

# IRAN NEWS

Iran Summoned Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Tehran to Strongly Protest the Execution of Six Jailed Iranian Nationals in the Arab Kingdom Over Alleged Drug Trafficking

Iran Says One of Its Airbus Planes That Was Grounded Because of U.S. Sanctions Has Become Airworthy Again Thanks to Efforts by Local Engineers to Repair Or Manufacture Parts Needed to Fix Its Landing Gear

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### Iran Envoy, Italian Official Discuss Cases of Detained Nationals



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian Embassy in Rome says Ambassador Mohammad Reza Sabouri has exchanged views with Italy's Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Riccardo Guariglia about consular issues and the cases of detained nationals.

In a note sent to the IRNA news agency on Thursday, the Embassy said Sabouri held "a friendly meeting" at the Italian foreign Ministry with Guariglia at the invitation of the latter.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed the latest situation of Iranian citizen Mohammad Abedini, who is jailed in Milan over unfounded accusations, as well as the case of Italian national Cecilia Sala, who is imprisoned for violating Iran's law, according to the note.

Sabouri explained at the meeting that relevant Iranian bodies, based on Islamic clemency and humanitarian considerations, have provided Sala with all she needs, including access to the consular section of the Italian diplomatic mission and repeated phone calls with her family.

Tehran, in return, expects the Italian government to expedite the release of Abedini and provide him with necessary comfort items, he added.

Abedini was arrested on December 16 at Milan's Malpensa airport on a US warrant alleging he was involved in the 28 January drone attack against a US military outpost in Jordan.

In a statement, the General Directorate of Foreign Media of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance said Sala travelled to Iran on December 13 on a journalist's visa and was arrested six days later for violating the law of the Islamic Republic.

Sala's case is under investigation and her arrest was carried out in accordance with regulations, the statement read, adding that the Italian Embassy in Tehran has been informed of the matter.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has always welcomed the lawful activities of international journalists in Iran and has protected their legal rights, it emphasized.

### Dozen Settlers Injured as Yemeni Missile Hits Israeli Target



SANAA (Dispatches) - Yemen has launched a missile attack on Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians amid the occupying regime's ongoing war on the besieged Gaza Strip.

Air raid sirens sounded in the center and south of the occupied territories early Friday as a missile crossed into the territories.

Israel's military claimed that the missile "was intercepted", citing reports about shrapnel from the interception that fell in the area of Modi'in.

However, a video shared on social media showed the missile fired from Yemen hitting an Israeli target.

Israel's emergency service provider, Magen David Adom, reported that 12 people required treatment for injuries sustained in the rush to bomb shelters and nine suffered anxiety attacks.

Yemeni officials have not yet commented on the missile operation.

Since the onset of Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip in October 2023, Yemeni forces have carried out scores of operations in support of the war-hit Gazans, striking targets throughout the occupied Palestinian territories, in addition to targeting Israeli ships or vessels heading towards ports in the occupied territories.

Israel launched a genocidal war on Gaza on October 7, 2023 after the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas waged the surprise Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against the occupying entity in response to the Israeli regime's decades-long campaign of bloodletting and devastation against Palestinians.

The regime's bloody onslaught on Gaza has so far killed at least 45,581 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and injured more than 108,438 others. Thousands more are also missing and presumed dead under rubble.



### Pezeshkian Says We Will Continue Path of Gen. Soleimani With Power

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Massoud Pezeshkian says the Islamic Republic will continue the path paved by legendary anti-terror commander General Qasem Soleimani with all its power.

"We will stand for the truth and stay on this path with strength, where we will rub the nose of the cowards to the ground," Pezeshkian told a ceremony in Tehran Thursday to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the martyrdom of Gen. Soleimani.

"We pledge that we will continue the path of Martyr Soleimani with strength and stand against oppression as long as we live," he added.

Gen. Soleimani, the president said, shamed the oppressors with his blood.

"Such a person should have been martyred and showed that America, Israel and Europe, who falsely claim to support humanity and human rights, are liars.

"They are in fact the enemies of humanity. You can see how barbaric they are and what crimes they are committing," he added.

Pezeshkian said the whole goal and effort of Gen. Soleimani was unity and cohesion of the Islamic Ummah.

The top commander, the president said, did not know day and night wherever he was needed to defend the oppressed irrespective of their religion whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan or elsewhere.

The president touched on the enemies' efforts to create divisions in Iran with the help of some anti-revolutionary elements and carry out their conspiracies in the country.

"We must try and not let their conspiracies and sinister plans come to fruition and this will be possible with the help of all dear Iranians," he said.

Pezeshkian said the first step for unity is to obey and support the policies of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, and then move to solve the problems of the Iranian people.

Meanwhile tens of thousands of Iranian people flocked to the southeastern province of Kerman

to pay homage to top anti-terror commander General Qasem Soleimani.

General Soleimani's hometown and burial site hosted a deluge of the legendary commander's lovers and followers from all walks of life and various social strata on Thursday in a cold snowy weather on his fifth martyrdom anniversary.

Commemorations and special events to remember General Soleimani were also held in several other cities, including the capital Tehran.

"In an era when warfare relies on weapons, the mass of bombs, and the number of piles of dead, he became known as the 'Commander of Hearts' because great commanders are not the conquerors of geographically known lands; they are the conquerors of hearts, and that is why their conquests remain forever," Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei wrote on X.

"On the anniversary of the martyrdom of the brave commander of Islam, the pride of the resistance, the soldier of the homeland, and the great hero in the fight against terrorism, Hajj Qasem Soleimani, we honor his memory and salute the souls of all the martyrs who defended the Iranian nation and resisted aggression, terrorism, and occupation," he added.

General Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and their companions were assassinated in a US drone strike authorized by then-US President Donald Trump near the Iraqi capital Baghdad's International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Both commanders were highly revered across West Asia because of their key role in fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

In less than a week after the attack, Iraqi lawmakers approved a bill that required the government to expel all US-led foreign forces from the country.

The IRGC also targeted the US-run Ain al-Asad base in Iraq's western province of Anbar with a wave of missile attacks in retaliation for the assassination of General Soleimani.

### No One Would Negotiate With Iran If Not for Its Missiles

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas

Araqchi has emphasized the significant leverage that Iran's missile capabilities provide in diplomacy with the West, saying without this power, no country would be willing to negotiate with the Islamic Republic over its nuclear energy program.

Araqchi made the remarks in an interview with the semi-official Tasnim news agency on Wednesday.

The minister said diplomacy moves based on power and power-building factors such as missile capabilities.

"I have said many times, and I firmly believe, that had it not been for our missile capabilities, no one would have negotiated with us at all."

In 2015, Iran and the P5+1 group of countries—the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany—signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was ratified in UN Security Council Resolution 2231.

"If they could destroy our nuclear facilities with a military strike, what reason would they have had to negotiate with us?"

"What reason," the Iranian foreign minister asked, "would they have to sit down for over two years of negotiations, and have the US secretary of state or the foreign ministers of the P5+1 meet for 18 days to reach an agreement?"

"The reason was that they lacked the ability to eliminate our facilities militarily," Araqchi stated.

"Our armed forces had generated this capability through missiles that had a deterrent effect."

However, in 2018, then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from the JCPOA and reinstated the anti-Iran sanctions that had been lifted by the agreement, leaving the deal's future in limbo.



In retaliation, the Islamic Republic resorted to several legitimate retaliatory measures, which were in line with its entitlement under the JCPOA.

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

"It was the United States that withdrew from this agreement, and we, considering the US's withdrawal, adjusted our policies and expanded our nuclear program," Araqchi said.

"When the sanctions were reinstated, we naturally suspended our commitments based on the mechanisms outlined in the JCPOA."

"They are not going to make it through force, pressure, and sanctions. They have experienced this; the more sanctions and pressure they impose on Iran, the more resistance Iran will show."

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian foreign minister said that whether or not new negotiations will take place depends on how prepared the other side is.

"We have never, even after the US's withdrawal, and not even until recently under the late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's government and afterward, left the negotiation table."

"We are confident about the peaceful nature of our nuclear program, and that negotiations should result in building trust regarding Iran's nuclear program, with the lifting of sanctions in return."

"This has always been our position, and we negotiated based on this approach and formula in the JCPOA," Araqchi stated.

"The Islamic Republic has never abandoned negotiations."

### Iran's Oil Exports Rebounded Sharply in Second Half of December



LONDON (Dispatches) - The TankerTrackers says Iran's oil exports rose sharply after a slump reported in early December.

Iran ramped up its oil exports in the second half of December after a slump reported earlier in the month, according to an announcement by a major international tanker tracking service.

The TankerTrackers said in a post on its X account on Tuesday that it had traced increasing exports of oil from Iran to other markets in the second half of December.

"Iran's crude oil exports have rebounded sharply after a slower first half of December 2024," it said.

The service did not provide more details or figures.

It came nearly a month after reports suggested that Iranian oil exports had dropped to multi-month lows mainly because of an increase in domestic demand and also because of growing political and military tensions in the region.

Kpler, another major data analytics firm, said in mid-December that Iranian oil exports to China had reached an average of 1.31 million barrels per day (bpd) in November, down 0.524 million bpd from October and the lowest reported in four months.

The company said new US sanctions affecting Iran's oil transport arrangements with Chinese customers had also influenced the shipments.

It said that Iran's floating oil supplies near Singapore and Malaysia had increased in early December because of declining deliveries to China.

Iranian Oil Ministry authorities rejected the figures and said there had been no major change in the volume of exports to China.

Some other sources said a sudden fall of the government in Syria, a major customer of Iranian oil in the past year, had also affected the supplies.

They said developments in Syria had provided the Chinese customers with increased negotiating power on prices because more Iranian oil shipments were being rerouted to China after the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in early December.

Iran has been supplying a bulk of its crude oil to private buyers in China in the past years to avoid US sanctions that restrict deliveries to state buyers.

### Energy Consumption in Iran 2.5 Times the Global Average



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf has highlighted the country's excessive energy consumption, stating that Iran's energy usage is currently more than 2.5 times the global average.

Speaking on the sidelines of a ceremony marking the replacement of streetlights with LED bulbs in Torbat Heydariyeh, Qalibaf pointed out that electricity consumption growth in Iran is currently 5.5 times the rate of production.

He stressed that simply increasing investment would not be enough to address the country's electricity shortages and imbalances. He urged citizens to focus on energy conservation to alleviate the situation.

"We hope that with the implementation of energy-saving initiatives, such as replacing inefficient lights, everyone will contribute to improving energy management and reduce waste," Qalibaf remarked.

The energy-saving initiative, which involves replacing high-energy-consuming streetlights in Khorasan Razavi with energy-efficient LEDs, was officially launched in Torbat Heydariyeh, a city located 150 kilometers south of Mashhad, in the presence of Qalibaf.

During his visit on January 3, to commemorate the martyrs of the 9th of Dey, 1979, Qalibaf also acknowledged the dissatisfaction of the public with the country's management, particularly in the economic sector. "People are right to be upset about the management of the country, especially in terms of the economy," he said.

Qalibaf went on to criticize the country's paradoxical situation, where despite being the world's top oil and gas producer, Iranians face electricity shortages in summer and gas shortages in winter. "This is a clear sign of mismanagement," he explained.

# IRAN NEWS



## Isfahan Province Handicraft Exports Reach \$7.6m in 9 Months

ISFAHAN (IRNA) - A local official in charge of handicraft affairs in Isfahan province has reported that during the past nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21 to December 20, 2024), handicraft exports from Isfahan have reached \$7.6 million. Nourullah Abdollahi said that during the last Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023 - March 20, 2024) \$15 million worth of handicraft products were exported from the province. According to IRNA, out of 602 handicrafts identified worldwide, 299 are found in Iran, and of these, 200 are in the historical and artistic province of Isfahan. This has enabled the province to find a flourishing market in other countries.

## Elite Migration: A Costly Brain Drain



TEHRAN - Minister of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education has described the migration of elites as a "capital-burning" phenomenon for the country. "While the material and scientific loss may not be quantifiable, it signifies the loss of superior national genetics," said the Minister.

Speaking at the closing ceremony of the conference on "Scientific Elite Migration in Contemporary Iran" on Thursday evening, Mohammad Reza Zafarhandi highlighted economic conditions as a major driver of elite migration. "In the medical field, many individuals with stable and successful careers, often at a professional level, still choose to migrate," he remarked.

Zafarhandi pointed out that many doctors migrating to countries like the U.S. and Canada must abandon their medical professions. "Over 80% of them cannot practice medicine there because it is not economically viable for them."

The Minister emphasized the challenges migrant doctors face. "Their qualifications are not recognized, and their age often prevents them from meeting the requirements for local exams. Consequently, they are forced to pursue alternative careers," he said.

He warned that such migration represents a significant waste of resources. "In medicine, we are witnessing a depletion of national assets. Elite migration, in general, amounts to the loss of our country's superior genetic pool."

Zafarhandi argued that the migration of elites isn't solely rooted in economic issues. "Educational inequality and unequal opportunities are among the key factors. If someone qualifies for prestigious universities like Tehran University, their path should be facilitated, not obstructed by unfair educational practices."

He criticized systemic barriers, such as quotas and inequities, which he identified as deterrents to academic fairness and key motivators for migration. "The instability of political conditions and educational injustice prompt individuals to leave," he added.

## Iran and China Strengthen Cooperation on Renewable Energy Development



TEHRAN - In a press briefing on the sidelines of the 14th International Renewable Energy Exhibition, Mohsen Tarzatab, an official from Iran's Ministry of Energy, outlined significant plans to expand renewable energy infrastructure in the country.

Tarzatab announced that under the 14th government's agenda, Iran has set a target to construct 5,000 megawatts of wind power plants in areas such as Khaf and Sistan-Baluchestan, which are known for their wind corridors.

"We plan to initiate the construction of 2,500 megawatts of wind power plants in these regions soon," he stated.

Addressing renewable energy exports, Tarzatab emphasized that under the Electricity Industry Obstacles Removal Act, investors in renewable energy projects are allowed to export 10% of the electricity they produce. "This incentive is provided to all investors entering the renewable energy sector, enabling them to export up to 10% of their installed capacity through existing transmission lines," he explained.

Tarzatab highlighted Iran's expanding collaboration with China in renewable energy. "We have launched multiple initiatives to leverage China's state-of-the-art renewable energy technology. As a global leader in solar and wind energy, China's expertise is invaluable," he said.

He further noted that Iran plans to engage with Chinese manufacturers and private sector entities to enhance cooperation and benefit from their technological advancements.

The Head of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Organization of Iran announced ongoing preparations for an international tender to attract foreign investors to develop renewable energy projects in the country.

"This tender, which will soon open for international participation, has already garnered interest from several countries," Tarzatab revealed.

The move is expected to bolster Iran's renewable energy capacity and strengthen its position in the global renewable energy market.



## Uzbekistan-Iran Trade Reaches \$500 Million

TEHRAN - In a meeting with the Governor of Mazandaran, Uzbek Ambassador Fariduddin Nasriyev emphasized the potential for strengthening trade relations between Mazandaran Province and Uzbekistan.

"We had a productive discussion focused on agricultural trade between Mazandaran and Uzbekistan," Nasriyev stated. He highlighted promising prospects for expanding ties between the two regions and noted significant agreements on exporting and importing agricultural products.

Nasriyev also mentioned a fruitful meeting with local traders and business representatives in Mazandaran. During the discussions, it was agreed that a high-level delegation, led by the Mazandaran Chamber of Commerce, would visit Uzbekistan. Additionally, a formal invitation was extended to the Governor of Mazandaran to visit Uzbekistan.

Reflecting on last year's trade statistics, Nasriyev noted that trade volume between Iran and Uzbekistan reached \$500 million. Following a recent meeting between the presidents of both nations, a mutual agreement was made to double this figure to \$1 billion. To achieve this goal, Nasriyev stressed the importance of enhancing bilateral cooperation.

The ambassador's visit to Mazandaran marks a strategic step toward fostering closer economic ties between the two countries.

Meanwhile in a meeting with Uzbekistan's ambassador to Iran, the Governor of Mazandaran, Mehdi Younesi Rostami, emphasized the province's focus on resolving export challenges as one of its key objectives.

Rostami highlighted the new Uzbek government's approach and the goodwill of Iran's president toward Uzbekistan as opportunities to boost trade relations

with the country.

The governor outlined important provincial plans, noting that increasing international flights and developing Dasht-e-Naz Airport are among the priorities.

He added, "Resolving export obstacles one by one is a significant goal for us. We are not seeking to create further complications or demands. Ensuring a safe and stable environment for the Chamber of Commerce, industries, mines, and agriculture is a serious priority, as it will lead to job creation in Mazandaran."

Nasriyev also stated that agreements were made to enhance relations with the Governor of Mazandaran. He said that it was decided a large trade delegation from Mazandaran, led by the Chamber of Commerce, would visit this country.

Yunesi Rostami, who also chairs the Administrative Council of Mazandaran, stated, "The value of Mazandaran's commercial exports to Uzbekistan currently stands at \$10 million, which is very low. We aim to increase this figure by four to five times."

In conclusion, he stressed, "Our efforts are not limited to enhancing trade and economic exchanges or removing export barriers. We also aim to establish cultural and tourism ties, which will foster mutual job security, income generation, and reduce social harms."

He stated that efforts must be made to overcome obstacles, saying: "Trade exchanges with Uzbekistan must be multiplied, and we aim to develop tourism between the two sides. This is because an increase in tourism leads to greater job security and enhanced income generation."

## Culture Minister Urges Embracing Diversity for National Unity



TEHRAN - The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, emphasized the importance of recognizing and celebrating societal diversity as a cornerstone of unity in Iran. Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Coordination Council of Public Relations in Executive Organizations under the National Reconciliation Government, Salehi Amiri asserted that all attempts at societal homogenization in Iran have been unsuccessful.

"We live in a nation of vast civilizations where uniformity is impossible to achieve," he said. "No one, from the Pahlavi era to the present day, has been able to implement a project of societal uniformity." He referenced historical attempts at cultural assimilation, such as forcing ethnic minorities to abandon their languages and traditions, arguing that such efforts only lead to fragmentation.

Salehi Amiri contrasted Iran's struggles with the examples of countries like Canada and Australia, where diverse ethnicities and religions coexist peacefully. "This demonstrates that cohesion and diversity are directly related," he noted. "Unity is achieved in societies that recognize diversity, not through rigid control or suppression."

He lamented the failure of educational and cultural institutions to instill a sense of national pride and belonging in younger generations. "Patriotism should evoke deep emotions," he said, "but today, we see people leaving the country in search of opportunities elsewhere, reflecting weakened national identity and pride."

Highlighting Iran's extensive cultural heritage, Salehi Amiri pointed out that the country is home to 40,000 nationally registered historical sites and 28 UNESCO-listed landmarks. "No other nation has such untapped potential within its borders," he said, describing Iran as a unique hub of cultural resistance and resilience.

Salehi Amiri emphasized the need to educate young people about Iran's cultural and historical achievements. "Our schools and universities must teach students that they live in a land that inspires admiration worldwide," he said. "This is not just a responsibility of the government but a collective effort to foster a deeper connection

with our heritage."

The minister also provided a historical overview of governance and ideological shifts in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. He characterized the initial post-revolutionary decade as dominated by the values of sacrifice and resistance, while the subsequent years saw a focus on economic and political development. However, he criticized the lack of coherent governance during the fourth decade, describing it as a period of ideological stagnation.

Salehi Amiri highlighted the current government's focus on reconciliation and inclusivity, stating that the "reconciliation discourse" seeks to create a broad umbrella under which all ethnicities, minorities, and social groups can coexist. "We must move beyond false dichotomies and recognize that not everyone in a society can think, dress, or act the same," he stressed.

The minister identified unresolved issues in Iran's national discourse and governance, calling for a shift from minor disputes to addressing larger, systemic challenges. "Without resolving these fundamental issues, we risk becoming a fragmented society incapable of achieving its goals," he warned.

Salehi Amiri also underscored the importance of preserving the Persian language as a vital element of Iranian identity. "Persian has endured through centuries, resisting crises that have affected other languages. It has been a unifying force for our culture," he said.

In his concluding remarks, Salehi Amiri urged journalists, educators, and public officials to prioritize fostering a sense of belonging and pride in Iran among younger generations. "When someone leaves this country, it should feel like a loss, not a relief," he said, calling for collective action to reverse the trend of emigration.

The Coordination Council of Public Relations in Executive Organizations held its inaugural session on January 1 at the Summit Conference Hall in Tehran. The meeting brought together officials and experts to discuss strategies for fostering national unity and addressing the challenges of modern governance.

## Makran Coasts to Become a Major Tourism Hub



TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Ali Darabi, has stated that the Makran coasts and Chabahar, as the center of Iran's largest oceanic port, will soon become one of the most important tourism hubs in Iran and the region. This development aligns with the special attention given by officials, especially the policies and directives of the Supreme Leader of Iran regarding the expansion of maritime-centered growth.

Darabi explained that the historic "Tis" port in Chabahar, in addition to its commercial significance, is home to ancient and important archaeological sites. It has long been considered one of the top tourist destinations in Sistan and Baluchestan province and Iran. The port is set to be internationally recognized as part of efforts to highlight its ancient heritage and promote maritime development.

He added that Chabahar and the entire Makran coastline are poised to become key tourism centers in Iran. "We have proposed the historic 'Tis' port for global recognition due to its historical and archaeological significance," Darabi remarked.

The Deputy Minister continued by highlighting Chabahar's rapid growth and development. As per the plans outlined for the 7th Development Program, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts aims to increase the number of museums in Iran from 800 to 1,000. "The private sector is expected to build 100 hotels annually across the country, with support from the Ministry through facilitation of administrative, banking processes, and offering loans," he added.

Furthermore, Darabi emphasized that the goal is to increase the number of tourists to 15 million, which would lead to further development in the sector.

Darabi also pointed out the necessity for a focused approach toward Chabahar's development in the areas of cultural heritage, tourism, and handicrafts. During a visit to Chabahar's museum and tourism facilities, he stated that the city requires special attention, budget allocation, and equipment to improve in these areas.

He noted that the first National Symposium on Revisiting Conservation and Restoration Experiences at National and Global Heritage Sites offers a unique opportunity to showcase Chabahar as Iran's largest oceanic port. "I hope everyone enjoys the beauty and potential of this land and becomes familiar with its rich culture and history," he said.

## Iran's Medicinal Plant Exports to U.S. Still Under Sanctions



TEHRAN - Mohammad Ali Rezaei, Head of the Agriculture Commission at the Iran Chamber of Commerce, announced annual medicinal plant exports from Iran totaling \$650 million. Approximately \$320 million of this figure is attributed to saffron, predominantly sold in European, Chinese, Russian, and Indian markets.

Rezaei noted that since medicinal plants, including saffron, are classified as food products, their export is not subject to sanctions, except for shipments to the United States. He added that Iranian-branded and packaged exports are feasible, but like other Iranian goods, medicinal plant exports face challenges in currency repatriation. This issue is particularly pronounced in trade with Europe.

To bolster exports, Rezaei emphasized the need to register medicinal plants, assigning identification codes to cultivation areas. Farmers should be trained in proper harvesting, drying, and storage techniques to ensure products remain uncontaminated. He highlighted that cold plasma systems, which eliminate microbial contamination without damaging the plant, are available in Iran but are cost-prohibitive for producers.

Rezaei also discussed the state of Iranian pistachio exports, revealing that challenges related to exporting to Europe are being resolved. Iran has improved its packaging and storage standards to prevent further suspensions. While exports continue, they must comply with strict conditions, such as undergoing two rounds of certification and limiting packaging sizes to 10 kilograms.

He attributed these export challenges to non-reputable exporters sending substandard products abroad, stressing that established exporters prioritize maintaining market integrity.

## Romania and Bulgaria Become Full Members of EU's Schengen Zone

BUCHAREST (Dispatches) - Romania and Bulgaria scrapped land border controls to become full members of the European Union's Schengen free-travel area on Wednesday, joining an expanded bloc of countries whose residents can travel without passport checks. Fireworks lit the sky at a crossing close to the Bulgarian border town of Ruse just after the stroke of midnight as the Bulgarian and Romanian interior ministers symbolically raised a barrier on the Friendship Bridge straddling the Danube River. The crossing is a major transit point for international trade, and bottlenecks are common.

"This is a historic moment," said Bulgarian Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev. "From Greece in the south to Finland to the North and all the way to Portugal to the West - you can travel without borders."



## Venezuela Announces \$100,000 Reward for Exiled Gonzalez Urrutia



CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuelan authorities announced they are offering \$100,000 for information leading to the capture of opposition candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, who has left exile in Spain and is on his way to Argentina.

Gonzalez Urrutia, who insists he beat Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro at the polls in July, was expected in Buenos Aires in the coming hours, a presidential source there told AFP.

"Our tour of Latin America begins. First stop: Argentina," wrote Gonzalez Urrutia on X, sharing a statement that said he will meet with Argentine leader Javier Milei on Saturday, and calling on Venezuelans to rally in the central Plaza de Mayo.

The 75-year-old has pledged to return to his country to be sworn in as president on January 10 in place of Maduro, who is set to take the oath of office that day with the backing of the loyal military.

Venezuelan police published on social media Thursday a photo of the previously little-known ex-diplomat with the word "wanted" under the image.

Judicial sources confirmed to AFP that the poster will be displayed at airports and police checkpoints across the country.

Gonzalez Urrutia fled to Spain in September after Maduro claimed victory in the troubled, economically distressed country's July 28 election and cracked down hard on dissent.

Spain granted him asylum on December 20 after Venezuela announced conspiracy and racketeering charges against him.

Venezuela declared Maduro the winner of a third six-year term in the July vote but the opposition cried foul, saying it has detailed polling station numbers that show Gonzalez Urrutia won handily.

## Trump Can Be Decisive in Helping Stop Russia's Putin



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Thursday that U.S. President-elect Donald Trump could be decisive in the outcome of the 34-month-old war with Russia and help stop Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin.

Zelenskyy, facing advances by Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, said in an interview with Ukrainian television that Trump had told him he would be one of the first to visit Washington after the presidential inauguration this month.

Zelenskyy also said a priority was to stabilize the front line early in the new year. Putin, he said, feared negotiations as they would be tantamount to a defeat for Russia.

"Trump can be decisive. For us, this is the most important thing," Zelenskyy said in a televised interview.

"His qualities are indeed there," Zelenskyy said of Trump. "He can be decisive in this war. He is capable of stopping Putin or, to put it more fairly, help us stop Putin. He is able to do this."

Zelenskyy has said that achieving a just peace for Ukraine meant receiving solid security guarantees from its allies, joining the European Union and receiving an invitation to join the NATO alliance, a notion rejected by Moscow.

"Naturally, any security guarantees without the United States are weak security guarantees for Ukraine," he said.

## New Orleans Truck Attacker Acted Alone But Inspired by ISIS



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - A U.S. army veteran motivated by loyalty to the jihadist Islamic State group likely acted alone when he killed and injured dozens in a truck attack against a New Orleans crowd of New Year revelers, the FBI said Thursday. Despite initial concerns that Shamsud-Din Jabbar had accomplices still on the run, preliminary investigations show he likely was alone, FBI deputy assistant director Christopher Raia said.

"We do not assess at this point that anyone else was involved," Raia said.

However, new evidence emerged detailing the extent of the U.S. citizen's loyalty to the Islamic State group and his plans to cause mayhem in the attack, which killed 14 and injured more than 30 in the French Quarter district, ending only after he was shot by police.

"He was 100 percent inspired by ISIS," Raia said, using an alternative name for the international jihadist group.

Just before the attack, in which 42-year-old Jabbar slammed a rented Ford F-150 pickup into the crowd, he "posted several videos to an online platform proclaiming his support for ISIS," Raia said.

He also carried a black ISIS flag on the back of the vehicle.

In one video, Jabbar "explains he originally planned to harm his family and friends, but was concerned the news headlines would not focus on the 'war between the believers and the disbelievers.'"

Raia said that Jabbar had planted two homemade bombs in drinks coolers in French Quarter streets. The bombs were viable but were made safe in time, he said.

Raia clarified that the total death toll of 15 from Wednesday's carnage included 14 victims and Jabbar himself, who died after wounding two police officers in an exchange of gunfire.

The New Orleans attack coincided with a high-profile incident in Las Vegas a few hours later where a Tesla Cybertruck blew up outside a hotel owned by US President-elect Donald Trump.

One person was killed and seven were injured in the incident. It remains unclear whether it was accidental or deliberate. U.S. media quoted law enforcement sources as saying the person who rented the Tesla truck was a current US Army special forces member.

In another echo of the New Orleans incident, the vehicles in both cases had been rented through the car-sharing app Turo. Raia said: "At this point, there is no definitive link between the attack here in New Orleans and the one in Las Vegas."

In New Orleans' French Quarter, cleaners continued to clear the debris. Bourbon Street, at the heart of the area's famous nightlife and jazz establishments, remained closed to the public.

After a 24-hour delay due to the violence, the city was gearing up to stage the major Sugar Bowl college football game in the Superdome later Thursday. The stadium will also host the NFL's Super Bowl championship game in February.

"We believe we can absolutely provide a safe and wonderful environment today, and hold the Super Bowl and all of our activities," New Orleans Police Superintendent Anne Kirkpatrick said.

The terrifying incident came three weeks before Trump takes over as president.

The Republican has used the mayhem to push his anti-immigrant agenda, despite the slain killer being a U.S.-born citizen. Overnight, Trump again took to social media to link the attack to "OPEN BORDERS."

In a lengthy rant, he berated law enforcement bodies for "attacking their political opponent, ME, rather than focusing on protecting Americans from the outside and inside violent SCUM."

## Israeli Airstrikes Kill Gaza Head of Police, 67 Others

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Israeli airstrikes killed at least 68 Palestinians across the Gaza Strip on Thursday, including at a tent camp where the head of the enclave's Hamas-controlled police force, his deputy and nine displaced people died, Gaza authorities said.

Israel said the deputy was the head of Palestinian militant group Hamas' security forces in southern Gaza.

The attack occurred in the Al-Mawasi district, which was designated as a humanitarian zone for civilians earlier in the 14-month-old war between Israel and Hamas, which rules Gaza.

The director general of Gaza's police department, Mahmoud Salah, and his aide, Hussam Shahwan, who were checking on residents of the camp, were killed in the strike, according to the Hamas-run Gaza interior ministry.

"By committing the crime of assassinating the director general of police in the Gaza Strip, the occupation is insisting on spreading chaos in the (enclave) and deepening the human suffering of citizens," it added in a statement.

The Israeli military said it had conducted an intelligence-based strike in Al-Mawasi, just west of the city of Khan Younis, and eliminated Shahwan, saying he led Hamas forces in south Gaza. It made no mention of Salah's death.

"As the year begins, we got ... another reminder that there is no humanitarian zone let alone a safe zone" in Gaza, Philippe Lazzarini, head



of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA, said in a post on X. "Everyday without a ceasefire will bring more tragedy."

Thursday's death toll was among the highest of recent weeks.

Other Israeli airstrikes killed at least 57 Palestinians, including six in the interior ministry headquarters in Khan Younis and others in north Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp, the Shati (Beach) camp, central Gaza's Maghazi camp and Gaza City.

Israel's military said it had targeted Hamas militants who intelligence indicated were operating in a command and control centre "embedded inside the Khan Younis municipality building in the Humanitarian Area".

Asked about Thursday's reported death toll, a spokesperson for the Israeli military said it followed international law in waging the war in Gaza and that it took "feasible precautions to mitigate civilian harm".

The Israeli military has accused Gaza militants of using built-up residential areas for cover. Hamas denies this.

Hamas' smaller ally Islamic Jihad said it fired rockets into the southern Israeli kibbutz of Holit near Gaza on Thursday. The Israeli military said it intercepted one projectile in the area that had crossed from southern Gaza.

Israel has killed more than 45,500 Palestinians in the war, according to Gaza's health ministry. Most of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced and much of the tiny, heavily built-up coastal territory is in ruins.

## Gunman Kills 12 in Montenegro Small-Town Rampage

CETINJE (Dispatches) - A man shot dead 12 people in a rampage in a small town in Montenegro before turning his gun on himself early on Thursday, authorities said, in one of the Balkan nation's worst mass killings.

The attacker, named by police as 45-year-old Aco Martinovic, initially shot dead four people at a restaurant in Cetinje on Wednesday afternoon after an altercation.

He then shot dead eight other people, including two children and his sister, police director Lazar Scepanovic told a press conference in the capital Podgorica.

"All the victims were his godfathers, friends ... he killed his own sister, with whom he had good relations and with whom he spent New Year's Eve," Scepanovic said.

He said police initially had misleading information about the site of the first shooting and went to a place 3 km (two miles) away.

It was the second mass shooting in less than three years in the same town, 38 km (24 miles) west of Podgorica. In August 2022, a gunman killed 10 people, including two children, before being shot dead.

After being cornered by officers near his home in the town, Martinovic tried to kill himself, then died of his wounds on the way to hospital in the early hours of Thursday, Scepanovic said.

"When commanded by officers to drop his weapon, he turned the gun against his body and fired," he said.

Police found an illegally owned handgun and 90 more rounds on Martinovic's body. There were few people on the streets in Cetinje on Thursday and all public venues were closed.

"It was dreadful. Such uncertainty, such fear among all the families in Cetinje. You didn't dare look through the window," 43-year-old resident Slavica Vusurovic said.



"When I ... saw it on TV, I started crying," said Sloba Matic, 64.

Later on Thursday, in Podgorica and most other Montenegrin cities, scores of people gathered in silence to light candles to commemorate the victims.

Sanja Jovanovic, a middle-aged woman from Podgorica, said she was angry over the government's unwillingness to accept its share of responsibility for the violence that permeates the society.

"The society is in a crisis," Jovanovic said.

Police said Martinovic had been drinking heavily.

In 2022, police found two airguns and a homemade bomb at his home. He was sentenced to three months in jail but appealed and court proceedings were still ongoing at the time of the shooting.

He was also ordered to undergo psychiatric evaluation.

Four other people suffered life-threatening wounds during Wednesday's rampage, and one was in a critical condition, said Aleksandar Radovic, director of the Clinical Centre in Podgorica.

Prime Minister Milojko Spajic declared three days of national mourning and scheduled a session of the National Security Council for Friday to discuss the aftermath of the shooting and how to restrict illegal weapons, the government said.

The proposals include tighter criteria for owning and carrying firearms, and recruitment of more police officers.

However, stricter gun controls would likely face stiff opposition. All the Western Balkan countries - Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia - are awash with weapons, mostly from the wars of the 1990s.

## Djokovic Continues Monfils Dominance to Reach Brisbane Quarters



BRISBANE (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic's bid for a 100th ATP Tour title gained momentum as the Serb thumped fellow veteran Gael Monfils 6-3 6-3 to reach the Brisbane International quarter-finals. The 37-year-old, who is looking to join Roger Federer (103) and Jimmy Connors (109) as players who have won at least a century of titles, breezed through the first set on the back of a solitary break in the fourth game. Djokovic never looked back from there as he powered through the second set to extend his win-loss record against the French player to 20-0, nearly two decades after their first encounter in the opening round of the 2005 U.S. Open. "We've been playing for many years," said Djokovic, who will be gunning for an 11th Australian Open title when the season's opening Grand Slam begins later this month. "I've known Gael since I was 15. We played quite a bit at juniors and on Tour and have had a good score against him but we have had some incredible battles. He's one of the best, if not the best, athlete in our sport over the years." Djokovic will step up his preparations for a tilt at a 25th Grand Slam title at the Jan. 12-26 Australian Open when he takes on big-serving American Reilly Opelka in the next round. Opelka got past Matteo Arnaldi 7-6(9) 7-6(4) while Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard, another player who can blow away his opponents with booming serves, upset fourth seed Frances Tiafoe 6-4 7-6(4). Czech 19-year-old Jakub Mensik earlier mowed down Serbian lucky loser Dusan Lajovic 6-3 6-2. In the women's event, No. 1 seed Aryna Sabalenka overcame a spirited challenge from 15th-seeded Yulia

Putintseva to record a 7-6 (2), 6-4 win in a Round of 16 match at the Brisbane International in Australia. Sabalenka, of Belarus, rallied from down 5-3 in the first set and finished with six aces to dispatch the Russian-born Kazakhstani in 1 hour and 49 minutes. While Sabalenka advanced, third-seeded Daria Kasatkina of Russia and 10th-seeded Victoria Azarenka of Belarus were not as fortunate. Polina Kudrmetova of Russia posted a 1-6, 6-2, 7-5 win over Kasatkina and Czech Marie Bouzkova secured a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Azarenka. Eighth-seeded Russian Mirra Andreeva dispatched Czech Linda Noskova, the No. 12 seed, 6-3, 6-0 in 63 minutes. Also on Thursday, Ons Jabeur of Tunisia collected a 6-4, 1-6, 6-4 win over Elina Avanesyan of Armenia and Anhelina Kalinina of the Ukraine cruised to a 6-1, 6-4 win over Yuan Yue of China. Ashlyn Kreuger seized a 7-5, 6-0 victory over Suzan Lamens of the Netherlands and Australian Kimberly Birrell notched a 7-6 (2), 6-2 win over Anastasia Potapova of Russia. Top-seeded Madison Keys cruised into the quarterfinals with a 6-1, 6-2 win over Jaqueline Cristian of Romania in Auckland, New Zealand. Keys fired three aces and took advantage of five double faults to dispatch Cristian in 67 minutes and set up a match versus fifth-seeded Clara Tauson of Denmark. Fellow Americans Hailey Baptiste, Alycia Parks and Robin Montgomery also were victorious. Baptiste overcame a first-set stumble to notch a 5-7, 7-5, 7-6 (6) win over Jodie Burrage of Great Britain, Parks secured a 7-5, 6-3 victory over Greet Minnen of Belgium and Montgomery breezed to a 6-2, 6-2 triumph over Nao Hibino of Japan.

## Dumfries Double Fires Inter to Super Cup Semis Win Over Atalanta



RIYADH (Dispatches) - A second-half double from Denzel Dumfries earned Inter Milan a 2-0 win over Atalanta in Riyadh on Thursday to reach the Italian Super Cup final, where the Serie A champions will aim to win the trophy for the fourth successive time. In Monday's final, Inter will meet the winner of F second semi-final between Juventus and AC Milan. While Inter manager Simone Inzaghi went with his strongest available 11, Atalanta's Gian Piero Gasperini, already without top scorer Mateo Retegui through injury, surprisingly left both Ademola Lookman and Charles De Ketelaere on the bench. The opening half ended scoreless, mostly thanks to Atalanta keeper Marco Carnesecchi, who first denied Lautaro Martinez with a reflex save from close range. Carnesecchi then pulled off a double save, parrying away a powerful Martinez shot, then quickly getting back on his feet to stop Federico Dimarco's effort from the rebound. Atalanta had one decent chance in the first half, thanks to a poor headed clearance attempt from Inter defender Alessandro Bastoni which left Giorgio Scalvini with a header from close range that he sent straight at keeper Yann Sommer. After the break, Inter forced a couple of early corner kicks, and took the lead when the ball came to Dumfries in the six-yard box. With his back to goal the Dutchman controlled with a header before firing an overhead shot into the net. Gasperini responded by sending on Lookman and De Ketelaere, along with Ederson, but it was Inter who found the second goal on the counter just when Atalanta began to look dangerous.

## Rice, Ballo Lead Indiana Past Rutgers

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Myles Rice scored 21 points and Indiana overcame the loss of leading scorer Malik Reneau to shoot its way past Rutgers 84-74 in a wild game in Bloomington, Ind. Reneau injured his right knee 29 seconds into the game and subbed out in favor of Oumar Ballo, who missed Indiana's previous game for an undisclosed reason. Ballo answered the bell and compiled 17 points, 12 rebounds and three blocks. Mackenzie Mgbako added 16 points and seven rebounds, Trey Galloway had 11 points and Luke Goode scored nine for the Hoosiers (11-3, 2-1 Big Ten). Rutgers (8-6, 1-2) played without star freshman Dylan Harper, the fourth-leading scorer in the country, due to an illness. Fellow freshman Ace Bailey picked up the slack with a season-high 39 points on 16-of-29 shooting and eight rebounds. None of his teammates scored more than Jamichael Davis's nine. Indiana made 12 of 27 3-point attempts one game after shooting 1-for-20 from beyond the arc. The Hoosiers outrebounded Rutgers 48-36 and earned a 34-8 edge in second-chance points. With Rutgers trailing 16-10, Bailey singlehandedly tied it back up. He hit a long 2-point, a difficult fadeaway and another jumper while spinning in the paint. That ignited a 13-0 Rutgers run to give the Scarlet Knights their largest lead about 10 minutes into the game. Bailey accounted for 11 of those points. Indiana strung together a 10-0 run to flip a five-point deficit to a 34-29 lead with 4:07 before halftime. Bailey responded with a three-point play to get to 19 points in the half.



On the final sequence of the half, Bailey stuffed Rice's layup off the backboard and the ball careened toward midcourt. Anthony Leal collected it and sent up a wild 3-pointer at the buzzer that banked in to make it 41-34 Hoosiers. Mgbako drained a 3-pointer to spark a 9-0 run that gave Indiana its largest lead at 56-38 with 12:35 to play. Lathan Sommerville's two three-point plays anchored an 8-0 Rutgers spurt to cut it to 10. Bailey added two more threes to close the Scarlet Knights within 58-52, but Rutgers played a zone that was weak against Indiana's 3-point shooting, especially from the corners. Goode made two and Galloway sank another to stretch the lead to 71-57 at the 4:08 mark. The Hoosiers weren't threatened the rest of the way. Meanwhile Cameron Johnson scored 26 points and Cam Thomas added 24 as the visiting Brooklyn Nets withstood a furious fourth-quarter rally to beat the Milwaukee Bucks 113-110.

The Nets led 111-90 with 6:55 remaining before missing their next 12 field-goal attempts. Damian Lillard scored five straight points to cap a 20-0 run and cut the deficit to 111-110 with 37.4 seconds remaining. After Milwaukee star Giannis Antetokounmpo missed a layup with 6.1 seconds left, the Nets' Ziaire Williams sank two foul shots to make it a three-point game. Lillard missed a 3-point attempt on the Bucks' next possession. Milwaukee had one final chance with 0.6 seconds left, but Lillard's 35-foot shot fell short, and Brooklyn escaped with the victory to snap a three-game losing streak. Nic Claxton had 16 points and 11 rebounds for Brooklyn, which won the season series against the Bucks 3-1. Jalen Wilson scored 13 points, and D'Angelo Russell had 11 points and 12 assists. Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee with 27 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists. Lillard contributed 23 points and seven assists, Bobby Portis Jr. added 15 points and eight boards, Khris Middleton scored 12 points, and Gary Trent Jr. chipped in 10 points. Thomas scored 12 points off the bench in the first quarter to help give the Nets a 30-23 at the end of the period. Brooklyn maintained control throughout the second quarter and held a 66-54 advantage at halftime. Thomas had 17 points to lead the Nets, while Milwaukee shot 5 of 15 (33.3 percent) from 3-point range in the half. The Nets extended their lead to 24 points and held a 90-68 advantage with 4:35 left in the third quarter before the Bucks pulled within nine after closing the period on a 17-4 run.

## Arsenal Close Gap on Liverpool as Jesus Stars Again



LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal closed the gap on Premier League leaders Liverpool to six points as Gabriel Jesus extended his hot-streak in a 3-1 win at Brentford. Mikel Arteta's side were rocked by Bryan Mbeumo's first-half goal at the Gtech Community Stadium. But Arsenal refused to be blown away on a wet and windy evening in west London as Jesus equalised before the break. It was the Brazilian's sixth goal in his last four games after he scored just once in his first 20 matches this season. Mikel Merino and Gabriel Martinelli netted in quick succession soon after half-time to ensure Arsenal moved into second place above Nottingham Forest. Excluding their 5-1 rout of Crystal Palace, the Gunners had spluttered through their last four league games with lacklustre draws against Fulham and Everton followed by a narrow win over lowly Ipswich. But Arsenal's first Premier League game of 2025 provided compelling evidence that they are ready to compete in the title race with Liverpool, who have a game in hand on the north Londoners. Runners-up to Manchester City for the last two seasons, Arsenal are unbeaten in 12 games in all competitions, a revitalising run that now includes four successive wins. "We can only win our next match and see what happens. It's not in our hands," Arteta said of chasing Liverpool. With Bukayo Saka sidelined for several months due to a hamstring injury, 17-year-old Ethan Nwaneri made his first league start for Arsenal. Kai Havertz was absent after scoring Arsenal's winner against Ipswich but Jesus ensured the German was not missed. Arsenal did not lose a single one of their 10 league London derbies in 2024 and they maintained their impressive record in capital clashes after surviving an early blow. Arsenal keeper David Raya was making his first return to Brentford since leaving in 2023. The Spaniard was taunted by his former club's fans, who took great delight in his misjudgement as Brentford went into the lead from their first serious attack in the 13th minute. Martin Odegaard surrendered possession cheaply and Mikkell Damsgaard's pass picked out Mbeumo on the right flank. Mbeumo cut inside Riccardo Calafiori but the Cameroon forward's low drive from 20 yards should have been dealt with by Raya, whose slow reaction allowed the ball to beat him at the near post. Raya nearly gifted Brentford a second goal when he let Mbeumo's shot slip through his grasp before desperately clawing it away just centimetres before it crossed the line.

## Swiatek takes Poland into United Cup semis

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Poland returned to the semi-finals of the United Cup mixed team tournament for a third successive year after hard-fought singles victories in Sydney handed them an unassailable 2-0 lead over Britain. Iga Swiatek settled the tie after an almighty battle with Katie Boulter, prevailing 6-7(4) 6-1 6-4 as last year's runners-up booked a last-four clash with Kazakhstan in the \$10 million tournament before the Jan. 12-26 Australian Open. "I'm just exhausted," said Swiatek after the near three-hour marathon at Ken Rosewall Arena. "I'm happy that I won, so that I don't need to play mixed doubles. This match was crazy, so many changes of momentum." Swiatek squandered a 4-1 lead in the opening set, which her opponent clinched in 74 minutes after an inspired comeback. But the world number two was not to be denied as she romped through the second set and shrugged off a right leg issue in the decider to outlast Boulter. "I thought I had it under control in the first set but I got tight. I didn't want to repeat the same mistake in the third and I took four pain killers," Swiatek said. "A lot hurt, but I'm happy that I won and for sure I'm going to need the day off tomorrow."



"If they give me space to lie down (in the dugout) I'll take a nap ... I think I'll just go to the locker and die." Hurkacz clinched a tight opening set when Billy Harris sent a backhand long in the tiebreak and then stepped up a gear late in the second set to seal a 7-6(3) 7-5 victory and put his team ahead 1-0 in front of delighted fans. "Definitely super pleased with myself," Hurkacz said after his first singles win of the tournament. "Today was a really difficult battle with Billy ... This win is so crucial to get more confidence and get another match in." United States, the 2023 champions, have already reached the semi-finals and will await the winner of the quarter-final clash between Italy and the Czech Republic. The United States swept China in Perth to punch their ticket to the semi-finals of the United Cup in Australia. No. 4-ranked Taylor Fritz recorded a 6-4, 6-4 win over China's Zhizhen Zhang and Coco Gauff scored a 7-6 (4), 6-2 victory over Shuai Zhang in singles. The Americans completed the sweep after Desirae Krawczyk and Robert Galloway posted a 6-3, 6-7 (1), 10-3 win in mixed doubles over Zhang and Fajing Sun.