people in the fight against Takfiri terrorist groups."

He expressed confidence that Takfiri terrorist groups are carrying out their attacks as part of an American-Zionist plot, emphasizing, "The role of the Zionists in designing this conspiracy should not be overlooked."

"Iran has always supported the Syrian government and people in their fight against terrorist groups and will continue to do so with all its might and with whatever is needed and requested by the Syrian government," Araqchi pointed out.

The top Iranian diplomat once again warned that terrorism knows no bounds, saying the fight against the scourge should not be limited to borders.



"In order to protect our own security, we must support the security of our neighbors in the fight against terrorism," he pointed out.

He urged a non-discriminatory fight against terrorism, saying the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Nusra Front have been designated as a terrorist group by the United Nations.

Syria has been gripped by foreign-sponsored militancy since March 2011, with Damascus saying the Western states and their regional allies are aiding terrorist groups to wreak havoc in the Arab country.

The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham armed group launched a large-scale attack in Aleppo and Idlib provinces in the northwest of Syria on November 27, seizing several areas. Since then, the Syrian government forces have been engaged in fierce clashes to regain

ground.

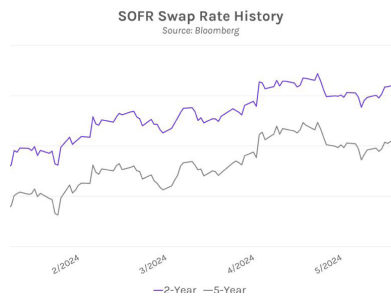
The Iraqi foreign minister condemned the ongoing attacks in Syria by terrorists who are listed as a terrorist group by the UN.

Hussein said his country has been a victim of terrorism and will continue to fight it.

He added that security of Iraq links to security in Syria and other neighboring countries.

Hussein underscored the importance of preventing the spread of war and terrorist attacks to his country, saying the Iraqi armed and security forces as well as fighters of the resistance movement Hashd al-Shaabi and Kurdish Peshmerga are fully prepared to protect the country's territory and people.

IRAN NEWS



Annual Producer Inflation Hits Lowest Level in Seven Years

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Mohammad Reza Farzin, Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, reported during a recent cabinet meeting with the president that, according to data from November 2024, the Producer Price Index (PPI) showed a monthly inflation rate of 2.4% in November.

Farzin stated that annual producer inflation for November also decreased by 1 percentage point compared to October, reaching 27.6%. This figure is one of the lowest annual producer inflation rates recorded in the past seven years, since November 2018. The Central Bank Governor also highlighted that annual consumer inflation (CPI) in November dropped to its lowest level since November 2020.

Strengthening Maritime Fleet Vital for Access to Russian Market



TEHRAN - The Vice President of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce has stressed the necessity of strengthening maritime logistics to access the Russian market. He also highlighted the shortage of rubles for trade with Russia and described Azerbaijan as a major competitor to Iran, particularly in agricultural exports.

Roshnaali Yektay Qarabaei, Vice President of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber, discussed Azerbaijan's barriers to Iran-Russia trade. He stated, "For years, Azerbaijani restrictions have been a significant challenge for Iranian exporters. Azerbaijan competes heavily with Iran in agricultural exports to Russia. Additionally, Azerbaijan's territory has become the main transit route for goods heading to Russia, making it harder for Iranian businesses to compete."

He further explained that Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey as a strong ally, often acts in a discriminatory manner toward its neighbors. This behavior, coupled with diplomatic shortcomings, has seriously impacted Iran's trade relations with Russia. Even Russian officials have acknowledged Azerbaijan's restrictive practices.

The vice president also highlighted Iranian traders' struggle with a shortage of rubles, which complicates transactions. Furthermore, they face delays in receiving necessary approvals from the Central Bank and the Trade Promotion Organization, further impeding business operations.

He argued that Azerbaijan might adopt a more cooperative stance if Iranian reliance on Azerbaijan's transit routes were reduced, especially considering the high fees Azerbaijan imposes on Iranian trucks.

On a positive note, Yektay announced that private sector representatives from Iran and Russia have agreed to directly address and resolve disputes and challenges in their trade relationships through negotiations.

To overcome these challenges, Yektay emphasized the importance of bolstering Iran's maritime fleet. He called for enhancing logistics systems, including RoRo vessels, liner services, and air cargo, to better compete in the Russian market. However, he noted ongoing issues with ship operations and inconsistent pricing that undermine these efforts.

He also highlighted the stark disparity in trade figures, pointing out that Russia conducts \$700 billion in global trade annually, yet Iran's share of exports to Russia stands at a mere \$1 billion. He criticized the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran for its lack of effective support and poor cooperation with business stakeholders.

Moreover, Iranian traders face a shortage of rubles and struggle to secure necessary approvals from the Central Bank and the Trade Promotion Organization. Yektay suggested that reducing reliance on Azerbaijan's transit routes could alleviate some of the friction.

34% Growth in Iran's Foreign Transit



TEHRAN - In a meeting with senior customs managers across the country, Faroud Asgari, the head of Iran's Customs Administration, announced a 34% increase in foreign transit during the first eight months of this year.

Asgari stated that Iran is currently a member of 15 international conventions and is committed to fulfilling their obligations. He highlighted ongoing efforts to enhance the customs infrastructure, including upgrading X-ray equipment for trucks and luggage. Additionally, he emphasized the reform of valuation systems for imported and exported goods as a key priority.

Iran's customs system operates with 8,000 employees across 140 customs offices, ensuring coverage in every province. Out of the 15 free trade zones in the country, seven provide customs services, along with 31 units handling maritime trade and 20 border markets serving local communities.

"As the economic guardians of Iran's borders and a key hub of foreign trade, customs plays a critical role in the nation's economy," Asgari remarked. He further noted that customs ranks as the third-largest source of government revenue. In the last fiscal year, customs contributed 2.42 quadrillion rials to the national treasury, with 1.70 quadrillion rials deposited in the first eight months of the current year.

Regarding the surge in transit, Asgari described it as a growing industry that requires maximum facilitation at entry and exit points. He reported that foreign transit volumes grew significantly, from 10.8 million tons last year to 14.7 million tons during the first eight months of this year, marking a 34% increase.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



Iran's Trade with EAEU Rises by 11% Amid Observer Membership Prospects

TEHRAN - Trade between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) saw an 11% increase during the first nine months of 2024 compared to the same period last year, according to the EAEU's press service.

This announcement, shared with the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) in Moscow on Saturday, comes as Iran prepares to gain observer status in the EAEU, expected to be formalized during the Union's summit in December 2024 (Dey 1403).

The EAEU reported a 9% increase in Iranian exports to its member states during the first nine months of 2024 (January-September) compared to the same timeframe in 2023. Iran's top exports included vegetables, fruits, and nuts, reflecting an 11% rise in the volume of these goods shipped to the EAEU.

Similarly, EAEU exports to Iran experienced a significant boost, particularly in agricultural products, which saw more than a 10% increase compared to the same period in the previous year.

Iran's push to strengthen ties with the EAEU has been a long-term goal, culminating in its bid for observer membership in the bloc. On December 4, Dmitry Volvach, Russia's Deputy Minister of Economic Development, confirmed that Iran's request for observer status had been approved by EAEU deputy prime ministers. The final decision will be made during the EAEU Supreme Council meeting in December 2024.

Volvach described Iran as a critical partner, predicting that observer status will elevate bilateral relations to new heights.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian also commented on this development during a televised address on December 3, noting that observer membership would enable Iran to negotiate reduced or zero tariffs on trade with EAEU member states. "This step will create a new market for Iranian producers and traders, allowing them to compete more effectively," he stated.

Founded in 2014, the Eurasian Economic Union comprises five member states: Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. The bloc also

has observer members, including Uzbekistan, Moldova, and Cuba.

Iran's growing engagement with the EAEU aligns with its broader strategy to diversify trade partnerships and reduce reliance on traditional trading routes. A significant milestone in this relationship was the signing of a free trade agreement (FTA) between Iran and the EAEU in 2023. While the agreement requires ratification by the parliaments of all member states, it promises transformative benefits once fully enacted.

According to the agreement, 87% of Iranian exports to EAEU countries will be exempt from customs duties. In return, EAEU exports to Iran will enjoy similar tariff reductions. However, the deal's implementation remains pending as the parliaments of Iran, Armenia, and Kazakhstan have yet to finalize their approvals.

Mirhadi Seyedi, an international trade advisor at Iran's Trade Development Organization, expressed optimism about the agreement's progress, noting that it has already been ratified by Russia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. "The agreement will come into effect two months after its final ratification, and we hope to see its positive impact on our national trade soon," Seyedi added.

EAEU Trade Minister Andrey Slepnev highlighted the potential for bilateral trade growth, estimating that trade volumes between the EAEU and Iran could reach \$12 billion in the near future. The steady increase in trade over recent years underscores the strong economic complementarities between the two sides.

Iran's observer membership, expected to be granted later this month, will further solidify its role as a strategic partner to the EAEU. With reduced tariffs, expanded market access, and strengthened economic ties, Iran's integration into the Eurasian trade bloc is poised to bring significant benefits for both sides.

As Iran moves closer to full participation in the EAEU, the partnership offers a promising avenue for economic expansion and regional cooperation.

Iran Pursues 20 Free and Preferential Trade Agreements to Boost Foreign Trade



TEHRAN - The Deputy for International Business Development at the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran has announced the implementation and negotiation of 20 free and preferential trade agreements aimed at expanding the country's foreign trade.

Seyed Mohammad Sadegh Ghanadzadeh, Deputy for International Business Development, described Iran's free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union as the country's first multilateral trade deal. He added that this agreement has been approved by the Economic Commission of Parliament and is awaiting final ratification by the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Once ratified by member states, the agreement will come into effect two months later.

Ghanadzadeh highlighted another significant agreement, Iran's free trade deal with Syria. He noted that the revised bill for this agreement has recently been passed by Parliament and is awaiting notification to the government for implementation. Under this agreement, tariffs on 100% of goods traded between the two countries will be reduced to zero, and the domestic production depth requirement has been reduced from 50% to 40%.

Referring to a preferential trade agreement with Indonesia, Ghanadzadeh stated that it has been approved by Iran's Parliament and communicated to the government. The agreement includes 260 items, offering tariff discounts ranging from 10% to 50%. The agreement awaits formal notification by the Indonesian government to become operational.

The Deputy also mentioned that Iran's free trade agreement with

Venezuela is nearly finalized. Over 90% of goods have been agreed upon, and the final meeting with Venezuelan officials is scheduled in the coming weeks. The agreement is expected to be signed by the end of this year.

Regarding Oman, Ghanadzadeh revealed that one round of negotiations on a preferential trade agreement has been completed, with 70% of the documentation agreed upon. A delegation from Oman is set to visit Iran in early January to finalize the details, with the agreement expected to be signed at the joint commission in early February.

He added that although Serbia is part of the European Union, Serbian officials have expressed interest in negotiating a free trade agreement with Iran. Talks are expected to take place in March during the first joint commission meeting between the two countries.

Discussing trade with Pakistan, Ghanadzadeh noted that Iran currently has a preferential trade agreement with Pakistan. Four rounds of negotiations on a free trade agreement have already been held, and discussions are ongoing to finalize the list of goods covered under the agreement.

He also pointed out that a basic preferential trade agreement with Uzbekistan was signed during the Uzbek President's visit to Iran. The initial list of goods under this agreement was finalized and signed during a visit by Uzbekistan's Minister of Industry and Investment. Negotiations on the second and third lists are ongoing and are expected to be completed within one to two months.

OPEC and Non-OPEC Members Extend 39.7m Barrel Production Agreement



TEHRAN - In a significant decision at the 38th meeting of OPEC and non-OPEC oil ministers, held today (Thursday, December 6) via video conference, the coalition agreed to extend the production levels of crude oil. The meeting, which involved members of both organizations, emphasized their ongoing commitment to market stability and long-term transparency in the oil sector.

The ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the "Declaration of Cooperation" (DoC), which was first signed in December 2016 and has been continuously endorsed in subsequent meetings. This agreement is aimed at stabilizing global oil markets through careful, proactive, and preventive measures.

Key decisions taken during the meeting included: Extension of Oil Production Quotas: The total crude oil production of OPEC and non-OPEC countries, as agreed in the 35th OPEC+ ministerial meeting, will be maintained at 39.7 million barrels per day until December 31, 2026. This decision follows the successful approach of previous agreements that prioritized market stability.

Continued Monitoring by JMMC: The OPEC+ Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) was granted continued authority to oversee global oil market conditions, production levels, and member compliance with agreed production cuts. The JMMC will receive support from the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) and the OPEC Secretariat for accurate monitoring.

Regular Ministerial Meetings: Oil and energy ministers of OPEC and non-OPEC countries will meet biannually, in line with OPEC's regular scheduled sessions. In addition, the JMMC will have the authority to call additional meetings as necessary to address market developments.

Monitoring and Accountability: OPEC+ members stressed the importance of full adherence to the agreed production levels. The compliance will be tracked based on data from seven secondary sources, with an emphasis on transparent and accurate reporting. Furthermore, any deviations from agreed production levels will require corrective actions.

Independent Assessments: An evaluation period by three independent sources was extended until November 2026, to provide guidance for future reference production levels in 2027.

Iran Starts Chicken Exports to Russia



TEHRAN - Hossein Mahdizadeh, head of the Poultry, Aquaculture, and Beekeeping Task Force at Iran's Chamber of Commerce, responded to reports on lifting restrictions on chicken exports. Speaking to ILNA, he clarified: "Chicken exports were never banned to begin with. In late November, due to reduced chicken breeding and increased domestic demand, exports faced a temporary halt. However, no official decree prohibiting exports was issued."

Mahdizadeh announced the initiation of Iranian chicken exports to Russia, stating: "The main export markets for Iran's chicken and eggs remain Iraq and Afghanistan. However, chicken exports to Russia are now finalized, and the first shipment is set to be sent in early January."

When asked about the potential monthly volume of exports to Russia, Mahdizadeh noted: "No specific figure has been determined yet. However, obtaining export permits for the Russian market is seen as a significant achievement, surpassing mere tonnage considerations. The volume will depend on surplus production in Iran, as traditional markets remain the priority, with Russia ranked after them."

He also highlighted ongoing exports of Iranian eggs to Russia, Qatar, and Oman, adding: "Kazakhstan has expressed interest in importing Iranian eggs. Efforts are underway to penetrate this market as well."

Mahdizadeh emphasized the government's supportive stance, mentioning: "The government has indicated plans to exempt agricultural and poultry exporters from foreign exchange settlement obligations. It has also assured exporters that no barriers will be imposed on exports, even during domestic shortages, with the domestic market being supplemented through imports. If these commitments are fulfilled, chicken and egg exports are expected to increase significantly."

Pakistan's Imran Khan Threatens Civil Disobedience Movement

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistan's jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan has called on his supporters to hold a rally next week and threatened to start a civil disobedience movement days after his party led a deadly protest march in Islamabad. In a post on X on Thursday, Khan asked supporters to converge on Dec. 13 in the northwestern city of Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province which is ruled by his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. He demanded a judicial probe into the crackdown on the Nov 25 protest march which he said killed at least 12 of his supporters and violence on May 9 last year which killed 8. All arrested political workers should also be released, he said.



IRAN NEWS

Romanian Top Court Annuls Presidential Election Result



BUCHAREST (Dispatches) - Romania's top court annulled an ongoing presidential election after accusations of Russian meddling and ruled on Friday the entire process, which had been due to conclude this weekend, would have to be re-run.

The second round had been scheduled for Sunday and voting has already begun in polling stations abroad. It would have pitted Calin Georgescu, a far-right, pro-Russian candidate, against pro-European Union centrist leader Elena Lasconi.

"The electoral process to elect Romania's president will be fully re-run, and the government will set a new date and ... calendar for the necessary steps," the court said in a statement.

Georgescu scored single-digit numbers in opinion polls before the first round vote on Nov. 24 but then surged to a first-place finish that raised questions over the result.

Georgescu wants to end Romanian support for Ukraine against Russia's invasion. If he won the presidency, it would upend the pro-Western politics of the EU and NATO member, pushing Romania closer to a belt of states in central and Eastern Europe that have powerful populist, Russia-friendly politicians, including Hungary, Slovakia and Austria.

Friday's court ruling plunged the country into institutional chaos.

Current President Klaus Iohannis's term ends on Dec. 21, but he said in a televised address that he would stay in his post until a successor is elected, meaning he will nominate a prime minister following a Dec. 1 parliamentary ballot.

Analysts said the court ruling may erode institutions, trigger street protests and ultimately still endanger the nation's pro-Western course. It was not yet clear if Georgescu would be allowed to take part in the re-run election.

"(The ruling) shows the weaknesses of the Romanian state, the vulnerabilities of institutions that were not able to identify early on in the process the Russian interference," said Laura Stefan, a legal expert at think tank Expert Forum.

Romania's top security council declassified documents on Wednesday that said the country was a target of "aggressive hybrid Russian attacks" during the election period. Russia has denied any interference in Romania's election campaigns.

Ukraine Shows Off New Rocket-Drone in Bid to Boost Long-Range Strikes



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine showed off a new locally-produced "rocket-drone" on Friday which it said could fly 700 km (430 miles) - more than twice the longest range attributed to missiles supplied by Western allies.

The unmanned craft, called "Peklo" - which means hell in Ukrainian - is the second such "rocket drone" unveiled by Kyiv as it tries to increase its ability to strike deep into Russia, which invaded 33 months ago.

The drones could reach speeds of 700 kph, a representative from Ukraine's state arms manufacturer Ukroboronprom told reporters at a ceremony where they were officially handed over to the armed forces.

No other details were provided and no evidence was given of the drone's range or speed. Ukraine has released few details of its arms industry, citing concerns about giving useful information to Moscow.

Ukraine's arms production minister told Reuters in November the "rocket-drone" could be viewed as something akin to a cruise missile, which flies low on a guided path to its target, usually below the speed of sound.



AMMAN (Dispatches) - Syrian rebels said they seized control of the southern city of Daraa on Saturday, the birthplace of a 2011 uprising against President Bashar al-Assad and the fourth city his forces have lost in a week.

Rebel sources said the military agreed to make an orderly withdrawal from Daraa under a deal giving army officials safe passage to the capital Damascus, about 100 km (60 miles) north.

Social media videos showed rebels on motorcycles and others mingling with residents on the streets. People fired shots into the air at the city's main square in celebration, according to the videos.

There was no immediate comment from the military or Assad's government, and Reuters could not independently verify the rebels' claim.

With the fall of Daraa, Assad's forces have surrendered four important centres to the insurgents in a week.

Daraa, which had a population of more than 100,000 before the civil war began 13 years ago, holds symbolic importance as the cradle of the uprising. It is the capital of a province of about 1 million people, bordering Jordan.

Daraa's seizure followed the rebels' claim late on Friday that they had advanced to the edge of the central city of Homs, a key crossroads between the capital and the Mediterranean coast.

Capturing Homs would cut off Damascus from the coastal stronghold of Assad's minority Alawite sect, and from a naval base and air base of his Russian allies there.

"Our forces have liberated the last village on the outskirts of the city of Homs and are now on its walls," the Syrian faction leading the sweeping assault said on the Telegram messaging app.

A coalition of rebel factions that include the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) made a last call on forces loyal to Assad's government in Homs to defect.

Ahead of the rebel advance, thousands of people fled Homs towards the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartus, strongholds of the government, residents and witnesses said.

A U.S.-backed alliance led by Syrian Kurdish fighters captured Deir el-Zor, the government's main foothold in the vast eastern desert, on Friday, three Syrian sources told Reuters.

The rebels seized Aleppo and Hama in the northwest and centre earlier in the lightning offensive that began on Nov. 27.

In another ominous sign for Assad in the east, the Syrian Kurdish force said Islamic State - a jihadist group that imposed martial law under its harsh rule before its defeat by a U.S.-led coalition in 2017 - had taken control of some areas in eastern Syria.

Aron Lund, a fellow at think-tank Century Foundation, said Assad's government was "fighting for their lives at this point".

It was possible the government could hold Homs, "but given the speed at which things have moved so far, I wouldn't count on it", he said on Friday.

Syrian state TV reported Russian-Syrian airstrikes targeting rebel headquarters in the countryside of Hama, Idlib and Aleppo killed at least 200 insurgents on Friday, citing the Russian Coordination Centre in Syria.

A Syrian army source said Iran-backed Hezbollah forces were positioned to bolster government defences in and near Homs.

Syrian state media reported dozens of rebels were killed in the Homs countryside on Friday in an operation by Syrian and Russian air forces, artillery, missiles and armoured vehicles.

Capturing Homs would solidify a chain of powerful positions under the Islamic insurgents' control from Aleppo on the Turkish border in the north to Daraa on the Jordanian border to the south.

Gaining Homs would also increase the rebels' chances of isolating the seat of Assad's regime in Damascus with the ability to block the route northwest from the capital to the sea.

As the rebels pressed their offensive, Russia and Jordan on Friday urged their nationals to leave Syria.

After years locked behind frozen front lines, rebel forces have burst out of their northwestern Idlib bastion to achieve the swiftest battlefield advance by either side since a street uprising against Assad mushroomed into civil war 13 years ago.

Syria's conflict killed more than 305,000 people between 2011 and 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Office said in 2022.

The head of the main rebel faction HTS, Abu Mohammed Al-Golani, vowed in a separate interview with the New York Times published on Friday that the insurgents could end Assad's rule.

"This operation broke the enemy," he said of the rebels' lightning offensive.

EU, Mercosur Heave Free Trade Deal Over the Line

MONTEVIDEO (Dispatches) - The European Union and South America's Mercosur bloc dragged a long-delayed free trade deal over the line on Friday, announcing an agreement - at least in principle - on the pact that has deeply divided nations in Europe.

In a press conference in Montevideo, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and her Mercosur counterparts heralded the deal after 25 years of talks, citing the need for free trade in the face of rising protectionism globally.

"This agreement is not just an economic opportunity, it is a political necessity," von der Leyen said. "I know that strong winds are coming in the opposite direction, towards isolation and fragmentation, but this agreement is our near response."

European officials and proponents of the deal say that it offers a way to reduce reliance on trade with China as well as insulating EU nations from the impact of likely trade tariffs being threatened by U.S. President-elect Donald Trump.

The trade agreement is however just the start of what could be a lengthy endgame to turn it into a reality. It needs to be legalized, translated and then approved by member nations, and could even be blocked, with France the fiercest opponent.

A short press conference in Montevideo itself underscored some of challenges. Only von der Leyen and Uruguayan President Luis Lacalle Pou spoke, with no questions taken after. The presidents of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay sat in silence.

"Only two of the five spoke and no questions were taken. That in itself, speaks volumes," said an EU source closely involved in the talks.



"This came out but it came out, but by the skin of its teeth... At least we have the association agreement, the rest will keep playing out in the coming days."

With negotiators racing against time and pushback against the deal at home, von der Leyen had made a late call to fly in for the summit of Mercosur, which includes farming powerhouses Brazil and Argentina as well as Uruguay and Paraguay.

The agreement saw amendments made to public procurement, auto

trading, and critical minerals exports versus a version agreed in 2019. It also saw an annex about environmental measures to defuse South American fears about EU protectionism.

"After more than two decades, we have concluded negotiations on the agreement between Mercosur and the European Union," Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva wrote on X.

Paraguayan President Santiago Peña acknowledged the deal was an important step but cautioned much work remained to be done. "We have to be very realistic, we have a long way to go," he told Mercosur leaders later on Friday.

France, the most vociferous critic of the deal in the EU, has branded it as "unacceptable". Underscoring the obstacles it now faces, French Trade Minister Sophie Primas pledged to resist its next stages, citing environmental and farming concerns.

European farmers have repeatedly protested against an EU-Mercosur deal that they say would lead to cheap imports of South American commodities, notably beef, that do not meet the EU's green and food safety standards.

European farm lobby Copa-Cogea reiterated its opposition to the deal on Friday and called for protests in Brussels.

Italy said on Thursday there were no conditions for signing off on a deal. Poland said last week it opposed the free trade deal in its current form.

European green groups also broadly oppose the accord. Friends of the Earth calls it a "climate-wrecking" deal.

South Korea's President Apologizes for Martial Law

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol apologized on Saturday for his attempt to impose martial law this week but did not resign, defying intense pressure to step down even from some in his ruling party and only hours ahead of a planned impeachment vote.

Yoon said he would not seek to avoid legal and political responsibility for his decision to declare martial law for the first time in South Korea since 1980. He said the decision was born of desperation.

The speech was the embattled leader's first public appearance since he rescinded the martial law order early on Wednesday, just six hours after it was declared and after parliament defied military and police cordons to vote against the decree.

The move plunged Asia's fourth-largest economy and key U.S. military ally into its greatest political crisis in decades, and threatened to shatter South Korea's reputation as a democratic success story.

"I am very sorry and would like to sincerely apologise to the people who were shocked," Yoon said in a televised address to the nation, promising there would be no second attempt to impose martial law.

"I leave it up to my party to take steps to stabilise the political situation in the future, including the issue of my term in office," he said.

Standing in front of the South Korean flag, Yoon bowed after he finished his brief remarks, staring solemnly into the camera for a moment.

Han Dong-hoon, leader of Yoon's People Power Party (PPP), said after the address that the president was no longer in a position to carry out his public duties and his resignation



was now unavoidable.

On Friday Han said Yoon was a danger to the country and needed to be removed from power, increasing the pressure on Yoon to quit even though PPP members later reaffirmed a formal opposition to his impeachment.

Han met Prime Minister Han Duck-soo on Saturday, local Yonhap News reported. Under the constitution if Yoon resigns or is impeached then the prime minister, who was appointed by Yoon, becomes South Korea's acting president.

If Yoon leaves office before his single five-year term ends in May 2027, the constitution requires a presidential election to be held within 60 days upon his departure.

Lawmakers were scheduled to vote on the main opposition Democratic Party's motion to impeach Yoon. DP leaders said if the motion fails, they plan to revisit it again on Wednesday.

Martial law has been declared more than a dozen times since South Korea was established as a republic in 1948.

But Yoon shocked the nation late on Tuesday when he gave the military sweeping emergency powers in order to combat unspecified threats from "North Korean communist forces", and "to eradicate the shameless pro-North anti-state forces".

He went on to accuse the National Assembly of launching an unprecedented number of impeachment efforts against members of his administration, effectively paralysing key operations, and of handling the budget in a way that undermined the fundamental functions of the government, including public safety.

Yoon has been dogged by personal scandals and strife, an unyielding opposition and rifts within his own party. Once regarded as a tough political survivor he has become increasingly isolated.

The martial law declaration also sent shockwaves around the world and drew rare criticism from senior American officials who had previously praised Yoon as a champion of democracy in Asia. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin scrapped plans to travel to South Korea, two U.S. officials told Reuters on Thursday.

Edwards Pours in 30 as Wolves Trounce Warriors



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Anthony Edwards put up a game-high 30 points, Rudy Gobert and Naz Reid anchored a stingy defense and the Minnesota Timberwolves ran away from the Golden State Warriors for a 107-90 triumph Friday night in San Francisco.

The Timberwolves used a 23-2 second-quarter flurry to erase an early deficit and pave the way to a fourth consecutive win.

The Warriors got within three in the third quarter and early in the fourth, but the visitors responded with suffocating defense and just enough offense in each case to protect their lead.

Edwards logged his sixth 30-plus-point game of the season. He made 11 of his 18 shots, including four of 10 3-point attempts, while also finding time for a game-high nine assists.

Gobert snatched a game-high 11 rebounds to complement 17 points. Reid blocked a pair of shots while also contributing nine points, 10 rebounds and two steals to the cause, helping the Timberwolves win a fifth straight over the Warriors dating back to the 2022-23 season.

Julius Randle added 16 points and nine rebounds, Mike Conley had 13 points and Jaden McDaniels put up 10 points for Minnesota, which outshot the hosts 45.5 percent to 39 percent overall and 33.3 percent to 28.2 percent on 3-point attempts.

Minnesota held a fourth straight opponent to 92 points or fewer, a stretch in which the Timberwolves are allowing just 85.5 points per game.

Stephen Curry returned from a one-game absence to pace the Warriors with 23 points, but he was harassed into 6-for-17 shooting overall and just 3-for-9 from deep.

Golden State's Draymond Green, who missed the previous two games, provided 10 points, a team-high nine rebounds and a team-high six assists. The Warriors hurt themselves with 22 turnovers on the second night of a back-to-back set.

Coming off a career-high, 33-point effort Thursday night in a 99-93 home win over the Houston Rockets,

Jonathan Kuminga chipped in with 13 points for Golden State. Andrew Wiggins had 11 before sitting out most of the second half with a sore ankle.

Meanwhile Johnny Juzang had season highs of 22 points and six 3-pointers and John Collins added 20 points as the Utah Jazz steamrolled the host Portland Trail Blazers 141-99.

Walter Kessler collected 17 rebounds and five blocked shots to go with 13 points as the Jazz broke a five-game losing streak. The win was just the second in 11 games for Utah and just its fifth in 22 games this season.

Keyonte George had 17 points, Collin Sexton registered 16 points and seven assists and Svi Mykhailiuk had 13 points and eight boards for the Jazz, who had a 39-18 edge in fastbreak points.

Jerami Grant and Dalano Banton scored 19 points apiece for Portland, which lost for the seventh time in nine games. Anfernee Simons and Kris Murray added 14 apiece for the Trail Blazers.

The Jazz shot 55.2 percent from the field, including 14 of 32 (43.8 percent) from 3-point range, and held a commanding 61-34 rebounding edge while improving to 3-8 on the road.

Juzang wasn't the only Jazz reserve to make a big contribution. Drew Eubanks had 12 points and nine rebounds, Isaiah Collier also scored 12 points and Brice Sensabaugh had 11 points.

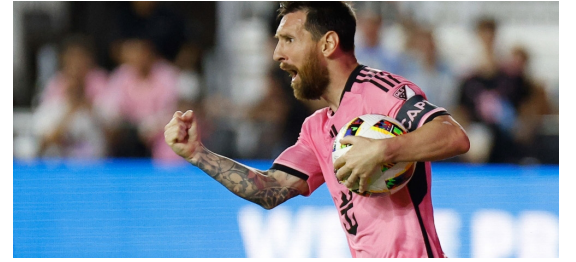
Portland hit just 38.9 percent of its field-goal attempts and was 14 of 47 (29.8 percent) from behind the arc. Shaedon Sharpe added 10 points for the Trail Blazers.

Portland's Robert Williams III (concussion) missed his fifth straight game.

Utah dominated from the start and jumped out to leads of 13-3, 18-5 and 33-17 at the end of the first quarter.

The lead reached 38-20 after Sensabaugh's basket with 9:53 left in the first half and reached 20 for the time on Kessler's dunk with 1:38 to go. It was 67-44 at the break as George led the way with 13 points. Simons had 11 in the half for Portland.

Messi Named MLS MVP After Record-Setting Season



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Lionel Messi was named Major League Soccer's Most Valuable Player on Friday after leading Inter Miami to a record-breaking regular season campaign.

The Argentine superstar was handed the accolade after his performances helped Miami to a record regular season points tally, including the club its first ever Supporters Shield.

The 37-year-old maestro finished the regular season with a league-leading 36 goal contributions after netting 20 goals and 16 assists.

Messi's MVP award comes despite an injury-hit campaign in which he made only 19 appearances.

Miami and Messi's season ultimately fizzled out, when the team suffered a shock first-round defeat in the MLS Cup playoffs.

Messi is the 10th South American to win the MVP, and the fifth from Argentina after Luciano Acosta, Diego Valeri, Guillermo Barros Schelotto, and Christian Gomez.

Messi was presented with the award in a ceremony at Inter's Chase Stadium in Fort Lauderdale alongside Miami Academy players.

"Truly, it is an honor for me to receive this award from all of you," Messi told the Academy players in a video posted on the team's website.

"It's a source of pride to watch you all train. I'm very happy to be here every day.

"I'm happy to be in this city, in this club that is growing ... I invite you to keep fighting and striving for your dreams."

Inter Power Past Parma in Comfortable 3-1 Win



MILAN (Dispatches) - Inter Milan eased to a 3-1 win at home against Parma in Friday's Serie A clash, with Federico Dimarco, Nicolo Barella, and Marcus Thuram all finding the back of the net.

The win kept third-placed Inter on the heels of leaders Napoli, who are just one point ahead with 32 points. Parma are in 12th place with 15 points.

Inter were in action for the first time since their Serie A match against Fiorentina was abandoned last Sunday after midfielder Edoardo Bove collapsed on the pitch and had to be taken to hospital.

On Friday, Dimarco impressed with a deft heel touch to flick the ball past a defender and into the box and then fired in from a tight angle to break the deadlock five minutes before the interval.

The hosts doubled their lead in the 53th minute when Barella latched onto a perfectly timed pass from midfield that slipped behind the Parma defence, giving him ample time to slot the ball into the net.

Parma keeper Zion Suzuki saved his side going further behind when his quick reflex save denied Martinez from scoring with a header.

An unmarked Thuram sealed Inter's win in the 66th minute, volleying a flicked-on corner into the net for their third goal against the team from his city of birth.

"Things are going well but I still have a lot to learn. I'm working with my teammates and I'm following the teachings of Lautaro (Martinez) and (Marko) Arnautovic who are helping me improve," Thuram told DAZN.

"This team (Parma) has a place in my father's heart and for me playing against the yellow and blues is a bit strange but I'm happy to have scored and won this match."

Parma pulled one back in the 81st minute when Inter defender Matteo Darmian attempted to intercept a through ball but accidentally sent it into his own net.

Inter and Martinez were awarded another penalty in the dying moments but the decision was overturned following a VAR review.

Despite the defeat, Parma coach Fabio Pecchia remained optimistic about his team's performance.

"The boys' performance was positive, we knew who we were facing. The attitude was positive, with the desire to do what we usually do," he said.

"In the situations of the first half we could have been a little luckier, but this match is a new step for my boys".

Inter will next travel to Bayer Leverkusen for a Champions League clash on Tuesday.

Murisier Wins Men's World Cup Downhill at Beaver Creek



ZURICH (Dispatches) - Switzerland's Justin Murisier kicked off the speed season in style as he edged pre-race favourite Marco Odermatt to win the men's downhill at the formidable Birds of Prey track in Beaver Creek, Colorado, on Friday for his first World Cup victory.

Murisier clocked a time of one minute, 40.04 seconds to beat fellow Swiss and three-time reigning World Cup overall champion Odermatt by 0.20 seconds. Slovenia's Miha Hrobat finished third for his first World Cup podium.

"It's amazing, I've dreamed of this for many years," said Murisier. "I had so many ... injuries and surgeries that I was almost not dreaming anymore of this, so it's so nice to achieve it now and even more on such a nice course."

Murisier was the third skier out of the starting hut in the opening World Cup downhill race of the season and after setting the early pace in perfect conditions nervously waited at the

bottom for the rest of the 60-man field to challenge.

Odermatt, who also won the downhill, super-G and giant slalom titles last season, threatened Murisier's lead but the Swiss standout was unable to match his compatriot's pace at the bottom and settled for a disappointing runner-up.

It marked another Beaver Creek downhill runner-up finish for Odermatt, who also finished second to Norway's Aleksander Kilde in 2022. Kilde announced in October he would miss the World Cup season due to an ongoing shoulder issue.

Vincent Kriechmayr, who finished second in the downhill at Beaver Creek in 2019, clocked the fastest time in training on Thursday but the Austrian settled for fifth place.

The race was interrupted for nearly 20 minutes after Swiss skier Arnaud Boisset crashed and was tended to before being taken off the mountain on a sled. American Samuel Dupratt, the penultimate competitor, also needed to be taken away on a sled after crashing.

The event marked a World Cup return to the Birds of Prey track for the first time since 2022 as

challenging weather forced the cancellation of last year's event. The action at Beaver Creek resumes on Saturday with a super-G followed by giant slalom on Sunday.

Guardiola Says After Six Titles Comment Draws Mourinho Response



LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said he was only joking when he referred to winning twice as many Premier League titles as Jose Mourinho, after the former Chelsea boss said that he, unlike Guardiola, had won his titles fairly.

The Spaniard also said City were innocent until proven guilty, responding to Mourinho's allusions to their alleged violations of Premier League financial rules from 2009 to 2018, which the club has always denied.

Guardiola, who held up six fingers to Liverpool fans on Sunday, a gesture similar to Mourinho holding up three fingers in 2018 before getting sacked by Manchester United, had made the comment when asked if he could suffer a fate similar to the Portuguese.

"I hope not in my case... He won three, I won six... but we are the same like that," Guardiola answered.

Mourinho responded to Guardiola's comment on Friday, ahead of his team Fenerbahce's clash with Besiktas.

"I won fairly and cleanly... I don't want to win by dealing with 150 court cases," Turkish outlet Hurriyet quoted Mourinho as saying.

City did not immediately respond to a request for comment about Mourinho's statement.

Guardiola, speaking to reporters later on Friday, said he had no bad

intentions when making the comment about Mourinho.

"If I have offended him, I am so sorry. But it was a joke. The fact is he has three and I have six, it is a fact. But the intention was completely fine," he said.

"I think both with our teams - he with Chelsea, myself with Man City - we can sit in the table with Sir Alex Ferguson, Arsene Wenger, right? For the many, many titles we've won. And I'm pretty sure sooner or later they will congratulate us."

Guardiola said there were many people around the world who wanted to see City at the bottom.

"We are innocent until proven as guilty. After that we'll see what happens, but it is what it is," he added.

Mourinho has taken shots at City before, saying in October that he was hoping he could add a fourth Premier League medal to his cabinet if City are stripped of their titles and United, who finished second in 2017-18, are awarded the Premier League trophy.

Chelsea, where Mourinho won his three English top-flight titles in 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2014-15, are being investigated by the Premier League for potential financial rule breaches between 2012 and 2019.