

Iran's Foreign Ministry Summoned the Italian Ambassador to Tehran in Protest at the Continued Detention of Iranian Citizen Mohammad Abedini Najafabadi, Who Is Jailed in Milan Over Unfounded Accusations

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Central Bank, in a Statement, Denied Claims About a Reduction in Foreign Reserves and the Insufficiency of Funds for Importing Goods Into the Country by the End of the Year

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Iran, Pakistan Agree to Extend Electricity Sale Agreement



ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Pakistan and Iran have reportedly agreed to extend their electricity sale agreement, setting the price at 7.7 to 11.45 cents per kWh after successful negotiations between the concerned entities of the two countries, well-informed sources told Business Recorder.

The previous electricity sale agreement was between the Central Power Purchasing Agency-Guaranteed (CPGA-G)/NTDC and the Iranian company M/s Tavanir which expired on December 31, 2024. The Prime Minister's Office had also sought an update regarding the extension of the agreement.

In response, the Iranian embassy sent around two dozen remittance and invoice items to CPGA-G for clearance of pending dues related to imported electricity.

Currently, Pakistan imports 100 MW of electricity from Iran to supply to the bordering areas of Balochistan, with payments made through informal channels or under a barter trade agreement between the two countries.

The import amounts to approximately 18 million units per year. At present, the price of Iranian electricity supplied to Balochistan's border areas exceeds Rs 27 per unit, which is significantly higher than the cost of electricity generated from imported coal and RLNG.

Sources mentioned that a delegation from Tavanir, Iran, visited Islamabad on December 25, 2024, and meetings were held on December 26-27, 2024, at the CPGA-G office to finalize the terms of Amendment No. 10. A record note summarizing the discussions and agreements made under Amendment No. 10 has been shared with the Prime Minister's Office.

According to the sources, with regard to the minimum take-or-pay clause, it has been agreed that the buyer will take or pay Rs 30 million on all interconnection lines.

Iran Will Continue to Offer Material, Spiritual Support to Resistance Front



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran will continue to extensively offer material and spiritual support to the Resistance Front, says the Iranian Ambassador to Beirut Mojtaba Amani.

The envoy made the comment during a ceremony to commemorate the fifth martyrdom anniversary of Iran's anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in Iraq in 2020.

He said General Soleimani played a leading role in West Asia, particularly in Lebanon.

"General Soleimani played a crucial role in promoting stability in the region. He made great efforts in all political and military fields to thwart the US plots," the Iranian diplomat said.

Amani noted that the top Iranian anti-terror commander's path did not end even after his assassination.

He rejected speculations about any change in Iran's stance on the Resistance Front and Lebanon, saying such rumors are spread frequently, particularly after a "ceasefire agreement" between the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah and the Israeli regime.

"The Israeli regime and its [affiliated] organization seek to spread such rumors against Iran," the ambassador said.

If Iran wanted to stop supporting the resistance, it would not have followed this path for 45 years, he said.

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.



TEHRAN - The spokesperson for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) stated that Martyr Qassem Soleimani was a symbol of unity, defeating the American "Greater Middle East" plan, and solidifying a powerful front against the Zionist regime while fostering unity in Syria.

Speaking in Kashan on Friday evening during the commemoration of the fifth anniversary of Soleimani's martyrdom, Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini praised the late commander, describing him as a multifaceted and unparalleled figure whose influence continues to resonate years after his death.

General Naeini highlighted Soleimani's significant role in shaping regional and international dynamics. He referred to him as a key player in power equations across Southwest Asia, effectively countering U.S. and Israeli ambitions in the region. "Martyr Soleimani was a formidable obstacle to these goals, which is why he was targeted," Naeini said.

The IRGC spokesperson emphasized Soleimani's efforts in expanding and strengthening the regional resistance front, a manifestation of global Islamic unity. Soleimani, he noted, possessed four defining characteristics: a wise politician, a capable field commander, a beloved figure, and a narrator of the culture of resistance.

Naeini underlined Soleimani's recognition of the importance of psychological and cognitive warfare, noting his strategic efforts to counter misinformation and distortions. Despite many of his contributions remaining undisclosed, Soleimani's legacy was encapsulated by Iran's Supreme Leader, who referred to him as a "dear and sincere friend."

According to Naeini, Soleimani played a pivotal role in transforming Hezbollah from a semi-operational force into a full-fledged military power. He remarked on the shift in regional dynamics, including Hezbollah's role in forcing the Zionist regime to withdraw from southern Lebanon, dismantling the notion of Israel's invincibility.

Soleimani's efforts transcended sectarian and ethnic divides, fostering a unified front against occupation and oppression. Naeini credited him with advancing a "resistance vs. submission" narrative over divisive ideologies and establishing a cross-border resistance network.

Discussing Soleimani's contributions in Syria, Naeini outlined his strategic measures during critical periods, including the formation of civil defense units and the mobilization of over 150,000 resistance fighters. These efforts were instrumental in defeating ISIS and stabilizing the Syrian government.

Naeini also reflected on Soleimani's emphasis on the power of popular resistance. Soleimani believed in leveraging the faith of the people as the real "software" behind the resistance front's success, which proved decisive in countering enemy threats.

Concluding his remarks, Naeini noted the evolving nature of warfare, particularly in media and cognitive domains. He emphasized Iran's strong deterrence and offensive capabilities, underscoring the nation's preparedness to counter threats and uphold the vision of resistance.

The commemoration served as a testament to Martyr Soleimani's enduring impact on regional and global resistance movements, reinforcing his legacy as a unifying and transformative figure.

NDF Supports Increased Oil Production as \$174b Deposited Since Inception

TEHRAN - The Head of the National Development Fund (NDF), Mehdi Ghazanfari, announced that the Economic Council has approved a project to increase oil production by 250,000 barrels per day, with the Fund playing a key role in financing. Speaking during a press conference marking the Fund's 14th anniversary, Ghazanfari emphasized the need for improved governance to align with the Fund's mission.

The NDF aims to transform oil and gas revenues into productive, sustainable investments while preserving wealth for future generations. "Any deviation from this mission contradicts the law," Ghazanfari stated. He added that the Fund must grow annually and avoid ventures that fail to yield returns, underscoring the importance of safeguarding resources for future generations.

Highlighting the Fund's international benchmarks, Ghazanfari noted that sovereign wealth funds globally maintain a fixed growth rate, reaching up to 6%. He stressed that the NDF's role is not akin to annual government budgets but rather to foster business development and entrepreneurship.

Over the past three years, the NDF has improved debt collection and transparency. Previously, the Fund provided loans exclusively through intermediary banks, resulting in high default rates. To mitigate risks, the NDF has introduced new financial instruments, including currency-linked bonds and flexible deposit schemes, allowing for better resource management.

Ghazanfari revealed the establishment of specialized departments focusing on sectors like oil, gas, renewable energy, and artificial intelligence. These departments evaluate project feasibility to ensure investments align with the Fund's goals. "While we participate in projects, we are not involved in direct management," he clarified, adding that the Fund prioritizes its share in development without operational control.

The NDF recently embarked on its first overseas investment and has implemented stringent currency recovery measures. Ghazanfari stated, "Since we provide loans in foreign currency, repayments are calculated based on current exchange rates and the Electronic Trading System (ETS)." This ensures the Fund's sustainability and reinforces its commitment to transparency and anti-corruption efforts.

The Economic Council's decision to increase oil production by 250,000 barrels daily



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requires \$3 billion in funding. The NDF will finance the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) but has yet to disburse funds. Additionally, the Fund has introduced new financial mechanisms to address challenges in the electricity sector, including support for renewable energy and solar panel projects.

Ghazanfari highlighted ongoing collaborations with the Ministry of Energy, urging accurate cost assessments for solar power projects. He stressed the importance of aligning investments with actual needs to prevent resource mismanagement.

Alireza Saleh, Deputy Head of the NDF, reported that the Fund has accumulated \$174.8 billion since its inception in 2010, primarily from oil, gas, and condensate exports. Of this, \$96.5 billion has been allocated to

sovereign and governmental projects, with \$9.3 billion converted into local currency for bank deposits.

However, Saleh noted that no new oil revenues have been added to the Fund over the past three years. He emphasized the need to expand revenue streams to reduce dependency on oil in the national budget.

The NDF has financed 60 oil and gas projects worth \$23 billion, as well as 48 power plant projects totaling \$4.8 billion, generating 7,000 megawatts of electricity. The Fund has also supported transportation and water supply projects, bringing total disbursements to \$33 billion, with \$5 billion still pending.

In addition, the NDF has recovered \$11 billion from past loans, thanks to accelerated repayments linked to project operations. The Fund continues to explore new projects in oil, gas, and renewable energy, with \$26 billion in proposals under review.

The NDF is expanding its international collaborations, including a joint fund with Russia and credit lines for projects in Africa and Latin America. A \$50 million credit line with Kyrgyzstan has also been finalized. Future initiatives include renewable energy investments in cooperation with China and other countries.

The NDF remains committed to supporting strategic national projects while ensuring fiscal discipline and resource sustainability. With \$29 billion currently held at the Central Bank of Iran, the Fund is poised to further its mission of transforming natural resource wealth into enduring economic prosperity.

Iran Ready for Constructive Nuclear Talks



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has said that the Islamic Republic is ready for constructive negotiations to reach an agreement regarding its nuclear program.

Araqchi expressed Tehran's readiness for renewed talks during an exclusive interview with China's CCTV on Friday.

Araqchi said negotiations should be aimed "at reaching an agreement." "We are ready to enter into constructive negotiations without delay," he stated.

"The formula we have is the same as the previous JCPOA formula, which is building trust about Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the removal of sanctions. We are ready to negotiate on this basis," he added.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is the agreement signed in July 2015 between Iran, the European Union and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, known as the P5+1.

Britain, France, and Germany are set to begin a new round of talks with Iran over its nuclear program in Geneva on January 13.

"For more than 2 years, we negotiated with the 5+1 countries in good faith and finally we managed to reach an agreement that the whole world accepted and admired as an achievement of diplomacy," he stated.

Araqchi said that Iran implemented the nuclear deal with good intentions, but it was the United States that decided to pull out from it without any reason or justification.

"The US withdrawal from the JCPOA was a very big strategic mistake and was met with a reaction from Iran. Then the US expanded its sanctions," he stated.

He said that one round of negotiations has been held with European countries and the second round of these negotiations will be held with three European countries within the next two weeks.

In addition, Araqchi said that when the upcoming Trump administration formulates its own policy "we will make a decision based on it."

Iran-India Relations Are Traditional and Historical



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi has said that the relations between Iran and India are traditional and historical.

Takht-Ravanchi made the remarks on Friday while attending the 19th Iran-India Political Consultations event held in New Delhi, India.

"This afternoon in New Delhi, I participated in the 19th Iran-India Political Consultations. We discussed bilateral, regional and international issues with Mr. [Shri Vikram] Misri, the Foreign Secretary of India," he wrote on a social media platform on Friday.

"Economic relations, including Chabahar Port, were prominent in the negotiations," he stated.

Takht-Ravanchi said he also had a useful meeting with India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar.

"Iran-India relations are traditional and historical. They (Iran and India) are determined to promote relations in various fields," he added.

The 19th round of the Iran-India Political Consultations event was held in New Delhi on Thursday and Friday.

Iran and India have a long-standing historical relationship and cultural and economic ties.

India agreed in 2016 to finance the development of the Iranian port but the process was stalled two years later due to the US sanctions reimposed after Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

Iran and India signed a deal in May last year under which the India Ports Global (IPGL) company is allowed to develop and control Chabahar for 10 years.

Chabahar is located on Iran's coast along the Sea of Oman and is the country's only ocean port.

It is regarded as a major trade link between the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan and landlocked countries in the Central Asia region.

IRAN NEWS



Pope Vows to Try to Establish Peace, Friendship in World

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic Church, has promised to make his efforts to establish peace and friendship in the world.

Speaking in a meeting with the Founder of the University of Religions and Denominations Abolhassan Navab on Friday, Pope Francis said that all human beings are respected and have rights and no one should violate human rights and prevent their freedom.

God created humans free; but today there are those who want to enslave people and humanity to achieve their goals, he added. Stressing the fact that that problems have arisen in the relations between the Vatican and Israel, he said: "We also have no problem with the Jews, and our only problem is with Benjamin Netanyahu, who regardless of International laws and human rights has created crises in the region and the world."

Gasoline Production to Reach 130m Liters Per Day



TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Oil announced an upcoming 1,000-kilometer expansion of crude oil and oil product pipelines across the country. By the end of this year, the total pipeline length will increase from 14,000 kilometers to 15,000 kilometers.

Mohammad Sadegh Azimifar highlighted the strategic importance of the recently inaugurated crude oil supply project for the Bandar Abbas refinery. Speaking on Thursday, December 13, at the project's inauguration ceremony, he emphasized the project's role in ensuring a stable crude supply and maximizing oil product output at the Bandar Abbas refinery through efficient use of the Goreh-Jask pipeline.

Azimifar stated that the Refining and Distribution Industry has prioritized several key initiatives to meet its mandates, including oil product production, addressing energy imbalances, and completing the value chain. These efforts align with the Seventh Development Plan's goals. The first priority is maximizing oil product output through efficient use of existing refinery capacities.

He noted that since the start of the 14th administration, efforts have focused on leveraging underutilized refinery capacities. As a result, within four months, daily gasoline production increased by approximately 11 million liters, and daily diesel production rose by 12 million liters.

Azimifar stressed that the medium- and long-term objectives of the National Refining and Distribution Company include completing ongoing refining projects by the end of the current administration. These include modernizing existing refineries and implementing new refining projects to achieve a combined daily gasoline and diesel production target of 130 million liters.

He added that addressing energy imbalances requires more than just production increases. Measures to optimize consumption, improve efficiency, and combat fuel smuggling are also underway and will soon bear fruit.



Iran's Small Share in the \$6 Trillion Halal Market

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TEHRAN - In a joint meeting with the Secretary-General of Alborz Chamber of Commerce, Hamidreza Omidan, Secretary-General of Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, highlighted the crucial role of private sector collaboration in addressing economic challenges. He emphasized that cooperation between the public and private sectors in organizing events and achieving shared goals is promising.

During the meeting, Omidan announced Isfahan Chamber's readiness to co-host the upcoming International Halal Brand Conference and Exhibition. He proposed forming a task force comprising provincial chambers, the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, exhibition companies, and the National Standards Organization to ensure a successful event. "Boosting this sector benefits the entire country," he remarked.

Seyed Ebrahim Ebrahimi, Director-General of the Department of International Affairs and Halal at the National Standards Organization of Iran, provided updates on Halal certification. Since 2017, the organization has been the sole authority for issuing Halal certificates. Recently, in collaboration with the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, the evaluation process has been partially delegated to the Islamic Chamber Research and Information Center (ICRIC), which refers applicants to the National Standards Organization for certification.

Ebrahimi noted that the global Halal brand market is vast, with an estimated value of \$6 trillion. However, Iran's share has plummeted from 12% to a mere 0.1%. "Isfahan alone, with its robust food production and tourism potential, could capture 2-3% of this market," he said. He cited examples such as

Malaysia's Halal hospitals, which attract Muslim patients worldwide by adhering to Islamic principles.

He also announced that the Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC) has designated May 17 as World Halal Day. Last year, Iran hosted its first national Halal brand exhibition despite time constraints. This year, the goal is to organize a major international event to coincide with the global occasion. He stressed the importance of collaboration between public and private entities to restore Iran's standing in the Halal market, highlighting SMIIC's willingness to support the event.

Seyed Mohammad Baqer Razavi Taqavi, a representative of Alborz Chamber of Commerce, emphasized the importance of collective efforts, particularly from provinces with high potential in the Halal sector. He proposed a four-way cooperation agreement between Alborz Chamber, Isfahan Chamber, SMIIC, and Isfahan International Exhibition Company.

Razavi noted that Persian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, are making significant investments to increase their share in the Halal market. "Iran has substantial untapped potential in food, tourism, and cosmetics industries," he added.

Ahmad Gholami, Secretary-General of Alborz Chamber, expressed optimism about the cooperation between Isfahan and Alborz Chambers through the Halal Brand event. He urged stakeholders to maximize available resources as the event approaches in May 2025, describing it as a pivotal opportunity for Iran's economic actors to reclaim a larger share of the global Halal market.

Iran and South Korea to Collaborate on Renewable Energy Development



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A professor from Seoul National University in South Korea has proposed a pilot project and the formation of a task force consisting of government representatives, universities, research centers, and industrial companies from both Iran and South Korea. This initiative aims to establish a long-term collaboration in renewable energy development under a structured timeline.

Speaking at the 14th International Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Exhibition in Iran, Professor Hwang outlined the potential for cooperation between the two countries in transitioning to cleaner energy sources. Highlighting advancements in the electricity sector of both nations, he emphasized the need for synergy in smart grid development, renewable energy expansion, and economic decarbonization.

Professor Hwang noted that South Korea's current installed electricity generation capacity is approximately 149 gigawatts, with 38 gigawatts derived from renewable energy sources. The remainder is split between nuclear power (26 gigawatts) and thermal power plants (85 gigawatts). Thanks to advancements in South Korea's electricity sector, the average annual power outage per customer has been reduced to around 8 minutes, and transmission and distribution losses are capped at 3.5%.

Reflecting on South Korea's experience with smart grid projects, Professor Hwang stressed the importance of integrating renewable energy plants, smart meters, electric vehicle charging stations, and energy storage systems within the power grid.

He added that South Korea has set ambitious targets, including a 40% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and achieving complete decarbonization by 2050. To date, South Korea has developed approximately 25 gigawatts of solar power plants, 10 gigawatt-hours of battery storage capacity, and nearly 600,000 electric vehicle charging points. However, achieving the goal of 508 gigawatts of clean power generation and putting 20 million electric vehicles on the road by 2050 will require a fully digital and smart grid.

Iran Faces 24,000 MW Electricity Shortage Next Year



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran is expected to face a 24,000 MW electricity shortage next year if current trends in energy consumption persist, according to Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi, the CEO of Tavanir, Iran's national electricity company.

Rajabi Mashhadi highlighted that over 35,000 MW of electricity consumption during summer is driven by cooling systems. This surge resulted in a 20,000 MW energy deficit last summer, and the situation could worsen in the coming year.

Rajabi Mashhadi emphasized the importance of energy efficiency and smart electricity management to address the crisis. He pointed out that smart meters and advanced communication infrastructure, adopted by developed nations such as France, Sweden, Canada, and South Korea, have proven effective in reducing peak electricity demand by 6-12% through time-of-use pricing and critical peak pricing schemes.

He further noted that energy optimization requires only one-tenth of the investment needed for capacity expansion. For instance, in the U.S. in 2023, a \$1 billion incentive program for 10 million consumers resulted in a 13,600 MW reduction in electricity consumption through efficiency initiatives.

Highlighting Iran's achievements in electricity production, Rajabi Mashhadi reported a 13-fold increase in power plant capacity and a 22-fold growth in electricity generation from 1979 to 2023, surpassing the global average of 3.4 times. Other milestones include a 12-fold expansion of the electricity grid and 13-fold growth in electrified rural areas since the Islamic Revolution.

Despite these advances, he pointed out that affordable electricity tariffs are a significant driver of overconsumption. The current electricity price, excluding fuel costs, is approximately 392 Iranian toman per kilowatt-hour—one-third of its true value (1,250 toman). Including fuel expenses, the real cost of electricity exceeds 4,000 toman per kilowatt-hour.

Rajabi Mashhadi warned that if energy prices remain unrevised, consumption will remain unchecked. To address this, he urged for public campaigns and incentive programs to encourage energy conservation, redirecting saved electricity to the industrial and productive sectors of the economy.

Creating a Safe and Transparent Environment for Investors a Top Priority for Oil Ministry



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Oil Minister announced the Ministry's readiness to collaborate with the private sector and chambers of commerce to achieve the country's major economic goals. He emphasized that creating a safe and transparent environment for investors is a key priority for the Ministry's agenda.

Mohsen Paknejad, speaking during a meeting with members of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, as well as private sector representatives, presented an overview of the country's energy production and consumption. He stressed the importance of constructive interaction with the private sector and large-scale investments in the oil and petrochemical industries. He added that the private sector could play a significant role in helping the government mitigate the energy imbalance crisis.

Highlighting Iran's extensive oil and gas potential, Paknejad stated that as one of the world's largest energy producers, Iran holds considerable opportunities for international cooperation. He emphasized that developing this industry requires sustainable investment and strengthened economic ties with other countries, which could drive economic growth and job creation.

The Minister called on the Chamber of Commerce members to play a more active role in encouraging both domestic and foreign investors to engage in production and refining activities. He underscored that cooperation with the private sector in the oil

industry could serve as a strategic opportunity for the country's sustainable development.

Paknejad reiterated that the Ministry of Oil is fully prepared to work with the private sector and chambers of commerce to achieve national economic goals, stressing that creating a secure and transparent environment for investors is a cornerstone of the Ministry's efforts.

During the meeting, members of the Chamber of Commerce stressed the need to reform existing structures and remove obstacles to facilitate collaboration. They called for the development of supportive policies to strengthen and ensure the effective participation of the genuine private sector in oil-related activities.

Discussions included topics such as focusing on energy management, leveraging the private sector's potential in bunkering, facilitating private sector involvement in the development of oil and gas fields, and establishing a financial engineering framework within the Ministry of Oil.

The Minister issued directives to implement some of the private sector's suggestions promptly and emphasized the continuation of such meetings.

This meeting aimed to create synergy between the government and the private sector to advance the oil industry. Preliminary agreements were reached to pursue joint initiatives.

One-Third of Kurdistan's Imports Come from Iran



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The head of the Union of Exporters and Importers of Iraq's Kurdistan Region emphasized the importance of establishing a direct flight route between Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, and Isfahan, Iran. This Iranian city leads the country's exports to the Kurdistan Region.

In a meeting with the President of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, Amir Kashani, discussions centered around increasing commercial exchanges and tourism. He highlighted Isfahan's readiness to host trade delegations from Kurdistan and send its own trade teams to the region. Amir Kashani pointed out that Isfahan boasts strong sectors, including textiles, steel, chemicals, polymers, agriculture, and greenhouse products, and has the potential to contribute significantly to Kurdistan's development, especially in construction.

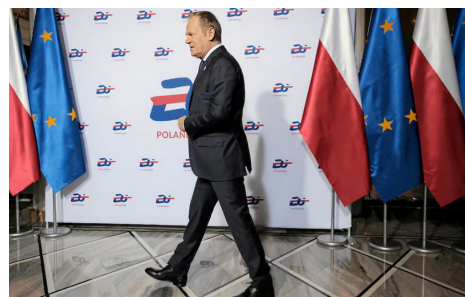
Mohammadreza Gol Ahmad, a member of the Chamber's board, underscored Isfahan's vast commercial potential and its willingness to connect visiting delegations with local businesses. He suggested forming specialized trade groups focusing on specific commodities to enhance exports to Kurdistan.

Farshieh Amini, head of the Chamber's Export Development Commission, noted Kurdistan's growing appreciation for high-quality Iranian goods. She stressed the need for better credit verification processes for businesses on both sides to build mutual trust.

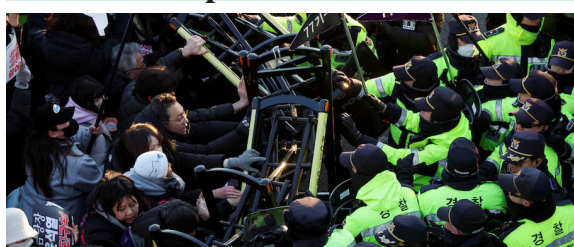
Saeed Ebrahimi, International Affairs Manager for the Isfahan Chamber, stated that Isfahan is the top exporter of Iranian goods to Kurdistan, maintaining high trade volumes with minimal disputes.

Poland Takes Over EU Presidency With Focus on Security

WARSAW (Dispatches) - Poland launched its presidency of the Council of the European Union on Friday mired in a diplomatic row with Hungary that underscored a deepening sense of political disunity across Europe just as it confronts a raft of major global challenges. Saddled with a sluggish economy, the EU is bracing for the return of Donald Trump to the White House this month on an "America First" platform and the possible imposition of U.S. tariffs on European exports. It also faces deteriorating trade relations with China and Russia's grinding war in Ukraine, all at a time when the EU's two leading powers, France and Germany, are distracted by domestic political upheaval. Against this gloomy backdrop, Poland is seeking a leading role in shaping European policy, especially on security.



South Korean Presidential Guards Prevent Arrest of Impeached Yoon



SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's presidential guards and military troops prevented authorities from arresting impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol on Friday in a tense six-hour stand-off inside Yoon's compound in the heart of Seoul. Yoon is under criminal investigation for insurrection over his Dec. 3 martial law bid that stunned South Korea and led to the first arrest warrant to be issued for a sitting president. "It was judged that it was virtually impossible to execute the arrest warrant due to the ongoing stand-off," the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) said in a statement. CIO officials and police evaded hundreds of Yoon supporters who gathered in pre-dawn hours near his residence on Friday, who adopted the "Stop the Steal" slogans popularized by U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's supporters, to block the arrest. Officials from the CIO, which is leading a joint team of investigators, arrived at the gates of the presidential compound shortly after 7 a.m. (2200 GMT Thursday) and entered on foot. Once inside the compound, the CIO and police were outnumbered by cordons of Presidential Security Service (PSS) personnel, as well as troops seconded to presidential security, a CIO official told reporters. More than 200 PSS agents and soldiers blocked the CIO officers and police, he added. While there were altercations and PSS agents appeared to be carrying firearms, no weapons were drawn, he said. Yoon, who has been isolated since he was impeached and suspended from power on Dec. 14, was not seen during the stand-off, he said. South Korea's defence ministry said the troops involved were under the control of the PSS.

Judge to Sentence Trump Before Inauguration But Not to Fine or Jail the President-Elect



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The New York judge presiding over President-elect Donald Trump's hush money case on Friday set sentencing for 10 days before his January 20 inauguration and said he was not inclined to impose jail time. Judge Juan Merchan said Trump, the first former president ever convicted of a crime, can appear either in person or virtually at his January 10 sentencing. In an 18-page decision, Merchan upheld Trump's conviction by a New York jury, rejecting various motions from Trump's lawyers seeking to have it thrown out. The judge said that instead of incarceration he was leaning towards an unconditional discharge - meaning the real estate tycoon would not be subject to any conditions. The sentence would nevertheless see Trump entering the White House as a convicted felon. The 78-year-old Trump potentially faced up to four years in prison but legal experts - even before he won the November presidential election - did not expect Merchan to send the former president to jail. "It seems proper at this juncture to make known the Court's inclination to not impose any sentence of incarceration," the judge said, noting that prosecutors also did not believe a jail term was a "practicable recommendation."

French, German FMs Meet Syria's New Leader in Damascus



PARIS (Dispatches) - French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot and his German counterpart Annalena Baerbock were in the Syrian capital for talks on behalf of the European Union, in the highest-level visit by major Western powers since Islamist-led forces toppled longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad last month. One of their first stops was Syria's notorious Sednaya prison, north of the capital. Accompanied by White Helmet rescuers, Barrot and Baerbock toured the cells and underground dungeons of Sednaya, an emblem of atrocities committed against Assad's opponents. Sednaya was the site of extrajudicial executions, torture and forced disappearances. An advocacy group said more than 4,000 people were freed from the detention facility when rebel forces took Damascus on December 8. Speaking to journalists at the French embassy in Damascus shortly after arriving in the Syrian capital from Lebanon, Barrot expressed his hopes for a "sovereign, stable and peaceful" Syria. It was also a "hope that the aspirations of all Syrians can be realised", he added, "but it is a fragile hope". Later Barrot called on Syria's new rulers to reach a settlement with Kurdish authorities in the northeast, who fear for the de facto autonomy their administration has enjoyed since early in the civil war. "A political solution must be reached with France's allies, the Kurds, so that they are fully integrated into this political process that is beginning today," Barrot said after meeting civil society representatives in Damascus. Barrot also urged Syria's new rulers to swiftly contact a chemical weapons watchdog so they can inspect and destroy stockpiles belonging to the former authorities. The visit by the French and German foreign ministers came weeks after rebels, led by the Islamist group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), ousted Assad from power. In an interview with FRANCE 24 and a group of foreign journalists last month, HTS chief Ahmed al-Sharaa called on Western nations to lift the international sanctions imposed on the Assad regime. In a statement issued before leaving for Damascus Friday, Baerbock said her visit was "a clear signal" - on behalf of the EU - to open the way for a "new political beginning between Europe and Syria, between Germany and Syria", but that lifting sanctions would depend on Syria's political process going forward. She added that she was travelling to Syria with an "outstretched hand" after Assad's ouster and more than 13 years of civil

war, which have devastated the country. "We now have a goal in mind that millions of Syrians also long for: that Syria can once again become a respected member of the international community," she added. Since ousting Assad, HTS have sought to reassure Arab countries and the international community that they will govern on behalf of all Syrians, including the country's religious minorities. Western governments have begun to gradually open channels with Sharaa and HTS, a Sunni Muslim group previously affiliated with al Qaeda, and are starting to debate whether to remove the group's terrorist designation. Baerbock warned Syria's new leaders Friday not to establish an Islamist government after the overthrow of longtime ruler al-Assad. "Europe will support" Syria in its transition but "will not finance new Islamist structures", Baerbock told reporters, adding: "This is not only in our own security interests but also what I have heard time and again from very many Syrians in Germany... and here in the region." Baerbock said she was travelling to Syria to express "clear expectations" of the new rulers, who she said would be judged by their actions. "We know where the HTS comes from ideologically, what it has done in the past," said Baerbock. "But we also hear and see the desire for moderation and for understanding with other important actors," she added, citing talks with the US-allied Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Baerbock also asked the new regime to avoid "acts of vengeance against groups within the population", to avoid a long delay before elections, and to avert attempts to Islamise the judicial and education systems. "This must be our common objective," she added. Syria's new authorities have announced curriculum changes, including scrapping poetry relating to women and love and references to "Gods" in ancient history courses, and interpreting a Quranic verse about those who had angered God and strayed as referring to "Jews and Nasara", a derogatory term for Christians. The national anthem has also been removed from school textbooks and the nationalistic phrase "to sacrifice one's life in defence of his homeland" has been replaced with the Islamist "to sacrifice one's life for the sake of Allah".

Israeli Strikes Kill at Least 42 in Gaza

GAZA (Dispatches) - Israeli strikes killed at least 42 people in Gaza, including children, overnight and into Friday, hospital and emergency response workers said, as health workers and Israel's military traded claims over reported evacuation orders for two hospitals in the territory's largely isolated north. The assertions over Al-Awda and Indonesian hospitals occurred as stalled ceasefire talks to end nearly 15 months of war were set to resume in Qatar. Staff at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital said that more than a dozen women and children were killed in strikes in central Gaza, including in Nuseirat, Zawaida, Maghazi and Deir al-Balah. Dozens of people were killed across the enclave the previous day. "We woke up to the missile strike. We found the whole house disintegrated," Abdul Rahman Al-Nabrisi said in the Maghazi refugee camp. Later Friday, officials at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital said that an airstrike killed three people in a car in Zawaida in central Gaza. And the Civil Defense, first responders affiliated with the Hamas-run government, said that an airstrike killed seven people, including four children and a woman, in the Shijaiyah neighborhood outside Gaza City, and another strike killed two people at Al-Samer junction in Gaza City. The Israeli army said in a statement that during the past day it had struck dozens of Hamas gathering points and command centers throughout Gaza. And it warned people to leave an area of central Gaza, saying that it would attack following launches toward Israel. The military said that a few projectiles entered from central and northern Gaza, with no injuries reported.



Freelance journalist Omar al-Derawi was among those killed Friday. A press vest was placed on his shroud. The Committee to Protect Journalists said last month that more than 130 Palestinian reporters have been killed in the war. Israelis also woke up to attacks. Israel said that missiles were fired from Yemen, setting off air raid sirens in Jerusalem and central Israel and sending people scrambling to shelters. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage. The Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen often claim responsibility. While the U.N. Security Council met Friday to discuss the war's effects on hospitals in Gaza, a hospital in the north, Al-Awda, said in a statement that Israel's military had told staff and patients to immediately evacuate. It didn't give details. And a nurse at the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza told The Associated Press they had received orders to evacuate. Speaking on condition of anonymity

because they weren't authorized to speak publicly, the nurse said that they were still there with 19 people, including eight patients, and staffers had asked for ambulances. Israel's military said that it wasn't "operating to evacuate" Al-Awda or Indonesian hospitals. "Messages were sent to reiterate to officials in the health authorities that there is no need to evacuate the hospital," it said of Indonesian. Neither side's statements could be immediately verified. The Israeli military heavily restricts the movements of Palestinians in Gaza and has barred foreign journalists from entering the territory throughout the war, making it difficult to verify information. The war's effect on hospitals has been a contentious issue as the health system has been largely devastated. Israel has repeatedly accused Hamas of operating out of hospitals and said that the military tries to protect the facilities. The military has carried out raids on several hospitals, including Al-Awda and Indonesian, during the war. U.N. human rights chief Volker Turk told the Security Council on Friday that a recent report by his office documented "at least 136 strikes on at least 27 hospitals and 12 other medical facilities in Gaza, which caused significant death and injury among doctors, nurses, medical staff and other civilians and damaged or destroyed many of the buildings targeted." He said both sides must protect the facilities. Hamas said in a statement that indirect ceasefire negotiations would resume Friday, a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said he authorized a delegation from the Mossad intelligence agency, the Shin Bet internal security agency and the military to continue the talks in Qatar.

Republicans Narrowly Re-Elect Mike Johnson as U.S. House Speaker

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Republican Mike Johnson was returned as speaker of the US House of Representatives on Friday with the crucial backing of incoming president Donald Trump, ending a bitter standoff that threatened to see the 2025 session opening in chaos. Johnson had angered backbenchers by working with Democrats to pass legislation, and his victory was secured only after tense backroom negotiations that saw more than a dozen rank-and-file Republicans voice doubts over his leadership. A chaotic 2023-25 session was marked by conservative anger in particular over the Louisiana lawmaker's handling of spending negotiations, as fiscal hawks lined up to accuse him of being soft on the deficit. In the end there were only three Republican holdouts as voting began -- with all 215 Democrats backing their leader Hakeem Jeffries. Johnson was able to keep his speakership ambitions alive by persuading two to change tack. With the exception of Kentucky conservative hardliner Thomas Massie, the opposition to Johnson always looked superficial, and he had spent much of the week working the phones and holding meetings with the conservatives who had opposed his candidacy. He appeared to assuage some lingering doubts in the hours before the vote by pledging to "reduce the size and scope of the federal government, hold the bureaucracy accountable, and move the United States to a more sustainable fiscal trajectory." And Trump weighed in early Friday with a social media post wishing Johnson "Good luck" and declaring him "very close to having 100% support."



With the vote looking set to go down to the wire, former Democratic speaker Nancy Pelosi, who is 84 and recently suffered a fractured hip, turned up to cast her ballot, wearing flat heels for possibly the first time in her career. Defeat for Johnson would have marked another embarrassment for Trump, who was shown the limits of his sway over House Republicans after they rebuffed his demands for a suspension of the country's borrowing limit in December. Trump's looming presidential inauguration had also raised the stakes of the speakership fight, since the House would not have been able to certify the 78-year-old Republican's victory, set for Monday. Johnson would also have risked losing Trump's support if the battle dragged out further, with moderate Republicans beginning to cast around for other options. The speaker wields key influence in Washington by presiding over House business and is second in line to the presidency, after the vice president. But Johnson has been weakened by the standoff with his party's hardliners, who demonstrated the leverage they hold given the Republicans' wafer-thin majority in the lower house of Congress. "Mike Johnson brings people together to achieve a shared goal. He is deeply committed to conservative values and advancing a pro-America agenda. He is making Louisiana proud," said Bill Cassidy, who represents Johnson's home state in the Senate. "Americans trust Mike to lead the House effectively and with integrity this Congress. I do too!"



Djokovic Falls to Inspired Opelka in Brisbane Quarters

BRISBANE (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic's hunt for a landmark 100th ATP title ended with a whimper following an unexpected 7-6(6) 6-3 defeat by big-serving American Reilly Opelka in the Brisbane International quarter-finals.

Defeat was a huge blow for the Serb, who will bid to join Roger Federer (103) and Jimmy Connors (109) as players who have won at least 100 titles when he heads to the Australian Open, where he will also seek a 25th Grand Slam trophy.

Djokovic saved three breakpoints in stifling conditions to go 5-4 up but lost the opening set in a tough tiebreak as Opelka cranked up his serve and seized early control of his maiden tour meeting against the 37-year-old.

Opelka, who missed nearly two years due to injuries before returning to the elite circuit last year, broke for a 3-1 lead in the next as Djokovic looked rattled by the 6ft 11 in (2.11 m) American, who pulled off spectacular winners on both flanks.

The final blow came on Opelka's serve and the 27-year-old fittingly finished the match with his 16th ace against one of the game's best returners.

"He's the greatest player the sport has ever seen," said Opelka, shortly after one of his biggest wins. "It's difficult being in Novak's position. He can scout me or other opponents all day long. The reality is we have nothing to lose against him."

"You end up playing more free. You take a lot more risk because it's your only chance. If you play your normal level or even above it he's going to win every time."

"He gets guys that are good players who roll the dice. And on a day like this, when a lot of things go my way, that's how it works out."

Up next for Opelka is Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in what promises to be an explosive battle after the Frenchman sent down 19 aces in his 7-5 7-6(5) win over Czech Jakub Mensik to take his tournament tally to 75.

Defending champion Grigor Dimitrov went through after Jordan Thompson retired while trailing 6-4 2-1, while Jiri Lehecka made quick work of Nicolas Jarry, prevailing 6-4 6-4.

In the women's event, reigning Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka shrugged off another slow start and some shaky moments on her forehand late on to get past Marie Bouzkova 6-3 6-4 for her third straight-sets win this week.

Up next for Sabalenka is Russian 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva, who cut short Ons Jabeur's comeback from form and injury issues with a 6-4 7-6(2) win.

Anhelina Kalinina saved a matchpoint to end the run of local wildcard Kimberly Birrell with a 4-6 6-1 7-5 win to book a clash with Polina Kudrmetova, who beat Ashlyn Krueger 7-6(5) 6-3.

Four-times Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka made her first semi-final in nearly three years after rallying to a 6-7(2) 6-1 6-2 victory over Hailey Baptiste at the Auckland Classic.

"The key focuses I had were just to have a lot of belief and confidence in myself," said Osaka, who returned to the WTA Tour 12 months ago after a maternity break.

"I put a lot of work in throughout last year, and even though the results didn't show it, I'm just continuing to try as hard as I can and see where it gets me."

Meanwhile top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus will meet No. 8 seed Mirra Andreeva of Russia in the semifinals at the Brisbane International in Australia.

Hurkacz, Swiatek Send Poland Into United Cup Final



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Poland marched into a second successive final at the United Cup mixed team tennis tournament on Saturday with a convincing 2-0 victory over Kazakhstan after Hubert Hurkacz and Iga Swiatek won their singles matches.

Last year's runners-up will take on inaugural champions the United States or the Czech Republic in the title clash. The two teams face off in the second semi-final in Sydney.

World number two Swiatek wrapped up the tie with a battling display against the big-hitting Elena Rybakina for a 7-6(5) 6-4 victory at the Ken Rosewall Arena.

"I think this was the first time I was able to win against Elena on a faster surface," said an exhausted Swiatek after the epic battle that lasted a little over two hours.

"It means a lot. I didn't start well, I felt like I was on the handbrake a bit. I knew I had to do something because this match could go both ways. I wanted to change the momentum and I'm happy I did that in the last possible chance."

"I told myself that I'm not going to miss anymore, and I'm happy because it's always tough against Elena."

Hubert Hurkacz earlier beat Alexander Shevchenko 6-3 6-2 in less than an hour to help his team put one foot into the final.

"The last match here gave me a little bit of confidence and I've been playing better with every single match," said Hurkacz, who beat Briton Billy Harris in the quarter-final after a couple of defeats in the group stage.

Poland were beaten by Germany in last year's final. The 18-team United Cup is a tune-up event for the Australian Open, which runs from Jan. 12 to 26.

Celtics Ride Hot Shooting to Overwhelm Rockets

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Derrick White and Jayson Tatum combined for 43 points and the visiting Boston Celtics rode a brilliant offensive first half to a 109-86 win over the injury-depleted Houston Rockets.

White scored 23 points and drilled six 3-pointers while Tatum scored 10 of his 20 points down the stretch of the first half to help the Celtics -- who played without Jaylen Brown (shoulder) -- cruise to victory. Payton Pritchard and Jrue Holiday totaled six 3-pointers and chipped in 20 and 14 points, respectively, as Boston made 19 of 39 3-pointers and overwhelmed the Rockets with offensive precision.

Houston could not keep pace en route to its third loss in four home games. Jalen Green led the Rockets with 27 points while Alperen Sengun added 14 points and seven rebounds. But Houston could not overcome the



absences of Amen Thompson (suspension), Tari Eason (leg), and Jabari Smith Jr., who broke his left (non-shooting) hand during shootaround earlier Friday.

Smith is scheduled to undergo surgery and is expected to be sidelined for four to eight weeks.

Both teams were scorching early, shooting a combined 11 for 16 while Houston pushed to a 15-12 lead by the 7:29 mark of the first quarter. But the Celtics seized control with a 10-0 run out of a timeout, with Holiday nailing two 3-pointers and Luke Kornet adding a pair of dunks.

Boston extended to a 17-4 run and double-digit lead Houston shaved to 37-31 entering the second. Holiday scored 12 points on 5-of-6 shooting while Pritchard tallied 10 points off the bench in the first quarter. The

Celtics shot 62.5 percent in the frame and made 7 of 12 3-pointers.

Bellingham Grabs Real Madrid Late Valencia Win After Vinicius Red

VALENCIA (Dispatches) - Jude Bellingham made amends for missing a penalty by snatching 10-man Real Madrid a 2-1 victory at Valencia to take them top of La Liga after winger Vinicius Junior was sent off.

Huro Duro sent the hosts ahead in the first half of a feisty clash but Luka Modric levelled for Carlo Ancelotti's side before Bellingham pounced in stoppage time.

Vinicius, who squared off with Valencia supporters who racially abused him at the same stadium in 2022, was dismissed for shoving Los Che goalkeeper Stole Dimitrievski in the back of the neck with little over 10 minutes remaining.

Madrid were trailing at the time but Bellingham set up veteran midfielder Modric to level in the 85th minute and spark a superb comeback.

Bellingham broke in to strike in the 96th minute after a Valencia defensive error, sending Madrid two points clear of Atletico Madrid at the top of the table, having played a game more than Diego Simeone's team.

"(Bellingham had a) great game, he didn't dip after the missed penalty, it gave him extra motivation," said Ancelotti.

"He made an extraordinary effort... (scoring) was a reward for him for the game he had."

Ancelotti said he did not think Vinicius' push deserved a red card and was surprised by his team's poor start to the match.

"We didn't think it was a red card... he went off and the team reacted, to the red, the missed penalty."



"It's hard to explain how badly we did in the first half and how good we did in the second, even with 10 men. "It's three very important points, deserved, but we can't show these two sides (of ourselves)."

Los Blancos' trip to face Valencia was postponed at the end of October after devastating flooding in the region on Spain's east coast. Sitting 19th, Valencia appointed Carlos Corberan to replace former coach Ruben Baraja during the winter break, pinching the Spaniard from English Championship club West Bromwich Albion.

The hosts made a strong start, shackling Madrid's star-studded attack before making the breakthrough after 27 minutes.

Dimitri Foulquier cut the ball back for Javi Guerra, whose shot was superbly saved by Thibaut Courtois but Duro turned the rebound into

the empty net.

Mbappe was kept silent in the first half but a burst of pace in behind early in the second earned Madrid a penalty, when Tarega was adjudged to have brought him down.

Bellingham was tasked with dispatching the spot kick but jumped just before he struck the ball and skidded a low effort against the post.

Replays indicated Valencia goalkeeper Stole Dimitrievski was off his line when the penalty was taken, but it was not spotted by the officials.

Mbappe, who missed two penalties for Madrid before Christmas himself, thought he had pulled Los Blancos level when he skipped around Dimitrievski and tucked home, but he was fractionally offside.

Madrid were reduced to 10 men when Vinicius shoved Dimitrievski in the back of the neck after Valencia's goalkeeper had pushed him, after the Brazilian hit the deck under a fair challenge in the box.

Despite their numerical disadvantage Madrid pulled level when Bellingham nudged the ball through for substitute Modric, 39, to stab home.

The former Borussia Dortmund man snatched the winner when Foulquier's poor pass put team-mate Hugo Guillamon under pressure, and Bellingham raced on to his attempted back pass to finish with aplomb.

Milan Come From Behind to Beat Juventus 2-1 in Super Cup Semis



RIYADH (Dispatches) - AC Milan reached the Italian Super Cup final after coming from behind to beat Juventus 2-1 on Friday in Sergio Conceicao's first game in charge, setting up a derby decider with Inter Milan.

A second-half penalty from Christian Pulisic and an own goal by Federico Gatti completed Milan's comeback after Kenan Yildiz had fired Juve into a 21st-minute lead.

Milan will play Inter in Monday's final, after the Serie A champions overcame Atalanta 2-0 in their semi-final meeting on Thursday, where Conceicao could immediately get his hands on a trophy after replacing the sacked Paulo Fonseca as Milan manager on Monday.

The expected intrigue of a father against son battle failed to materialise, after Juventus winger Francisco Conceicao was named in the starting 11 but was withdrawn after picking up an injury in the warm-up.

Conceicao's place was taken by Yildiz, and after a slow, cagey start to the game, it was the Turkish forward who broke the deadlock.

A through pass from Samuel Mbangula caught the Milan defence off guard and found Yildiz who took the ball into the area before smashing his shot into the roof of the net, beating Milan keeper Mike Maignan at his near post.

The second half began with another Yildiz effort going just wide in the opening seconds, and shortly afterwards, he played a low pass across the area but Dusan Vlahovic sent his effort wide.

Milan had a massive chance to equalise from a corner kick when the ball fell to Theo Hernandez, but he somehow managed to send a shot over the bar from close range.

The game at last opened up and Nicolo Savona's foul on Hernandez gave Milan a penalty kick in the 71st minute which Pulisic sent straight down the middle to beat Michele Di Gregorio.

Milan went ahead four minutes later, through an own goal. Yunus Musah's cross took a wicked deflection off Juve defender Gatti which took the ball past Di Gregorio who had come off his line.

"For our second-half performance, we deserved the final. In the first half I saw a Milan with many doubts, like a few weeks ago," Conceicao told SportMediaset.

"Then we spoke at halftime. We had to understand what we had to do to win and they were really brave."

Deep into added time, Juventus had one last chance to send the game to penalties, but Gatti's volleyed effort from close range went just wide.

The Milan manager embraced his son after the game before celebrating with his players, and Conceicao will now aim to stop Inter from winning their fourth consecutive Super Cup trophy.

"The second half was completely different, but we haven't done anything yet," Conceicao said.